

best practice guides
for the strategic housing role



paper 2 in the IDeA series

good practice in access to housing and good housing services



The IDeA is grateful to those authorities that have participated in the production of this guide, through giving up their time to help the guide's authors develop case studies of their practice.

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1. introduction

The Housing Green Paper 'Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable' (July 2007) sets out a series of measures to meet the Government's vision for everyone to have access to a decent home at a price they can afford, in a place where they want to live and work. The Green Paper and the subsequent Housing and Regeneration Bill emphasise that delivery is a shared endeavour, and that through their strategic housing role, local authorities have a vital contribution to play in addressing the housing needs of all local residents across all tenures. By working effectively with partners to deliver new market and affordable housing and make best use of stock, the local authority strategic housing role is at the heart of the place shaping agenda.

This guide focuses on the 'people' issues at the heart of the local authority strategic housing role; the wide range of roles local authorities have in helping people gain access to, and sustain occupation of, suitable housing including the role of strategic housing teams in promoting quality landlord services by affordable housing providers in their area.

The main purpose of this guide is to inspire authorities. It shows how successful authorities have tackled complex issues through a strategic approach. All of the examples have resulted in better outcomes, with strong performance achieved through partnership working, as part of councils' wider place shaping activities.

This guide is the second in the IDeA series on emerging good practice in the local authority strategic housing role. The first guide in this series, “Community leadership and the strategic housing role in local government”, was published earlier this year. It described how the strategic housing role is no longer a narrow and technical one, it has become complex and cross cutting and is integral to the fundamental purpose of every local authority in its work of:

- delivering better places for its citizens
- providing robust community leadership, and...
- improving the health, cohesion and quality of life of all who live within the authority's boundaries

Future publications in this series will look at what authorities can and are doing to integrate strategic housing activity within a wider ‘place-making’ agenda, and to ‘balance housing markets’ by facilitating the provision of market and affordable housing within their localities. They will support authorities in increasing housing supply and as such, will help authorities to fully respond to the challenging agenda set out within the Housing Green Paper.

This current guide focuses on approaches that authorities can adopt to promote the efficient use of the existing stock of 20 million public and private sector homes. Whilst concerned with the balance of the entire housing market in their areas, local authorities have a particular responsibility to find solutions for the homeless, the vulnerable and those in need. This lies at the heart of the strategic housing role of every local authority in England.

The knowledge and understanding gained from the four areas of activity described in this guide underpins how each local authority will commission and influence the supply of new accommodation as part of its place making role. It emphasises that the “people” dimension of the strategic housing role cannot be separated from the planning, procurement and delivery side.

this 'access to housing' guide

An essential housing function for all housing authorities is to assist people to get access to reasonable quality homes that will meet their needs. The focus is on those people who have been unable to find their own solutions in the housing market, including the vulnerable and excluded groups.

This guide examines four areas in which local authority strategic housing teams have a role. They are the areas that most closely touch the specific needs of individuals and families.

- Emerging good practice in housing advice, homelessness and allocations. Driven by a fresh approach to “what is it that the customer wants?” This section discusses the change in emphasis that is taking place in the range and quality of housing advice, and the impact this is having on the lettings made by social landlords.
- Providing accommodation for vulnerable people who require support: the Supporting People programme. This section considers the local authority strategic housing role in relation to the Supporting People programme and how this is made up of the strategic decisions and activities associated with effective planning and delivery of support services, which link homes to the support and other services that people need in order to become settled.

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- Making the most of accommodation for older people.
This section considers strategies for providing suitable housing for older people and the issues surrounding advice and access.
 - Encouraging local landlords to provide quality housing and access services. This section considers the important role of strategic housing teams in ensuring their areas are served by a range of landlords and other providers who can satisfy the full range of local demand for different types of landlord services.

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2. emerging practice in housing advice, homelessness and allocations

Two of the most notable successes in the English social housing system over the past few years have been the introduction of choice to housing waiting lists and the prevention of homelessness by intervening and providing quality housing advice at an early stage. These successes have occurred against a backdrop of major pressures on housing affordability and rising waiting lists for social housing.

Most local authorities over the past five years have adopted this new "options approach", which has emphasised sign-posted choices and advice to individuals. Local authorities have looked at how they maintain their housing registers, and many have implemented choice-based lettings schemes. Many are partnerships with housing associations and some have become cross-authority allocations schemes. Good strategic housing teams will also have created mechanisms to give access to assisted home ownership schemes and be considering the breadth of housing options available to support vulnerable people¹.

Nevertheless many councils have work to do in continuing to fine tune the toolkits they use for providing options and advice. How should the strategic housing team go about this? Firstly, and most importantly, by regularly asking the customer. Key stakeholders will also have opinions and ideas that may improve the types of option and advice service available. Secondly, by exploring innovations others are

¹ Within this guide the terms 'vulnerable people' and 'urgent housing need' are used in the context of the statutory framework for assessing and responding to the needs of homeless people.

adopting and considering if they could have a role in your own local circumstances.

This section concentrates on describing the journey that three authorities have taken to understand customer choice far better, and what measures need to be taken to offer more choice in terms of advice across a greater range of types and tenures. It will also consider the organisational and cultural attributes that have allowed this to happen.

In the first case study, Croydon is an authority that has retained its housing stock but nevertheless, demonstrates a strong commissioning culture and desire to make the most of what partners in both the voluntary and private sectors can offer. The second case study describes how two small authorities have collaborated together to set up a sub regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The case study of the City of Norwich describes a further journey of change, also with a sub-regional dimension.

The approach that these local authorities have adopted involves providing as much customer information and choice as is reasonably possible. These authorities also embrace the private sector as full partners in the allocation and letting of accommodation. Offering choice and providing customer information are key themes in the government's future policy options.

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case study London Borough of Croydon

organisational context

The London Borough of Croydon is the largest London Borough with a population of 336,000 and has acute accommodation problems. It is an area of complex social and cultural mix, with 36% of its population from minority ethnic communities.

challenges

It has 10,000 households on its housing waiting list and is facing the challenge of making even modest numbers of lettings to those other than priority homeless applicants.

achievements and learning

Achievements include reducing homeless acceptances; reducing use of temporary accommodation; variety of new advice and prevention techniques; innovations with the private sector. Key learning points include the success of investing in the housing options and advice team, introducing a choice based lettings scheme and key workers/shared ownership schemes. Also, effective management of the waiting list by setting allocation targets and use of the private rented

sector. Other learning points include the value of designing solutions with partners and using partner organisations to deliver where appropriate, for example the Single Homeless Pathway described below.

strategic housing

Croydon has retained its housing stock. The strategy and enabling team sits within the Housing Department which has a full range of housing functions, including landlord, housing options, strategy/enabling and development. Croydon is a Borough that invests heavily in partnerships and uses this to constantly look for solutions to its complex problems. The Borough works with a very broad range of partners to offer housing advice and to create the broadest possible range of housing options for its citizens. It has done so, guided by its housing and homelessness strategies, which themselves integrate carefully into other strategies under the umbrella of the Croydon Sustainable Communities Plan (see for example the approach to young people services described below).

Croydon takes a proactive approach to developing the skills and capacity of its options and advice team. There are twenty-five staff engaged in the provision of advice and options. This team is at the forefront of Croydon's ambition to make the housing waiting list a credible register once again.

In 2002/03 Croydon rehoused only 14 families needing two bedrooms or larger accommodation from its waiting list. In 2007/8 waiting list families will be allocated 140 homes. With 700 family homes becoming available each year from a total of 1170 lettings (Council and housing association) this may appear modest but there is the necessity to make major reductions in the use of temporary accommodation. Progress is steady, and lettings to the waiting list are projected to rise considerably in the coming years.

The desire to promote the housing waiting list as a credible tool underpins Croydon's approach to providing the maximum transparency and realistic choice in a system that is under acute pressure.

Croydon operates a Choice Based lettings scheme on behalf of all the social landlords within Croydon. It aims to be fair, simple and transparent. It is designed to be enabling, not gate keeping. It relies upon good information to empower customer choice. The waiting list is divided into five bands. Each band is designed to reflect housing need but also takes account of insecurity in the applicant's tenure. Its rationale is to house those in the greatest need whilst seeking to prevent actual homelessness. This means that no greater priority is given to those accepted as homeless and residing in temporary accommodation over those applicants judged to be in urgent housing need. Every effort is made to give the best information to each applicant and to empower the customer to make an informed choice. Intermediate housing (e.g. key worker or shared ownership schemes) now represents half of all new supply and every effort is made to promote and identify qualifying applicants. The waiting list is actively managed by setting allocation targets for each priority band. The system is rooted in a clear estimate of annual housing supply, which is used to predict an average waiting time for applicants within the specific housing bands. There is profiling of need within each band and bedroom size. The council uses an active monitoring process to review achievement of targets and ensure that fairness is integral within the system.

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Informed choice and addressing the underlying personal problems for young people below the age of twenty-five characterises the Single Homeless Pathway adopted by Croydon. This is an integrated programme in which housing staff work actively with educational, employment and counselling agencies to help young people to sort their lives out and in doing so resolve their housing crisis. It is a dedicated service with its own branding and is designed to engage with single people between the ages of 16-25 years and young women 16-17 years who are pregnant. The service is fronted by Croydon Association for Young Single Homeless and incorporates Housing Options, Social Services and both statutory and voluntary partners. It uses joint assessments for those who may be homeless and/or with a child in need.

Every effort is made to maximise opportunities to create or free up accommodation. The housing market is managed and a variety of techniques are deployed to create capacity. Council tenants who can afford to buy their own home are incentivised through the Assisted Private Purchase scheme that offers assistance of up to £40,000. Croydon is a pilot for the government's Social Homebuy scheme with tenants able to purchase a minimum 25% share in their homes. Tenants who under-occupy their homes can consider moving into a smaller rented home aided by Special Transfer Payments of £2,000 per room. There is an enhanced Special Transfer Payment for larger homes of £10,000 per room

(such is the scarcity of 4 bedroom and larger homes). Croydon staff have visited every larger home in their stock and through this intervention expect to double the supply of larger homes becoming available.

Croydon also seeks to reduce under-occupation of RSL property. This is done by offering to match fund under-occupation moves at £1,000 per room, for which the nomination right goes to the Council (66% of RSL family homes are now included in the scheme). There is also the use of Freshstart (to low demand areas), and negotiation with RSLs to increase nomination rights.

There is an extensive programme designed to maximise the use of the private sector in providing rented accommodation opportunities. Once again focussed effort has achieved results in that nearly two thousand lets have been made in partnership with private sector landlords. This is managed by a team of ten staff who work closely with those threatened with homelessness, by finding accommodation and promoting "self find" solutions (supported by deposit and incentives payments). The team gives direct support to landlords in relation to Housing Benefit, whilst also securing standards through Environmental Health checks. Opportunities to prevent homelessness are maximised by giving unlimited offers to individuals or families. Private sector lets are now being accepted as permanent solutions as families settle into accommodation or see the wider

choice that it offers.

Combined with the other prevention techniques described above the use of the private sector has had a major impact in reducing Croydon's use of temporary accommodation. The council's success in accessing the private sector through the Landlord Deposit Scheme has led to a significant shift over the past two years in its use of temporary accommodation. There has been a big increase in the number of placements made as prevention of homelessness and in qualifying offers.

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case study

East Midlands Peak Choice Based Lettings Scheme

organisational context

Derbyshire Dales District Council and High Peak Borough Council are rural local authorities with populations of 70,000 and 89,500 respectively, a large proportion of which is based in the Peak District National Park. The four main founding partners of the Home-Options scheme (www.home-options.org) are Derbyshire Dales District Council, Dales Housing, High Peak Borough Council and High Peak Community Housing.

challenges

For significant numbers of local people, the availability of affordable housing is a problem. There are 4200 applicants on the combined housing register, whilst supply is less than 700 vacancies a year. The challenge was to move away from multiple allocation systems that were confusing to customers and staff. The old systems resulted in over 30,000 phone calls a year asking “where am I on the list” or “when am I going to get a house”.

The emphasis was for Home-Options to provide much more information to customers but in doing so enabling staff to a focus on the more vulnerable. This also means managing difficult messages about choice and scarcity for the remainder of those on the housing register, and those who aspire to be on it.

achievements and learning

Achievements include rethinking the way customers access housing and how housing advice is given. Emphasising to the customers the consequences of scarcity of affordable housing and offering advice on alternative options tailored to each applicant's circumstances. This has led to greater engagement between stakeholder agencies within the sub-region. This was the first sub-regional CBL scheme to go live from the 2005/2006 round of Communities and Local Government funded schemes.

strategic housing

In 2005 both authorities recognised that they form a sub-regional housing market. From this understanding an agreement has come about that a single strategic housing team of four people undertakes their combined strategic housing function.

Derbyshire Dales District Council (DDDC) and High Peak Borough Council (HPBC) are adjacent local authorities. One transferred its housing stock by large-scale voluntary transfer in 2002 to Dales Housing; the other formed an ALMO, High Peak Community Housing (HPCH) in 2004. Their combined social housing stock across the two areas is 7000 with a further 700 homes in the ownership of twenty-five other RSLs. Overall there are about 700 lets available per year.

Both authorities faced capacity issues in the management of their strategic housing roles following their decisions to stop directly managing the landlord functions. In both cases the authority retained just two staff to fulfil their strategic housing responsibilities. HPBC had noted the success in 2005 of DDDC's short listed Beacon application for affordable housing. There was already a history of joint working on housing e.g. Stock Condition Survey and wider corporate activity. The success of earlier collaboration had a big influence on the decision to combine the strategic housing teams. The authorities view is "we recognise that we don't have the expertise or capacity to deliver everything we would like to achieve. But we do have the skills, ability and knowledge to bring the right people together as well as skills to attract inward investment to enable us to deliver."

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The driver of change for the partnership in relation to allocations policy came from the recognition that they shared a sub regional housing market area and were under significant pressure from customers who had unrealistic expectations of an offer of accommodation from their housing registers. All understood they needed to give better information to applicants in order to offer more tailored advice about their supply options. Customers were confused between the Council and the LSVT/ALMO as to who held the register. DDDC had one points system and one banded system. HPCCH had a points system.

High Peak Community Housing (High Peak Borough Council's ALMO) were much advanced in their approach to CBL when an opportunity arose for sub-regions to bid for Government funding to establish CBL schemes over wider areas. The Peak Sub region was successful. The Communities and Local Government funding enabled the partnership to procure a full IT package, consider all policy options, carry out extensive consultation and publicity events, staff training, design of branding and printing of material and the delivery of the Home-Options scheme. All partners came to the conclusion that their customers needed one name, a single point of access, and one message for the whole housing market area no matter which organisation you walked into. "Why have to go through multiple organisations to live in the next village?" Elected Members and Board Members were brought into

the process of development at an early stage in relation to the allocations policy and system and were involved in developing the system requirements.

For DDDC this was also an opportunity as it held only 75% nomination rights to Dales Housing properties following transfer. Dales Housing was brought in as a full partner. This has allowed the scheme to incorporate transfers into its policy. Working relationships between the DDDC and Dales Housing have improved as a consequence of this decision.

The partners were determined not to get over complicated during their review and change process – delegated decision-making was given to one person from each of the partners to produce an allocations policy. These were employees with direct management of the service and an understanding of the issues within each of their organisations. A draft policy was then passed to an executive group for comment before going through each board/committee as a draft. Consultation events followed. Changes were made and accepted into a working document.

Compromises were made along the way. There was concern about the concept of bands, the incorporation of transfer applicants and home-seekers and the inclusion of applicants from another local authority area. There was concern that all properties might be allocated to the top band with other banded applicants having no opportunity. These concerns

were answered by proposing a full review after 6 months of operation. The outcome has been the migration from three separate systems and the move to a single hosted common register – the East Midlands Peak Choice Based Letting Scheme.

The Allocations Policy created balances between the needs of current tenants seeking transfer against the needs of home-seekers. The scheme considers needs across all tenures within a single policy. Those prioritised in greatest housing need will be considered irrespective of them being home-seekers or transfer applicants.

An effective Choice Based Lettings Scheme needs a simple and transparent allocation policy that customers can readily understand. It also needs a good delivery platform. To achieve this requires a robust procurement process. In the case of the East Midlands Peak Scheme this included reviewing other existing schemes, carefully building a specification, and making an allowance for development costs at each stage of the process before beginning the formal tendering and selection process. The outcome is the purchase of the system that most closely met the specification from an organisation that could demonstrate flexibility and good service. For the partners this includes online registration – including automated banding of applications where possible, automated bidding services, customer relations management document hosting and

letter generation, mutual exchange and supported housing assessment.

The software company selected as commercial partner met the partners' specification requirements in full. They showed expertise in establishing large regional CBL systems which include many partners and thousands of applicants and brought added value to the scheme and the efficiencies gained through working with a not for profit consortium.

For customers there is an on-line application form (but paper application forms are available where applicants have no IT access). The system is made widely accessible through property list displays and access to computers in most of the offices of Derbyshire Dales District Council, High Peak Community Housing and Dales Housing. Staff at Libraries, Connexions and CAB have been trained and also display free property lists and posters. Customers are offered five ways to make their bid; through phone, text, web, coupon or staff. This gives a high level of functionality in relations to communications. There is a vulnerable applicants list with mail out to those who fit strict criteria of no support, unable to access local outlets etc. They receive a personal property list that only shows properties for which they are eligible.

As rural authorities in a National Park the two authorities have particular dilemmas over the local connections of applicants. They accept that there is a level of migration

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required within the sub-region to enable people to work and offer/receive support to family members. This is established within the Allocations Policy. It has to balance also with the local connection requirements of the Peak National Park (in settlements of less than 3000 people priority goes to people with a connection to the parish). The dilemmas are acute as local people face great difficulties being able to remain local with increasing house prices and private rents. The scheme is therefore designed such that all applicants are assessed according to their need and banded accordingly. Properties are advertised based on local connection requirements in the first instance and offered outside of the locality if there is no local need.

The treatment of property equity has also been a significant dilemma in designing the allocations scheme. As house prices have increased the authorities have found that they have a lot of older applicants who require accommodation who reside in houses worth in excess of £250,000. The applicants are not willing to sell to move to more suitable accommodation - they wish to sell to pass on an early inheritance. The scheme tries to balance need against an applicant's ability to solve his or her own housing difficulty. The scheme specifically states that options other than rehousing through the Home-Options scheme may be more appropriate, and if so they will be referred to other appropriate agencies.

The authorities are working towards creating more variety within the housing market to offer those with equity more choice and opportunity. They are working with Age Concern Derby and Derbyshire who offer an advice and signposting service to assist older people in making the right decision at the right time in relation to their housing needs.

Home-Options has attracted interest from other local authorities and registered social landlords and in December 2007 Amber Valley Borough Council and its ALMO, Amber Valley Housing will be joining the scheme.

case study

Norwich City Council

organisational context

Norwich is currently a District Council with a population of 125,000, surrounded by the rural county of Norfolk. The housing market area for Norwich actually covers three local authority areas.

challenges

Challenges included the need to raise resident satisfaction with Council services and the need to prevent and tackle homelessness. This was reinforced by a housing service inspection that rated the council's housing services as one star with promising prospects of improvement.

achievements and learning

Achievements include a new business led approach emphasising outcomes for customers which has had a marked impact and taking a sub-regional partnership approach to the whole urban area of Norwich. Learning includes the value of using strong analytical techniques and having a focus on outcomes for customers when redesigning a service.

strategic housing

The Strategic Housing Service comprises Housing Options, Housing Strategy, Housing Development and Private Sector Housing. Strategic Housing is one of four services within the Community and Neighbourhoods Directorate. One of the other three services within the Directorate is Landlord Services that includes Housing advice, CBL, Homelessness service, Homeownership service (for leaseholders and 'right to buy' applicants), private sector leasing and contract management of the Home Improvement Agency.

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The City of Norwich is an example of an authority that has taken on board the options-based approach in its work with homeless and vulnerably housed households. Norwich is continually looking for new and innovative approaches. They firmly believe in the merits of multi-agency working and in listening to the users of their services. They are committed to continuing to develop better and more effective housing options. "We feel that the way to build better services is to provide more and more options, there can never be enough".

The Council had already embarked upon an in-depth review and revision of major service delivery processes. Business process reengineering was used. The opportunity was taken to comprehensively restructure and refocus the homelessness service from a reactive Housing Needs service to a customer facing Housing Options service, one that focused on the prevention of homelessness. Only a third of the staff from the old service remained following the restructure. All staff, new and old, went through an intensive training programme.

This business led approach, with a strong focus on outcomes for customers, has had a marked impact. In 2003/04 there were 679 families in temporary accommodation with 1391 homeless decisions and 770 acceptances taking place. Three years later, in 2006/07 there were only 88 families in temporary accommodation

and 400 homelessness decisions with 142 acceptances. A key change was the creation of a team of Housing Advisors who became the first point of contact for all people contacting Norwich City Council for housing advice and assistance.

Service development and improvement has also been pursued with sub-regional partners. This was in recognition that the housing market area for Norwich actually covers three local authority areas. The Greater Norwich Housing Partnership (GNHP) is a partnership of all organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors with an interest in housing in Greater Norwich. Although initially envisaged as a vehicle to attract additional development funding into the sub-region, the GNHP became much more. It expanded into other complementary areas of work and established strong political and senior officer buy-in through an innovative structure. It made sense for Greater Norwich to pursue a partnership approach as the urban area of Norwich extends beyond the City Council boundaries. There is also interaction with rural areas and several partner organisations that operate across authority boundaries. The GNHP brings co-ordination to all of this.

Sub-regional working has led to the development of a number of tools, which are directly supporting the new housing options approach. These include a sub-regional Night Stop Scheme for young people and a sub-regional empty homes leasing scheme. There is also a sub-regional protocol with Broadland and South Norfolk Councils to reflect the fact that homelessness does not fit neatly within administrative boundaries and effective joint working is necessary.

The business led and outcome focussed approach has also been responsible for new thinking that has led to a new allocations policy which aims to assist households before their circumstances deteriorate to the point where a homelessness presentation is necessary. Other complementary initiatives include a homelessness prevention fund used flexibly to respond to a household's circumstances e.g. payment of a household's rent arrears to prevent a private landlord taking action and a private sector leasing scheme which taps into the large private rented sector in Norwich (they offer to lease private sector properties for a fixed length of time, usually three years. Norwich then choose a tenant and manage the properties and can offer a repairs service. In return the landlord receives a guaranteed rent for the period and will receive the property back at the end of the lease in the same condition less fair wear and tear).

Norwich and its partners across the county have also been adopting some of the outcomes thinking to begin solving issues that Districts find hard to solve alone. Recent initiatives include:

- a sub-regional protocol with Children's Services for dealing with intentionally homeless families
- a sub-regional protocol for dealing with prolific offenders and young offenders
- a statement of support from Districts for a strong Supporting People service,
- a County-wide Sanctuary Project to offer safety, security and options to those at risk of domestic violence.

Norwich very much sees itself at the beginning of a journey. They are continuing to explore new ways to provide opportunities for customers and sub-regional working features significantly.

3. accommodation for vulnerable people who require support: the Supporting People programme

The local authority strategic housing role in relation to the Supporting People programme is made up of the strategic decisions and activities associated with effective planning and delivery of support services which link homes to the support and other services that people need to become settled. This is a challenging and complex area. Delivery of the role requires strategic housing teams to engage with the agencies that create the “people solutions” – such as the Supporting People Partnership and the public, private sector and voluntary organisations who provide the support); the agencies that deliver the property solutions (the planning, procurement and development activity undertaken by RSLs and other development companies); and the funding and commissioning agencies (such as the regional housing and planning board, the Housing Corporation, Probation and the PCT(s)). In two tier authorities, there must be engagement with the county council and its districts to ensure effective delivery of Local Area Agreement (LAA) and other key strategic outcomes e.g. Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) and Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA).

The Supporting People programme was created in 2003. It provides the means through which government ensures that some of society’s most vulnerable people receive help and support to live independently. It makes an important contribution to the objectives of promoting equality of opportunity and enabling vulnerable people to participate

fully in the social and economic life of their communities.

Supporting people helps more than a million people each year to achieve or maintain independence through the provision of housing related support services. It is helping to reduce re-offending, reduce homelessness and rough sleeping and avoid antisocial behaviour. Government strategy has been reviewed and a new supporting people strategy was published in July 2007. Locally, Administrative Authorities were required to create a five-year strategy and annual plan in 2005. These run until 2010; each year an updated annual plan sets out strategic priorities.

The new national Supporting People strategy is based on four key themes: keeping people that need services at the heart of the programme; enhancing partnership with the third sector; delivering in the new government landscape; and increasing efficiency and reducing bureaucracy. The strategy is clear that both housing and support are required to help vulnerable people to make choices that can both improve their own circumstances whilst helping government in its aims of promoting social mobility, employment opportunities and cohesive mixed communities. The message has been restated. The commissioners of housing and the commissioners of housing support must work closely together to achieve outcomes for vulnerable people. New National Strategy states, "...we expect local authorities to look beyond the scope of the Supporting People

programme, to discuss how housing support can and should help to deliver the wider Sustainable Communities Strategy, amongst others."

Over the past four or five years the supporting people programme has highlighted the importance of having local preventative and early intervention services available. There has been an improvement in the understanding of the pathways that individuals who have chaotic lifestyles adopt. In particular, there is more clarity about the important role that transitional support services, such as outreach floating support and foyers, can play in making housing accessible to vulnerable people and the crucial role of next stage move-on accommodation if these facilities are to be used efficiently. An example of the prioritisation of move on accommodation by allocation through a quota system in the London Borough of Croydon has been discussed in the previous section.

The relationship between the strategic housing role and supporting people is continuing to evolve. The Programme has provided an effective framework to support a continuous drive to improve services in supported housing for vulnerable people and a variety of techniques have been used to achieve this. Nationally there have been, and continue to be, extensive briefings on good practice as it emerges. Regional improvement groups and value improvement projects have been set up. More recently has

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seen the appointment by the government of regional champions to disseminate good practice. Extensive use of the Internet as a medium for learning continues. Staff from strategic housing teams have been completely involved in this process through membership of core strategy groups and strategic planning groups. This learning has become embedded in strategic housing teams as much as with their colleagues in the wider Supporting People Partnership and the providers.

During this time there has been a growing emphasis on outcomes. The supporting people commissioning process has been, and continues to be particularly good in developing thinking about “will this change the life of this individual for the better?” Communities and Local Government has been working on developing national outcome indicators since September 2006; the indicators for short-term services started on 31st May 2007 and for long-term services from 31st July 2007. What matters for individuals are the outcomes of strategies. Did the investment of support and specialist accommodation make a measurable difference to the individual, or family? Asking this important question has become a crucial feature of the supporting people programme.

The “outcomes set” has become formalised through the creation of an enabling tool that has been developed by government. St. Andrews University is acting as collector of data on the journey that individuals or families take through the supporting people programme and from this will provide analysis and disseminate findings. It is worth noting that identifying measurable outcomes is also a key feature of the work done in the drafting of Local Area Agreements. As will be seen below in the case study of the London Borough of Lambeth, the two approaches have significant synergy and have led the authority to bring the LAA and supporting people together.

Also below are case studies that illustrate the complex partnership working required to make a success of delivering accommodation in two tier authorities as illustrated in Derbyshire, and the sophisticated strategic approach to commissioning accommodation to match the supply of support services in Bolton.

case study

Derbyshire Supporting People Partnership

organisational context

Derbyshire is a medium sized and diverse county. There is one urban area with a population over 100,000 (Chesterfield) and a large number of smaller towns and villages. Around 750,000 people live in the county. The communities are diverse, ranging from former mining and industrial areas to rural and agricultural areas with a mix of deprived and relatively affluent districts.

challenges

Coordination of Supporting People programme with eight District Councils whilst undertaking challenging strategic service reviews.

achievements and learning

Achievements include the strength and inclusiveness of its partnership working and its integrated commissioning of housing and support services. The consensual decision making process used has not prevented strong challenge and difficult decisions from being made.

Learning includes the value of having a strong elected member role in the commissioning process and value of using project boards when conducting strategic service reviews.

strategic housing

Derbyshire is a county council and therefore does not have responsibility for housing. A number of the District Councils within its boundaries do recognise a capacity issue. This is described below.

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

The nature of the engagement of the strategic housing role with supporting people differs depending on whether it is in a unitary structure or two-tier (district and county) structure. This case study considers these relationship issues for a county council that has worked hard on the quality of its engagement with its district councils. At the national level, the future quality of this engagement is a matter that the Audit Commission has identified as a concern. District councils appear to be losing their focus in relation to their interaction with the supporting people programme. This is occurring because of capacity issues and because of the perception by some district councils that the County Council holds the partnership responsibility, rather than being a shared concern.

Derbyshire County Council is a county council that has accepted the leadership responsibility of achieving full engagement with the eight district councils and other key partners including Health and Probation. They have been particularly careful to be inclusive and build upon collective strengths and ensure this includes the primary care trusts and the countywide probation service. The Derbyshire Partnership has adopted an approach that is evolutionary and inclusive. It is one that requires full consensus in its decision-making. There is a willingness to devote the time necessary to achieve consensus when it is necessary to do so. On occasion this has lengthened the decision making process but it also ensures all partners understand and

support decisions. It places a strong discipline on the officer core strategy group, together with housing policy colleagues, to ensure that proposals have been thoroughly researched, consulted upon, fully costed and have clear outcomes.

Having Elected Member representation from the county council and district councils on the Commissioning Body supports this approach. Their role in leading the programme ensures that there are effective links with the county council and district Cabinets and the Local Area Agreement (LAA) governance structure. It streamlines decision-making and enables a strong information flow.

Derbyshire was a LAA pilot. Like Lambeth (see below) they believe that the LAA has proven helpful in achieving strategic alignment to countywide priorities. The supporting people programme is aligned within the LAA governance structure in Derbyshire. A focus on outcomes is apparent. The Derbyshire Partnership adopts a project management approach to commissioning services and always begins the process by asking all of the stakeholders (providers, service users and the commissioners themselves) "what do you want this service to do?"

A series of strategic reviews is currently under way. These reviews were prioritised based on the national Value Improvement Project risk assessment tools, including Supply Positioning and Supplier Preferencing for each service and are linked to the agreed Procurement Timetable. A project group is established for each strategic review with membership including the Derbyshire core strategy group (the district council representatives are usually responsible for housing strategy and policy issues); relevant voluntary and community sector organisations; service users and providers. Current reviews include young people, people with chaotic lifestyles and domestic violence refugees.

Engaging with supporting people, whilst undertaking the variety of other responsibilities of the strategic housing role, can be a significant challenge for district councils. They usually have only small numbers of staff to fulfil the strategic housing role. Two district councils, who have adopted a solution to this capacity issue by collaborating, are featured as an earlier case study. High Peak and Derbyshire Dales District Councils have found that their collaboration has made it easier to effectively engage with Derbyshire County Council. It has also led to success in winning capital funding from the Housing Corporation and the Department of Health for two extra care schemes.

Supporting people strategies and housing strategies are aligned in Derbyshire. It has proved possible to prioritise developments in accordance with countywide strategy. There are several examples where strategic housing teams have planned and executed development activity in accordance with the outcomes identified in the Five-Year Supporting People Strategy. Examples include property swaps to improve disabled people's access to dwellings and working with RSLs to commission accommodation for supported housing that gives the RSL security against its investment. There is flexibility built into designs to allow for future reconversion in the event that commissioning should cease. The partners use a weighted scoring system to prioritise bids for Housing Corporation capital funding. The strategic planning commissioning framework ensures that each service proposal is tested against agreed outcomes and not limited to re-provisioning an existing model, whether accommodation based, or floating support.

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

This collaborative approach and the use of project boards provide skills and capacity to the whole system. In Derbyshire it works because the boards contain people who understand the principles of good commissioning; and staff who can interpret physical designs to ensure they are a logical extension of the designs for personal support that are being promoted by the supporting people commissioners.

case study

London Borough of Lambeth

organisational context

The London borough of Lambeth is the fifth most densely populated authority in the country. The population is 286,500 and expected to rise. It has a diverse community with 38% of the population from black and minority ethnic communities. It is also a young borough with 45% of the population aged 20-40 years. It has very high levels of social housing (42%) and private sector lettings (18%).

challenges

Major social inclusion issues that were not being effectively addressed in the fragmented system that existed earlier in the decade. Complex homelessness and access issues for vulnerable people.

achievements

Achievements include the coherence and clarity of the commissioning of housing with support that is now designed to take place within the framework of the Local Area Agreement. Learning includes the value of being able to work inside of strong partnership structures, which enjoy high-level support from both the Council and the LSP. Use of GIS has also informed Lambeth's approach to commissioning.

strategic housing

The strategic housing role sits within the Housing Strategy and Partnerships Division of the Regeneration and Housing Department alongside Homelessness /Allocations, Private Sector, ALMO client, Estate Regeneration and Policy functions. The Department has five other divisions: Planning; Asset Strategy; Regeneration and Enterprise; Housing Management and Property Services; Resources.

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

Lambeth is an example of an authority that has used good commissioning principles to ensure that buildings and specialist support for individuals have come together under the clear focus of achieving positive outcomes for individuals. Some years ago Lambeth had a fragmented system. However, partnership work developed through the local strategic partnership processes has brought together partners from housing, health and social care. The initial focus was on freeing up places in institutions by helping individuals move into independence. The decommissioning of services proved difficult and forced partners to take an analytical and data led approach to both needs and supply. The Supporting People methodology proved helpful in developing this robust approach.

This early method has now been modified by the outcome driven approach required by the local area agreements. Lambeth was a pilot for LAAs and the authority welcomed the synergy that was obvious between the Supporting People and LAA processes. Both are partnerships that use grants that focus on delivering an agreed set of outcomes whilst decision-making for both is through the LSP; and both target the over-arching theme of the LAA in Lambeth, namely social inclusion.

The aims of the LAA in Lambeth are to deliver more efficient and effective local services. A large number of grants are pooled and aligned to compliment and influence

mainstream activities using an integrated commissioning approach in order to:

- 'narrow the gap' through the building of effective partnerships
- offer innovative solutions to inclusion / prevention initiatives
- improve neighbourhood delivery by identifying local need
- apply an integrated approach to performance management and the delivery of outcomes
- enable successful community and user engagement

The Supporting People administrative authority has become part of one of the themed LAA joint commissioning boards which is supported by six weekly housing 'partnership board for vulnerable adult' meetings. The strong commissioning principles of Supporting People (for example quality assurance and effective procurement) have made it an ideal programme for aligning into the LAA.

The social inclusion focus of Supporting People and the crosscutting nature of the service meant that there was already a high profile for both the Supporting People programme and homelessness in Lambeth. There was a good understanding of the issues for both housing and support in both senior councillors and officers. But it also helped that the LSP was already represented on the Supporting People Commissioning Board and that the Board

was brought into discussions concerning the potential of the LAA at an early stage. There was a debate on the benefits of alignment of the funding streams and agreement achieved that Supporting People should become part of Lambeth's Safer and Stronger Block.

The extent to which Lambeth has chosen to adopt an outcomes focussed approach can be judged from the fact that the Council is now endeavouring to rearrange its own structures behind the LAA framework. There is good governance, in the form of strong political ownership from the Council but also ownership at the LSP partnership executive board, which includes the Primary Care Trust, voluntary sector chief executives and the Learning and Skills Council.

With 45% of the Supporting People grant devoted to homelessness strategies, it was inevitable that the housing strategy team would play a fundamental part in commissioning. From the beginning geographic information systems were used to collect data on needs and supply. This has been invaluable in building up a picture of how supported housing really works within the borough. There are regular housing development group meetings, which include RSLs, to discuss new housing developments and the re-provisioning of existing accommodation. This has included the facilitation of property swaps. Schemes in the private sector have been designed. Stretch targets within

the LAA push providers and landlords to use resources innovatively. There is a move-on quota within the housing allocations system; this guarantees outcomes for an agreed number of people housed in temporary accommodation each year.

good practice in access to
housing and good housing services

Case study Bolton Metropolitan District Council

organisational context

Bolton is situated in the North West of England. It is one of ten metropolitan councils in Greater Manchester and comprises eight townships, each with a distinct socio-economic profile. It is one of the largest boroughs in the country covering 54 square miles, 45 per cent of which is urban. Bolton's population is 264,800. The area has high levels of deprivation. Political representation is finely balanced between the three political parties, but nevertheless governance arrangements in Bolton are well thought of.

challenges

How to commission in the most effective manner both the revenue support of Supporting People and the accommodation in which the support would be delivered.

achievements and learning

Achievements include how Bolton has built a well-respected (by regional, as well as local stakeholders) and transparent allocation and prioritisation process that involves all of the stakeholders in the Borough. Learning includes how really effective partnership working with RSLs is founded in building trust and in embedding partners into policy-making structures.

strategic housing

Bolton have developed a sophisticated partnership structure that includes RSLs, Developers and the Voluntary sector. The local authority retains strategy, policy development and supervision of the ALMO. Significant responsibilities are placed with the partnership company Bolton Community Homes.

The origins for the current housing partnership relationships in Bolton began with the formation of Bolton Community Homes in 1992. This was a company limited by guarantee formed by seven RSLs and the local authority. Initially, it was conceived as a development vehicle to covenant land to RSLs in exchange for new accommodation providing 100% nomination rights. It has developed over fifteen years in parallel with the broader development of partnership working taking place in Bolton to take a pivotal role in Bolton's housing partnership work.

These partnership arrangements have been very helpful to the development of the Supporting People programme within Bolton. The collaboration taking place between probation, health and housing during the 1990s provided a good foundation for the Supporting People programme in Bolton, and Supporting People work has now been incorporated into the wider governance structures.

The second, notable aspect of the approach in Bolton that is proving to be a strength are the strategic decisions taken in 2002 concerning the overall shape of housing services in the Borough at the time Bolton formed Bolton at Home, its Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO). This allocated housing services in the following way:

Bolton at Home

- housing management
- maintenance
- regeneration

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council

- housing strategy and policy
- ALMO performance monitoring
- development

Bolton Community Homes

- homelessness and temporary accommodation
- housing advice and choice based lettings
- leasehold management and landlord accreditation
- environmental health related to housing issues
- advice to home owners
- mediation and many skills
- furnished tenancies

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

Bolton Community Homes is at the centre of a memorandum of understanding and joint management agreement that makes it responsible to the Vision Partnership (LSP) and in doing so brings together adult services, development and regeneration, the ALMO, RSLs and strategic housing into a coherent whole. The Chair of Bolton Community Homes sits on the Vision Partnership Executive. Bolton Community Homes is now part of the Stronger Communities block of the LAA.

The efficacy of the organisational arrangements described above can be seen in the manner by which the commissioning of all housing accommodation in Bolton takes place. This is directed and coordinated through a programme board known as the Supported Housing Partnership Board. Housing development opportunities for vulnerable people are considered in the context of strategic aims and the availability of revenue funding from Supporting People. The Board meets monthly and ensures capital and revenue commissioning is fully coordinated and that commissioning decisions reflect Bolton's Supporting People Strategy and Housing Strategy respectively.

The Board includes representatives from all the relevant stakeholders. This includes Adult Services, the Primary Care Trust, Bolton Community Homes, and planners, Supporting People, development, Children's Services and voluntary sector representatives. It coordinates capital streams from

bodies such the Housing Corporation, Department of Health and Communities and Local Government and marries these up to revenue streams from commissioning bodies such as Supporting People and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

A useful innovation is the reports it regularly receives that map existing provision to care and support needs using the modelling capabilities of Geographic Information Software to analyse these at the spatial level. This provides the capability to make commissioning decisions that can avoid the over-concentration, or absence of particular types of accommodation or services in any part of the borough.

Bolton Community Homes is also being used as a vehicle for supporting people service reviews. In Bolton these are about radically rethinking services with commissioners, providers and service users all at the review table. For example, the accommodation and support services for single people in Bolton were reviewed in this way.

4. making the most of accommodation for older people

Government encourages local authorities to prepare older people's housing strategies as a component of overall housing strategy documents. However most councils have not yet developed such strategies and some do not appear to have developed policies and provision that responds to the strategic concept of active ageing. Nevertheless, local authority housing strategies will almost always contain specific actions necessary to support interventions for older people.

The logic of demographic change caused by ever longer survival times for older people means that there is a growing strategic necessity to consider older peoples' housing. It is likely to become a distinct subset of the strategic housing role at the local, sub regional and regional levels. It will also become an important component of Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements. A National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society is expected to describe how the Government wishes to influence both the public and the private sectors in the coming years.

The emerging strategic approach in this area is about working with the grain of the concept of "active ageing". For housing professionals this is about increasing the choice of accommodation and accessibility options to which care and support can be delivered cost effectively. What would older customers tell us now if we were to ask them?

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

Evidence from organisations such as the Elderly Advice Council suggests that local authorities concentrate too much of their attention on letting their social housing sheltered stock, and that local authorities are not always good at providing advice and signposting for older occupiers, particularly those in lower value homes.

In the case of assistance with maintenance and property conditions older owner-occupiers are usually able to seek guidance or direct support from local Care and Repair Schemes. An example of a related intervention in the private sector can be found in the case study of Middlesbrough. The availability of good quality advice to older owner-occupiers who have equity available in their homes is a mixed picture across the country. It is becoming increasingly important that older occupiers are able to access quality advice to support them in making complex decisions about housing equity and the future nature of the accommodation they wish to live in as they grow older and less active. An authority that supports advice in this complex area is the City of Reading who use a tool called HOOP. This is a tool that comes in two versions, one that requires an adviser and one that is “do it your self”. It acts as a framework for the rational analysis of an individual’s financial and personal aspirations in the event that they may be weighing up the options of either moving home or staying put. It can be found at,

<http://www.housingcare.org/making-elderly-housing-choices/housing-options-for-older-people.aspx>

The case study of the City of Liverpool below shows an authority that embarked upon the creation of an accommodation strategy for older people and is still developing it. It has a notable example of a housing allocation and advice service. The second case study of North Tyneside Council shows how a combination of asset management and customer outcomes have produced two extra care schemes and a bid for funding through the Private Finance Initiative.

case study

City of Liverpool

organisational context

Liverpool City Council is a metropolitan council with a population of 447,500 of which 8.2 per cent are defined as other than white British. It is the most deprived council area in England. Liverpool includes a housing market renewal area.

challenges

Liverpool has significant numbers of older people in areas of poor quality social housing (which are now being addressed by the decent homes programme) and in areas of poor quality private sector accommodation some of which is being tackled through the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder (New Heartlands). Health deprivation is a major problem.

achievements and learning

Achievements include adoption of an Older Persons Accommodation Strategy and commissioning specific mechanisms for the allocation of suitable accommodation to vulnerable older people and people with disabilities. This is delivered through a bespoke lettings and disabled facilities agency that represents all social landlords in Liverpool who own accommodation for older people.

Learning includes the value of the strategic approach, without which the agency (Access Liverpool) would not have been created; as well as the value of developing an approach to meeting need that is shared by housing providers across the authority.

strategic housing

The Housing Strategy and Investment Unit is part of the Housing and Neighbourhoods Department of the City of Liverpool. It is responsible for policy, strategy, private sector housing, capital investment programmes and will soon be responsible for the client role following the transfer of its remaining housing stock to Liverpool Mutual.

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

The City of Liverpool embarked upon its strategy for accommodation for its older people several years ago. It grew from action taken by the Liverpool Housing Action Trust and a number of RSLs. Along with the local authority in 2001 they commissioned a report from consultants, the substance of which was subsequently adopted by Liverpool's strategic housing partnership as its strategy and became the driver for redesigning housing, care and support services in the city. The strategy sought to move housing and support away from institutional delivery forms into services that will empower older people to improve their quality of life and to remain in the home and community of their own choice. For example, this has been reflected in the development of extra care housing in Liverpool as a positive alternative to residential care and the establishment of active ageing services.

Liverpool uses a common allocation and advice service that operates through the ACCESS Liverpool service. ACCESS Liverpool was set up in 2000 to operate common assessment and waiting list processes on behalf of housing providers in Liverpool to the advantage of older and disabled people who required specialist accommodation. ACCESS operates housing and advice services on behalf of a partnership of 24 housing providers including the city council. The service also works in partnership with other key stakeholders such as Age Concern Liverpool and the PCT. Access Liverpool is a small, dedicated team that operates a

common waiting list for sheltered accommodation, extra care housing and the accessible homes waiting list on behalf of the City and its RSL partners. It is well established and very popular, as evidenced by satisfaction surveys. It avoids older and/or disabled people who need specialist accommodation having to approach twenty-four different landlords. Its strengths include the use of home visits, actively encouraging older people to talk through their needs and choices and the application of single assessment methodology. In 2006/07, Access Liverpool re-housed 366 people, including a quarter that were homeless or had other serious issues. The waiting list contains 600 persons seeking sheltered housing and 600 seeking specialist adapted dwellings.

case study

North Tyneside Council

organisational context

North Tyneside borders urban Newcastle, the coast, the river Tyne and Northumberland. The borough has no single major centre but comprises a series of individual settlements linked by a strategic highway network.

challenges

Research undertaken in North Tyneside found that many older and vulnerable households who require support do not receive the right service or live in a property that is unsuitable for the needs of themselves or their family. The Council is rising to the challenge of developing housing and support services that will assist people to maintain their independence.

achievements and learning

Achievements include Adult Social Care and Housing Services have jointly commissioned the "Housing, Care and Support Needs of over 55's Study 2005" that identified future housing and support priorities. An action plan has been developed that is monitored by North Tyneside, RSL's and older people. Through multi

agency working, an Older People's Strategy has been developed and is reviewed at an annual event. There has been preliminary award of Private Finance Initiative credits to redevelop existing sheltered accommodation schemes. RSL's have provided three extra care schemes in the borough with development work taking place to provide a further two.

Learning includes the value of having the Older Persons Strategy as a tool for investment and funding.

strategic housing

The Strategic Housing function is within the Development Directorate. It is grouped with Planning, Regeneration, Valuation and Asset, Building Control, Environmental Health and Business Management. The Community Services directorate is allocated the responsibility for housing advice, applications, allocations, homelessness, including the provision of temporary accommodation and its housing management.

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

The older persons housing strategy in North Tyneside was written as a result of the prioritisation of older persons issues by both the Council and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). In 2004, issues for older people were being strongly championed from within the Adult Services Department. The Strategic Housing Team willingly took up this initial leadership. In 2005 the North Tyneside LSP agreed a vision of older people in the borough. This was for “older people to have and improve quality of life” and for there to be “nothing about us, without us”. This is a crosscutting theme for the LSP.

The older persons strategy was launched in June 2006 and is now organised and delivered through an overarching strategy group of the LSP that regularly monitors and updates its action plan. It is also reinforced through the appointment of an older persons champion at Cabinet level within the Council. Delivering the action plan has become a focus for staff across the Council, the PCT and voluntary sector partners.

The older peoples’ strategy includes the objective of ensuring older people are supported to lead active lives and that age discrimination is not a barrier. There is a clear path for older people to contribute to the planning of change.

The LSP strategy for older people includes a section on “bringing housing centre stage”. It describes how housing is integrated into the planning of health and social care services. Objectives include increasing the range of housing options across both the social and private sectors. It aims to ensure that new business processes are introduced; one example is integrating housing assessments with the single care assessment process.

The strategy also uses mapping, supply data and stock condition information to configure the specialist, accommodation system for older people. The strategy includes proposals for the development of extra care housing and sheltered housing in all tenures, housing for people with dementia and for floating support. One of the project aims is to avoid having to move people twice during the redevelopment process, which is a major programming constraint.

A joint management group chaired by the heads of adult services and housing has developed a business case for a housing PFI. Through the award of PFI credits, around £100million will be invested to redevelop accommodation. Work on this project, known as Older Peoples Homes for the Future, is likely to start in 2009/2010. The joint management group has identified the sites for two further extra care housing schemes and is pursuing the funding of these two schemes through the PFI and also through the use of housing Association funding outside of the PFI.

5. encouraging local landlords to provide quality access and housing services

The strategic housing role is about developing and delivering a holistic approach to meeting the housing needs of all. Part of that is about making best use of existing stock. Local authorities have to be concerned about the quality of services being offered by housing providers and other partners. Authorities will want to sustain and encourage partnership working with organisations that meet target quality and performance standards and strive for continuous improvement.

These are especially important issues in relation to helping people gain access to housing. Councils need to be satisfied that property and services meet “industry standards”, and that this applies to all partners whether public, private or voluntary sector.

This promotion of quality and high performance across a broad range of housing services by local landlords is an aspect of the strategic housing role that local authorities deal with in a wide variety of ways. A standard approach is through the promotion of local housing partnerships (usually now under the umbrella of the local strategic partnership). There is significant variation in the terms of reference and

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

the nature of the activities that these local housing partnerships undertake. This will often reflect the capacity and the ambition of the host local authority in exercising its enabling, leadership and influencing roles.

The better local housing partnerships have a distinct structure and, in larger areas, may include staff that are paid for by partnership members. They will also be strategically focused. The local housing partnerships will have sub groupings that cover areas identified as strategic priorities such as development, homelessness and housing management services. The best of these in relation to landlords' services will have a fully inclusive membership, including the private sector alongside the local large scale voluntary transfer housing association or arm's-length management organisation and other registered social landlords.

Emerging best practice for that part of the local housing partnership is to have a structure that requires regular reporting on performance management information, tenant/resident feedback and which will be regularly reviewing specific service areas as part of a continuous improvement programme.

Local authorities with an ALMO have a particular opportunity to develop a well-structured housing partnership approach. ALMOs are independent

management companies that are wholly owned by their local authority. They are managed by independent management boards, which are responsible for monitoring the contract (management agreement) with the local authority. Typically they can have a turnover of between £10 and £50 million per annum and be responsible for very large capital programmes. Nevertheless, despite the scale of their operations ALMOs do not have the responsibility that ownership brings.

This means that councils have to have a client monitoring function that can ensure the obligations written into the management agreement are carried out diligently. This role is usually located in the strategic housing team. Most local authorities with ALMOs employ a client officer (or share this role amongst a number of officers) with particular responsibility to manage the client-contractor relationship for the Council and ensure that the business objectives agreed between the two parties are met. This will include a standardised performance monitoring framework. The client monitoring role and the framework that it creates within the authority provide the opportunity to manage local partnerships in an organised, if less formal (as compared to the ALMO) manner. Many local authorities with ALMOs have taken this opportunity. Examples include Hounslow and Derby.

A growing feature of the partnership working of many local authorities is their work with private sector landlords (for example described above in the case studies of Croydon, Norwich and Middlesbrough). This has occurred as a result of market pressures, particularly the reduction in access to owner occupation and social renting for some income groups that has occurred in recent years. This has elevated the engagement and the role of the private rented sector. Many local authorities have recognised the inherent flexibility of private sector lettings for people who are not in acute housing need but who nevertheless have a reason to move accommodation and who may not wish to stay long in a particular area or tenure.

The private rented sector is particularly flexible for people moving across distances and local authority boundaries.

It is also flexible for young people willing to share, and allows for labour market mobility far more easily than owner occupation or social renting. In university towns and cities the private rented sector can play a major role as a provider of accommodation.

However this useful supply role can sometimes have an impact upon the social cohesion of an area prompting neighbourhood management interventions and the need for strategic housing interventions. This is the case in the City of Nottingham for example where the Housing Strategy 2005-8 promotes interventions that are shared with the

Sustainable Communities Plan. Strategic Housing teams work closely with Environmental Health and Neighbourhood Management colleagues in such circumstances. This may include the use of statutory regulatory powers under environmental health legislation and under the Housing Act 2004 to ensure homes in multiple occupation meet legal standards for amenities and number of occupants and are safe to occupy.

An example of an authority that has a local housing partnership which is aligned to the strategic priorities of both the Council and the local strategic partnership in the manner in which it seeks to influence the operations of its local landlords is Middlesbrough Council. Middlesbrough has also engaged with private sector landlords to help address neighbourhood management concerns.

Note: The Chartered Institute of Housing has published 'Cinderella Strikes Back: The Private Rented Sector' – a publication that promotes taking a strategic approach to working with the private rented sector.

In addition, LACORS has produced 'Raising Awareness of Private Sector Housing: A Councillor's Guide'. This publication is available at www.lacors.gov.uk.

good practice in access to
housing and good housing services

case study Middlesbrough Council

organisational context

Middlesbrough Council's population of 134,000 has declined by 10,000 over the ten-year period from 1991 to 2001. Over six per cent of the population is from minority ethnic communities. The area has significant levels of deprivation. It is assessed as the second most deprived unitary council.

challenges

Despite drops in many crime rates in recent years, crime issues are often top of local people's concerns. As a result, the two themes of regeneration and community safety are reflected in the priorities and composition of the housing strategy in Middlesbrough.

achievements and learning

Achievements include the good strategic coordination of both private sector and RSLs and the effective deployment of its Housing Partnership behind the council's strategic priorities. Learning includes how strong leadership can make an impact on delivery systems across the RSL and private landlord sectors to the benefit of neighbourhood management and implementation of the Respect Agenda.

strategic housing

The strategic housing team is part of the Regeneration Department of Middlesborough, in particular it sits in the Planning, Housing and Regeneration Programmes division that also contains Urban Policy, Development Control, Building Control, and Regeneration Programmes

Middlesbrough Council chairs a housing forum that meets six times per annum. The forum is well attended by a wide range of key stakeholders and partners, including several RSLs, the Homebuilders Federation, Tees Valley Living and local estate agents. A variety of topic areas are covered relating to regeneration and housing issues across Middlesbrough.

The council is currently working with its sub – regional partners, other Tees Valley local authorities and RSLs, to develop a protocol with the Housing Corporation. It is likely to be the first protocol to be developed on a sub – regional basis. The protocol itself will recognise the importance of joint working to achieve the delivery of affordable housing and sustainable communities. Key areas that will be covered include homelessness, affordable housing, sustainable communities, section 106 agreements, land use, choice based lettings, regeneration and community cohesion.

In 2004 the Council transferred its housing stock to a new organisation, Erimus Housing. Responsibility for choice based lettings and homelessness/housing advice were also contracted to Erimus Housing at the same time. The Council saw the transfer as an opportunity to strengthen its retained strategic and enabling role in light of the huge regeneration challenge it was facing. Placing the additional services in Erimus Housing was part of a considered decision in order to make an effective response to the Government's

homelessness prevention agenda and to maximise housing opportunities for those in housing need using Choice Based Lettings. The strategic housing team became part of the Directorate of Regeneration. The team manager reports to a head of service responsible for planning, housing and regeneration programmes.

The decision has been a significant success. The strategic housing team is making a major contribution to Middlesbrough's regeneration agenda. Meanwhile, the quality of the homelessness/housing advice service has been recognised by Government. The Council and Erimus Housing were selected by Communities and Local Government to act as Homelessness Regional Champions in 2006/07 to disseminate good practice in tackling homelessness.

The borough works hard to increase its housing supply (and thus access to housing for residents) by working with landlords. For example, Middlesbrough believes that private sector landlords can offer choice in terms of rented homes to people looking for accommodation. This includes people displaced by clearance schemes and homeless households. There is also the pragmatic recognition that individual private rented properties will only begin to fulfil this role when they afford the same or better quality of property and living environment as the social sector.

good practice in access to housing and good housing services

To foster partnership with the private sector Middlesbrough has formed a Housing Protection Service to provide a holistic response to the related issues of poor housing conditions, housing management, and crime and anti social behaviour. This has also provided the opportunity to base the Housing Respect Team within the service. This team works with all housing providers to coordinate the implementation of the housing management elements of Middlesbrough's Respect Action Plan. The team takes a leadership role in driving activities that involve all partners and align their activities behind the strategic priorities of the respect action plan.

The Shield Project is a voluntary landlord scheme and assists in the delivery of housing-led regeneration by enabling access to well-managed private sector housing. The Housing Respect Team provides a range of free services to private sector landlords and tenants. These are designed to tackle anti-social behaviour and encourage good management practices to end the cycle of inappropriate rehousing of anti-social tenants. The service includes:

- maintaining a register of private rented sector properties available to rent and assisting landlords with identifying suitable tenants;
- reference checking potential tenants and pre-tenancy counseling
- tenancy sign up service including robust tenancy agreements;
- post-tenancy visits for all new tenants;

- tackling the first signs of neighbour nuisance and anti-social behaviour, caused by tenants;
- investigate complaints of environmental crime caused by tenants
- taking appropriate legal action against anti social individuals
- provision of training, legal advice and support to landlords in dealing with anti- social tenants

Making checks on references, coupled with a robust approach to tenancy sign-up and post-tenancy support visits, are at the core of this successful intervention and prevention strategy. The team prioritises early intervention on families and individuals causing nuisance to adjacent residents, also to those under threat of eviction. Landlords who are members of the scheme use the team's expertise in dealing with anti-social tenants and are encouraged not to enforce the tenancy agreement until the tenant has been given advice, support and the opportunity to cease behaving in an anti-social manner. Intervention measures include challenging perpetrators of anti social behaviour, joint home visits with landlord and Police, use of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, referrals to a Families Project, Parental Behaviour Contracts, injunctions and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. Eviction is the last resort when all other intervention measures have failed.

The Housing Protection Service was successful in its submission to government to designate an area of low

housing demand for a mandatory Selective Landlord Licensing scheme. This adds a further measure to the intervention and prevention strategy toolkit, which is a key component of the regeneration strategy for these areas. Work is also taking place to pilot a voluntary scheme in a neighbouring area, to be called the Respect Quality Mark in Housing Management. This is broader than the standard accreditation scheme, incorporating housing conditions and housing management. Standards required from landlord members will be equivalent to the terms and conditions of Selective Licensing. Middlesbrough is also working with a consortium of RSLs to assist them to sign up to the Respect Standard in Housing Management. Finally, the team has introduced a Tenant Accreditation Scheme to bridge the referencing information gap for tenants who are moving from the private rented sector into social housing. The aim is to reduce or prevent the movement across the tenures of particularly problematic tenants

Middlesbrough is also the lead local authority for a Tees Valley-wide sub regional choice based lettings project. The project steering group has recognised the valuable role that private sector landlords can play in meeting housing need, and a sub regional event is planned as part of the project to promote choice based lettings to private sector housing providers. This event will also raise awareness of accredited private landlord schemes, promote the benefits of partnership working with social landlords and encourage

private landlords to advertise their properties through the choice based lettings scheme.

Another example of how Middlesbrough has influenced its local landlord partners relates to adaptations for people with disabilities. Middlesbrough's housing stock was transferred to Erimus Housing (LSVT) in November 2004. Part of the transfer agreement was the provision that Erimus would fund major adaptations to its own housing stock and not draw upon the council's Disabled Facilities Grant resources. Erimus now has a specialised Adaptations Team that funds and facilitates work on behalf of its disabled tenants.

Middlesbrough has worked with its landlords to adopt the best practice published by the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Department of Health. This includes the integration of Housing and Social Care staff to offer a one-stop service for the provision of adaptations and the development of the Disabled Persons Rehousing Assistance Scheme. This scheme offers the client the alternative of being re-housed to a more suitable property where it is the most cost effective solution as opposed to, for example, the building of an extension. The Middlesbrough Mobile Adapt and Mend Service provides a fast-track handyman service for the installation of minor adaptations, such as grab rails, banister rails etc, and the provision of minor repairs. The service also provides a risk assessment on the client's homes to identify any further areas of concern.

6. conclusions and further developments in the strategic housing role

This guide has considered how strategic housing is changing in the areas that most closely impact the lives and specific housing needs of individuals and families. The case studies have illustrated several emerging practices and behaviours to encourage and inspire further enquiry.

We have seen how the combination of business tools to analyse the customer experience and the necessity to improve information and advice to the customer is beginning to introduce a greater degree of realism of expectation concerning housing waiting lists and is reducing homelessness allocations. In the case of vulnerable individuals requiring accommodation with support the Supporting People programme has had a profound impact over the last five or so years. For some district councils this is raising issues of capacity and ownership in relation to their ability to participate in their supporting people partnerships.

We can also see how cross authority and sub regional working is emerging as a significant feature of the work of all housing strategy teams. This is an operational feature that can be expected to become increasingly important in the coming years. Overall progress in this direction appears to be mixed, however the collaboration with the Housing Corporation protocol and sub regional choice based lettings as described within this guide indicates the direction of travel.

The IDeA will be publishing three further guides in this series during 2008 as described in the introduction. In addition the IDeA is working with partner organisations over the coming months to develop tools that will enable authorities to scrutinise their own strategic housing roles and to consider how they could better integrate them with other area or authority-based strategies and performance management frameworks. These tools will become available on the IDeA website www.idea.gov.uk/housing.

If you have views about the strategic housing role of local authorities and how you think it could be improved, both by changes in policy and in practice please send them to:
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