

REPORT TO: HOUSING, DUNDEE CONTRACT SERVICES AND ENVIRONMENT SERVICES COMMITTEE - 25TH JANUARY 2010

REPORT ON: ABOLITION OF THE PRIORITY NEEDS TEST - APPROACH TO 2012

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF HOUSING

REPORT NO.: 24-2010

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to propose the way forward for achieving the abolition of the Priority Needs Test, in accordance with legislation in the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003. This places a duty on local authorities to provide permanent accommodation to all people assessed as being unintentionally homeless.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Committee:

- 2.1. Note the contents of this report.
- 2.2. Remit the Director of Housing to implement measures to Abolish the Priority Needs Test for homeless applicants in Dundee, with an implementation date of April 2010; now that a specialist Homeless Prevention Team has been introduced and is fully functional.
- 2.3. Remit the Director of Housing to update the Homeless Policy and the Homeless Strategy Action Plan to reflect this change.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. There are no financial implications at this time for the Housing Revenue or Council Tax Accounts.

4. MAIN TEXT

- 4.1. The Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 provides the framework for the abolition of the distinction between 'priority need' and 'non-priority need' for homeless households by 2012.
- 4.2. The Ministerial Statement published in December 2005 set an interim target of 50% reduction of non-priority decisions by 2009. This was set against a baseline year of 2003/04. The Ministerial Statement did not however, set out how the 2009 target should be achieved; each local authority should set its own priorities.
- 4.3. In Dundee during 2003/04, 1,155 households presented as homeless. Of these presentations 72 (6%) were assessed as non-priority homeless.

- 4.4. The number of homeless presentations for 2008/09 was 2,562 (figures up to the end of September 2009 were 1236). Up to September 2009 there were only 4 cases assessed as non- priority, therefore removing the non-priority distinction will have a minimum impact on rehousing. The removal of this test will also free up more staff time to carry out more comprehensive needs assessment to ensure sustainable outcomes for clients thus preventing repeat homelessness. To work towards the Government's 2012 target, Dundee requires to reduce the non-priority assessments to less than 31 presentations with a year on year decrease to finally abolish non-priority decisions by 2012.
- 4.5. The Homeless Unit has recently been restructured to align services with specific tasks. The creation of the Homelessness Prevention Team supports the objectives of the 2008-2012 Homeless Strategy.
- 4.6. All applicants who present at the Lily Walker Centre will be seen by a member of the Prevention Team. By the use of a housing options approach, staff will be able to deliver a responsive service which is advice led and sensitive to the needs of the applicant. Prevention Officers will take a pro-active approach to early intervention by the provision of housing and support advice to resolve difficulties where tenancies are under threat.

This advice led preventative approach will assist to reduce the number of homeless applicants who require a full homeless assessment.

- 4.7. The Homeless Assessment Officers will be able to focus on all cases where the client is homeless or threatened with homelessness and a preventative or housing options approach is unable to respond to the situation. These cases often have multiple needs and require in-depth case management including support assessments, referrals and inter-agency liaison.
- 4.8. Local policy has already included additional groups within the priority need category. These are:
- Applicants who are living in insecure accommodation.
 - Applicants with children regardless of the child's age, where the child is still dependant or requires ongoing parental support.
 - Applicants over the age of 50 years.
 - Those where a relationship has irretrievably broken down and causing pressures on general health and well-being.
- 4.9. The above changes, along with the introduction of the new Letting Regulations will modernise the existing homeless service to allow the 2012 abolition of priority need target to be met.
- 4.10. Homeless Assessment Officers currently spend a considerable amount of their time assessing if a client is in priority need. Accepting that all clients who are referred on by the Prevention Team are in priority need, will free up essential resources.

Assessment Officers will still investigate the remaining three issues:

- Homeless/threatened with homelessness.
- Intentionality.
- Local connection.

This will enable Officers to focus on achieving earlier decisions, remain in contact with clients until the assessment is fully completed and ensure a customer focused outcome.

4.11. Housing implications from the abolition of priority need for the Housing Department are listed below:

4.11.1. **Homeless Policy**

Dundee City Council will require to update its Homeless Policy to reflect the abolition of priority need.

4.11.2. **Permanent Housing**

The Letting Regulations currently cater for both priority need and non-priority clients. As the target figure for non-priority is less than 30 annually, the impact should be minimal. We also continue to work with our partner agencies to maximise the lets to registered social landlord through our nominations and Section 5 Protocol. Joint working is also ongoing with private landlords within the City and by the extension of the Dundee Homefinder Service.

The abolition of the priority need test will not significantly increase the number of homeless clients requiring permanent accommodation.

Between Dundee City Council and Section 5 referral lets by RSLs we anticipate letting approx. 975 properties to homeless clients in 2009/10.

The current waiting list for homeless clients is approx. 700 and we are confident that, in 2010/11, making 45% of all Dundee City Council lets to homeless clients, in conjunction with RSL Section 5 lets, we can meet the demand for permanent rehousing of homeless clients. RSLs have agreed to let 22.5% of their total lets to homeless clients as Section 5 referrals (i.e. 45% of the 50% of total lets which they currently let to Dundee City Council nominations/Section 5 referrals).

The new allocation policy and associated IT system, going live in March, 2010, will allow for better matching of homeless clients to vacant properties. It is also anticipated that the recent introduction of the Prevention Team within the Homeless Services Unit will deliver a reduction in the number of homeless presentations which lead to a homeless priority being awarded.

4.11.3. **Temporary Accommodation**

Clients are entitled to temporary accommodation whilst their application is being assessed. Abolition of the priority needs test should therefore only have a minimal effect.

4.11.4. **Prevention of Homelessness**

The current Homeless Strategy is prevention led and we will continue to work with our partner agencies in this strategic forum.

The creation of the Homeless Prevention Team will assist by ensuring a proactive housing options approach to resolving housing issues.

5. **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1. This report has been screened for any policy implications in respect of Sustainability, Strategic Environment Assessment, Anti Poverty, Equality Impact Assessment and Risk Management. There are no major issues.

6. **CONSULTATIONS**

- 6.1. The Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive (Support Services), Director of Finance, Assistant Chief Executive and all other Chief Officers have been consulted on this report. No concerns have been expressed.

7. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 7.1. Review of Single Homelessness, March 2007.
- 7.2. Dundee City Council Homelessness Strategy 2008-12.
- 7.3. HLI, Scottish Government Homeless Statistics 2003/4 - 2008/9, and April to September 2009.
- 7.4. Ministerial Statement, Abolition of Priority Need, December 2005.

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