

**Epping Forest District Council**

**HOUSING DIRECTORATE  
STRATEGY ON  
HOUSING ADVICE**

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 This strategy sets out the Housing Directorate's approach to the provision of housing advice. The Council works in partnership with the three Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) in the District to provide a range of advice and to support to those who may be experiencing difficulties with their housing situation.
- 1.2 The Council has quarterly liaison meetings with CAB Managers which is chaired by the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) with the Housing Options Manager and the Area Housing Managers also being in attendance. The purpose of the meetings is to enable updates on matters of policy and also to discuss serious cases which may have arisen.
- 1.4 The C.A.B. have offices in Epping, Loughton and Waltham Abbey and outreach services at the Council's homeless persons hostel Norway House in North Weald, the Health Centre in Chigwell and the library in Ongar. There is also a home visiting service for people who are housebound.
- 1.5 Local housing authorities have a statutory duty to offer advice and assistance on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. They also have a duty to ensure that an allocations scheme for determining priorities for allocating social housing is available for inspection and that a summary is available, on request, free of charge. This strategy sets out how the advice offered by the Housing Directorate and the C.A.B. will be delivered and monitored.
- 1.6 This strategy was developed in consultation with the three CAB Managers, the Tenants and Leaseholders Association and the Housing Scrutiny Panel. It was formally approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder on xxxxxx.

**2. Background to the Service**

- 2.1 Advice and assistance on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness can encompass a wide range of issues. The Housing Options Section, based at the Civic Offices in Epping, has 5 FTE officers dedicated to homeless prevention work. These officers provide a link to a range of other housing options, which are set out in the Council's Homelessness Strategy.
- 2.2 The provision of housing advice is a specialist area and includes debt management, with appropriate cases to be referred to the C.A.B. Other agencies and organisations to which enquirers may be directed by housing officers include: the Alcohol and Drugs Advisory Service; the Community Drugs and Alcohol Team; Social Care; the Department of Social Security; Connexions; Voluntary Action in Epping Forest; Victim Support; Harlow Women's Aid and the Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme.

- 2.3 The Housing Options Section, when giving advice liaise with other Sections within the Council, for example, the Housing Benefit Division. In addition, Private Sector Housing would deal with any private landlord issues where there may have been harassment, illegal evictions, properties in need of repair, (including those which are unfit for habitation) and matters regarding houses in multiple occupation.
- 2.4 Housing Options staff also offer advice on charitable and other organisations assisting homeless people, sourcing privately rented accommodation and shared ownership schemes.
- 2.5 Advice is available on a range of legal matters including Notices to Quit, rent levels, property rights in cases of relationship breakdown, interim and temporary accommodation and related licences, access to Housing Registers and registered social landlords, assignments by way of mutual exchange, rights in respect of access to files and reviews and appeals.
- 2.6 The Council works in partnership with In Touch Support who is funded by the Supporting People programme. In Touch provide support vulnerable tenants and formerly homeless people living in interim and temporary accommodation with the aim of preventing repeat homelessness.

### **3. Coverage**

- 3.1 In summary, housing advice encompasses –
- (a) Assisting people who may be threatened with losing their home through the homelessness prevention service;
  - (b) Providing Interim or Temporary accommodation to appropriate applicants; and
  - (c) Providing general housing advice to any person who approaches the Council in accordance with its statutory duties.

### **4. Relationship with other Documents**

- 4.1. This Strategy forms part of the Council's overall Housing Strategy and the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. The Provision of Housing Advice is also included in the Homelessness Strategy.
- 4.2 The Council has adopted a Housing Charter, and Service Standards which set out the promises made to its customers, and gives full details of the services that they can expect to receive. The performance against the standards are reported annually to the Tenants and Leaseholder's Federation and the Housing Scrutiny Panel.
- 4.3. The Council follows the guide set out in the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice in Rented Housing.
- 4.4. The Council follows advice from central government set out in circulars including the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities and Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Housing Authorities.

4.5 The following Government guides are made available

- Assured and assured short-hold tenancies – a guide for landlords
- Letting your home
- Letting Rooms in Your Home –a guide for landlords and their tenants
- Assured and assured short-hold tenancies – a guide for tenants

4.6 The Housing Directorate produces its Housing Allocations Scheme and a summary leaflet, which sets out the Council's policies on these matters.

4.7 An application pack for the Housing Register is provided including: a summary of the Housing Allocations Scheme, entitled "Moving Home with the Council" which includes advice on mutual exchanges, the formal application including guidance notes, and an information booklet.

4.8 All applicants are also sent a HomeOption Scheme User Guide which gives detailed information on how to participate in the Council's HomeOption choice based lettings scheme and also suggests other housing options. In addition, a fortnightly free-sheet is available for all applicants on the Housing Register which advertises all available Council and housing association vacancies in which applicants can express an interest.

4.9 In addition to the literature detailed above, which is freely available, important items of general interest are included in a newsletter, "Housing News", which is sent, usually quarterly, to tenants and, when appropriate, to housing applicants as well.

4.10 Information about these services is also available on the Council's website at [www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing](http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing).

## **5.Aims and Objectives**

5.1. The aim of the Council's Strategy on Housing Advice is:

" To ensure that housing advice is readily available, free of charge, to anyone in need of it, enabling them to explore their options and understand the possible consequences of certain courses of action".

5.2. The aim of this Strategy will be met by:

5.3 Providing the Council's tenants with information on the express terms of their tenancies, including their statutory rights in respect of assignments, successions and assignments by way of mutual exchange.

5.4 Working with the Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP) for the Epping Forest District which enables the provision of good legal advice to homeless applicants and was launched in June 2002. This multi-agency partnership includes Voluntary Action Epping Forest, Age Concern, CAB, some privately practicing solicitors, Essex County Council and the Legal Services Commission. The CLSP was set up to co-ordinate the provision in the District of good quality, publicly funded legal advice and assistance on civil matters.

- 5.5 Providing advice and assistance on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, for example assisting with debt management, in partnership with the CAB who has a dedicated expert who deals exclusively with debt referrals from the Homelessness Prevention Team. Some cases may be referred to other agencies included the Council's Benefit Division.
- 5.6 Advice is given on a range of other matters including:
- Harassment
  - Illegal evictions by private landlords
  - Properties in need of repair, including those which are unfit for habitation
  - Houses in Multiple Occupation
  - Charitable organisations assisting homeless people (including victims of domestic violence)
  - Securing private rented accommodation
  - Access to shared ownership schemes
  - Property rights in cases of relationship breakdown or other domestic issues
  - Interim and temporary accommodation
  - Nominations to other local housing authorities
- 5.7 A range of advice and information leaflets are made available, some produced by the Housing Directorate, others published by the National Homeless Advice Service and the CLG. Where English is not the first language of the client, assistance can be obtained through approved agencies or documents can be translated in appropriate cases. For the visually impaired, literature can be made available either in large print or by audio cassette or Braille. The Council will also be publishing its Housing Application form in an easy-read format to meet the need of any applicants who have learning disabilities. Where a profoundly deaf client is a sign user, the Council can arrange "signing" through an approved agency. A loop system for people with hearing difficulties is available at the Civic Offices and at the Area Housing Office (South) at The Broadway, Loughton. Home visits will be made in appropriate instances.
- 5.8 Under the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, fortnightly free-sheets are produced and distributed to various locations across the District giving details of properties in which homeseekers can express an interest. Free-sheets can be provided to vulnerable homeseekers by way of postal subscription.
- 5.9 The tenant's magazine "Housing News" is sent to all tenants 3 times each year, and when appropriate, to all homeseekers providing advice on a range of Housing services.
- 5.10 The 3 CAB offices in the District are based in Epping, Waltham Abbey and Loughton. The Council has a Service Level Agreement with the three bureaux to provide a range of advice and to support those who have difficulties expressing their needs effectively. The Council contributed £114,000 from its General Fund in 2009/10 towards CAB running costs.
- 5.11 The Council has formal arrangements for referring cases and, in addition to front-line liaison on a case by case basis, the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations) the two Area Housing Managers and the Housing Options Manager, meet with the Bureaux Managers each quarter.

- 5.12 The Epping CAB will arrange to visit residents at the Council's hostel Norway House, North Weald. A home visiting service is provided for people who are housebound.
- 5.13 Where a client is pursuing a review of a homelessness decision made by the Council they are advised in writing to seek assistance from the CAB or Shelter. Often, where applicants seek advice from one of the CAB offices, they in turn seek specialist advice from their dedicated solicitor.

## **6. Statutory Requirements**

- 6.1 Part IV of the Housing Act 1985 sets out all tenant's rights under the Tenant's Charter.
- 6.2 The Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 sets out a number of provisions relating to private tenancies and leases.
- 6.3 The Protection from Eviction Act 1977 governs the period of notice required from landlords when terminating tenancies.
- 6.4 Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002 governs the allocation of social housing. This is supported by the Allocation of Accommodation Code of Guidance to Local Authorities to which local housing authorities must have regard. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1996 is relevant to classes of applicant disqualified from applying for social housing.
- 6.5 The requirements of the Race Relations Act 1976, Sex Discrimination Act, Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Code of Practice in Rented Housing apply to the allocation of accommodation.
- 6.6 The Homelessness Act 2002 gives a housing applicant certain rights to information relating to the assessment of their application and decisions made. It also provides for the right to request a review of certain decisions.
- 6.7 Personal information held by the Housing Options Section is protected by the Data Protection Act 1998 which, together with the Housing Act 1996, allows individuals to access any information held about them.
- 6.8 The provisions of the Rent (Agricultural Act) 1976 are relevant to some Housing Register applicants.
- 6.9 Under the terms of the Children's Act 1989, an authority responsible for social care may request the help of a housing authority in discharging its duties towards a 'child in need'. A local housing authority must comply with any such request if it is compatible with its own functions and does not unduly prejudice the discharge of its own functions.
- 6.10 The Human Rights Act 1998 is most likely to be engaged for housing needs issues in respect of Articles 6, 8 and 14. These relate to the right to a fair trial (review and appeals procedures), respect for private and family life, home and correspondence (confidentiality) and discrimination (equal opportunities).
- 6.11 The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 sets out the responsibilities of the Council as an employer in respect of the health and safety of staff.

## **7. Client Consultation, Information & Involvement**

- 7.1. Consultation in respect of major changes to the Housing Allocations Scheme is undertaken with the Housing Scrutiny Panel, RSLs, Town and Parish Councils, Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation prior to consideration by the Cabinet.
- 7.2. Housing Register applicants may be informed on an individual basis of changes that affect them with items of general interest being publicised in the tenant's magazine "Housing News" which is sent on a quarterly basis to tenants and, when appropriate, all housing applicants, to keep them informed of important issues.
- 7.3 It is a requirement of the Homelessness Act 2002, that all local housing authorities must produce and publish a Homelessness Strategy on at least a 5 yearly basis. As this area of work regularly changes, it has been agreed that the Council's Strategy would be reviewed on a three yearly basis. The Housing Scrutiny Panel, Town and Parish Councils, RSLs, Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Tenants and Leaseholders' Federation are consulted prior to consideration by the Cabinet.
- 7.4. The Council consults on major policy changes with the C.A.B.
- 7.5. Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation is involved in the planning and delivery of services and kept informed on performance and general issues relating to housing advice. It is consulted on all housing policy matters prior to consideration by the Portfolio Holder and Cabinet.

## **8. General Principles**

- 8.1 When Housing Advice is provided for those with special needs, appropriate cases will be referred to In Touch Support, Homelessness Prevention Officers or other specialist advisers. Where English is not the first language of the client, the Housing Options Section will employ the services of 'Language Line' and arrange for document translation in appropriate cases. For those with visual impairment, it will make literature available in large print or arrange for the provision of audio cassettes or Braille translations as required. Where a deaf client is a sign language user, it will endeavour to ensure that a specially trained member of staff is present at interviews. The Council will also conduct home visits in appropriate cases.
- 8.2 Both general and specialist housing advice will be offered through appropriate service areas within the Council and by the CAB offices in the District.
- 8.3 The Council will, in addition to ensuring that personal interviews are arranged in appropriate instances, have readily available a wide range of literature offering advice on landlord and tenant matters.
- 8.4 The Council will ensure that housing advice reflects any changes in legislation, and that its literature is updated accordingly.
- 8.5 The Council will ensure that appropriate and up to date information is available on its Website.
- 8.6 The Council will respond to requests for information from Shelter and the CAB on specific cases where housing advice has been sought from those agencies, if provided consent has been given by clients.

8.7 Any applicants dissatisfied with the way in which the service has been delivered can make a Complaint under the Council's Compliments and Complaints procedure.

8.8 The performance of the Housing Options Section will be monitored under the quarterly performance management meetings chaired by the Director of Housing.

## 9. Future Developments

9.1 The following analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) forms the foundation for future action:

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successful Homelessness Prevention Service</li> <li>• A number of initiatives to assist people to either seek or retain accommodation</li> <li>• Good working relationships with partner agencies</li> <li>• Effective consultation</li> <li>• Effective mediation service</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None identified</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of the HomeOption Choice Based Lettings Scheme</li> <li>• Additional sites for Gypsies and Travellers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Touch Support funded through Supporting People where funding could be reduced</li> <li>• Funding for Homeless Prevention Officers only guaranteed by Government until March 2011</li> <li>• Reduced Government funding for various "recession busting" initiatives</li> <li>• Shortage of affordable housing</li> <li>• Possible reduced funding for the CAB service</li> </ul>

## 10. Action Plan

Action	Lead Officer	Timescale	Resources
Continue regular liaison meetings with C.A.B.	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	Ongoing	Within existing resources

<b>Action</b>	<b>Lead Officer</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Ensure that information leaflets etc. are updated in accordance with changes in legislation	Housing Options Manager	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Continue to ensure housing information is available in a variety of formats	Housing Options Manager	Ongoing	Within existing resources
Implement the "Housingmoves" Choice Based Mobility Scheme	Housing Options Manager	December 2009	Existing Resources
Implement the revised Service Standards for the Housing Options Section	Housing Options Manager	December 2009	Existing Resources
Review the Equality Impact Assessment and ensure it is compliant with the new legislation	Housing Options Manager	March 2010	Existing Resources
Make necessary preparations for the Government's short notice inspections	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	April 2010	Existing Resources
Report to Cabinet on funding for the Homelessness Prevention service, if necessary	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)	March 2011	Budget provision may need to be made through the General Fund



## 11. Resourcing the Strategy

11.1. Housing Options staff delivering this Strategy in 2009/2010 is approximately 4.85 FTE which includes the staffing levels detailed in paragraph 11.2, and other officers time spent on the service. The projection for the number of staff required to deliver the Strategy over the following three years is detailed in the following table:

<b>Staff Resource Projections</b>				
<b>Posts</b>	<b>2009/10</b>	<b>2010/11</b>	<b>2011/12</b>	<b>2012/13</b>
<b>Housing Options Staff (FTE)</b>	4.85	4.85	4.85	4.85

11.2 The following table details the estimated proportion of Housing Options staff time spent on the service for 2009/2010:

<b>Staff Resources Breakdown</b>	
<b>Posts</b>	<b>FTE</b>
Housing Options Manager x 1	0.10
Asst Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) x1	0.25
Homelessness Prevention Officers x 5	4.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.85 FTE</b>

## 12. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

12.1 There are no key targets for the provision of housing advice as it is a service that is responsive to demand.

## 13. Reviewing the Strategy

13.1. This strategy will be reviewed in consultation with the Housing Scrutiny Panel and the Epping Forest Tenants and Leaseholders Federation in December 2012.