

Epping Forest District Council

HOUSING SERVICES STRATEGY ON HOUSING ADVICE

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This strategy relates to housing advice provided by Housing Services and supplemented by the 3 Citizens' Advice Bureaux (C.A.B.) within the District.
- 1.2. This strategy works within the framework of the Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP) for the Epping Forest District, a multi-agency partnership including Voluntary Action Epping Forest, Age Concern, C.A.B., some privately practicing solicitors, Essex County Council, the Legal Services Commission and Epping Forest District Council. The latter three are the main partnership funders.
- 1.3. The CLSP is set up to co-ordinate provision in the District of good quality, publicly funded legal advice and assistance on civil matters. It aims to achieve suitable quality mark accreditation for all partner organizations and to make available an on-line advice/referrals directory. At a consultation event held on 6th March 2003, housing was one of five main categories of law identified as being in most demand. Across the categories, the need for advocacy, mediation and out-reach services and home visiting services were highlighted.
- 1.4. The Council has a rolling Service Level Agreement with the three Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABX) in the District to provide a range of advice and to support those who have difficulties expressing their needs effectively. EFDC is contributing £120,500 from its General Fund in 2005/06 towards CABX costs and has guaranteed increased funding, at least in line with inflation, in future years, as long as there is no worsening in the Council's own budgetary situation.
- 1.5. EFDC has formal arrangements for referring cases to the CABX and, in addition to front-line liaison on a case by case basis, the Housing Management Team, which consists of the Head of Housing Services and two Assistant Heads of Service, meets with the Bureaux Managers each quarter. These meetings serve a number of purposes: to discuss general issues arising from individual cases and receive feedback on the Council's housing policies and procedures; to consult on proposed changes to housing policies; to co-ordinate the approach to the provision of housing advice in the District; and to ensure CABX Managers have up to date information on local and national housing issues.
- 1.6. The C.A.B. have offices in Epping, Loughton and Waltham Abbey and outreach services at the Council's hostel for homeless families 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.
- 1.7. 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. Further, that a summary of that scheme is available, on request, free of charge.

- 1.8. Landlord authorities, such as Epping Forest District Council, have a duty to provide their 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.
- 1.9. This strategy sets out how the advice offered by Housing Services and the C.A.B. will be delivered and monitored.
- 1.10. This strategy was formulated in consultation with the three C.A.B.X in the District and the Housing Scrutiny Panel. It was formally approved the Housing Portfolio Holder on 27th March 2006.

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 Needs Section of Housing Services, based at the Civic Offices in Epping, has 2.5 FTE officers dedicated to homeless prevention work. These officers provide a link to housing and a range of other services. The part time officer has permanent employment with the Council but the 2 full time officers are on temporary contracts as their posts are being funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), at least until March 2008. The Council has plans to appoint an additional full time homelessness prevention officer, on a similar basis as the other 2, funded largely by the ODPM but with a 'top up' from the Council under 'spend to save'. Full information relating to the Council's plans in connection with homelessness prevention is given in the Council's Homelessness Strategy.
- 2.2. Many aspects of advice require specialist knowledge. Some, for example debt management, whilst not being unusual, do not arise often enough in relation to housing matters for the Council to have its own specialist in the field. This being so, part of the role of housing officers is to identify appropriate cases to be referred to the C.A.B. The Housing Needs Section has a formalised arrangement with the C.A.B. for this purpose. In addition, one of the aims of the quarterly meetings between Housing Services and the C.A.B.X is to ensure that the provision of housing advice continues to be offered in a co-ordinated way.
- 2.3. 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; and Womens' Aid.
- 2.4. Some matters, for instance Housing Benefit, are covered by other Council Services. Issues on which Environmental Health Officers offer specialist advice include: harassment and illegal evictions by private landlords; properties in need of repair, including those which are unfit for habitation; and houses in multiple occupation. Here again, housing staff offer basic advice and support to ensure that expert help is accessed.
- 2.5. Additional matters on which Housing Needs staff offer advice include: charitable and other organisations assisting homeless people; sourcing privately rented accommodation; Notice to Quits issued by landlords (together with related legal proceedings); shared ownership schemes; rent levels; property rights in cases of relationship breakdown or other domestic issues; interim and temporary accommodation and related licences; access to Housing Registers and registered social landlords; assignments by way of mutual exchange; and rights in respect of access to files, reviews and appeals.

- 2.6. Although Housing Needs Officers do give advice to Council tenants, other housing officers have prime responsibility for advice on the Council's Conditions of Tenancy and related issues, including assignments and successions, sheltered and very sheltered accommodation and adaptations for disabled people. Most of these staff work at the Civic Offices in Epping but some are based at satellite locations in Loughton and Chigwell.
- 2.7. The Council employs 1.5 FTE (full time equivalent) housing welfare officers to support vulnerable tenants and formerly homeless people in interim and temporary accommodation. Advice on housing related matters is an important part of the duties of these officers, helping to prevent repeat homelessness.
- 2.8. Due to the wide ranging nature of housing advice it is not possible to give accurate information on the volume of cases overall,¹ but the following 2 paragraphs give an indication of some workloads.
- 2.9. The CABX estimate that over 2,000 people contact them in the course of a year on housing related matters.
- 2.10. Over 6,000 enquiries are received at the Housing Needs Reception Desk in the course of a year; the Council has approximately 6,600 tenants; around 3,000 households are on the Housing Register at any one time; homeless prevention officers see 450 or so households per annum, preventing homelessness in over 93% of cases; homelessness officers deal with a similar number of cases in the course of a year. The volume of telephone enquiries to the Housing Needs Section is far higher than the number of personal callers but written and electronic enquiries are fewer.

3. Coverage

- 3.1. In summary, the responsibility for providing housing advice is spread but rests primarily with the Council's Housing Services and Environmental Services. The former takes the lead, giving advice on social housing tenancies, particularly the Council's own tenancies, and homelessness, except in cases of illegal eviction, harassment and matters of disrepair.

4. Relationship with other Documents

- 4.1. This Strategy works within the *Council Plan* and accords with the Council's *Best Value Performance Plan*, which sets out annually the authority's intentions for the delivery and development of its services, giving information on past performance and how the Council plans to improve services on a continuing basis. One of the key issues is 'Homes and Neighbourhoods' and social inclusion.
- 4.2. This Strategy accords with the *Community Legal Service Plan*.
- 4.3. This Strategy forms part of the authority's overall approach to strategic housing, set out in the *Housing Strategy*, and accords with Housing Services' *Housing Revenue Account Business Plan*.
- 4.4. This Strategy interrelates with the Council's *Homelessness Strategy* and other Housing Service Strategies on: *Housing Management; Allocations; Tenant Participation; Information; and the Private Rented Sector*.

- 4.5. *The Housing Needs Service Review 2000 - 2001* was a rigorous review of the Housing Needs Section, undertaken as part of the Best Value initiative.
- 4.6. The Council has adopted a *Housing Charter*, which sets out in simple, clear and precise terms its general approach to all its housing services.
- 4.7. The Council follows the guide set out in the Commission for Racial Equality's *Code of Practice in Rented Housing*.
- 4.8. The Council follows advice from central government set out in circulars and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's *Code of Guidance on Allocations* and *Homelessness Code of Guidance*.
- 4.9. A booklet produced by Housing Services entitled *Homelessness* explains a little about homelessness legislation, the Council's duty towards homeless applicants and how homeless applications are processed.
- 4.10. Another booklet, *Housing for single people*, produced by Housing Services to assist single people, gives basic information on, amongst other matters, shared-ownership and renting accommodation in the private sector.
- 4.11. Two more booklets produced by Housing Services entitled, *Housing Allocations Scheme* and *Mutual Exchanges Scheme*, set out in full the Council's policies in these matters.
- 4.12. A summary of the *Housing Allocations Scheme* and *Mutual Exchanges Scheme*, entitled *Moving home with the Council*, and a booklet, *Where to live*, produced by Housing Services, are included in the Housing Register Application Pack. Other booklets, *Joint Tenancies* and *Redecoration Voucher Scheme*, are available separately.
- 4.13. Included in the Council's *Tenants Handbook* are the following leaflets: *Information on housing services; Rents, benefits and housing management; Repairs and improvements to your home; Services for the elderly; Succession to a tenancy; Buying your home from the council; Renting a garage; Your rights and the conditions of your tenancy; and Housing appeals and complaints*.
- 4.14. The following booklets and information sheets produced by Housing Services, give more general advice: *Mobile Homes; Private Accommodation; Shared Ownership Schemes; Housing Associations for Elderly Needs; Housing Associations for General Needs Accommodation*.
- 4.15. Epping Forest Domestic Violence Action Group has produced an information pack, *Domestic Violence – Take Control*. Voluntary Action for Epping Forest has produced a leaflet, *Housing Relocation*, giving details of a Council sponsored project to support older people moving home. Both are available from Housing Services.
- 4.16. The following guides are available from Housing Services but were produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister:
- *Assured and assured shorthold tenancies – a guide for landlords*
 - *Letting your home*
 - *Letting Rooms in Your Home – a guide for landlords and their tenants*

- *Assured and assured shorthold tenancies – a guide for tenants*

4.17. 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.

4.18. Information about the Council's Housing Service can be obtained through the Council's Website: 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:

- a) giving advice through the most appropriate media for the applicant;
- b) making housing information available on the Council's web-site;
- c) offering personal interviews, mainly at the Civic Offices but at other locations where appropriate, including at home addresses;
- d) publishing details of the Council's Housing Register and Mutual Exchange Schemes;
- e) making freely available other leaflets and documents, including details of the Council's Conditions of Tenancy;
- f) arranging language translation in appropriate instances;
- g) liaising with CAB and other agencies and services;
- h) ensuring appropriate cases are referred at an early stage to housing welfare officers, homelessness prevention officers or other specialist advisers;
- i) encouraging homeless applicants with adverse homelessness decisions to seek specialist housing advocacy advice.

6. Statutory Requirements

6.1. The *Homelessness Act 2002* requires that the Council has a *Homelessness Strategy*, based on a homelessness review, and elements of this strategy relate to the provision of advice and information.

6.2. More specifically, the Council must ensure that advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness is available to anyone in the District. This is pursuant to the *Housing Act 1996*, as amended by the *Homelessness Act 2002*, statutory instruments and the *Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Homelessness Code of Guidance*.

- 6.3. *The Housing Act 1996*, as amended by the *Homelessness Act 2002*, supported by the *Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Code of Guidance on Allocations* prescribes the information to be provided in respect of the allocation of social housing.
- 6.4. *The Local Government & Housing Act 1989* sets out the framework for the funding of homelessness functions i.e. in respect of the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account.
- 6.5. *Part IV of the Housing Act 1985* regulates the provision of information to tenants about the express terms of their tenancies and related matters.
- 6.6. *The Protection from Eviction Act 1977* sets out safeguards to ensure that residential tenants are not unlawfully evicted.
- 6.7. Environmental health officers, housing officers and C.A.B. staff deal with enquiries on a wide range of legislation relating to rights of occupancy in private accommodation. Some issues only occur from time to time, such as those relating to the provisions of the *Rent (Agricultural) Act 1976*.
- 6.8. The requirements of the *Race Relations Act 1976*, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*, and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* apply to the provision of housing advice, as does the *Code of Practice in Rented Housing*.
- 6.9. *The Human Rights Act 1998* is most likely to be engaged for housing issues in respect of Articles 6,8 and 14. These relate to the right to a fair trial (appeals procedures), respect for private and family life, home and correspondence (confidentiality) and discrimination (equal opportunities). The *Data Protection Act 1998* also governs the protection and use of personal data held by the Council.
- 6.10. *The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974* sets out the responsibilities of the Council as an employer in respect of health and safety matters.

7. Client Consultation, Information & Involvement

- 7.1. Due to the wide ranging nature of housing advice, consultation with service users is not straight forward, but set out below are details of some consultation exercises that have been undertaken by the Council.
- 7.2. As part of the Housing Needs Service Review conducted during 2000/01 an extensive consultation exercise was carried out, seeking views on a range of matters, such as the helpfulness of staff, the clarity of literature and the time taken to deal with requests for information. Overall, responses were favourable, although some areas of weakness were identified and action was taken concerning these.
- 7.3. In 2003, further consultation was undertaken as part of the homelessness review in preparation for the production of the *Homelessness Strategy*. This involved exit surveys at the close of interviews, postal surveys, focus groups and a Consultation Day. Council staff, partner and stakeholder organisations as well as services users were invited to comment on a wide range of issues. It was clear from these exercises that investment in liaison between organisations has resulted in a good quality advice service.
- 7.4. The Council has regular liaison meetings with the C.A.B.X. on all housing matters.
- 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.

7.6. As indicated in 4. above, Housing Services produces a wide range of free literature.

8. General Principles

8.1. One of the medium term aims of the Council Plan is to address key housing need. One of the ways this will be achieved is by the provision of timely housing advice.

8.2. The Council Plan also seeks to promote social inclusion and put people first. Performance in respect of 'Homes and Neighbourhoods' is a key issue and the Council will aim to ensure housing advice is available to anyone in the district in need of it, conveying it in a way appropriate to individual needs.

8.3. Housing advice will be offered in accordance with the principles of equal opportunities. Provision will be made for those with special needs and appropriate cases will be referred to housing welfare, homelessness prevention officers or other specialist advisers. Where English is not the first language of the client, Housing Services will engage 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 profoundly 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 instances.

8.4. Both general and specialist housing advice will be offered through appropriate service areas within the Council and by the 3 C.A.B.X. in the District.

8.5. 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.

8.6. The Council will ensure that housing advice keeps abreast of changes in legislation and other issues and that its literature is updated as the need arises.

8.7. The Council will ensure that appropriate and up to date information is available electronically, in particular through its Website.

8.8. The Council will respond to requests for information from Shelter on specific cases where housing advice has been sought from that agency, if appropriate authority has been given by clients.

8.9. The Council will respond to requests from the C.A.B. for information on specific cases, if appropriate authority has been given by clients.

8.10. Complaints about the service will be dealt with and appropriate action taken in accordance with corporate procedures.

8.11. Comparisons on performance will be made through the 'Housemark' benchmarking initiative, as appropriate.

9. Best Value Considerations

9.1. A Best Value Inspection of the Housing Needs Section, covering allocations, homelessness, advice and information was carried out in November 2001. The

outcomes of 'the 4 Cs' in preparation for the inspection and as they relate to housing advice are set out below.

Challenge – 'a solid foundation with strong structures, experienced workforce and clear knowledge of major issues'

Compare – 'a range of services which is at least comparable to, if not greater than, the other responding authorities'

Consult – 'there is a need to focus on the initiatives that are most likely to lead to an improvement in the service'

Compete – 'the Council works well with organisations from other sectors, both voluntary and private'

10. Future Developments

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

Strengths

'Homes and Neighbourhoods' a corporate priority
Highly successful homelessness prevention service
Good working relationships with C.A.B.
Well trained, experienced staff
Wide range of literature
Performance monitored
Involvement of Tenants & Leaseholders Federation

Weaknesses

Ratio of housing welfare officers to tenants/applicants very poor at 1:6,000
Housing welfare officers are funded through Supporting People and this could be withdrawn

Opportunities

Use of new technology to disseminate information
Introduction of CBL to allow housing applicants to exercise maximum choice

Threats

FTE homelessness prevention officers only guaranteed funding to March 2008
Funding of housing welfare officers under review as part of countywide exercise

11. Action Plan

| Action | Lead | Timescale | Resources |
|---|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Continue regular liaison meetings with C.A.B. | Head of Housing Services | Ongoing | Within existing |
| Continue to ensure that information leaflets etc. are up to date and apposite | Housing Needs Manager | Ongoing | Within existing |
| Continue to ensure housing information is available in a variety of formats | Housing Needs Manager | Ongoing | Within existing |

| | | | |
|--|---|------------|--|
| Continue to ensure staff are well trained | Housing Needs Manager | Ongoing | Within existing |
| Monitor funding for housing welfare officers and make appropriate provision if at risk | Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) | March 2007 | Budget provision may need to be made through both the General Fund and the HRA |
| Make provision for alternative funding for 2 FTE homelessness prevention officers, if necessary | Head of Housing Services | March 2008 | Budget provision will need to be made through the General Fund |
| Appoint 1 additional homelessness prevention officer | Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) | June 2006 | To be funded from O.D.P.M. grant and General Fund on a 'spend to save' basis |
| Ensure introduction of CBL is well publicized and housing applicants are supported to bid for properties | Assistant Head of Housing Services (Operations) | March 2007 | Funding received from ODPM for project manager to oversee introduction of CBL |

12. Resourcing the Strategy

12.1. Funds will be provided from the General Fund for the C.A.B. as outlined in 1.4.

12.2. The housing welfare officers' posts will be funded, at least for the time being, through Essex County Council's Supporting People budget.

12.3. The 2 homeless prevention officer's posts will be funded by central government until March 2008.

12.4. The Housing Revenue Account will fund necessary literature.

12.5. Staffing resources will be as follows:

| | Staff Resource Projections | | |
|---|----------------------------|------------|------------|
| | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 |
| Staff to provide the service (FTE p/a) | 3.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 |

| Staff Resource Breakdown | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | FTE | FTE | FTE |
| Posts | | | |
| Housing Needs Manager | .10 | .10 | .10 |
| Assistant Housing Needs Managers | .25 | .25 | .25 |
| Housing Officers & Housing Assistants | .10 | .10 | .10 |
| Homelessness Prevention Officers | 2.00 | 2.50 | 3.50 |
| Welfare Officers | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Hostel Managers | .05 | .05 | .05 |
| Total | 3.50 | 4.50 | 4.50 |

13. Key Targets and Performance Monitoring

13.1. Housing advice covers a broad spectrum of work, so it is difficult to set targets. However, Housing Services will;

- a) monitor performance on homelessness prevention and supply the O.D.P.M. with statistical information as required
- b) make use of Housemark to compare the service provided with that of other similar authorities where appropriate
- c) work with Essex County Council's Supporting People Team on Validation Inspections
- d) update the Council's Homelessness Strategy every 2/3 years
- e) ensure that other key documents, such as the Allocations Scheme, are updated as necessary on an annual basis
- f) ensure that literature offering advice and information, for instance the Mobile Homes leaflet, is updated as necessary to reflect changes in circumstances
- g) update information on the Council's web site
- h) take qualitative feedback from C.A.B. managers
- i) undertake client satisfaction surveys from time to time

14. Reviewing the Strategy

14. 1. This Strategy will be reviewed, in consultation with the C.A.B.X in Spring 2008.