

A Draft Strategy for Meeting Statutory Housing Need

1. Introduction

This homelessness strategy has been produced following a robust independent assessment of the existing service (baseline review), and a councillor-led review which focused on particular aspects of the service and involved a range of our partners.

A key driver of homelessness is the shortage of appropriate housing; many of the households we see on a daily basis would be able to resolve their housing need without intervention from the Council if there was sufficient rented housing available at prices they can afford. In addition, relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems and financial problems can all contribute to making households homeless. Some of those who are homeless have complex problems which require tailored solutions beyond simply a roof over their heads.

Becoming homeless creates a crisis for any household. The uncertainty about the future, the challenges of living in temporary accommodation, the impact on health, are all well-documented. Our primary aim is to prevent homelessness wherever possible, and where this is not possible to support the household to find alternative accommodation quickly. Becoming homeless is no longer the way into social housing: the Council will seek all solutions including the private rented sector and where appropriate, low cost home ownership solutions.

This strategy provides a vision for the future service, underpinned by some broad key objectives, and actions to deliver these objectives. The external context for our work is continually changing, and it is likely that the legislative context will also change over the next 12 months or so. In developing this strategy we have looked ahead as far as possible and responded to known and predicted changes. The strategy provides a broad, robust framework which should remain relevant despite these changes. The more detailed actions will be subject to an annual review.

2. Wider context

Across the UK, homelessness is increasing, driven by the shortage of social housing and market rent housing at prices which are affordable to those on lower incomes. The situation in Milton Keynes is exacerbated by our success in being an area where people aspire to live and work. Increasing the supply of housing is a high priority for the Council, creating a range of accommodation to meet different needs and aspirations. There is a significant supply of new housing, some of it already on site and some of it planned. The Council has been proactive in encouraging developers, and in particular investors, to support rented accommodation as well as properties to buy. We have also been proactive in encouraging a range of lower-cost home ownership schemes, to enable those on middle to lower incomes to get that first step onto the housing ladder.

Nevertheless, there will remain a significant proportion of households for whom renting is the only short-term solution. Although Milton Keynes is an area of high employment, some of that work is lower waged. Not everyone who wants to live in Milton Keynes will be able to do so. Part of our strategy is working to create more realistic expectations in customers about the housing market in Milton Keynes, and in particular to highlight the extreme shortage of social housing.

3. Legal framework

The Council has a number of legal responsibilities under the homelessness legislation and statutory codes of guidance. This includes the duty to develop a homelessness strategy which works to prevent homelessness, to secure accommodation for those who need it, and to find ways to access support for those who may need a bit of extra help to prevent them becoming homeless again in the future. Alongside this are statutory duties to help some households to secure accommodation – those who are found to be homeless, not intentionally so, who have a local connection and are in priority need.

Currently there is no statutory duty to prevent homelessness. Such a duty has already been introduced in Wales and Scotland, and a Parliamentary Commission currently looking at homelessness is likely to recommend a new duty for England. This strategy puts prevention at the heart of our service, and will be fit for purpose if this new duty is introduced.

4. Conclusions from the baseline review

- The housing options and homelessness service attracts a very high volume of enquiries and requests for assistance: during 2015/16 there were over 7,000 callers into the Civic Centre (approximately 26 per working day), with 1,614 housing options interviews (approximately six per working day) and 1,111 homeless applications (approximately four per day). 85% of homeless applications result in a statutory duty being accepted. Between 2014/15 and 2015/16 there was a slight reduction in both the number of callers into the Civic Centre and the number of housing options interviews (possibly as a result of introducing the on-line self-help tool). There was a small increase in the number of homeless applications;
- Currently almost all those accepted as homeless will get an offer of social housing, after a period of time in temporary accommodation. The supply of social housing, both from the Council's own stock and from rental properties is reducing: combined numbers were down by around 300 homes in 2015/16 compared to the previous year;
- Not surprisingly, this is resulting in larger numbers of households living in temporary accommodation. On average there were 271 households in temporary accommodation each month during 2015/16, compared with 163 the previous year. This is resulting in households having to be sent out of Milton Keynes for accommodation, and is also putting significant pressure on budgets;
- As a result, the service has become overly responsive and focused on the Council's statutory duty. Prevention work is not well-embedded, recorded or managed. Making a significant shift towards greater prevention should reduce the numbers requiring temporary accommodation and alleviate some of the pressure. The main alternative option for most customers will be the private rented sector, which is difficult for many customers to access. There will need to be a strong focus on increasing supply, and a need to "change the message" with customers who often expect to get social housing as a right;
- There has been a visible increase in rough sleeping in Milton Keynes, reported by staff, members and partners, but there is limited data on this, and no assessment of the extent of sofa surfing locally. Tackling rough sleeping quickly – even amongst those who are not owed a statutory duty – is important in preventing the development of longer term, embedded needs and patterns of behaviour, and in

building the image of Milton Keynes as a successful town attractive to new employers;

- A recent councillor Task and Finish Group on homelessness recognised the role that partners play in tackling homelessness, particularly for single homeless people, rough sleepers and those at risk of sleeping rough. Councillors have recommended a more joined-up approach with better co-ordination to help to maximise the impact of current services; there also needs to be shift towards a “No Second Night Out” approach in line with current government policy. Partners recognise the duplication that exists within voluntary services, welcome the member intervention and are hopeful that this signals the start of a more constructive dialogue with Milton Keynes Council.

5 Key recommendations for the strategy

Recommendation one: Achieve a significant cultural shift across the service away from being a path into social housing towards helping people to find housing solutions

- Consider the balance between prevention and statutory work in the new structure and ensure that prevention is the focus on all contact with the client;
- Use the short-term prevention officer posts to develop and embed prevention work;
- Agree how homelessness prevention performance will be measured and how data collection will be carried out in short term;
- Undertake skills audit for homelessness prevention and identify training needs; develop and deliver training plan;
- Develop clear housing pathways and an up to date toolkit for staff to use;
- Review the role of social housing allocations/nominations to reflect shift to prevention;
- Ensure housing advice is accessible to non-priority households, including access to services to tackle landlord issues;
- Work with partners to support their housing advice functions, including supporting a drop-in advice centre.

Recommendation two: Get the message out about the shortage of housing and shift expectations

- Engage proactively with customers, partners, stakeholders and wider community to really get the message across about the shortage of social housing, housing pressures and homelessness, and the outcomes from a homelessness application;
- Ensure a clear and consistent corporate message which is supported by councillors, senior managers and all services;
- Use all engagement with customers, including website, written and oral communication to get the message across;
- Work more proactively with partners to ensure a wider understanding amongst agencies and volunteer staff, so they in turn can promote realistic housing solutions, and focus efforts on services that help people towards independence.

Recommendation three: Work differently with partners

- Create opportunities for open and constructive dialogue with partners about the role that the Council can play, that partners can play and expectations of each other. Ideally, the Council should provide resources to co-ordinate a Homelessness Forum, that brings partners together to reduce duplication, and develop a more effective response;
- Review and refresh protocols with statutory and voluntary sector partners, taking the opportunity to embed prevention at the heart of joint working and create more realistic expectations of each other and messages to the customer;
- Create appropriate forum(s) for discussion with the Council landlord and rental properties on the role that social housing should play, who they house, and how they manage accommodation. This should include greater challenge of restrictions on lettings (eg, proportion of accommodation designated for elderly, rejection of nominations on inappropriate grounds) and pre-eviction protocols.

Recommendation four: Increase the focus on performance supported by clearer data

- Get stronger information about real number of customers for service;
- Improve the collection and credibility of data;
- Move away from managing performance on a caseload basis; find ways to capture performance on prevention;
- Include partner data in prevention figures;
- When commissioning new IT system ensure data collection is embedded into workflow processes.

Recommendation five: Make best use of existing stock/resources

- Review TA and refocus appropriate supply for prevention/discharge of duty;
- Open discussions with partners about impact of single room rate extension to social housing and opportunities to create shared accommodation from existing or acquired stock;
- Launch a lodging scheme matching those wishing to let a room with those seeking a room;
- Review and re-launch the deposit bond scheme, with clear criteria and tighter management;
- Move management of Discretionary Housing Payment and LWP into housing options team and refocus on prevention;
- Create savings scheme to enable repayment of loans for deposit/rent in advance or for saving for deposit when move on.

Recommendation six: Continue work to increase range of accommodation solutions available to those on lower incomes

- Use new accommodation development posts to proactively increase number of private landlords working with the Council; explore alternative incentives including rent insurance scheme (either externally purchased or funded internally);

- Explore the potential for local authority or partners to manage shared housing as a solution for younger/single homeless;
- Explore the potential for bringing empty properties back into use as rented accommodation for those at risk of becoming homeless;
- Explore the potential for a local authority owned or influenced process to acquire and develop properties for rent at market/sub-market level; this could be an expanded role for an existing organisation or a new body such as a local housing company;
- Continue to explore and progress institutional investment in market rented schemes;
- Explore the role that could be played by rent to purchase models, as a housing solution for working families, instead of social housing.

Recommendation seven: Take forward the recommendations in the Homelessness Task and Finish Group

- Create a resource within the new team structure to lead on partnership working around single homelessness and rough sleeping and lead on development of agreed pathways, underpinned by shared data and resources;
- Work with partners to identify premises and resources for a drop-in centre for homeless people to access a wide range of help and advice, including from Council services and other statutory partners such as health services, drug and alcohol teams;
- Ensure NSNO¹ approach is embedded into new ways of working.

In addition to the above, the Cabinet has been asked to also consider the following additional recommendations as part of this Strategy:

- *‘Consider how the Homelessness (Statutory Need) Strategy aligns with the emerging work on non-statutory homelessness and the implementation of the Homelessness Task and Finish Group Report to ensure a single unified approach to all Homelessness across the Council and wider city’.*
- *‘Consider developing a scheme with the private rented sector to secure longer term assured tenancies’.*
- *‘Consider ways to prevent homeless applicants from the parental family home, with the exception of violent situations’.*
- *‘To consider how applicants should be required to access training and education opportunities, where appropriate’.*

6 Action Plan

Timescales:

- immediate = 3 – 6 months,
- short-term 6 = 12 months,
- medium term 1 = 2 years,
- longer term = 2 years plus.

¹ *Nil satis nisi optimum* – “nothing but the best is good enough”

Recommendations	Priority	Resources	Timescale
Recommendation one: Achieve a significant cultural shift across the service away from being a path into social housing towards helping people to find housing solutions			
Consider balance between prevention and statutory work in the new structure and ensure that prevention is the focus in all contact with the client	H	Existing (in new structure)	Immediate
Use the short-term prevention officer posts to develop and embed prevention work	H	Existing (in new structure)	Immediate
Agree how homelessness prevention performance will be measured and how data collection will be carried out in short term	H	Can be done within existing resources.	Immediate
Ensure data collection for prevention is embedded into workflow	H	Some short term improvements may be possible; this needs to be a key element when current system is reviewed	Medium
Develop housing pathways and housing options toolkit for top 3 reasons for homelessness (ending of ASTs, asked to leave parents/family/friends/DV)	H	HQN will provide template and structure, there is also existing information which can be utilised	Immediate
Develop housing pathways and housing options toolkit for remaining reasons for homelessness	M	See above	Short
Undertake skills audit for homelessness prevention and identify training needs; develop and deliver training plan	H	HQN will provide suggested template; individual audits can be part of appraisals; training plan likely to include motivational interviewing techniques	Short
Agree processes for capturing and sharing learning from prevention and implement	H	May be as simple as standard item on team meeting agenda or may require additional meeting(s)	Immediate

Recommendations	Priority	Resources	Timescale
Recommendation two: changing customer perceptions			
Review website content to deliver a much stronger message on the shortage of social housing and that the outcome of a homelessness application may well be a private sector tenancy	H	Work can be spread over a number of months to make this more manageable; IT have already indicated a willingness to prioritise changes needed	Short
Ensure website content is up to date	H	Part of the same piece of work	Short
Providing written confirmation of oral advice	H	Template letters with links to relevant information on the website can be developed in line with development of the toolkit	Immediate (top 3 reasons) Short (rest)
Review self-help tool to ensure clearer message and more tailored advice; provide link to Neighbourhood Employment Service for appropriate cases	H	The tool is being reviewed almost constantly and these are mostly tweaks rather than fundamental changes	Immediate
Ensure all communication with customers stresses the need to consider other options, at all stages	H	This is a shift in way of working rather than additional resources	Immediate
Agree a small number of short and clear messages which should be consistently communicated to customers by Members, senior managers and all staff	H	Can be done as part of sign-off process for the strategy	Short
Recommendation three: Work differently with partners			
Create opportunities for open and constructive dialogue with partners about the role that the Council can play, that partners can play and expectations of each other	H	Resources within new structure once implemented	Short
Review and refresh protocols with statutory and voluntary sector partners, taking the opportunity to embed prevention at the heart of joint working and create more realistic	M	Existing resources	Medium

Recommendations	Priority	Resources	Timescale
expectations of each other and messages to the customer			
Create appropriate forum(s) for discussion with the Council landlord and RPs on the role that social housing should play	H	Existing resources	Immediate
Recommendation four: Increase the focus on performance, supported by clearer data			
See recommendation above on agreeing how homelessness prevention performance will be measured	H	Can be done within existing resources.	Immediate
Ensure data collection on homelessness cases is embedded into workflow	M	Needs to be tied in with review of IT system and commissioning of new system if that is the outcome	Medium/longer
Shift away from measuring case-load to measuring outcomes and through-put to provide a truer picture of the volume of work	H	Can be done within existing resources.	Immediate
Find ways of capturing information about returning customers to get a clearer picture of true volume of work	H	Can be done within existing resources.	Immediate
Capture, analyse and share quarterly information to get a better picture of emerging trends	M	Can be done within existing resources.	Medium
Conduct regular case-file audits to ensure consistent quality and approach	M	Can be done within existing resources.	Medium
Recommendation five: Make best use of existing stock/resources			
Review TA and refocus appropriate supply for prevention/discharge of duty, eg, leased properties where can offer assured shorthold tenancy of at least 12 months	H	Existing resources	Short
Open discussions with partners about impact of single room rate extension to social housing and opportunities to create shared accommodation from existing or acquired stock	M	Existing resources	Medium

Recommendations	Priority	Resources	Timescale
Launch a lodging scheme matching those wishing to let a room with those seeking a room	M	Existing resources	Medium
Review and re-launch the deposit bond scheme, with clear criteria and tighter management	H	Will require some budget which could be funded from savings on TA	Immediate
Move administration of DHP and LWP into housing options team; resource to manage this will also have to be transferred	H	Existing but based in another team	Immediate
Create savings scheme to enable repayment of loans for deposit/rent in advance or for saving for deposit when move on	M	Existing	Medium
Recommendation six: Continue work to increase the range of accommodation solutions available to those on lower incomes			
Use new accommodation development posts to proactively increase number of private landlords working with the Council; explore alternative incentives including rent insurance scheme (either externally purchased or funded internally)	H	Resources within new structure	Short
Explore potential for bringing empty properties back into use as rented accommodation for those at risk of becoming homeless	M	Resources within new structure	Medium
Explore potential for a local authority owned or influenced vehicle to acquire and develop properties for rent at market/sub-market level; this could be an expanded role for an existing vehicle or a new vehicle such as a local housing company	H	Existing resources	Medium

Recommendations	Priority	Resources	Timescale
Continue to explore and progress institutional investment in market rented schemes	H	Existing resources	On-going
Explore the role that could be played by rent to purchase models as a rented solution for working families, instead of social housing	M	Existing resources	Medium
Recommendation seven: Take forward the recommendations in the Homelessness Task and Finish Group			
Create a resource within the new team structure to lead on partnership working around single homelessness and rough sleeping and lead on development of agreed pathways, underpinned by shared data and resources	H	Resources within proposed new structure	Short
Work with partners to identify premises and resources for a drop-in centre for homeless people to access a wide range of help and advice., including from Council services and other statutory partners such as health services, drug and alcohol teams	M	May require additional resources	Medium
Ensure NSNO approach is embedded into new ways of working	H	No specific resources required	Medium