

- A responsive out of hours emergency telephone service for homeless people has been developed
- Comprehensive and meaningful service standards for housing needs have been developed with service user input
- A directory of services for accommodation providers and referral agencies has been produced
- The needs of homeless and other vulnerable people have been considered in the development of the 'B with Us' choice based lettings scheme
- Funding has been identified for a sanctuary scheme to help domestic violence victims remain in their own homes
- Development of specialist worker to support black minority ethnic domestic violence victims

Choice based lettings

In March 2001, the government announced that Blackburn with Darwen Council had been successful in its bid for funds to support the establishment of a choice based letting project in the borough.

The project, currently known as B-with-us, is based on giving choice to customers who are looking to access rented housing and has to been developed in partnership with local housing associations.

The B-with-us scheme has replaced the waiting list and is used by all other local housing associations. There is now a single register that customers can join to access the homes of five landlords. All of the housing provided by Twin Valley Homes and half of all other social housing in Blackburn with Darwen is now provided under a Choice-Based Lettings scheme.

Along with neighbouring boroughs in Pennine Lancashire we have submitted and been successful in a bid for funding to develop a sub-regional choice based lettings scheme. The Pennine Lancashire scheme aims to promote mobility and allow households to move within Pennine Lancashire to be closer to their job opportunities. Initial safeguards will be built into the CBL scheme to make sure the housing needs of each local authority area are balanced with the sub-regional scheme.

As part of the Pennine Lancashire scheme, all housing options & advice services within the four local authority areas will include best practice and homeless applicants will, as is currently practised, be offered appropriate high priority so as not to be disadvantaged over other home seekers through the scheme.

“The B-with-us scheme has replaced the waiting list and is used by all other local housing associations.”

Developing the strategy

The strategy has been developed against a background of changing legislation and recent national, regional and local developments; it is informed by a thorough review of homelessness that included consultation with key stakeholders and service users.

Regular updates and stakeholder consultation

The first Blackburn homelessness strategy has been formally updated three times since its publication in 2003.

Each update has been preceded by a multi agency seminar where agencies were able to contribute towards the new action plan.

The first multi agency update seminar was held in June 2004 and in September 2004 the first Blackburn homelessness strategy update was published. The update prioritised the following actions:

- Improvements in advice and housing options work
- Improvements in communication between agencies
- Improvements in the payment of Housing Benefit
- Developments in multi agency working with health services
- Early interventions to maximise homelessness prevention

The second multi agency update seminar was held in September 2005 and the second update was published in January 2006: identified priorities included:

- Continuing the multi-agency work already underway and explore other options for developing services for victims of domestic violence
- Improving support to assist people moving out of temporary accommodation
- Considering the needs of the BME communities, particularly in relation to the provision of information and support for victims of domestic violence

The third multi agency update seminar was held in late 2006 and an update was published. Recommendations were made to develop work around the following issues and vulnerable groups:

- Domestic abuse
- Youth homelessness
- Improving health services to the homeless
- Issues with the private rented sector
- People leaving hospitals and prisons without accommodation
- Prolific and priority offenders without accommodation

The third homelessness strategy update was published in January 2006.

Face to face consultations with key stakeholders have also been undertaken during the preparation of this strategy and a list of agencies consulted is provided in appendix three.



Service user consultation

The housing needs team recently carried out a service user consultation exercise.

A postal survey was conducted consisting of two separate questionnaires targeting people who had either had a homeless prevention visit or who had experienced the homeless service and had received a decision letter.

Running along side this, a face-to-face survey was undertaken to seek the views of a random selection of service users immediately after their homeless appointment. During these interviews the availability of bilingual staff helped to target the BME community effectively.

Service users have also been consulted during the preparation of this strategy:

young people, older single people, refugees and families have been asked to contribute

their views on the services offered and ways they may be developed. Appendix three contains more details of the consultations.

Homelessness strategy 'health check'

The government published this document in 2006 to enable local authorities to carry out a self assessment of the effectiveness of their homelessness strategies.

The health check consists of over 200 questions for the authority to ask itself under a number of headings including:

- Corporate and member commitment
- Joint working and partnerships

- Meeting the 2010 temporary accommodation target
- Effective tenancy and floating support
- Health issues and hospital discharge
- Rough sleepers and hostel residents
- Offenders
- Homelessness among ethnic minorities
- Refugees
- Customer care and service quality
- Maximising housing supply

The Council held a staff 'away day' to complete the self assessment and the strategic housing service also conducted a specific review of services for young people using the relevant indicators in the main document.

The principle recommendations stemming from the two self assessments have been incorporated into the homelessness strategy.

Audit Commission 'diagnostic'

This self assessment is designed to help local authority housing advice and homelessness departments assess their performance in delivering their duties according to legislation and good practice and involves "drilling down further beyond the questions raised in the self assessment toolkit to look at the systems that lie behind the management of the service and its processes".

The housing needs service has completed this self assessment and has developed an internal plan for service improvement.

Evaluation by 'critical friend'

A specialist government advisor on homelessness visited Blackburn with Darwen in April 2008. The advisor met with the Council and key stakeholders to look at the progress made on homelessness and to suggest ways of improving the service. The advisor noted the following successes of the first strategy:

- Partnership working with housing associations (preferred partner agreement and new build protocol)
- Development of supported housing for offenders
- Development of a youth housing strategy
- Development of a multi agency assessment and referral team for young people
- Partnership working with health services (healthy hostels toolkit and outreach team)
- Securing additional monies to tackle homelessness from CLG hostel capital improvement programme
- Securing monies from the ethnic minority innovation fund for a ethnic minority domestic abuse support service
- Securing monies for Youth Action to establish a BME youth home skills project

The advisor noted that there is clearly chief officer and elected member commitment to tackle homelessness in Blackburn with Darwen.



Aims of the strategy

The key strategic aims of the second Blackburn homelessness strategy are to:

1. Prevent homelessness
2. Develop multi agency working to minimise the effects of homelessness
3. Provide a safety net of accommodation and support

The Council also has to comply with recent legislation requiring it to end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds by 2010 and reduce by 50%, the number of statutorily homeless people placed in temporary accommodation in 2010.

It is vital that progress towards achieving the aims of the strategy is recorded and we will monitor our performance by:

- Continuing to update the homelessness strategy and action plan on an annual basis
- Adding actions to the action plan as appropriate
- Ensuring partner agencies and elected members are kept informed on progress against targets
- Consulting with service users
- Benchmarking our services against other comparable boroughs

The action plan that accompanies this strategy provides details of specific actions that will enable the aims of the strategy to be achieved.

Objectives

The principle means by which the key aims will be achieved can be summarised as a short list of objectives.

- Developing integrated support pathways
- Developing protocols with key partner agencies
- Developing services for homeless people with high and complex needs
- Engaging effectively with partners
- Improving access to learning, training and employment for people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness
- Providing appropriate advice and options
- Undertaking initiatives to improve the health of homeless people

Priorities

The priorities for the homelessness strategy are divided into two categories:

1. People
2. Processes and partnerships

The people category shows what will be done to help the various groups who may be vulnerable to homelessness and the process and partnerships category looks at more general ways of developing services

such as better partnership working and the development of protocols.

People

The ongoing review process has identified a number of issues had by vulnerable groups as priorities for action in the new homelessness strategy.

Families

Families and pregnant women make up the vast majority (92% in 2007/8) of people accepted as homeless by the Council.

Most families are made homeless due to the ending of a private sector tenancy but some will be domestic violence victims or have had their houses repossessed due to mortgage arrears. A small minority of families face homelessness due to anti social behaviour.

Provision for homeless families is good; bed and breakfast accommodation is hardly ever used and then only in emergencies; no families had to stay in bed and breakfast for longer than one week in 2007/8.

The bond guarantee scheme is particularly effective in securing alternative private sector accommodation.

A very successful family intervention project has been developed in response to anti social behaviour from families; this has a cross cutting impact in that it reduces anti social behaviour such as noise nuisance and prevents homelessness caused by eviction. The project is fully funded until March 2009 but faces a significant funding shortfall in 2009/10.

New purpose built supported accommodation for families is being developed by Twin Valley homes in partnership with the Council. The new facility will offer a high standard of short term accommodation with support.

Actions for Families

- Ensure sufficient funding is in place to maintain the Blackburn with Darwen bond scheme
- Seek funding or staff secondments to maintain the family intervention project



Teenage parents

The number of live births to mothers aged 17 and under has dropped significantly in the last three years but there are still some young women with babies who are not supported by their families and for whom suitable accommodation and support must be provided.

Existing provision is excellent with 15 places available, but this may be an oversupply. A need has been identified for extra, short term, floating support for young mothers who are moving out of supported accommodation into their own tenancies.

Actions for teenage parents

- Research existing provision to ensure it is meeting need
- Develop semi independent accommodation including enhanced support for young mothers

Young people

Nearly a third of the population of Blackburn with Darwen is aged between 0 – 19, the highest proportion of all authorities in the North West and second highest in England. There are over 15,000 young people in Blackburn with Darwen aged between 16 and 24, representing 10% of the population.

In 2007/8, 26 applicants aged 24 and under were accepted as homeless by the Council, this equates to almost 20% of the total.

Blackburn has good services for young people and because of this tends to 'import' homeless young people from other Lancashire boroughs. A recent (2007) survey found that 30% of the young people at the Night Safe shelter were from outside Blackburn with Darwen.

Emergency accommodation is provided by the Night Safe Project and move on accommodation is provided via a partnership between Night Safe and Twin Valley Homes.

Twin Valley Homes has appointed a young people's tenancy support worker, for an initial 12 month pilot, to provide enhanced support to young people who have been given tenancies.

The Council has produced a young people's housing strategy which aims to promote joint working with key partners and strategies and to formulate an integrated approach towards preventing youth homelessness.

Young people - continued

A multi agency assessment and referral team is being created by seconding staff from the housing needs service, Connexions and children's social care services to ensure that all young people facing homelessness are offered the most appropriate service.

A major element of this service will be the development of the 'passport to housing'. This will comprise of a training course in housing related skills and tenancy maintenance that will be approved by the major social housing providers and act as a reference. It will also be recognised by the housing needs service who will consider issuing bonds to young people who have completed the course and are able to find affordable private sector housing.

It has been recognised that the Night Safe project needs to be re-sited in a more accessible location.

Actions for young people

- Develop a family mediation service
- Develop a prevention of eviction protocol for supported accommodation
- Develop accommodation for young people with high support needs
- Develop a cross authority protocol to relieve pressure of inward migration into Blackburn with Darwen
- Develop multi agency assessment and referral team
- Develop prevention work in schools and colleges
- Provide access to supported accommodation for young couples

Care leavers

Services for care leavers are relatively well developed – there are beds for care leavers at two accommodation projects – but these could be increased and the need for more floating support has been acknowledged.

The leaving care service works closely with partner agencies to secure move on accommodation and uses a nationally recognised training module to prepare looked after young people for independent living.

Actions for care leavers

- Develop an enhanced support service for care leavers moving on to permanent accommodation



Domestic violence victims

Domestic violence continues to be a major problem in Blackburn with Darwen. It was the second highest cause of homelessness in 2007/8. Twenty three households were accepted as homeless due to domestic violence during this period which constituted 17% of the total. In the same period Blackburn with Darwen Women's Aid received over 1,000 requests for assistance including 370 referrals for refuge accommodation.

Services for victims are well developed though and there are prevention measures in place as well as safe, secure, accommodation.

The Blackburn with Darwen sanctuary scheme is highly successful in preventing homelessness and has received recognition in the form of a Government Office North West good practice award.

A specialist worker for ethnic minority women has been appointed and this has helped to prevent homelessness as more women are now taking out injunctions against abusive partners rather than fleeing the family home. Funding for this service has been agreed from a number of agencies but long term funding needs to be secured.

There is currently no provision for women with complex needs such as substance misuse and/or mental health problems.

Actions for domestic violence victims

- Develop a protocol with housing providers to prevent domestic abuse victims having to apply as homeless
- Ensure the current level of funding for the sanctuary scheme is maintained or increased
- Ensure funding for the BME advisor post is maintained
- Support Pennine Lancashire proposals to develop refuge type accommodation for women with complex needs

Asylum seekers and refugees

Blackburn with Darwen is a dispersal area for asylum seekers and has a number of households likely to be granted refugee status in the near future.

This means that the government funding for their accommodation will cease and some will then be potentially homeless.

A consultation exercise with former asylum seekers was undertaken in May 2008. The key points that emerged from the consultation were that not all asylum seekers and refugees received the same quality of service. Therefore there was a need to develop the current advice service. A referral system for floating support needed to be developed.

Actions for asylum seekers and refugees

- Ensure all refugees are able to access appropriate housing advice services
- Develop better links with the floating support service
- Develop joint working with the asylum support service

People with drug and/or alcohol problems

Blackburn with Darwen has a high number of people with drug and/or alcohol problems and the highest number of problem drug users aged 15-24 in the North West.

There is some high quality supported accommodation available but much of the accommodation for problem drinkers and drug users is still in unregulated private sector properties where access to support services may be restricted.

NHS Blackburn with Darwen is commissioning a specialist family support worker post for families with drug and alcohol problems.

It has been recognised by the Blackburn with Darwen Supporting People partnership that there is a need to develop more alcohol/drug specific supported housing or increase the capacity of existing provision. Suggestions include the development of a 'wet house' (where drinking is allowed), the development of more supported housing for male drug users and an increase in the number of floating support places available.

Actions for people with drug and/or alcohol problems

- Consider all options for increasing the amount of supported housing and housing support



Offenders and ex offenders

As at March 31, 260 offenders in the Blackburn area were identified as having an accommodation need, drawn from 758 current offender assessments carried out by the national offender management service (NOMS).

A protocol has been developed for providing housing and support to the small number of prolific and priority offenders who are homeless in the borough. The protocol ensures that service users offered accommodation must engage fully with their rehabilitation programme and demonstrate a genuine commitment to address their past behaviour and become good tenants.

A service level agreement and information sharing protocol has also been agreed to cover lower risk people both in the community and on release from prison.

As there are approved probation hostels in Accrington and Blackburn with Darwen, some ex offenders tend to stay in the areas often occupying poor quality private sector housing. This can have a negative effect both on the individuals and the local community but NOMS Lancashire is committed to ensuring that offenders being released from approved premises are, wherever possible, re-located to where they come from.

Actions for offenders and ex offenders

- Develop a move on protocol with Pennine Lancashire authorities to address cross borough resettlement issues
- Provide training to probation service staff
- Sign information sharing protocol with probation service

Gypsies and travellers

According to the most recently available caravan count data (2007) there were 74 traveller caravans in Blackburn with Darwen.

There are three authorised sites in the borough currently providing 20 pitches and a further three unauthorised sites were noted in 2006. The Council expects the number of unauthorised developments in its area to increase over the next five years.

Actions for gypsies and travellers

- Continue to monitor unauthorised encampments
- Work with neighbour councils to develop a Pennine Lancashire approach to the provision of authorised sites in response to recommendations from the North West regional assembly.

People with mortgage arrears

The number of households made homeless due to mortgage arrears has remained fairly constant over the last five years at an average of 14 but the percentage of the total has increased from 4% in 2003/4 to 10% in 2007/8.

There were 221 mortgage repossession claims made in the county court in the first quarter of 2008; this represents a 28% increase on the same period in 2007.

It is therefore likely that an increasing number of households will be made homeless due to repossession of a mortgaged property.

Actions for people with mortgage arrears

- Provide a fast track advice service for people facing repossession due to mortgage arrears

People with complex needs

The review process has identified that a small but significant number of people who are either homeless, threatened with homelessness or vulnerably housed and who have needs that cannot be met by one agency are present in the borough. These people frequently exhibit challenging behaviour and present high risks to themselves, other service users and agencies.

The T.H.O.M.A.S project and the homelessness and health inclusion service have identified four actions that would considerably enhance the current service and provide a 'hand up' rather than a 'hand out' to people with chaotic lifestyles.

1. An Emmaus community could be developed: Emmaus communities help people to move on from homelessness by providing work and a home in a supportive, family environment. Residents work full time collecting renovating and reselling donated furniture
2. The current soup kitchen operated by T.H.O.M.A.S could be developed into a day centre to provide a one stop shop for support and assistance with benefits, health issues and housing
3. Support could be offered to people currently without tenancies to help them to access accommodation
4. A 'care of' address could be provide by T.H.O.M.A.S to enable transitory people to receive important communication and benefit payments

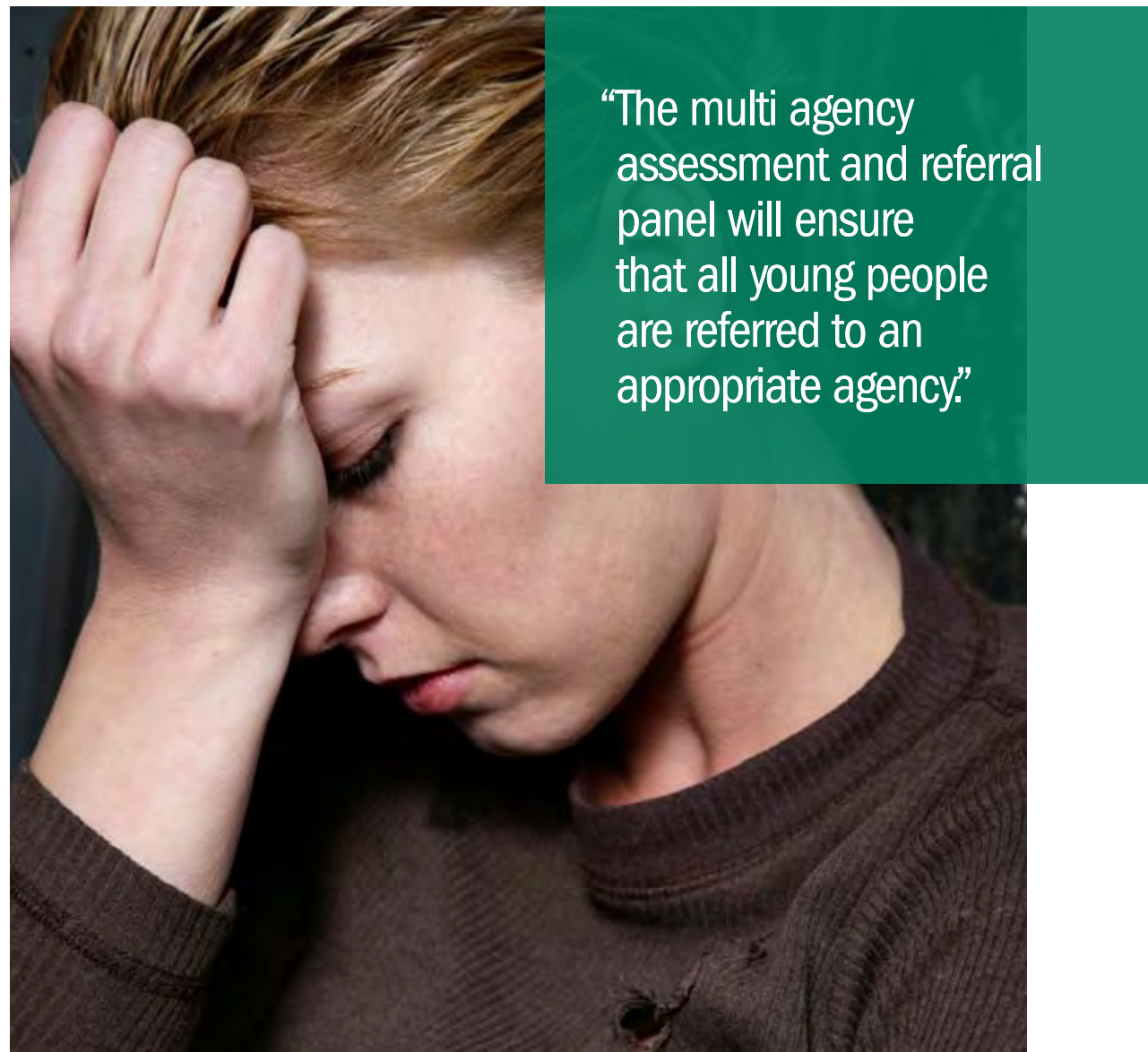


People with complex needs - continued

Actions for people with complex needs

Explore the possibilities of:

- Developing the T.H.O.M.A.S soup kitchen into a day centre
- Developing an Emmaus community in Blackburn
- Developing pre tenancy support for people in unstable accommodation
- Providing a 'care of' address for people with no settled accommodation



Processes and partnerships

The review has also identified a number of actions that affect more than one group and another set of actions that require partnership working with a specific agency to be developed.

The two key processes that need to be developed are a mechanism to ensure the most appropriate type of supported accommodation is made available to people that need it and one to help people move on from supported accommodation to independent living.

The multi agency assessment and referral panel will ensure that all young people are referred to an appropriate agency; the housing needs service will ensure that other homeless households are offered the same service.

Two actions that will assist this process are to:

- Develop a common referral form for supported accommodation
- Develop a vacancy notification system between supported housing providers and referral agencies

It has been noted by all agencies that a difficulty arises when people living in supported accommodation are ready to move on as landlords usually require references and, for the most vulnerable people, some evidence of their ability to cope with a tenancy. This is particularly the case with social landlords but the Council also wishes to encourage private landlords offering good quality accommodation to accept appropriate referrals for housing.

The Council and its partners will therefore develop a 'passport to housing'. This will comprise of a training course in independent living skills that will act as a landlord reference and give access to the bond scheme for people not currently eligible.

The course will be validated by the housing associations operating in Blackburn with Darwen and be delivered at an agreed place, or places, within the borough. Initially it will only be available to young people but will be extended to cover all groups.

