

Preventative Strategies in Homelessness:  
A special report for Purbeck District Council

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## Introduction

This report builds upon and considers the implications of the *Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008*. In particular, it seeks to identify and offer suggestions as to the different ways in which homelessness might be prevented in the district of Purbeck, and to ensure that the local authority and its agents, contractors and other external bodies remain focused on developing systems that prevent rather than exacerbate homelessness.

As a starting point, this report relies on a number of conclusions and key facts that emerge from the Homelessness Strategy. These suggest that the main causes of homelessness in the area are as a result of:

- Parents, relatives and friends no longer willing or able to provide accommodation;
- Relationship breakdown;
- End of assured shorthold tenancies.

Similarly, it acknowledges the district's housing profile. Here there is a significantly higher number of owner-occupied properties than in other areas within Dorset and a corresponding lower number of properties in the private and social housing rented sectors. Given that the ending of assured shorthold tenancies is a major cause of homelessness in the district, then creating and maintaining a vibrant private sector must remain an important element of any preventative strategy.

Many of the strategies identified within the body of this report reflect on those identified in the earlier Homelessness Strategy. While there is a danger of repetition, the points raised in this report intend to be more wide ranging and offer a sense of clarity that sometimes can only come from an independent report.

The notion of independence is important. As a consultant, the author is aware that he can offer suggestions and make statements that senior officers might find themselves unable or unwilling to make. Similarly, he is aware of the fact that, as an 'outsider looking in', he can ask questions that would otherwise raise eyebrows. It is essential to note that the suggestions made in this report are entirely those of the author, and any criticisms offered are confidential, with the intention of provoking debate and reflection. They are offered on the basis of being a 'friend', and are designed to improve service effectiveness.

## Homelessness Prevention at the Centre of Local Authority Business

In recent years, the expectations and demands placed on local authorities have grown significantly as central government has sought to tackle the problem of homelessness and the corresponding social issues. As a result, authorities have witnessed a widening of the scope of those entitled to be considered as vulnerable and in priority need. At the same time, they have found themselves subject to meeting increasing standards and targets, such as those relating to the use of temporary accommodation that should be made available to homeless households, and the length of time that homeless families with children should expect to be kept in Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

Traditionally, the responsibility for meeting such demands and expectations has remained solely within local authority departmental and divisional structures relating to housing and homelessness. As such, Purbeck District Council is not unlike many other local authorities, irrespective of whether that local authority has continued to manage its own housing stock. Increasingly, however, the nature of the preventative strategies needed to address both the demand in the number of homelessness cases and the expectations of central government require local authorities to adopt a 'joined-up' or cross-departmental approach to addressing housing need. This would ensure that the prevention of homelessness becomes central to the local authority's business, and would therefore require the involvement and commitment of all departments and officers in the authority. Indeed, as noted below, an effective and meaningful landlord accreditation scheme/compact will require the involvement and co-operation of disparate parts of the local authority.

The inclusion of diverse departments and services, such as those involving leisure and refuse collection, in devising a preventive approach to homelessness would help the authority to address the following question:

- To what extent do the different local authority services prevent homelessness and promote housing opportunities with the public?

One way to begin answering such a question might be to conduct an authority-wide audit of all departmental services, exploring the extent to which policy, guidance and practice impacts on those who are either

homeless or vulnerable to homelessness. Some examples of the potential questions that need addressing would include:

- Does the local authority effectively use its rights under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by the Planning and Compensation Act 1991) to secure an increase in the number of units of social housing?
- Do the policies and practices of the Housing Benefit system reduce or exacerbate the number of people struggling with 'rent arrears' or experiencing landlord-tenant problems?

The local authority might want to review various aspects of the Housing Benefit system, paying particular attention to:

- The nature of the information that landlords and tenants receive regarding Housing Benefit;
  - Undertaking further research concerning whether current levels of Housing Benefit cause debt and contribute to homelessness;
  - Trying to ensure that Housing Benefit payments coincide with rental periods;
  - Ensuring that Housing Benefit is paid promptly;
  - Ensuring that the use of Interim Awards becomes standard practice for those in housing need;
  - Ensuring that changes in circumstances are dealt with speedily.
- Does the practice of the Environmental Health Department exacerbate landlord-tenant relationship problems and increase housing insecurity?

The local authority is also encouraged to consider the need to establish a 'joined-up' approach to the processes and systems through which it allocates funds to local community projects and voluntary organisations. In particular, it is encouraged to consider the following questions:

- Are members and senior officers always aware of what money has been allocated by whom, to what organisation, and for what purpose or objective?
- Are members and senior officers advised as to the effectiveness of the services funded in meeting the authority's targets?

Unfortunately, in many authorities, it is often the case that departmental committees allocate funds to voluntary projects with little or no recourse to the other departmental committees within that authority. Further, on

occasions, funds are allocated without reference to committee specific objectives. Given this situation, Purbeck District Council is encouraged to consider whether it should ensure that:

- Cabinet groups and sub-groups allocating funding are better informed of the decisions made by other groups within the local authority;
- The funding provided is evaluated and monitored against the purpose originally stated;
- Prioritisation is given to those services that adopt preventative measures in helping those in housing need, or respond to those in housing crisis;
- Funding is not provided to those agencies that appear to offer referral services;
- Funding is only offered to those that can demonstrate quality assurance mechanisms and standards in their work. These should include:
  - quality of training given to staff;
  - access to on-going training and development support of advice workers;
  - the standard of resources available to workers;
  - access to, and use of, secondary advice services (such as second tier advice agencies/solicitors);
  - mechanisms that review the nature and quality of advice that is provided to individual members of the public.

In addition to, or instead of, the provision of funds, the local authority should also consider the practicality of providing a wider range of services to those voluntary and charitable organisations that seek to prevent or address homelessness in the district. Such services might include legal advice, help with the payment of salaries and the management of financial systems, or assistance in identifying alternative sources of funding and in the subsequent completion of grant applications.

## Understanding the Homeless Population

So that the local authority can formulate the most effective and appropriate strategies for the prevention of homelessness, it needs to understand the nature of the homeless profile that exists at any given time. This requires reliable statistical data gathering processes and an effective system for officers to monitor and analyse that data. The local authority needs to ensure that such systems are in place.

As noted above, the *Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008* identified that the three main causes of homelessness in the district are related to:

- Parents, relatives and friends no longer willing or able to provide accommodation;
- Relationship breakdown;
- End of assured shorthold tenancies.

Clearly, if the local authority wishes to be effective in reducing the number of homeless households and in preventing the current incidence of homelessness reoccurring, it might be assumed that, as a starting point, preventative strategies should focus on these three groups. However, at this point, the local authority should proceed with caution. The reason for this relates to issues concerning a lack of consistency in the report's use of variables and definitions, particularly when they relate to the categories used by central government in the quarterly returns (P1Es). Specifically, the council's report has, on two occasions, decided to group different categories of homeless people together. Thus, while central government's P1E returns require local authorities to distinguish between those who are made homeless as a result of parents no longer willing or able to provide accommodation, and those who are made homeless as a result of friends no longer willing or able to provide accommodation, the report does not. Neither does it appear to distinguish between those who experience relationship breakdown and those who experience domestic violence.

There is a need to revisit the data in the Homelessness Strategy and adopt the variables and categories defined and followed by central government. The reason for this is that the preventative measures which might be suitable for those who have become homeless as a result of one particular reason, might not be suitable for those who have become homeless for another.

Given this situation, the author finds himself in a difficult situation with regard to the suggestions and recommendations he can make. Despite

this, it is clear that a number of steps need to be taken, and these relate to ensuring that reliable information is collected from those who apply as homeless. Thus, with regard to those who are made homeless as a result of parents unwilling or unable to accommodate, the local authority should consider whether it might seek to secure the following additional information:

- Identifying the tenure (and landlord where appropriate) of the property of the parents. (This might lead the local authority to request that the landlord assists in devising or funding solutions/preventative services). It is important to note that some young people may be forced by parents to leave a property where the parents or other members of the household may be guilty of anti-social behaviour/neighbour nuisance. Tackling anti-social behaviour/neighbour nuisance at an early stage, by negotiation or mediation, may either highlight potential parent-child problems (in which case mediation may be used as a remedy) or reduce the likelihood of youth homelessness occurring.
- Identifying whether an applicant's siblings have previously been housed as homeless. (At the present time, the authority does not know whether the rate of sibling homelessness in the district is significant. High rates of sibling homelessness may lead the authority to devise some focused work on families/young people at risk.)
- Identifying the underlying reasons why the young person might be made homeless. (The household could be overcrowded and 'evicting' a family member might therefore be quicker than the time it would take to re-house the whole family. Here, the local authority needs to consider whether it might be helpful to move the household *en mass* to more appropriate accommodation, rather than house them in two properties.)

Further work could also be undertaken around the type of information that should be gathered from those who are made homeless as a result of the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy. Here, some additional attention might include:

- Identifying whether the reason the landlord gives for possession (return to live; modernisation; sale) is actually carried out;
- Identifying whether trends occur in certain towns/streets or with particular landlords. Such information may lead to more focused services such as Independent Living Support.

Further work is required across all causes of homelessness to identify whether any households have experienced serial/repeat homelessness. It is also the case that the local authority could draw on data gathered by a range of organisations providing services to homeless people in the district. Such data could confirm or predict trends, and may act to indicate the success or otherwise of the preventative strategies adopted. The main stumbling block to this, however, is the fact that inter-agency data is not collated, but when it is, it should be done in a systematic manner. Often the information held by different agencies is recorded in a different format. As a result, it is not always possible to gather a full and accurate picture of the nature of homelessness in the district.

Given this scenario, the local authority could consider working with agencies to devise a shared case recording sheet to be used by all organisations across the district. Failing this, they might consider making such a requirement linked to future funding.

## Preventative Strategies Relating to the Three Main Reasons for Homelessness

Despite the methodological limitations implicit in the report *Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008*, three reasons were identified as causing a significant contribution to the incidence of homelessness in the district, as detailed below. The local authority could adopt a number of strategies to reduce the incidence of homelessness in the district, which might include the following:

Homelessness as a result of parents unwilling or no longer able to accommodate

Leaving home is usually regarded as a staged move towards independent living, where young adults are able to draw on the support offered by parents and wider family members, and where opportunities for returning home on a temporary basis might continue to be available. Indeed, some young people might find it necessary to return to the parental home on a number of different occasions.

Those who are made homeless through parents no longer willing or able to accommodate are not always likely to have the ongoing support of parents and wider family members. Here, independence is often sudden as opposed to gradual, and many young people will lack the day-to-day skills that independence requires. In many instances, the homelessness that results will involve one of a number of other social issues that the young person is experiencing. It must be noted that the failure to return and seek support will also increase the likelihood of young people being vulnerable to further episodes of homelessness.

At present, the local authority knows very little about the population of homeless young people who come to it for help, advice and assistance, and again the issue of gathering more detailed data of their circumstances arises. Such data might allow us to understand whether:

- The applicant has had a sibling who was previously given assistance/accommodation as homeless;
- The parents of applicants have a particular form of housing tenure or a particular landlord. (As noted elsewhere, if the local authority is able to demonstrate a prevalence of one registered social landlord among young homeless applicants, this might form the basis of discussions between the local authority and the landlord regarding the funding and management of a preventive strategy.)

It is evident that the most effective preventative strategy to either stop homelessness occurring or ensure that leaving home is more planned

and organised than it might otherwise be, is the funding of a parent-child mediation scheme. While the information identified above might allow the service to be focused at the most vulnerable groups, the funding should be closely monitored and linked to clear evidence of success.

## Breakdown of Adult Relationships

The breakdown of adult relationships has a major impact on housing need across all sectors. While the authority cannot turn back the tide of national trends, it should consider funding mediation services for couples. Indeed, it might consider working with one or more registered social landlords and pilot such services for a group of tenants in order to assess the success of such a strategy.

## Violent Breakdown of Adult Relationships

Women escaping domestic violence should not be offered mediation services in order to increase the likelihood of them returning to their abusing partner. The local authority will agree that the focus of attention cannot be on encouraging reconciliation between the woman and her abuser. However, with the right level of services and support, women may be able to maintain their tenancies or be resettled into alternative accommodation with as little disruption as possible. In this instance, the Dorset Women's Outreach Project, which operates in other parts of the county and which is linked to county-wide ancillary services and emergency accommodation, becomes an essential service for the local authority to support.

While women and children escaping domestic abuse require immediate, safe and anonymous temporary accommodation, the demands on longer-term housing solutions may encourage the local authority to reconsider how their long-term housing needs may be met. These might include:

### **Owner Occupied Sector**

Ensuring that the woman registers an interest in the property and encouraging her to use the capital to address her longer-term housing needs (such as through shared ownership schemes). Further work will be needed with registered social landlords.

### **Social Housing Sector**

The local authority is encouraged to consider how it might work with registered social landlords to deal with male perpetrators who remain in the family home. A single person living in a two or three bed property is a waste of resources, and while the numbers of men falling into this category are likely to be low, a strategy that deals with this will ease waiting lists.

## Ending of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy

Assured shorthold tenancies are likely to be brought to an end for a number of reasons and this makes identifying a strategy to reduce the incidence of homelessness difficult. The most typical reasons for possession may include:

- To increase the rent;
- To free the property:
  - For sale;
  - For the landlord to return to live;
  - For conversion;
  - For another rental market (e.g. holiday accommodation).

As noted above, the local authority should take steps to ensure that the reasons given by a tenant and landlord during a homelessness application/investigation are actually carried out. This is because the landlord's reasons may mask a number of issues that the authority could have resolved with the landlord and original tenant, thus making the homelessness unnecessary. Mediation might prove to be a useful way forward because the underlying factors that contribute to a decision to regain possession, but which might not be communicated to the local authority, could be resolved without further action.

More detailed data collection, gathered as a result of a homelessness application and the subsequent investigation, might offer further insight into trends, which would then contribute towards the development of an appropriate strategy. Here, for example, there is a need to include details of the applicant's last property, including the street or area of a town, and the name of the landlord. If the problem of assured shorthold tenancies is centred on certain geographical areas, such information may inform the work of an Independent Living Project, and determine the precise outcomes that the local authority will expect in lieu of funding.

Strategies seeking to reduce the number of households becoming homeless as a consequence of the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy cannot and should not be divorced from those that set out to increase both the number of properties in the private rented sector and standards in the quality of accommodation offered. In undertaking this work, the local authority should consider:

- Creating a landlords' forum to develop good practice, standards, consistency and to provide an opportunity for landlords to express their needs as local business people. The local authority could consider including representation from those agencies that support the business community (Dorset Chamber of Commerce and Industry);

- Developing a landlord accreditation scheme/compact with the private rented sector, outlining expectations, principles of service, and offering any additional services such as private sector leasing arrangements;
- Regarding the withdrawal of a landlord from private sector renting as both a business failure as well as a housing problem, and respond to the issue as such. (This highlights the need for 'joined-up' thinking across departmental/committee boundaries.)
- Exploring ways in which Buy to Let and private renting might be better promoted;
- Using housing improvement/environmental grants to assist landlords in improving property and raising standards;
- Undertaking/updating an Empty Property Survey and devising a strategy to respond to findings;
- Re-appraising the Living Over The Shops initiative.

## Ancillary Issues

### Independent Living Support

One of the key issues evident in the Homelessness Strategy is a need to ensure that tenants in private sector accommodation are able to maintain such accommodation in the medium to long term (measured as being well in excess of the length of a six-month shorthold). An Independent Living Project (focused on budgetary skills, enhancing employment and educational opportunities, cookery, DIY, and other aspects of home management) should equip tenants, and particularly young people and other vulnerable tenants, with the skills to maintain accommodation.

While there may be some evidence that points to the effectiveness of projects that are not focused on client groups/areas or types of accommodation, the local authority could consider funding projects that:

- Are provided to those landlords in the private sector who join an accreditation scheme/long-term leasing arrangement;
- Are focused on those landlords/properties/areas in which the incidence of homelessness as a result of the end of an assured shorthold tenancy is particularly problematic.

### Supported Housing Projects

Short-term supported housing projects for both young people and other vulnerable groups are liable to become 'silted up' soon after opening. This means that accommodation originally meant for periods of between 6 and 24 months are fast becoming semi-permanent. Some young people have to balance personal relationships with commitments to young children in such accommodation. Unfortunately, there are usually few incentives for landlords to secure move-on accommodation for such residents, as 100% occupancy rates usually leads to maximising rental income. While some landlords are unable to exercise an influence on the nature and availability of move-on accommodation, the local authority may wish to ensure that discussions regarding future developments require landlords to explain how move-on accommodation for new tenants will be provided.

The local authority should be applauded for continuing to ensure that general-purpose social housing development is made available for this group of people.

### Money Advice Services

At present, mortgage and rent arrears do not appear to be problematic in the area. However, it is likely that, as result of the paucity of rented accommodation, rental increases might be an underlying factor in the ending of assured shorthold tenancies. The author has not seen the most recent Housing Conditions Survey, but it is possible that some tenants

are paying a high percentage of their income towards fuel costs. It is likely that these people will represent the poorest part of the local population. As a consequence, many are likely to suffer fuel debt. Further work with Money Advice Services could prove useful in addressing this aspect of housing need.

### Potential Areas for Further Research

The local authority may wish to consider the following research needs in helping it devise wider preventative strategies:

- Research that considers the routes by which local residents gain access to housing;
- Research that considers the routes by which those who are deemed intentionally homeless and/or not in priority need gain access to housing;
- Research on the housing careers that are pursued by local people throughout the course of their life.