

Bed & Breakfast Alternative Accommodation Overview & Scrutiny Review

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Housing, Social Services and Community Safety Overview & Scrutiny Panel has undertaken a review to identify and recommend ways of avoiding the use of bed & breakfast as temporary accommodation for families and young people under the age of 19. This is so that the Council is able to cease to use this form of accommodation for families and young people.
- 1.2 Over the past two years there has been a rise in the number of homeless households being accommodated in bed & breakfast (B&B). This rise is set to continue due to changing government legislation concerning the homeless and children leaving care. The Government's Bed & Breakfast Unit wishes to ensure that by March 2004 no homeless family with children has to live in a B&B hotel except in an emergency, and even then for no more than 6 weeks.

2. Scope

- 2.1 The Terms of Reference for the Review were agreed by the Panel on 10th September 2002. The scope of the review was to examine the extent of current temporary accommodation provision and to identify possible alternatives to the use of bed and breakfast establishments for homeless families with children and young people.
- 2.2 The full Terms of Reference are in Annex 1.

3. Method

- 3.1 Research was conducted to assess the current level of temporary accommodation provision and to provide information on a range of ways of avoiding and reducing the use of bed & breakfast. Current efforts to prevent homelessness were included (Annex 2). A detailed appraisal of the development of Housing Association Leasing Schemes was also provided (Annex 3). These documents were presented to the Panel on 19th November 2002.
- 3.2 Public comments were invited with a press release in mid November and a feedback form in relation to the Review on the Council's website. The Panel's meetings were all held in public with the opportunity for interested parties to attend, submit questions or make statements.
- 3.3 Panel Members took part in a visit to a local hostel on Friday 10th January 2003 to hear first hand the experiences of those staying in temporary accommodation

- 3.4 A contributor's session took place on Tuesday the 14th January 2003 with the emphasis on suggestions for alternatives to using bed & breakfast as temporary accommodation. Contributors were invited to make comments and then questioned by the Panel. The following took part:

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Catherine Brabner | Shelter |
| Cindy Groves | Landlords Association of Wessex |
| Tom McBain | Head of Property & Legal Services |
| Jane Alderman Carmel McCarthy | Somer Housing Group |
| Keith Goodred | Team Leader Planning Policy |
| Forbes Robertson | Bath Self Help Housing Association |
| Jane Shayler | Head of Housing & Supported Living |

A summary of the contributors' comments is to be found in Annex 4.

- 3.5 At the 14th January meeting the Panel received costings information for several of the alternatives to temporary accommodation (Annex 5).
- 3.6 On 6th February the Panel took part in a facilitated session to summarise its conclusions and produce recommendations.

4. Research Activities & Findings

4.1 Research

4.1.1 Current temporary accommodation provision

- 17 units at Dartmouth Avenue, Bath
- 7 units at Bloomfield Road, Bath
- 9 units at Caernarvon Road, Keynsham
- 6 units above the Council's commercial estate in Bath

4.1.2 Shortfall of current temporary accommodation provision

As at 7 November 2002, there were 26 households in B&B, comprising 2 young people aged 16-17; 7 families with a total of 14 dependent children; and 17 single people over the age of 18.

The Temporary Accommodation Strategy (Nov 2001) projected a need for the provision of the following additional units of temporary accommodation by March 2004:

| | |
|--------------|----------------------------|
| One-bed | 65 units |
| Two-bed | 24 units |
| Three-bed | 10 units |
| Total | 99 additional units |

4.1.3 Housing advice

Quality housing advice has an important role in preventing homelessness in addition to helping people understand their options and find solutions once homelessness is imminent or has occurred. The Housing Options and Advice team provides a comprehensive housing advice service including debt advice and tenancy relations. The quality of advice was recently assessed as “good to excellent” in an Audit Commission inspection, however access to the service was considered poor.

Further details about the housing advice provided directly by the Council and other advice services funded through voluntary sector funding are in Annex 6.

4.1.4 Comments on bed & breakfast accommodation and alternatives

Whilst widely acknowledged as unsuitable accommodation for homeless people, bed and breakfast accommodation does have some advantages: it can be accessed at very short notice; it is furnished; and it is non-secure and can, therefore, be withdrawn at short notice if the housing authority’s duty to provide temporary accommodation ceases. In order to provide a real alternative to B&B accommodation, temporary accommodation needs to share some, if not all, of these characteristics of bed and breakfast. There are costs associated with this. Lettings are shorter and there are more frequent void periods; prior to each letting, gas and electric safety checks must be undertaken (this is the case no matter how short the let); and furniture and white goods need regular repair and replacement (furniture is often stolen from temporary accommodation). Some of these costs can be accounted for in the rent, however it is likely that the housing association or private landlord providing this type of temporary accommodation will require the local authority to meet any costs not covered in the rent.

4.1.5 Other forms of temporary accommodation than B&B

Alternatives to B&B that involve other forms of temporary accommodation include:

- New hostel development – building a purpose-designed scheme for temporary accommodation
- Use of existing permanent stock – using housing association properties that are either hard to let or are not suitable for letting on a permanent basis
- Use of vacant spaces above shops in the Council’s commercial estate as temporary accommodation, usually by leasing it to a housing association for this purpose
- Housing Association Leasing Schemes (HALS) – a housing association leases private rented accommodation for use as temporary accommodation

Further details of these and their advantages and disadvantages are to be found in the research document (Annex 2). An appraisal of Housing Association Leasing Schemes was presented to the Panel at its meeting on 19th November 2002.

4.1.6 Other ways of reducing the numbers in B&B

In addition to preventing homelessness through housing advice, there are other ways of reducing the number in B&B:

- Making homelessness decisions more quickly which would mean fewer households needing to go into B&B and less needing to go into other forms of temporary accommodation.
- Improving access to the private rented sector, for example by the Deposit Bond Scheme which assists households in the form of a deposit
- Prevention and diversion schemes – developing policies and procedures and inter-agency protocols in order to prevent or delay homelessness
- Work in relation to social landlord policies on domestic violence, harassment and racial harassment – providing social landlord tenants with advice and assistance in these situations – being clear that about the possible disadvantages of a homelessness application in these circumstances
- Developing “homeless at home” policies and criteria
- Increasing the proportion of lettings that are made to homeless households

Further details of these are to be found in the research document (Annex 2).

4.2 *Expert contributors – summary of comments regarding alternatives to B&B*

The list of contributors and the organisations they represent is listed in 3.4 above. A fuller write up of the comments of contributors is to be found in Annex 4.

4.2.1 Overview

In an area with high house prices there is hidden homelessness, overcrowding, and young people who can't afford to move away from home. The issue can be clouded by the visible rough sleepers issue. The lack of temporary accommodation has been exacerbated by increasing levels of needs, homelessness and the problems of sustaining accommodation for both single people and families.

For many families in private rented accommodation when their tenancy comes to an end there is no incentive for them to find another property in the private sector. They decide to apply as homeless in the hope of gaining more security in the longer term.

4.2.2 The Council's commercial estate

The Council aims to bring vacant accommodation above the commercial estate shops into the best use. The properties may then be leased to Registered Social Landlords such as Somer Community Housing Trust for use as temporary accommodation. Sometimes the cost of bringing this accommodation back into use is prohibitive due to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and Health & Safety legislation. There have been conflicts where owners have complained about anti-social behaviour from the residents above the shops where there is shared access to property.

The Council can incur costs if people are granted a 6-month tenancy of, for example, a flat in a Living above The Shops scheme (LOTS) and then are re-housed before that 6 month period is up.

4.2.3 Deposit Bond Scheme

There are currently 47 properties in the Deposit Bond Scheme. In its current form the Scheme is not always attractive to private landlords. The tenant has no financial stake in the property and no moral obligation to look after it. The experience of

landlords using the scheme has not always been favourable. Landlords use their property as investments, if the property is damaged this can be a large financial burden for them.

One way to make the Deposit Bond Scheme more attractive to private landlords would be to increase the amount of deposit. Another would be for the local authority to agree to rehouse families in permanent accommodation when the landlord wants the property back. At present they are added back onto the Homeseekers register but don't always get a high level of priority.

4.2.4 Homeless at home

If the Council has advanced warning of impending homelessness there is an opportunity to negotiate with the mortgage lender or landlord for the person to remain in the tenancy with support. The policies need to be formalised.

4.2.5 Registered Social Landlord (RSL) policies on domestic violence, harassment and racial harassment

If a tenant is causing nuisance to a neighbour, then the RSL will be under pressure to take action to evict the tenant causing the nuisance. It has become more difficult for the Council to meet its statutory responsibility to rehouse people with challenging behaviour since the housing stock was sold.

There is good partnership working to address issues of tenants experiencing domestic abuse or harassment from neighbours. There is a need to make sure that everyone working with such people have the confidence of having good policies and procedures in place and knowledge of alternatives options other than going through the homeless application route. This is an ongoing process as staff leave and new staff need training.

4.2.6 New hostel accommodation

The length of stay in hostel accommodation is generally shorter than for other forms of temporary accommodation, therefore a greater number of people can be accommodated in hostel accommodation over a period of time. Hostel accommodation is furnished and people can be moved in at short notice.

Somer Housing Group are actively searching for potential hostel sites in Bath and North East Somerset.

4.2.7 Housing Association Leasing Schemes (HALS)

Housing Association leasing is relatively high risk in Bath & North East Somerset because of the high cost of private rented accommodation. This would also be an expensive scheme for the Council and there would be challenges in making it successful. Incentives for private landlords would be needed for them to put houses into a Housing Association Leasing Scheme.

4.2.8 Planning Policy

The key area of influence in the provision of affordable housing in the future is the emerging Bath and North East Somerset Local Plan - Deposit Draft 2002. There are policies to deliver affordable homes on allocated, windfall, and exception sites in urban and rural areas. Other policies enable the development of LOTS schemes, the sub-division of existing dwellings and Houses in Multiple Occupation.

Planning applications for temporary accommodation are treated on the merits of the scheme.

4.2.9 Prevention of homelessness

Legislation refers to the need for early intervention, which can prevent people from presenting as homeless in a crisis-driven way. The majority of homeless applicants have been made homeless from owner-occupation, private tenancies or from living with their family or friends. Causes of homelessness include repossession of property, individual lack of ability to sustain accommodation, and lack of ongoing support. Support is limited for tenants in private accommodation.

There is only one legal firm dealing with specialist housing advice in Bath & North East Somerset. A recent audit of the Housing Options and Advice Team said good advice is available but that there is poor awareness of and access to it.

The County Court Rota (in Bristol) is a successful scheme, operated by Shelter, enabling people to have an advocate in court at eviction hearings for two minutes. Swan Advice Network is in partnership with a local solicitor and other advice agencies to set up a County Court rota scheme. Funding is needed for an advisor to be at the court.

SWAN Housing Advice offer an Income Maximisation Service, which is funded by Social Services. Referrals for the Service come from Social Services. SWAN have a contract with Somer to offer a Benefit Maximisation Service. The Council offers debt-counselling services and work with people in mortgage arrears. There is room for developing this service further.

The savings achieved by preventative work such as this are hard to measure which can make it hard to predict the benefits of investment in these kinds of services.

4.2.10 Sources of support

Resettlement and support services are available to single homeless people, people with drug/alcohol problems and young people. Support services to women subject to domestic violence or abuse are also being developed. Women's Aid offers refuge, however some women do not want or wish to leave their homes but require support such as advice to make decisions.

4.2.11 Policies & processes

It is important that there is an effective use of accommodation to keep people moving through the system, and that the range of accommodation is appropriate and relevant to the needs of people. It's essential to find the right type of accommodation in the right location or there will be empty stock.

4.3 Contributions from members of the public

- 4.3.1 In November a press release invited members of the public to submit their views on alternatives to bed & breakfast to the Panel Convenor. The review has had press coverage on at least two occasions (one in November 2002 and another in January 2003). In addition the Council's website featured a page on the review with a form for submitting comments. One letter and two emails were received.

- 4.3.2 One member of the public pointed out that in the same paper as an article about alternatives to B&B there was an article about an enquiry regarding plans for a 316-bedroom block of student accommodation.

“Stop building new homes etc for students and concentrate on the homeless from the city. It seems that student accommodation has been taking more priority. Every time I read of something new being built or changed it seems it’s for students. If 26 families are homeless at the moment then get that sorted out first before accommodation for 316 student bedrooms.”

- 4.3.3 Another wrote:

“Could homeless families be partnered with other families that have their own home, who would be willing to share their space for a given period of time? ... I think it could work because of recent experiences in putting up people in the past. We’ve had students stay with our family for a period of 3 months, and have done it for years. Although occasionally challenging, it shows that this could be a way of getting people out of impersonal B&B’s.”

- 4.3.4 A third suggested another possible alternative to housing homeless households in B&B:

“a) Invest a proportion of right to buy receipts (current income being approximately £3M per annum) into building a purpose-built hostel comprising 20 self-contained bedsits (both single and double), 6 x 2 bed and 4 x 3 bed self-contained flats.

b) The provision of a caretaker with his/her own self-contained accommodation together with a community room / advice centre.

The cost of this scheme, potentially in the region of £3M, could be offset by right to buy receipts, Government and Housing Corporation grants. There would be savings to the Council in the long run. This is a chance for B&NES Council to take a lead nationally and to become a flagship authority by having no households in temporary B&B accommodation.”

5. Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1 Prevention / Diversion

- 5.1.1 Prevention of homelessness is a priority.
- 5.1.2 There is no *single* action or alternative to temporary accommodation that will avoid the need for the use of bed and breakfast as temporary accommodation.
- 5.1.3 A policy on “homeless at home” should be developed, along with procedures for its use and a system for monitoring the effects of the policy.
- 5.1.4 There should be further work with Registered Social Landlord partners on working practices. This should include consistency of approach (e.g. in relation to policies on harassment, racial harassment and domestic violence). The consistency should be cascaded to all levels of staff – perhaps through a facilitated workshop day. Service level agreements should be used as appropriate to encourage high standards in joint working.

- 5.1.5 The Panel requests a report on plans to increase the availability of information on advice and support services. This should include joint promotion with other agencies working with homeless people and people at risk of homelessness.
- 5.1.6 The feasibility of a county court rota system for Bath & North East Somerset should be determined, including identifying what, if any, funding would be needed. The Panel recognises the lack of local resources for such a system and recommends an investigation of cross-border working with other areas.
- 5.1.7 The Panel supports the proposals in the Local Plan Deposit Draft 2002 in relation to increasing the supply of affordable housing and for supplementary planning guidance for affordable homes provision.
- 5.1.8 The Panel requests further information regarding discretionary housing payments, their use, and any potential use in regard to the prevention of homelessness. (Relates to housing benefit and council tax benefit.)
- 5.1.9 The current deposit bond scheme provides bonds to enable people who may otherwise become homeless to secure private rented accommodation. This scheme is primarily aimed at single homeless people who do not have a priority need for housing and who therefore have low priority on the waiting list for social housing. This scheme should continue to be supported financially, as a cost-effective way of preventing homelessness.
- 5.1.10 A separate and additional deposit bond scheme to provide temporary accommodation for homeless people with a priority need for housing should be developed (including identifying the funding necessary to support such a scheme). This scheme would differ from the existing deposit bond scheme because it would focus on securing private rented accommodation for use *temporarily* whilst households waited to be rehoused, rather than securing *ongoing* private rented accommodation. As a consequence, homeless households accommodated under the scheme should have the same level of priority on the housing register as other homeless households in temporary accommodation or registered as homeless at home. This scheme and closer working with private landlords should be developed as part of work on developing the Council's Homelessness Strategy.

5.2 Temporary accommodation provision

- 5.2.1 The Panel requests a report providing a more detailed evaluation of the use of existing permanent stock as temporary accommodation.
- 5.2.2 There should be a report on unused/under-used commercial property such as flats and spaces above shops (Council or otherwise). This would include proposals for how these valuable spaces can be better used, whether for leasing out to be used as temporary accommodation or for other uses. The community safety benefits of having these spaces occupied should be considered. The Panel recognises that there are difficulties in bringing some properties into use and that this work must be done in accordance with planning and local plan guidelines
- 5.2.3 A Housing Association Leasing Scheme is not recommended at this time.
- 5.2.4 There is a need to find appropriate sites for 2 smaller hostels, with consideration for provision across the District. The Executive should be asked to work with our joint investment partners to find a site. (The Joint Investment Partnership comprises the

Council, the Housing Corporation and several Registered Social Landlords.) The Panel recognises that this is not a short-term but a medium-term solution.

5.3 Comment

- 5.3.1 There is a Public Service Agreement (PSA) proposal in relation to reducing the numbers of homeless households in bed and breakfast. Many of the recommendations above are pieces of work that the proposed PSA-funded worker could undertake or contribute to. The adoption of the PSA proposal may make a significant difference to how quickly the recommendations above could be implemented and consequently, the reduction in numbers in bed and breakfast.

6. Acknowledgements

- 6.1 The Panel would like to thank those who attended and contributed at the Panel's meeting on 14th January 2003 (as listed in section 3.4), as well as those people who met with Panel members on their visit to a temporary accommodation hostel, also in January.
- 6.2 The Panel would also like to thank members of the public who contacted them to make their views known by letter or email.

7. List of Annexes

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| Annex 1 | Terms of Reference |
| Annex 2 | Research document produced as part of the review |
| Annex 3 | Feasibility study into Housing Association Leasing Schemes |
| Annex 4 | Summary of comments at contributor session 14 th Jan 2003 |
| Annex 5 | Example costings information of alternatives to bed & breakfast |
| Annex 6 | Homelessness prevention and advice services |

8. Structure and Organisation

O&S Panel: Housing, Social Services & Community Safety

Convenor: Vic Pritchard

Panel Members:
Sheila Bateman
Phyllis Gay
Francine Haeberling
Adrian Inker
Victoria Kilroy
Lorraine Morgan-Brinkhurst

O&S Project Officer: Joe Duncan

Democratic Services Officer: Kirsty Denley

Director: Jane Ashman, Social & Housing Services

Head of Service: Jane Shayler, Housing & Supported Living

Main service area contributing: Housing & Supported Living

Other service areas contributing: Planning Services
Property & Legal Services