<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation Period</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation Methods</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation Event</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Workshops</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on the Workshops</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention of Homelessness</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximising the Private Rented Sector</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Use of Temporary Accommodation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Homelessness Households</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Consultation Event</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Meetings</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Users Consultation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-Line Consultation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Profile of Service Users</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Homelessness Strategy Consultation

1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings of the draft Homelessness Strategy consultation.

The purpose of the consultation was to seek the views of our stakeholders, partners, clients and interested parties on our draft Homelessness Strategy.

The Strategy provides a short and medium term perspective on homelessness in Stevenage and sets out our proposed strategic priorities and action plan for the next five years.

2. Consultation Period

The consultation period ran from the 30th November to 21st December 2015.

3. Consultation Methods

A range of consultation methods were used as detailed below:

- A partner and stakeholder Event
- Partner and stakeholder workshops
- Individual meetings with partners and stakeholders
- Questionnaire and copy of draft Strategy emailed to partners and stakeholders
- Questionnaire and copy of draft strategy available on-line for members of the general public
- Service Users focus group
- Service Users telephone interviews
- Presentation to Housing Managers' Board

4. Consultation Event

A Consultation Event was held on December 1st at the Council offices for both internal and external partners and stakeholders. The Event comprised of a series of speeches, workshops and a final summing up session with an open forum for questions and answers. There were 59 attendees representing the following organisations:

- Social Care, Stevenage, Family Safeguarding
- Department of Work and Pensions
- North Herts Citizens Advice Bureau
- The Stevenage Haven
- Aldwyck Housing
- North Herts District Council
• Hertfordshire Probation
• Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA)
• Environmental Health
• Hightown Housing Association
• Money Advice Unit, Hertfordshire County Council
• Citizens Advice Bureau, Stevenage
• North Herts Sanctuary
• Tenancy Support (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Housing Management Board
• Welwyn & Hatfield Community Housing Trust
• Empty Homes Team (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Stevenage Police
• Mental Health Services, Hertfordshire Partnership Foundation Trust (HPFT)
• Housing Advice (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Broxbourne Borough Council
• Stevenage Women’s Refuge
• Hertfordshire Drug and Alcohol Services
• Housing Development (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Homelessness Service (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Tenancy Services (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Children’s Services (Stevenage Borough Council)
• Children’s Services, Hertfordshire County Council
• Stevenage Private Rented Sector Letting Agents

5. Event Workshops

There were 4 workshops on the following draft Strategy priorities:

• Prevention of Homelessness
• Maximising the Private Rented Sector
• Best Use of Temporary Accommodation
• Support for Homeless Households

6. Feedback on the Workshops

Prevention of Homelessness

This workshop explored the three main triggers for loss of accommodation; Family Exclusion, Relationship Breakdown and Loss of Rental Accommodation. The workshop started with a summary of the challenges in homelessness prevention; welfare reform, cuts in public spending, ineffective prevention tools and lack of private rented accommodation. Delegates were asked to share their experiences and let us know what challenges they face. We also asked them be a critical friend, to tell us what they think we do well, what we could do better. The delegates then formed three sub-groups, to brainstorm the main causes of homelessness in more detail. Below is a summary of the views, recommendations and observations.
Family Exclusions

This group was formed of police, social workers and other front line housing professionals. There was a consensus that the problems of family exclusion, whilst often relate to expectations and, in particular, the expectations of Stevenage residents, were actually far more complicated than this and more education and early intervention work needs to be undertaken before families reach crisis point.

Discussed:

- Mediation – when any agency is aware of family tensions, particularly inter-generational, more should be done to support the family in the home. Meaningful mediation should be offered. In addition, some delegates felt engagement should be compulsory (where homelessness is threatened); however the difficulties of enforcing this are recognised.
- Tenancy audits – could these be used to pick up on family tensions with a view to relevant signposting being offered?
- More work in schools – at much earlier stage, delegates felt that going into schools at Year 9/10 was too late – it was suggested that should be pegged at primary level.
- More collaborative working – supported by a ‘making every contact count’ approach, ensuring all relevant partners take responsibility for early signposting/referrals. Multi-agency meetings could play a part in highlight opportunities to prevent matters escalating and bring the issue of prevention to the fore.
- More transitional support for care leavers to prevent future loss of accommodation e.g. independent living skills, budgeting etc.
- Discretionary Housing Payments– think outside the box. Are there ways of sustaining host families to keep their adult children at home for longer?
- More shared housing – should social housing providers get involved in Houses in Multiple occupation i.e. convert large family unit into 5 plus self-contained units for instance. SBC is currently looking into the regulation of HMOs following a recent Council debate and related Motion.

Relationship breakdown – including domestic abuse

This group included Department of Work and Pensions Officers, Haven Support Officer, Safeguarding Officer and other frontline housing professionals.

Discussed:

- Access to good impartial benefits advice was identified as a significant hurdle to separating families – difficulties in satisfying the ‘living as separate household’ test.
- A failure of relevant partners to communicate and support a more holistic approach.
- Cuts – group felt that recent cuts in Relate type services (and any no/low cost mediation aimed at reconciliation) had been very damaging and believe this leaves vulnerable individuals feeling isolated and unsupported.
- What can be done? More prevention work should be undertaken at the trigger stage e.g. loss of work, debt, addiction. When relevant partners are tackling these as a
primary issue e.g. health, education etc., could they do more to identify those at risk of relationship breakdown?.

- Lack of good affordable/free legal advice – can Local Authorities do more? The financial burden of relationship breakdown is highest for Local Authorities and, therefore would it not be more cost effective to have good legal advice available so that the family can be supported – either with help to reconcile, or where this is not possible, with alternative housing options advice.

- Evidence of signposting between the agencies, but not enough meaningful follow-up work being undertaken. In particular, where mental health issues are involved, is there enough hand-holding. Group questioned whether referrals should be made where there is an obvious sign of mental health issue (note there was no discussion regarding the consent required for this).

- Group felt that men are often the ones to leave or be ousted from family home and believe more should be done to support them – concerns re limitations of LHA for those under 35. The damage to long-term family relationships between fathers and children, where father ends up sofa-surfing and has nowhere suitable for access.

- Domestic abuse – group feel this is a growing problem and that welfare reform, cuts in public spending and legal aid have resulted in more victims staying put and suffering ongoing violence – much more needs to be done to highlight the 'every contact count' approach. Whilst it is recognised that the Customer Service Centre (CSC) do what they can to identify those at risk, this is not mirrored elsewhere; there is a need to develop joined-up thinking between the CSC and other teams/agencies.

- Strong views were expressed about the default line taken with victims of DA presenting as homeless; the group challenged the 'you aren’t safe here, you need to go to a refuge’ approach; this is harmful and is felt to be in part why some people remain in the family home, exposed to further/escalation in harm. The Group also felt that where a victim could safely remain in the area this has significant benefits for the whole family and can limit the trauma and disruption to the children.

- More communication – a CAF type, victim-centred approach. Professionals should work together.

- Safeguarding – more focus on this is required along with a greater priority when the is relaying cases to internal partners.

- Main issues identified by this group: prevention, collaboration and accessible family/housing/benefit law advice.

**Loss of Rental Accommodation**

This group included a homeless caseworker from Sanctuary, a private landlord, a member of a tenant panel and other housing professionals.

**Discussed:**

- Group highlighted some good practice observed by Stevenage Borough Council Tenancy Advisors and felt that there was a gap emerging between the good practice model of Stevenage Borough Council, compared with local housing associations, some of which operate remotely thereby losing the personal approach, relying too much on standard letters and phone calls. Poor tenancy sustainment was also felt to be an
issue and some agencies would like to see Stevenage Borough Council do more to bridge the gap.

- Private rented sector - the group felt that Stevenage Borough Council could do more to advertise the benefits of working with a dedicated private rented sector team e.g. legal advice and good practice workshops, a newsletter, dedicated website etc. They would like to see this delivered as part of a regular landlord forum, with guest speakers etc. Group endorsed comments made by the private sector speaker, i.e. that many landlords are getting into rental as a pension supplement and are inexperienced and unsure re their duties and responsibilities – group feels that a promotion of our services to this group would generate instructions and sustainable relationships with landlords who fear the red tape of regulation and would value the benefits of working with their local council.

Conclusion

- There was clear consensus that ‘making every contact count’ is an excellent approach, but some felt more could be done to encourage partners to follow suit.
- Prevention/early intervention – again, this was a recurring theme in all three groups, the long term cost savings, the benefits to family relationships, education, health, financial exclusion etc.
- Collaboration – there are some good examples of collaboration but needs to be top down and include those responsible for policy and implementing change.
- Communication – more opportunities to discuss and plan services in a joined-up way, rather than silo working.

Maximising the Private Rented Sector

This workshop was introduced with a background to the challenges Stevenage Borough Council has faced over the years in being able to access accommodation in the private rented sector and the impact this has had on the Council’s homelessness services. The workshop was divided into 2 groups with a brief to discuss the problems with accessing private accommodation and possible solutions. These groups included officers from the Citizens Advice Bureau, Hertfordshire Probation, neighbouring Local Authorities, Environmental Health and other housing professionals. Below is a summary of the views, recommendations and observations.

Discussed:

- Announcement of Universal Credit and Landlords’ concern at additional financial risk
- Increase in market rental driven by multiple factors – migration into the area of working professionals from higher rental areas, particularly London
- Impact on Local Housing Allowance rates
- The “stigma” of benefit claimants as tenants
- Occupational rights and property advice given about staying in accommodation/lack of move on ability
• Landlords selling properties
• Non secure tenancies being issued/short term tenancies ending quickly
• Landlords operating as business for commercial gain
• Standards of available accommodation
• Affordability
• Effect of homelessness on social issues

Conclusion

The groups felt that the following would help to maximise the use of the private rented sector:

• Introduction of a landlords forum
• Better training for tenants
• Incentives for landlords to engage with Stevenage Borough Council/set up social lettings agency
• Local Authority taking a more proactive approach when eviction imminent
• Specific/central points of contact for landlords to seek assistance with issues
• Ability to evidence why to take on "problem" tenants
• Provision of a wide range of clients for landlords
• There was a clear support for the ‘Assisted Lets’ scheme as outlined in the draft Strategy and the need for a landlords forum

Best Use of Temporary Accommodation

This workshop started with a summary of the upward trajectory trends in homelessness presentations, acceptances and numbers in temporary accommodation over the past 5 years and the anticipated demand over the next 5 years. The group was asked to look at how Stevenage Borough Council could best meet the demand for interim emergency accommodation placements and longer-term temporary accommodation placements. The group included officers from 2 neighbouring local authorities, the Council’s Housing Development Team and other housing professionals.

Discussed:

• The use of bed and breakfast accommodation to meet the demand for interim emergency placements. Stevenage Borough Council was the only local authority not to use such accommodation and the draft Strategy strives to continue to avoid the use of bed and breakfast.
• The use of out of area emergency placements. Again, Stevenage Borough Council was the only authority not to use these. It was agreed that, by virtue of having its own housing stock, Stevenage was in a better position to do this than non-stock holding local authorities. However, the lack of flexibility in Stevenage’s current temporary accommodation model was discussed and whether this was providing best value to Stevenage and its residents.
• Concern was expressed that, due to the temporary accommodation provided and relatively quick move on to permanent accommodation under part 6, applicants were
not prepared to fully consider other housing options such as the private rented sector. While the Strategy’s ‘Assisted Lets’ scheme was seen as positive, it was not felt by the group that this would sufficiently increase the supply of private rented accommodation to meet the increased demand from those households facing homelessness. There was concern that Stevenage Council was not well placed to see off demand from other local authorities for housing in Stevenage.

- Private sector leasing schemes were considered. Other local authorities are being contacted by the Developers of office block conversions. The Council’s Development Team advised that they had not been contacted. Concern was raised that it was often difficult to get a mortgage on these properties and there can be concerns at the quality of such developments. The procurement costs of private sector leasing schemes were looked at and whether the current HB formula allowed for local authorities to actually secure a surplus in this area. The Development team advised that they would be able to give advice/guidance on possible leasehold schemes.

- New development was considered as a means of increasing supply and there was discussion around the type of accommodation needed.

Conclusion

- There was a consensus that Stevenage Borough Council needed a more flexible model of temporary accommodation which did make provision, even if only used rarely, for emergency interim out of area placements. Recent case law concerning the need for a temporary accommodation procurement policy/strategy was discussed and the local authorities present agreed that the sharing of good practice in this area would be beneficial. Some authorities are further ahead than Stevenage in this area.

- There was also a consensus that there may be merit in regional local authorities working in a collaborative partnership with regard to temporary accommodation and to explore the possibility of a ‘bank’ of emergency accommodation/better ways to meet the demand for applicants needing to move to a new area for example, due to domestic abuse.

- The need for a strong partnership between Housing Development and Tenancy Management was agreed with homeless accommodation considerations needing to be taken into account at the outset of any proposed new development. While there was no consensus regarding the need for a new hostel type building, it was agreed that converting existing stock into units of multiple occupation may be one of the most cost effective ways in meeting some of the anticipated demand for future emergency/temporary accommodation. This though would have to be informed by broader SBC policy in this regard.

- There was not time to discuss in any detail the need for specialist temporary accommodation for those with particular support needs. However, it was agreed that further dialogue was needed with our partners who supply supported accommodation. The Council’s homelessness team already works closely with such partners, particularly those providing support accommodation for young persons and care leavers.
Support for Homeless Households

This workshop focussed on 3 of the 6 draft Strategy aims.

Elimination of repeat homelessness

- How services i.e. a women’s refuge, could make direct referrals into the Tenancy Support Services.
- Educating and training in understanding debt and benefits, employment etc. were priorities and fundamental to help tenants manage and understand their tenancy whether it was social or the private housing sector.
- Speak to people who have experience of homelessness and how support services help those affected to gain new life skills and improved health and well-being.
- For those giving support to be able to have ‘difficult conversations’ with people in order to help the person accept their responsibilities or acknowledge they need support.

Increased and innovative partnership working with Herts County Council in the provision of support for homeless families.

- Joint visits to households to provide dual support i.e. Citizens Advice Bureau attending a home visit with a tenancy support adviser.
- Improved sharing of information between mental health, housing and others partners.
- Set up and deliver partnership working to share information and support vulnerable individuals (housing, health, and other support agencies)

The ability of some of our support services to become income generating.

- Offer and deliver training to all new residents and that those at risk of losing their tenancy.
- Consider certificates for residents to show they have engaged with training which can be shared with landlords and build confidence in the tenant/landlord relationship.
- Bridge gaps in services to housing associations
- Link into landlords associations.

Conclusion

- There was a consensus that the above priorities were an important part of the draft Strategy.
7. Summary of Consultation Event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for draft Strategy Priorities</th>
<th>Yes %</th>
<th>No %</th>
<th>Need more detail %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prevention of Homelessness</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximising the Private Rented Sector</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Use of Temporary Accommodation</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Homeless Households</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, the headline strategic priorities were overwhelmingly supported. There was an overall consensus that collaborative partnership was key to tackling homelessness in Stevenage, especially given that most organisations were facing further financial restraints and that improved and innovative collaborative working was essential to provide high quality, client focussed services. One organisation felt that the draft Strategy was not strong enough on partnership wording. While partnership working is flagged up at the start of the Strategy and runs throughout, the need for this has now been emphasised further in the action plan. Some delegates felt that they needed more information on the priorities which were not covered by their workshop. However, the majority found the summing up session which covered all of the workshops very helpful. Each delegate was given a copy of the draft Strategy so they could make further comments once they had read all of the detail.

8. Individual Meetings

Individual meetings were held with some of those partners who were unable to attend the Consultation Event. As a result of an individual meeting with Children’s Services (Safeguarding), the issue of advice and assistance for those homeless families where there was not a housing duty, for example where an applicant has been deemed to be intentionally homeless, was raised. This point was also raised on the Event consultation evaluation forms and a request for more information on service users for whom a duty is not accepted or for those service users who do not even get as far as making a homelessness application. As a result of this a further action to the draft Strategy was added under the homelessness prevention priority.

An individual meeting with the Learning Disability Team has resulted in this team becoming part of a forum run by Stevenage Borough Council which will now support residents with learning disabilities as well as those residents suffering from mental ill-health.
Individual responses were also received from the Hertfordshire County Council Manager for Older People, Integrated Accommodation Commissioning Team and Community Commissioning and from the Hertfordshire County Council Development Team.

9. Service Users Consultation

In total 20 service users were consulted on the draft Strategy proposals either by telephone interview or as part of a focus group. The service users were at various stages in the homelessness process and included service users in emergency and temporary accommodation, those without a home and those who had been homeless. The profile of the service users is shown in Appendix A.

Summary of Service Users Consultation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIORITY</th>
<th>SUPPORT %</th>
<th>DO NOT SUPPORT %</th>
<th>REASONS GIVEN FOR NOT SUPPORTING THIS PRIORITY/OTHER COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prevention of Homelessness</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Concern that this priority may result in being made to stay in a parental home that was overcrowded or in unsuitable private accommodation. Staff at Customer Services did not appreciate how urgent my case was and my homelessness was not prevented. You [the Council] talk about ‘making every contact count’ but this does not happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximising the Private Rented Sector</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Will keep on being made homeless. Poor conditions/disrepair. Unaffordable. Poor relationship with landlords. Will never get social housing. Will never feel like a proper home. Worry that children will have</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to keep moving/change schools. Why can’t you still be in band B on housing register if you are placed in private accommodation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Use of Temporary Accommodation</th>
<th>80</th>
<th>20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern that a flexible model will result in people being placed outside of Stevenage. This will not sort out the length of time currently spent in emergency accommodation before a decision is made. Do not want to see shared or hostel type accommodation used</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for Homeless Households</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>0</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Some users who had been helped with private accommodation felt they still needed support but this was not offered. The majority of those consulted at Wellfield Court wanted better communication between the Council’s tenancy support and homelessness teams. Good to have support with difficult/confusing benefit claim forms and in chasing decisions.</strong></td>
<td></td>
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10. On-line Survey

There were no responses to the on-line survey.

Conclusion

The strong interest in the consultation process from partners/stakeholders and service users has been encouraging. In light of the consultation, revisions and additions have been made to the draft Strategy including amendments to the action plan to show a clearly defined, outcomes driven process. While the priority regarding maximising the supply of new affordable housing will be fully consulted on as part of the Council’s Development Strategy, this was generally discussed at the Consultation Event and with Service Users. There was an
overwhelming consensus that new development was needed to meet the assessed housing need of Stevenage residents. It is now recommended that the revised draft Strategy is adopted by Stevenage Borough Council.

APPENDIX A: PROFILE OF SERVICE USERS

Household Composition

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<tr>
<th>Household Composition</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Single person without children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single person with children</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple without children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple with children</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Answered</td>
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<td>0</td>
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Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<td>Prefer Not to Say</td>
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<td>Dual/Multiple Heritage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Ethnic Group</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prefer not to Say</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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### Age

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### Disability

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<td>85%</td>
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