From Vision to Reality - Report

A 5 year Strategy for the Residents of Winchester District

Winchester District Homelessness Forum

Monday 17th July 2017 - Guildhall Winchester
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Introduction

The new Housing Strategy sets out the Council’s plans on improving the housing of vulnerable and excluded households and ensuring access to quality, affordable housing which meets the needs of Winchester District Residents.

The new *Homelessness Reduction Act (April, 2017)*, places new responsibilities on local authorities to help prevent homelessness and extend the period during which someone is threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days. This legislation obligates councils to take reasonable steps to help secure accommodation for any eligible person who is homeless, placing a greater emphasis on prevention.

The briefing and workshop event brought together key stakeholders from across the Winchester District area to better understand how these changes will impact services locally.

A total of 41 representatives from over 20 statutory bodies and partner agencies\(^1\) attended the workshop.

The workshop focused specifically on two key priorities of the Housing Strategy which explicitly linked with the Council’s existing Preventing Homelessness Strategy:

**Priority 2.**
Improving the housing circumstances for vulnerable and socially excluded households.

**Priority 3.**
Supporting local people to access high quality and affordable housing which meets their needs.

The challenges

Affordability of housing is the most significant concern. Over recent years a broader cross section of society has become affected by the problems of unaffordability. Many

\(^1\) representatives included private landlords as part of the City Lets scheme. List of Agencies is included in appendix A

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households are unable to afford suitable accommodation, including some working in lower paid jobs in health and social care, education, leisure and hospitality sectors. Not only does this impact on the health and happiness of individuals, but through its effect on the local economy, local services and transport, it impacts on the health and happiness of everyone in the District.

It is not only affordability we need to tackle, we have many other challenges. We need to plan for the 12,500 homes due to be built by 2031, both in new and existing communities. We need to plan to provide support when and where it is most effective for our vulnerable and disadvantaged residents. We need to plan to make the best use of the housing we already have.

(Extract from Housing Strategy: Foreword, Cllr Horrill Leader, WCC)

**Headlines**

- 50,000 households across the District
- 67% of homes are in owner occupation. circa 19,000 rental households
- Winchester District Local Plan (Parts 1 and 2) make provision for about 12,500 new homes (2011 to 2031)
- 40% target for affordable homes (at 80% Market rate)
- Average household Income required to afford local private market rental £30,000pa
- Average household expenditure on Housing 36% (ONS family spending survey 2016)
- Average income of 2 adult household in the District £20,000 pa (Strategy p.13)
- Current market rate for 2 bed £285 pw
- Local Housing Allowance for 2 bed £182.45 pw until 2020
- LHA rates for under 35 years old (£75.19: room rate)
- Average of 130 applications for Supported Housing pa in the district (median 2014-16 figures). The majority of applications are male, with around 50% of applicants U35 y/o
- 6000 Winchester City Council Tenants
- Over half WCC tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit (See fig.1)
Fig 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property/Tenancy Category</th>
<th>% of WCC tenants In Receipt of HB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Needs</td>
<td>50.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered &amp; Extra Care Accommodation</td>
<td>71.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Accommodation</td>
<td>79.07%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Survey**

As part of the joining instructions delegates were invited to participate in a snap poll. The results of which were used to inform planning the workshops. 26 responses from 21 organisations were submitted.

**The vision**

**Overall (75%) delegates felt the strategy presents a strong vision for housing investment priorities in the Winchester District -**

Only 4 respondents said it did not. Reasons given (why not?) include:

- Not enough emphasis on homelessness, hidden homelessness and prevention.
- Lack of reference to U35 affordability issues.
- No reference to social rent.
- Proposed supply of housing cannot meet the growing demand or the needs of residents (it is not realistic).

**Customer need**

**When asked does the strategy meet the needs of the your customers the number of respondents who said ‘no’ doubled (30%:8)**

The 21 organisations support a range of customers. The unadjusted figures (by respondent) show the majority of organisations work with Single Homeless people with additional Support Needs (73%). A breakdown by respondent is included below (Fig 2).
Two organisations, the City Council Housing Options team and Citizens Advice, offer a universal Housing Advice service irrespective of the client group.

Impact of Local Housing allowance

The majority of respondents (>60%) reported that the cap in Local Housing Allowance rates was having an adverse impact (35%) or strong adverse impact (27%) on their customers.

The Priorities

Finally respondents were invited to select what they believe the top three priorities from the strategy should be. Priority 2 (93%) and Priority 3 (69%) were most weighted priorities across all 26 respondents. Priority 4 (65%) being the third most weighted response:

Housing Strategy Priorities

1. To accelerate and to maximise the supply of high quality affordable housing across the District.
2. To improve the housing circumstances of vulnerable and excluded households.
3. Supporting local people accessing high quality and affordable housing which meet their needs.
4. To make best use of housing.
5. To engage with residents and create cohesive communities.

Workshops

The two workshops were designed as round tables to encourage delegates to unpick and explore some of the challenges highlighted above in greater detail. The unifying objective of the strategy is to prioritise:

“Those who are unable to exercise a reasonable degree of choice about their housing circumstances.”

The first of the two workshops focused on priority 3 of the Housing Strategy: Supporting local people to access high quality and affordable housing which meets their needs.

Workshop One

Delegates were invited to consider:

“What must we do differently to prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness?”

Themes were introduced to provide a framework for semi-structured conversations with delegates. This approach also supported table/theme facilitators in capturing and qualifying feedback.

The Themes chosen dovetail with the various objectives and outcomes presented in the Housing Strategy, these included:

**Investment** – through possible Special Purpose Vehicle e.g. Community Land Trust or Arms Length Management Organisation.

It was recognised by delegates that there is no silver bullet to addressing the challenges but that any response requires a **mixed economy** of provision with the buy-in of different providers, and testing of different innovative models.
Feedback from delegates suggests that testing of new approaches should be **evidenced based and targeted** to improve outcomes of groups whose needs are not met through existing service provision.

**Early intervention** and preventative support was regarded as key to enhancing people’s aspirations and their ability to exercise choice and control. Examples of volunteer led advocacy and support type models included Age Concern Hampshire. The ACH Village Agents service provides access to IAG in the community for people over 55 before they reach crisis.

**Optimising assets** across the system; ensuring best use of housing providers assets, that the whole sector knows about any asset disposals - with the guiding principle to “look at best use rather than first opportunity”. Workforce planning should be linked to asset management strategy i.e. provision of key worker housing. Valuable assets should be sold to invest (including those of RPs and charities) where value can be realised. As part of the strategy any rent to buy opportunities are realised.

**Understanding Landlord aspirations** is key to unlocking the potential of the private rental sector:

- Some may want a long term guaranteed income stream and accept lower rent levels (LHA)
- Prefer equity release, keeping a part share
- Guarantees about repairs, dilapidations, management (e.g. Two Saints Real Lettings and City Lets)

**Education & Advice – Ensuring parity of service provision and quality housing advice**

A need for a greater **emphasis on prevention** in provision of Information, Advice and Guidance was a consistent theme across the groups.

Groups highlighted the need for **IAG to be accessible via a range of channels** for different audiences: Landlords, Schools, Health professionals and those at risk.

Currently **people present in crisis** and more could have been done if clients present sooner. Changes included in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018 should support these changes. There remain **gaps in services** for seldom heard groups such as those with Autism and Aspergers and people when they are released from prison. Do these groups need specialist information and support services? **Clearer published information and guidelines on eligibility** for services would prevent inappropriate referrals.

The **need for digital Signposting** services was also highlighted, including services like **Community First’s Help and Support**.
Targeted Initiatives – e.g. Key worker Housing, Housing First models

All groups chose to focus on Housing First as a targeted initiative. The details of feedback offered are covered in the Workshop Two discussion.

Move on – including providing access to affordable private rented housing

Feedback from the round tables highlighted many of the challenges facing customers in accessing appropriate move on accommodation. The needs of particular excluded groups were flagged including: Autism & Aspergers, Working age (< 55) who have care needs, extra care, people experiencing relationship breakdown who result in being accommodated in HMO properties and the resulting impact on dependants.

All groups raised issues of affordability, financial capability including housing management as being critical to ensuring customers are both Tenancy Ready and able to maintain a tenancy. Concerns were raised about the affordability of housing once a person returns to work. This structural barrier often results in people becoming more vulnerable and at risk again as they transition into work. This is in part a result of changes to welfare reform. It was stated that some vulnerable and excluded customers require access to ongoing flexible support. Questions to be considered include whether this need could be met through existing floating support contracts or whether other more flexible volunteer led outreach approaches such as citizens advocacy models or support linked into accredited advice service such as Citizen Advice services or the Village Agent model discussed above could be adopted?

A person centred approach was advocated which was described using the disability campaign slogan from the mid nineties “Nothing about me without me”. Service User/ Customer representation in the design of support services and participation in the co-design of policy should be considered at all levels. This would ensure the views and needs of customers are heard. Proposals detailing greater flexibility and personalisation around funding for adaptations were welcomed. It was noted that greater flexibility in rent setting and tenancy types would prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness. The messages offered by delegates suggests support should be flexible subject to individual’s circumstances and need.
Workshop Two

The focus of the second round table discussion looked in more detail at locally appropriate approaches to a Housing First model. Delegates were provided with resources for the workshop including a Executive Summary Report produced in partnership with Homeless Link and Changing Lives. A copy of which can be accessed here. The premise of a Housing First approach is that, unlike traditional supported housing, the provision of housing is separated out from ‘service’ support and not conditional on engagement with services e.g. abstinence from substance misuse. Instead the Housing First approach seeks to provide long term stable housing and flexible, wrap-around support - focused on harm prevention. In round tables delegates were invited to:

“Create an executive summary project proposal for a Housing First pilot”

As part of the workshop delegates were asked to consider the following factors when preparing their proposals:

- Audience – consider a scenario of who might benefit from access to a Housing First model
- Eligibility – what criteria would you use to decide?
- Resources – what will be needed to make it work?
- Impact – what outcomes would you hope to achieve?
- Risks – are there any possible unintended consequences?

Extensive discussions emerged about how to ensure the maximum sustained benefit from any Housing First approach. It was universally acknowledged any pilot would need to be very targeted, long term, properly resourced and that it would need to form a component part of a wider strategy - it is not a panacea.

Some feedback notes that smaller dispersed schemes are more sustainable and more likely to have positive impact on outcomes for beneficiaries. Delegates felt there are clear risks associated with resourcing such an initiative and in defining the target audience, associated eligibility criteria etc. e.g. should it seek to address entrenched rough sleeping or be a preventative programme targeting vulnerable clients who are willing to engage with services?

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The majority of delegates’ contributions suggests that this approach should be used where there is clear evidence that existing options had failed to support customers to move-on e.g. options exhausted due to associated risk or failure to engage. The risk being that it could be perceived to incentivise non-engagement.

It was noted that any WCC led initiative would be dependent on clients’ willingness to engage due to statutory requirements included in the HRA. Some groups felt that a prevention focused approach was more appropriate to the local context; supporting vulnerable excluded clients who do not fit with eligibility criteria of existing commissioned services. One noteworthy suggestion recommended an audit of throughput of stage one supported housing scheme recognising a need to better understand why some people repeatedly access stage one accommodation and fail to move on into more independent living. This information could be sourced through HCC and the PIERS commissioning pathway providers. Any such work should focus on why customers/clients believe services fail to meet their needs vis-à-vis what decisions have been made on their behalf by professionals and statutory bodies. Delegates also highlighted any Social Return on Investment or financial impact of a Housing First approach would be very difficult to realise. The total cost of intervention must be costed against the total cost to the public purse (i.e. Health, Police and Social Care) and not simply housing costs.

Next Steps and Recommendations

The purpose of the event was to bring together key stakeholders in an effort to better understand how policy changes, both nationally and at the local level, are going to impact on service provision locally.

As the strong representation at the event demonstrates, Winchester District is well positioned to meet the challenges facing its residents. The event produced some valuable insights and the next steps will ensure we build on the contributions and offers of support, made by partners, to identify actions and move forward together. All stakeholders want to do more to optimise the resources and the expertise available to identify ways in which we can work together to do things differently.
This summary report is designed to highlight some of the challenges and explore possible responses. Principally the report seeks to capture, collate and disseminate the contributions of delegates to inform the ongoing conversation.

**Next Steps**

At the event it was agreed to establish a working group that will ensure:

- A bi-monthly or quarterly forum, possibly facilitated by Cllr Horrill (Portfolio holder for Housing and Leader of WCC), to facilitate ongoing dialogue between WCC and wider stakeholders.
- Establish ways in which all stakeholders can contribute to supporting the delivery of the Housing Strategy and Homelessness Prevention Strategy ensuring that opportunities to collaborate are realised.
- A task and targeting approach with terms of reference is adopted to create a core group whose members are responsible for delivering the activities of the group whilst providing a flexible approach to ensuring representation from key stakeholders on particular workstreams.
- “Those who are unable to exercise a reasonable degree of choice about their housing circumstances.” are represented and heard in forums where decisions are made that impact on them.

Community First will continue to offer its expertise as a local infrastructure and development service for the not-for-profit sector. As part of this work Community First will invite stakeholders to participate in a feasibility study through a series of interviews and workshops to explore options around a Housing First approach in Winchester District. We will report the findings back to the forum in December.

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Tom Belshaw

Head of Development
Community First
Appendix  

Organisation Attendance

A2 Dominion
Bournemouth Churches Housing Association
Citizens Advice Winchester District
City Lets
Community First
Friends Meeting House
Hampshire & Isle of Wight Community Rehabilitation Company
Hampshire Constabulary
Hampshire County Council
Holding Hands Limited
NHS West Hampshire CCG
Test Valley Borough Council
Together for Mental Wellbeing
Trinity
Two Saints Limited
Winchester Churches Nightshelter
Winchester City Council
Winchester Housing Trust
Winchester Street Pastors
Yellow Brick Road Projects - Young Mums Matter