

Milton Keynes Council, Homelessness Strategy 2012-2017

Executive summary

The Homelessness Strategy sets out how we will work with those who become homeless over the next five years and sets out guiding principles for the development and delivery of homelessness services. In the current economic conditions it is more important than ever that homelessness services are appropriate, timely and effective.

The Vision for Milton Keynes (set out in the Council's Corporate Plan) notes the importance of housing as follows:

“To secure sustainable housing and employment growth that is advantageous for Milton Keynes subject to the timely provision of infrastructure and proactive regeneration to ensure no areas are left behind and that a two-speed city does not result”.

This strategy aims to ensure:

- The number of households who find themselves homeless will be minimised through effective preventative measures
- Through enhanced co-operation with other services, all households facing homelessness, including the most vulnerable, will be supported to access housing that meets their needs

The strategy has five strategic objectives;

1. To prevent homelessness
2. To work in partnership with others
3. To help households prepare for the impact of welfare reform
4. To increase the availability of housing for those in need across all tenures
5. To improve social mobility and the life chances

Background

Becoming homeless not only leads to loss of a home, but can disrupt attendance at work and school, and make it harder to access essential services. This in turn can lead to poorer health and wellbeing, lower educational attainment, higher unemployment and poorer life chances generally.

Whilst most residents of Milton Keynes are well housed, a minority of residents may experience the threat of homelessness or actual homelessness. Households may face issues of affording to buy or rent at market levels and struggle to find the deposit and first months rent for a new property when they need to.

Other households may become homeless for more personal reasons such as relationship breakdowns with partners or family. People suffering from mental health problems may be more at risk of homelessness if they are unable to cope with maintaining their home. Older people may require aids and adaptations, such as stair lifts or a downstairs bathroom to maintain their independence.

Rough sleeping is homelessness at its most extreme and many rough sleepers have complex needs, such as previous offending, mental health problems and drug or alcohol misuse.

We are legally required to have this strategy under the Homelessness Act 2002 and it sets out how the Council proposes to prevent homelessness and address the needs of homeless households within Milton Keynes for the period 2012-17.

We have reviewed and updated our Homelessness strategy:

- to address the underlying causes of homelessness, and
- to ensure that appropriate services are available to meet the needs of those who become homeless.

Strategy review process

At the time of writing this strategy, the economic situation, significant welfare benefit reforms and the localism agenda present a range of both challenges and opportunities to do things differently to achieve better outcomes within the resources available to us.

In January 2012 we had a 3 day 'critical friend' inspection by DCLG Homelessness Specialist Advisors. During the inspection the advisors looked at our performance figures, talked to staff, customers, partner agencies and commissioned service providers to get a deep understanding of the way we work.

In October 2012 we started to review the issues as part of Housing Allocations and Lettings Review Group (a sub group of the Housing and Communities Select Committee). This included an online consultation, workshops with staff, 3rd sector partners, Registered Providers, people who have been recently through the allocations or homelessness process and current applicants, a site visit to Swindon Council and discussion of desk based research on alternative schemes elsewhere.

Homelessness Applications and Acceptances

- From a low point in 2007/8 when we issued just 150 s63 or s184 decisions, we have experienced a sharp rise in the numbers of cases presenting as homeless, and in 2010/11 issued 425 decisions.
- Given the wider economic environment and forthcoming welfare reforms we anticipate that we will continue to experience similar levels of housing need into the medium term.

Why are people finding themselves homeless?

The five most common reasons for homelessness are:

- Eviction by family
- Eviction by others
- Termination of assured shorthold tenancy,
- Relationship breakdown violent
- Relationship breakdown non-violent.

In 2011/12 these reasons comprised over half of households presenting as homeless. This strategy therefore does focus on these areas in particular in considering prevention initiatives.

What types of homeless households do we assist?

Two thirds of those who we assist under homelessness requirements are either households with dependent children or households who are expecting a child. The rest are vulnerable due to issues such as health, disability and age.

Progress since the last strategy

- **Integration of homelessness into a wider housing options team** - when we designed our Housing Options Scheme (launched October 2007) we pulled together services addressing housing needs into one team. Homelessness services are now delivered in conjunction with general housing advice, access to the private rented sector, and specialist functions such as mortgage rescue and help for those experiencing domestic abuse.

Until the start of 2010/11 we had a sufficient supply of properties to ensure that homeless households could be dealt with in a planned way and re-housed under our options scheme rather than making a homelessness application. Since then however, the supply of properties has reduced - we are having to accept more households as homeless and are using bed and breakfast accommodation, including some in other local authority areas.

- **Finding alternative sources of accommodation** - the original private sector leasing scheme referred to in the 2004 action plan ended in 2006/7 when the grant funding stopped. However the Housing Benefit subsidy regime from 2011/12 to 2012/13 has presented us with the opportunity to resume private leasing to meet the needs of those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. In 2011/12 we secured 81 homes under this scheme but the funding ends 31 March 2013 so we are already considering exit strategies for these tenancies and we are developing arrangements for landlords to enter into tenancies with the existing residents where possible.
- **Expand use of private rented accommodation using rent deposit schemes** - since April 2009 we have helped 1035 households to access private rented housing via our Homebond and DIY Bond scheme. Whilst this has decreased significantly due to landlords concerned about the impact of welfare reform, we have been working with the Landlords Forum to develop alternative schemes that landlords will feel able to engage with.
- **Be proactive in addressing homelessness** - Until the start of 2010/11 we had a sufficient supply of properties to ensure that homeless households could be dealt with under our options scheme rather than having to take a homelessness application. Since then however, the supply of properties has reduced, and our increased reliance on bed and breakfast provision has brought into sharp focus the need to move the emphasis back towards prevention work.

- **Make sure that overall there is better use of all housing stock in Milton Keynes** - since the start of 2011 we have recognised the opportunities in having a more rounded approach to the private rented sector. Whereas our Private Rented Housing Team would previously have been primarily involved in enforcement around housing standards, they are now helping us to improve the quality of the private rented and hostel accommodation with which we are involved and developing relationships with landlords, promoting the opportunities available under leasing and Homebond. In December 2011 we launched a Landlord Accreditation Scheme which is intended to improve local confidence in the private rented sector locally
- **Identify preventative work carried out elsewhere** - we have instigated individual projects with our partners to tackle specific issues, and are reviewing our commissioned arrangements to make sure they are in line with our key priorities.
- **Consult and involve service users in developing the service** – we have quarterly 'New Tenant Meetings' - focus groups to which we invite those we have recently housed to come back and tell us about their experiences right from initial approach through to the first few weeks of their new tenancy. We have also been involved with the Tenant Performance Group and the Tenants Forum to examine performance and the future direction for the service and the quarterly Landlords Forum.
- **Make sure that all temporary accommodation is of a good standard** - bed and breakfast is the least satisfactory of the temporary housing options and for most of the period since the last strategy we have been able to minimise our use of it. However in 2010/11 numbers in bed and breakfast increased from 5 to 33 and much of it was in areas outside Milton Keynes where it is harder for us to monitor day to day standards. Since January 2012 we have secured an additional 20 rooms locally.
- **Assess the effectiveness of tenancy support arrangements** - in 2009/10 we re-tendered various tenancy support services under one main contract that is now delivered by Connections. However this contract is due to end in 2013 and at the time of writing we are consider options.
- **Assess homeless applications quickly, fairly and accurately and offer appropriate settled accommodation as quickly as possible to homeless households** - There has traditionally been a reliance on the number of (successful) review requests together with end to end times to tell whether applications are being determined quickly and correctly and this approach still serves us well. End to end times are subject to peaks during periods of higher demand when staff spend more time at the front desk at the expense of casework. This can prolong stays in temporary accommodation.
- **Improve joint working arrangements** - over the years we have commissioned a number of services from the third sector to provide individual services. During 2011/12 these are being reviewed, to ensure that the right services are being

delivered by the right providers, and to seek opportunities to amalgamate services into larger contracts to achieve better value for money.

- **Support effectively those experiencing domestic violence** - we have two officers working part time with MK Act on domestic violence cases, including drop in sessions and on site interviews at MK Act hostels. This is a valuable partnership and was identified on our DCLG critical friend inspection as meeting needs well.
- **Identify the underlying causes of homelessness** - we have identified the three main causes of homelessness as landlords notice to quit on assured short-hold tenancies, friends/family no longer willing and relationship breakdown. These will be the focus of our prevention work for the life of this strategy.
- **Research best practice elsewhere** - we are regularly approached by other local authorities to explain our housing options scheme - in particular how we are able to operate without a traditional waiting list as the localism bill has highlighted us as leaders in this field. We have now started using these opportunities to explore practices elsewhere.
- **Rough sleepers** - the last rough sleeper return in 2011 by survey identified 8 rough sleepers but this was an unusual peak. Our estimates have remained at this very low figure of between 4 and 6. We have a Rough Sleepers Task and Targeting Group including representatives from our Housing Options, Thames Valley Police, Safer Communities and the P3 project to record and track known rough sleepers and map their locations and activities. This offers a co-ordinated response to support rough sleepers back into settled accommodation.

Our 5 priorities and what we will do to achieve them

1. To prevent homelessness

We will do this by:

- Reorganising of the way front line services are delivered, including providing more information on our web page to help people self resolve where possible.
- Ensuring that officers have more time for casework and specific interventions
- Up-skilling of staff for this type of work
- Using mortgage rescue funding to prevent owner occupiers becoming homeless
- Working with landlords to prevent no-fault evictions
- Ensuring appropriate support is in place for households who are struggling to sustain a tenancy
- Having pre-eviction protocols in place with the main social landlords

2. To work in partnership with others

We will do this by:

- Working with Children's Social Care services to jointly assess the need of 16-17 year olds in housing need and develop appropriate plans that meet their needs in line with Southwark Judgement requirements
- Working with commissioned services, including the Citizens Advice Bureau, to ensure appropriate support is in place for households who are struggling to sustain a tenancy
- Work with partner agencies to engage with rough sleepers and get them into settled accommodation as quickly as possible and in line with national 'No Second Night Out' agenda

3. To help households prepare for the impact of welfare reform

We will do this by:

- Working with the our Revenues and Benefits Team to identify people adversely affected by the changes to welfare benefits, and with all our partners to ensure those households receive the help they need to find appropriate solutions

4. To increase the availability of housing for those in need across all tenures

We will do this by:

- Working with private sector landlords and agents to encourage them onto our Landlord Accreditation Scheme
- Working with those landlords to encourage them to accept referrals from us into their tenancies
- Bringing empty homes back into use across all tenures
- Work with the public and our partners to combat social housing fraud

5. To improve social mobility and the life chances of homeless people

We will do this by:

- Discharging our homelessness duty under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 by offering private rented accommodation provided that the tenancy is for at least 12 months and the landlord is registered on the Council's Landlord Accreditation Scheme - particularly where this would avoid a lengthy stay in temporary accommodation
- Ensuring all staff are trained in safeguarding issues and know where to refer cases that need additional support
- Referrals to the Neighbourhood Employment Scheme, which helps people to develop the skills, training and experience they need to enter (or re-enter) the job market