

REPORT TO CABINET

Title: **HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY 2008 - 2013**

Date: 18 December 2008

Member Reporting: Councillor Dudley

Contact Officer(s): Chris Thomas, Head of Housing & Residential Development
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Wards affected: All Wards

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1.1 The Royal Borough's Housing Strategy seeks to ensure that everyone in the area has access to a decent home at a price they can afford, and the Local Area Agreement has a priority to increase the supply of affordable housing.
- 1.1.2 A review of homelessness has been undertaken by the Royal Borough's Housing Options Team, and the self assessment health check toolkit issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government was utilised. This was used to establish how effective our services are in tackling and preventing homelessness.
- 1.1.3 Whilst there has been a decline in homelessness acceptances over the last five years, much of this has been the result of a pro-active approach to advice about Housing Options, utilising the private rented sector and advancing loans for deposits so avoiding the use of bed and breakfast accommodation wherever possible. There is however a possible threat to the current situation, which is posed by the global credit crunch, and its impact on the housing market in general. This may well result in increased levels of homelessness.
- 1.1.4 It is a requirement of the Homelessness Act 2002 and the associated Code of Guidance, that local authorities carry out a review of homelessness and adopt a strategy for dealing with the findings. The previous strategy ran from 2003 until 2008, so it has been necessary to undertake another review and to produce another strategy to cover the next period of five years. The Draft Strategy (Appendix 1) and Action Plan (Appendix 2) are available in Group Rooms, Members' Rooms and from Democratic Services.
- 1.1.5 **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 2013 be endorsed.

What will be different for residents as a result of this decision?
The Council will have a strategy in place for delivering a safety net locally, to vulnerable households and others who are made homeless through no fault of their own.

2. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

2.1 Background

- 2.1.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 for the first time placed a statutory duty on local authorities to review homelessness within their administrative areas, and to produce a strategy for dealing with the problems identified. This was a direct consequence of the Government's policy of reducing the use of bed & breakfast accommodation nationally, with a target of March 2004 being set for zero use in respect of families with children, for a period longer than six weeks. The initial strategy covered a five year period up to 2008, and a new strategy is now required for a further five year period.
- 2.1.2 The Royal Borough has been very successful over the period of the existing strategy, in that the March 2004 target was achieved several months before the target date, and the target figure has in general been regularly maintained ever since. This has been achieved through adopting a more pro-active approach to discussing housing options, rather than a re-active approach of accepting a homeless application, providing B&B, and then trying to find a solution to the problem. This has resulted in B&B only being used as a very last resort, and most families being moved on into alternative temporary or permanent housing within the six week period. This has meant major benefits for the families themselves, but has been a much more cost effective approach in respect of the homelessness budget.
- 2.1.3 It is therefore important that the new Homelessness Strategy is implemented in order to make sure that policies are in place to address any new challenges created in the coming years.

3. OPTIONS AVAILABLE AND RISK ASSESSMENT

3.1 Options

	Option	Comments	Financial Implications
1.	Not endorse the draft Homelessness Strategy.	This would leave the Council without an updated strategy leaving it open to a legal challenge.	Revenue: None Capital: None
2.	Amend the draft Strategy before endorsement.	This is possible, but further consultation may be required depending on the amendments.	Revenue: None Capital: None
3.	Endorse the Draft Strategy.	If endorsed the Strategy would become a policy document for the Council, and ensure compliance with legislation.	Revenue: None Capital: None

3.2 Risk assessment

- 3.2.1 The risk of not endorsing the strategy is that the Council would be in breach of its statutory duty to have in place a new strategy during 2008, and leave itself open to a

legal challenge.

- 3.2.2 Endorsing the strategy will ensure that the Housing Options Team have a strategy and an action plan to direct its work over the next five years. It will also ensure that the Council is better placed to meet the challenges posed by the financial crisis as outlined elsewhere in this report.
- 3.2.3 A major risk in the coming years is the financial state of the economy, particularly in relation to banking services, the downturn in the housing market, problems with the buy to let market, unsold shared ownership units, the inability to obtain mortgages and a recession. This will limit the options available to people needing a home. Increases in mortgage repossessions may well result in an increased number of homelessness applications being made. Many developers have already stopped building out sites, and this has seen a decrease in the supply of new rented affordable housing units being made available through S106 agreements. If there is a significant increase in the levels of homelessness, and a decreasing supply of properties in which to house them, then it is possible that this would once again see an increase in the use of B&B and other forms of temporary accommodation. The Royal Borough had a very significant number of households in B&B and other temporary accommodation in 1993 at the time of the last recession, which reached a high of 89 cases during 1994/95.

4. CONSULTATIONS CARRIED OUT

- 4.1.1 Consultation at workshop as part of Housing Forum.
- 4.1.2 Questionnaire compiled and made available to all callers to York House, Town Hall and Citizens Advice Bureau, mailed directly to key stakeholders and published on RBWM website.

5. COMMENTS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

- 5.1.1 That the report be recommended to Cabinet subject to the list of Accommodation Available in the report being listed by community location.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1.1 The following implications have been addressed where indicated below.

Financial	Legal	Human Rights Act	Planning	Sustainable Development	Diversity & Equality
✓ or N/A	✓ or N/A	✓ or N/A	✓ or N/A	✓ or N/A	✓ or N/A

Background Papers: Homelessness Act 2002 and Code of Guidance
Draft Homelessness Strategy 2008 – 2013