

Topic Title:	Homelessness Services
Officer Lead:	Divisional Manager, Commissioning
Planned start date:	August 2011
Target PPB Meeting:	November 2011

Topic description and scope:

An assessment of the Council’s statutory duties and preventative role in relation to homelessness and a review of the services provided with a particular focus on temporary accommodation services.

Why this topic was chosen:

Councils have a range of duties to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in 28 days, at the very least they are obliged to provide advice and assistance on housing options and some households are owed the main homelessness duty, which is the provision of settled accommodation. Local authorities are also expected to implement services to prevent homelessness. More information on the local authority homelessness role, both statutory and preventative, can be found at Appendix 1.

To respond to the housing needs of those who are homeless, it is necessary to provide a range of temporary accommodation that can be accessed in emergencies until settled accommodation can be found. There are a number of temporary accommodation schemes operating in Halton.

It is good practice to periodically assess the effectiveness of services provided for those who are homeless and this review is part of that process. The results will also feed into the wider strategic review of homelessness and development of the borough’s next Homelessness Strategy in 2012.

Key outputs and outcomes sought:

- An understanding of the local authority homelessness role and the services provided in Halton (see Supporting Information at Appendix 1).
- A review of the provision and effectiveness of temporary accommodation and other homelessness services in Halton with a view to identifying gaps in the service and potential efficiencies that can be made.
- Consider and make recommendations to the Healthy Halton PPB on how best to improve standards in the service.

Which of Halton’s 5 strategic priorities this topic addresses and the key objectives and improvement targets it will help to achieve:

A Healthy Halton:

To remove barriers that disable people and contribute to poor health by working across partnerships to address the wider determinants of health such

as unemployment, education and skills, housing, crime and environment.

A Safer Halton:

To tackle the problem of domestic abuse in all its forms, supporting the victims and their families and taking enforcement action against perpetrators.

Environment and Regeneration in Halton:

Provide sustainable, good quality, affordable and adaptable residential accommodation to meet the needs of all sections of society.

Nature of expected/desired PPB input:

Member led scrutiny review of homelessness services.

Preferred mode of operation:

Scrutiny working group of selected Members from Health Halton PPB involving representatives from relevant partner agencies and relevant Council officers:

- Desk-top review and performance analysis of current service provision.
- Literature review/examination of best practice in other local authority areas.
- Site visits to temporary accommodation schemes – YMCA, Belvedere, Halton Goals, Orchard House, Grangeway Court and Women’s Aid.

Agreed and signed by:

PPB chair

Officer

Date

Date

APPENDIX 1

Scrutiny Review of Homelessness Services Supporting Information

The Local Authority Homelessness Role – Statutory and Preventative

Communities and Local Government (CLG) define homelessness as ‘a lack of secure accommodation that can reasonably be occupied’.

The homelessness legislation is contained in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002).

Councils have a range of duties to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness (meaning they are at risk of becoming homeless within 28 days).

All households are entitled to receive advice and assistance from the Council and for those who are classified as statutory homeless (eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless, in priority need and with a local connection) the Council must provide settled accommodation (if it is not immediately available, temporary accommodation must be provided in the meantime). This is known as the main homelessness duty.

The offer of a settled home, i.e. nomination for a housing association tenancy, brings the homelessness duty to an end.

In addition, those who are in priority need but intentionally homeless (i.e. homeless because they did, or failed to do, something that then caused homelessness) must be provided with temporary accommodation for a period that will allow them to find settled accommodation themselves.

To be classified as in priority need the household must contain dependent children or be vulnerable in some way (e.g. as a result of old age, disability, the threat of violence or being aged 16-17).

Ever since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, local authorities have been expected to prevent, as well as to respond to homelessness. The Homelessness Act 2002 further encouraged local authorities to be more proactive in tackling homelessness through the production of a Homelessness Strategy, which should be based on a review of homelessness in the local area. The review would increase an authority’s understanding of the causes of homelessness in the area, which would allow them to develop a range of measures to appropriately prevent homelessness.

Homelessness prevention focuses on identifying those at risk of homelessness and intervening as early as possible in order to facilitate the household remaining in their current home or making a planned move from one settled home to another.

Services in Halton

The **Council's Housing Solutions Service** (within the Communities Directorate) performs the local authority functions in relation to homelessness. Access to the service is principally via the Council's Halton Direct Link (HDL) Service.

All those who present to the Service are offered an interview with a Housing Solutions Adviser where the possibilities for resolving their housing problem are explored, which may include making a statutory homeless application.

Those who are accepted as statutory homeless are given top priority on the Council's Housing Register, which is managed on the Council's behalf by Halton Housing Trust.

A range of **prevention services** are also provided through Housing Solutions for those who are at risk of homelessness, in addition, those who are not owed the main homelessness duty are also helped via this advice and assistance route. Some of the prevention services are detailed further below.

Mediation

Family breakdown is a primary cause of homelessness, often arising from problems between parents and adult children – this is particularly the case in Halton. Therefore, Housing Solutions work closely with families to re-establish relationships and enable the young person to continue living in the family home where this is appropriate.

Supported Lodgings (Nightstop)

A supported lodgings scheme has been developed, which enables young people to stay with a volunteer host family for an emergency period whilst more suitable short-term housing is found or until mediation leads to the young person returning to the family home.

Domestic Abuse Sanctuary Scheme

This scheme allows victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home by fitting enhanced security measures to deter the abusive partner (who will usually have been excluded from the property via an injunction).

Bond Guarantee Scheme

The BGS enables households to secure a private tenancy through a guarantee that the Council will pay the landlord up to £500 to cover any financial loss in lieu of a deposit should any problems arise in the first year of tenancy. This scheme offers an alternative route for those who are unable to access other forms of accommodation.

Mortgage support

The current economic climate has led to an increased number of people finding themselves in mortgage difficulty and Halton has been identified by CLG as a national 'hotspot' for repossessions. In response to this, Halton established a Repossessions Action Plan and Working Group to bring together the work of various agencies in the borough in preventing repossessions.

Housing Solutions has a dedicated Mortgage Rescue Adviser to help those who are facing repossession by providing advice on the help available, negotiating with mortgage lenders and attending court hearings.

Home Essentials Fund

Many homeless households are without the means to furnish a new home. The lack of furniture and essential equipment can make people reluctant to move from temporary accommodation and can contribute to abandonment of new tenancies. In Halton, this is particularly the case for younger people.

In an effort to help towards the cost of setting up a new home, the Council has established a Home Essentials Fund, which those aged 16-25 can access if they have become unintentionally homeless and have been provided temporary accommodation in one of the borough's hostels. The Council will purchase items (up to a total value of £300) from a set list on behalf of the customer to help towards the costs of fully furnishing their home.

Housing Solutions also advise or refer customers to other organisations for advice on a **wider range of tenancy sustainment** issues, to ensure early intervention in the homelessness risk process. Services to aid tenancy sustainment include:

- Provision of debt, welfare rights, benefit maximisation and budgeting advice via the Council's own Welfare Rights Service or referral onto organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB);
- Outreach support to help those who abuse drugs/alcohol to develop the skills needed to manage a home;
- Long-term supported housing alongside community based and outreach support for those with mental health problems to enable them to settle in the community after discharge from hospital;
- Floating support around maintaining a home for key risk groups increasing their capacity to live independently and developing their money management abilities; and in addition
- Registered Providers of social housing also have their own early intervention mechanisms to support tenants falling into arrears.

Temporary Accommodation in Halton

Grangeway Court

There are 32 self-contained units and access is generally only for those accepted as statutory homeless and mainly for pregnant women or homeless families with dependent children.

Women's Aid

A domestic violence hostel is available for those escaping domestic violence and access is direct or by referral (there are 15 bed-spaces).

Hostels

There are four hostels in Halton providing a total of 121 bed-spaces, only 10 of which are in Widnes. YMCA and Belvedere offer support to those over the age of 18, with the other schemes being focused on those aged 16 to 25.

The *YMCA* is the largest hostel in Halton and is based in Runcorn; it has 66 units for single people.

Belvedere is based in Runcorn and offers accommodation for 23 people.

Halton Goals main service is based in Runcorn and offers 22 units of accommodation; in addition the service supports four units of move on accommodation in Widnes.

Orchard House (Widnes) provides six accommodation units for young people with complex needs.

References

Halton's Homelessness Strategy 2009-2013 and Strategic Review 2008

Housing Act 1996, Part 7

Homelessness Code of Guidance 2006

Homelessness Prevention: A guide to good practice (2006)