

**TO: ADULT SOCIAL CARE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
17 APRIL 2012**

**INTRODUCTION TO THE HOUSING SERVICE
Director of Adult Social Care, Health and Housing**

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides members of the Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel with an overview of the Housing Service.

2 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 Members are asked to note and comment on the report.**

3 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 3.1 To provide members of the Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel with an overview of the Housing Service.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 Not applicable.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1 The Housing Service contains three service areas; Housing Strategy and Options, Benefits and Forestcare. This report will briefly review each service area in terms of why it is provided, the cost of the service and key facts as well as any emerging issues.

Housing Strategy / Housing Options

- 5.2 The Council's Housing Strategy Service provides the Council's response to its statutory obligation to assess housing needs. The service also develops initiatives to intervene on the housing market where there is market failure. For example the BFC My Home Buy Scheme to enable low income households to buy a home was a result of the lack of mortgage finance availability. This part of the service also works with registered providers (Housing Associations) to develop affordable housing. This can be by direct funding but also via negotiation of planning obligations on sites that qualify under the Council's Affordable Housing Planning Policy. This part of the service also manages the BFC MyChoice Choice Based Allocation Scheme by advertising properties from registered providers each week and short listing bids made by applicants. The Supporting People housing related support contracts are managed from this part of the service.
- 5.3 The Housing Strategy service cost £1.988 million gross in 2011/12 with £178,000 income.

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- 5.4 In 2011/12 the service enabled 24 units of affordable housing to be developed, 9 BFC My Home Buy purchases and 3 cash incentive scheme purchases. There were approximately 880 households who received housing related support. There were 48,517 bids for affordable housing during the year and 473 properties let. As of the end of March 2012 there were 3,950 households on the Council's Housing Register.
- 5.5 The Executive will consider a report recommending review of the Council's Allocation Policy on the 17 April. The Localism Act and impending statutory guidance on the allocation of accommodation guidance provide opportunities to review the Council's Allocation Policy. The forward plan for the Executive contains a report on the Housing Capital Programme for the 22 May. This report will recommend new and revised programmes to invest the proceeds from the stock transfer capital receipt.
- 5.6 The Housing Options Service provides the Council's statutory duty to provide housing advice as well as the homeless service. The service assesses household housing need and provides advice to households on their options for resolving their housing situation. The service aims to prevent homelessness but where that is not possible it will take homeless applications from households and investigate as to whether the Council owes the household a homeless duty to provide settled permanent accommodation.
- 5.7 The Housing Options Service gross revenue cost was £470,000 in 2011/12 with income of £178,000.
- 5.8 During 2011/12 the Housing Options Service prevented 272 households from becoming homeless, and accepted a homeless duty for 73 households.
- 5.9 The level of homelessness has increased by 280% since 2010/11. This is a direct result of the economic situations where first time buyers are unable to purchase due to unavailability the mortgage finance and those households renting the private rented sector pushing up rental values. That not only takes away private rented sector properties but also means that those households on low or modest incomes who rely on housing benefit to help towards their housing costs find it difficult to compete in the market place. This increase in homelessness has manifested itself in an increased use of temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast accommodation before more suitable housing becomes available for households.

Benefits

- 5.10 The Benefits Service provides the Council's statutory duty to administer the national Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Scheme. The service processes applications for benefit, promotes take up of benefits collects overpayments, makes payment of discretionary housing payments where households demonstrate hardship and takes actions against fraudulent claims for benefit.
- 5.11 In 2011/12 the estimated cost of the Benefits Service including payment of benefit was £29,103,000 with income of £28,800,000.
- 5.12 There were 30,401 units (3,949 new claims and 26,452 change events) of benefit applications processed in 2011/12 and £31,180,510.38 benefit paid. There was £3,419,586 benefit overpayment collected and 98 households received in total £17,369 of Discretionary Housing payments. In total £33,000 of additional benefit was received by households in the year due to take up activity. There were 89 sanctions for benefit fraud of which 31 were prosecutions in 2011/12. The total caseload of households claiming benefit at the end of March was 7,494.

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- 5.13 The Benefit Service will undergo significant change following the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act. Housing Benefit will now be updated in line with the consumer price index rather than the actual rent increases from April 2013. From the same date Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans will be devolved to Local Authorities to administer. The Council's Fraud Service will be seconded to the new Single Fraud Investigations Service under the Department of Works and Pensions from April 2013. From October 2013 Universal Credit will be introduced for all new claims and this will replace Housing Benefit. Existing claimants will transfer to Universal Credit up to 2017. Universal Credit will be a digitally based system with all claims being made on line. It will be administered by Department of Works and Pensions. Council Tax Benefit will be replaced by a Local Council Tax Support Scheme. The new scheme must be ready by February 2013. The funding for the new scheme will be based on previous Council Tax Benefit paid less 10%. The Government requires all new schemes to protect pensioners. If the 10% reduction in funding is applied to the rest of the caseload it will result in an average of 17.7% cut in Council Tax Benefit for working age households.
- 5.14 The Government is introducing a cap on total benefits from April 2013 of £26,000 for households with children and £18,000 for single households. The cap will be managed by local Authorities reducing the Housing Benefit the household would be entitled to at that point in time to ensure that the total benefit does not breach the cap.
- 5.15 As can be seen there are fundamental changes to the Benefit system and there will be a need to redesign the way the service operates. The Executive will consider a report at its meeting on the 17 April to implement a project to transform and redesign the service employing the system thinking methodology.

Forestcare

- 5.16 The Forestcare service provides two functions but both operate 365 days a year 24 hours a day. Firstly, it provides the emergency Lifeline service to vulnerable, mainly elderly, households and secondly it provides a commercial service to corporate customers in terms of an out of hours calls service. Commercial services include loan worker and calls monitoring as well as repairs handling.
- 5.17 The service cost £839,000 in 2011/12 with an income of £846,000.
- 5.18 The Forestcare service is fully accredited with the Telecare Service Association.
- 5.19 In 2011/12 the service took 443,420 alarm calls (April 11 to February 12) with 98.8% answered within 60 seconds. There are a total of 8,000 households (1,500 in Bracknell) supported by Forestcare.
- 5.20 The main issue facing Forestcare is the drive to continue securing business. This is both for the Lifeline service as well as corporate customers. The service regularly bids for corporate work and must balance the capacity of the existing service against extra income and the need to increase staff capacity to undertake new work.

6 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED / ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS / EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT / STRATEGIC RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES / CONSULTATION

- 6.1 Not applicable.

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Background Papers

None.

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