

**HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION FRAMEWORK  
(Report by the Head of Housing Services)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 To inform Cabinet of the progress made with homelessness prevention, and to note and approve the introduction of a Homelessness Prevention Framework to further progress works in this area.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Cabinet received a report on 21 December 2006 which explained the work and initiatives of the Housing Advice & Options team in reducing the instances of homelessness within the district. Cabinet also approved the development of a Prevention Framework for discretionary payments, and the use financial incentives to encourage private landlords to offer tenancies to households, reliant on Housing Benefit, who were threatened with homelessness.
- 2.2 Discussions subsequently took place with landlords and agents regarding the use of incentives and additional payments. Unfortunately though, due to the buoyancy of the private rented market, a significant proportion of agents still do not see the need to offer tenancies to households claiming Housing Benefit and so these properties remain unavailable to many households on low incomes and/or in receipt of Housing Benefit.
- 2.3 Despite this set back, the Council's more proactive approach to tackling homelessness has seen significant results. The number of households assisted under the terms of the safety net of the homelessness legislation has steadily reduced from 207 households in 2005/06 to 160 in 2006/07 to 75 in the first half of 2007/08 (this compares to 92 households in the same period last year). At the same time the number of households where the Council's advice and assistance has prevented homelessness has increased from 98 households in 2005/06 to 131 in 2006/07. From April to the end of September this year 68 households have been assisted, compared to 60 households in the same period last year.
- 2.4 These positive outcomes are as a result of the proactive approach to trying to resolve issues that may lead to a household becoming homeless in the first place, or assisting households to find alternative housing. Given the shortage of opportunities for households to access social rented tenancies via the Council's Housing Register realistic alternative housing options tends to be in the private rented sector. The use of the Council's Rent Deposit/Rent In Advance scheme remains the main tool available to the Advice & Options team in trying to help households access these more realistic housing options in the private sector.
- 2.5 In order to further progress the prevention work a Prevention Framework has been developed to allow officers to use payments for a variety of reasons to prevent a household becoming homeless and require a

placement into temporary accommodation. The benefit of this Framework is that it will ensure initiatives can be speedily approved and funded to generate real solutions for those households facing homelessness.

- 2.6 These types of schemes have been used with great success by some Councils. Central government's good practice guidance also recommends that Councils use these types of schemes and are promoted as an important part of the prevention 'tool kit'. These types of schemes are also known as invest to save schemes.
- 2.7 At the meeting held on 21 December 2006 Cabinet requested submission of further reports outlining the costs of additional incentives and on the overall progress of the initiatives. It is now intended to trial the Prevention Framework until the end of March 2009 and report back on costs and the success of the scheme in preventing and reducing homelessness.
- 2.8 The proposed Framework is appended to this report. Successful schemes are those that allow officers to use their initiative and react quickly to situations that may lead to homelessness. A successful scheme also leads to vulnerable households avoiding the crisis of being faced with homelessness, combined with the Council avoiding the potential costs of placing a household in temporary accommodation.

### **3. IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 Cabinet previously approved additional incentive payments to landlords (in the report of 21 December 2006). This was to be funded from the reimbursed costs from Defra, received in connection with the remedial works at the Mobile Home Park which met some staffing costs already included in the revenue budget. As mentioned in the previous report to Cabinet it is proposed to use this funding to pilot the effectiveness of prevention payments.
- 3.2 The Council's performance in terms of how it tackles homelessness has historically been measured via a number of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs), together with its progress towards achieving a 50% reduction in the use of temporary accommodation by 2010. Although the BVPIs are changing this year, the average length of stay of households in hostel accommodation and the number of cases where homelessness is prevented will still be collected nationally. Progress towards the reduction in the use of temporary accommodation is also monitored and affects whether the Council continues to receive its Homelessness Grant allocation (currently £42,000 per year). Failure to meet this target, and milestones in achieving this target, may result in the withdrawal of the Council's Homelessness Grant.
- 3.3 A successful Homelessness Prevention Framework for discretionary payments will help alleviate homelessness amongst some of the most vulnerable households in the community. It will also assist with improved performance against the BVPIs, contribute to an overall reduction in the use of temporary accommodation, and ultimately help achieve the Council's 2010 temporary accommodation target. This in turn contributes to a more positive assessment in the Audit Commission's assessment of the Direction of Travel of the Council.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

- 4.1 A successful Prevention Framework for discretionary payments can contribute to a reduction in numbers of households having to rely on the safety net of the homelessness legislation. This has benefits for the household, in that the upheaval and trauma of homelessness may be avoided, and also for the Council in that there is a reduced need to place households in temporary accommodation, avoiding the costs associated with this.
- 4.2 Further benefits may be gained in terms of the Council's performance against BVPIs, the Council's temporary accommodation target and the overall Direction of Travel of the Council.

#### **5. RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that Cabinet note the successes already achieved in the prevention of homelessness and approve the Homelessness Prevention Policy Framework for discretionary payments.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Homelessness Prevention A Good Practice Guide – DCLG 2006  
Homelessness Prevention & Housing Options Initiatives – Cabinet Report – 21  
December 2006

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**Housing Services****Homelessness Prevention Framework for Discretionary Payments****Introduction**

The Homelessness Prevention Framework for discretionary payments has been developed as pilot to support the Council's preventative approach to homelessness. Sometimes labelled "spend to save" prevention funds, these are being used successfully by Councils across the country. The scheme enables Councils to spend relatively small amounts of money to prevent homelessness thereby saving a larger amount of money that would otherwise be spent on Bed and Breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation.

The scheme provides Housing Advice & Options officers with access to a fund of money via a clear and simple process. The benefit of this scheme is that it will ensure innovative ideas can be speedily approved and funded to generate real solutions for those households facing homelessness and provide real alternatives to the use of temporary accommodation.

The Framework will allow Housing Advice & Options officers to assess a household's current situation and enable consideration of cost effective solutions to meet their housing needs.

**Benefits of the Framework**

The benefits from the scheme are seen as:

- Reduction of the number of homeless applications
- Reduction in households in Bed and Breakfast
- Providing real and cost effective options to households threatened with homelessness
- The potential to realise savings that may be re-invested into the preventive agenda
- A reduction in the crisis management approach to dealing with homelessness.

**Criteria for use of the Framework**

The fund will be used where:

- There is reason to believe the household is homeless or threatened with homelessness, in priority need and unintentionally homeless. (Consideration may be given, in exceptional circumstances to households found to be intentionally homeless if this prevents placement in B&B).
- Failure to do so would result in a household being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Medium to long term solutions are available to avoid homelessness or the threat of homelessness.

The payments will provide:

- A maximum grant of £1,500 per household, although the Head of Housing Services may authorise a higher payment in exceptional circumstances
- One payment per household (If relocation is required and a further payment is required, an amount additional to the original payment can be considered)

No cash payments will be made to applicants under this scheme.

### **Prevention Options that may be considered**

Payments may be made for the following, although this list is not seen as exhaustive:

- Rent in advance payments
- Bonds
- Damage deposits
- Rent “top ups” and tenancy sustainment payments
- Payments in respect of shortfalls or delays in Housing Benefit payments
- Rent arrears payments to housing associations and private landlords\*
- Agency fee payments
- One off payments for furniture removals and house clearance
- Financial incentives to delay the eviction of private tenants\*
- Rent guarantees for housing associations
- Court Costs for housing associations and private tenants\*
- Travel Costs

\*Payments to housing associations and private landlords will only be made where there is an undertaking not to evict tenant and allow tenant to remain in their home for at least one year. If a landlord takes further action to evict the tenant, without good reason, within the year, the Council may not make further payments under this scheme to that landlord for a period of 1 year.

### **Procedure for Accessing Prevention Fund**

#### **Role of Housing Advice & Options Officer**

- i) At housing options assessment interview / visit consideration must be made as to whether their needs can be met by utilising a prevention payment
- ii) The Advice & Options officer should establish that the household still has accommodation available to them and then consider whether use of the prevention payment can be used to assist them in maintaining or gaining that tenancy
- iii) Establish whether use of prevention payment is viable e.g. Where private landlord has served a notice for damage to property, will the landlord accept payment? Will the landlord allow household to remain at the property?
- iv) If the Advice & Options officer feels that housing options are available by use of a prevention payment a Prevention Payment Application form must be completed and signed by the Advice & Options officer.
- v) The application must be discussed and agreed with the applicant, including how reviews will take place with the applicant. The Application must then be countersigned by the Senior Advice & Options officer or the Housing Needs & Resources Manager.

- vi) A record of the application, whether it was approved and the outcome of the prevention work with the household must be kept on the monitoring spreadsheet.
- vii) If the application is approved the Advice & Options officer must inform the applicant and any other interested parties e.g. Landlord, of the outcome and any conditions relating to repayment.
- viii) Where an application is approved for more than £1500 the Head of Housing Services must approve and counter-sign the application.
- ix) If the application is rejected the Advice & Options officer will be responsible for advising household and other interested parties of the decision and reasons.
- x) The Advice & Options officer will be responsible for ensuring that any payment is processed and forwarded to the appropriate person
- xi) The Advice & Options officer will monitor the success of any prevention payment and update the monitoring systems accordingly.
- xii) The Advice & Options officer will ensure that reviews are undertaken within agreed timescales.
- i) The Advice & Options officer and Senior Advice & Options officer will sign the monitoring Review Form following the review of the case.

#### **Role of the Senior Advice & Options Officer**

- i) Will be responsible for discussing any proposed application with the Advice & Options officer to ensure that prevention payment is a viable option and agree monitoring timescale.
- ii) Will ensure the Advice & Options officer advises household of outcome of Prevention Payment Application and that payment is made to appropriate person
- ii) Will ensure the review of the case is completed and appropriate Review Form completed and counter-signed.

#### **Role of the Housing Needs & Resources Manager**

- i) Will ensure effective budget monitoring and management of prevention payments
- ii) Will receive and consider applications for payments by way of prevention payments
- iii) Monitor the use and success of the scheme so that its contribution to a reduction in homelessness can be analysed and a decision reached on the possible continuation of the scheme.