

Homelessness Strategy

2006 - 2010

Tackling and Preventing Homelessness
in Oldham

Homelessness Strategy 2006 - 2010

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Executive Summary

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires housing authorities to take a more strategic and multi-agency approach to tackling all forms of homelessness and to focus on prevention. Authorities need to address homelessness in its widest sense and understand that both homelessness and living in poor and unsuitable housing affects health, employment and education prospects.

Good practice in delivering homelessness services is reflected in the effectiveness of inter-agency working. Homelessness services are not just about the work of the section that makes assessments. They are about a wide range of services delivered not only by the Council, but also a wide range of voluntary and statutory agencies, and how these services work together to both prevent homelessness and deliver high quality services to those who become homeless.

The Local Area Agreement, Housing Block reflects the importance of good quality homelessness services including prevention services for the Borough. The targets contained within the LAA represent a challenge to improve homelessness performance over the three years of the agreement.

The Action Plan sets out how that performance will be improved across the key objectives of the strategy. The Homelessness Strategy Group will monitor the Action Plan's implementation and work has already begun towards addressing the needs and actions identified for improvement to services.

We will only achieve successes in reducing homelessness by continuing to broaden our understanding of the reasons families and individuals become homeless. The research into the future needs of specific groups as highlighted in the action plan will further develop our awareness of what needs to be done to address those needs.

The strategy will be reviewed annually, which will provide an opportunity to review changes to the reasons for homelessness and review the result of the impact of administrative and legislative decisions which affect vulnerable households and may alter the patterns of homelessness.

Over the last 12 months we have begun to see an increasing number of households for whom homelessness has been prevented. This has led to a reduction in homelessness across the Borough. We now need to build on our achievements and minimise the lives damaged by the experience of homelessness.

Introduction

Setting the context

- This strategy aims to build on the work undertaken in response to the Homelessness Strategy 2003 - 05
- The objectives of the strategy link with other key strategies including the Housing Strategy, Supporting People Strategy, Domestic Violence strategy and others.
- The Local Area Agreement Housing Block has been in place since 1st April 2006 and includes targets set around reducing homelessness and improving homelessness services. These targets will be monitored by the Housing Partnership. The stretch target for the Housing Block is to achieve a reduction in homelessness acceptances. It is intended to achieve this through preventing homelessness, including supporting more households to sustain their existing accommodation, and broadening the housing options available to households who are threatened with homelessness.
- First Choice Homes Oldham (FCHO), Voluntary sector agencies including Threshold Housing Project, NCH and Oldham Family Crisis Group, Housing Associations, Probation service, Aftercare, Vulnerable Adults services, Supporting People team, Private Sector housing team, Connexions and others, all play an important part in developing and monitoring homelessness policy and practice in Oldham.
- We recognise the importance of service user consultation and involvement in shaping and improving our homelessness services. We will continue to implement our Service User Consultation and Involvement Strategy in a way that offers homeless people a range of opportunities to be involved in the development and implementation of new and changing services.

Local context

The homelessness and housing advice service is delegated to FCHO by the Council and there is a service level agreement in place which sets out standards and targets for the delivery of the service. The homelessness service was inspected by the Audit Commission in August 2005, as part of the inspection of FCHO, and found to be 'both thorough and sensitive'

The inspectors noted improvements since their last visit in 2003, particularly around multi agency working and the improvements to the standards of temporary accommodation. Since the relocation of the Homelessness service from the Civic Centre to Medtia Square in May 2005, customers have benefited from the development of a wider range of services and advice available. The co-location of other services including Housing Support, Rehousing team, Tenancy relations Service, customer finance team has contributed to the delivery of a more effective and customer focused service. The offices at Medtia Square are well located for customers seeking

a range of services, being near to the Connexions service, the Job Centre and the offices of several Housing Associations.

During 2004/5 1568 homelessness presentations were made from individuals or families who considered themselves to be homeless or threatened with homelessness. Of these, 888 were accepted as homeless and in priority need. The main reasons for homelessness were loss of lodgings with parents, notice to quit a private sector tenancy, relationship breakdown, loss of lodgings with friends, domestic violence, harassment and insecure lodgings.

Only 398 homeless households were rehoused into permanent accommodation during 2004/5. Problems of reducing amounts of social housing stock available for letting were compounded by the needs of households requiring rehousing as a result of the HMR programme. The Right to Buy has had a significant impact in reducing the numbers of houses available for letting in Oldham. Shortages of vacant properties led to an increased use of Bed and Breakfast during 2004/5 with 165 households being placed in B&B during the year. Temporary accommodation was consistently full, with people sleeping on bed settees and occupancy levels as high as 130%.

Since then, an increasing focus on preventing homelessness and providing advice has begun to result in a reduction of homelessness acceptances. Homelessness acceptances reduced in 2005/6 to 698 households of whom 36% were homeless because parents, relatives or friends were no longer either willing or able to accommodate them and 27% were homeless due to a breakdown in relationship with a partner.

The reduction in acceptances has been reflected in a reduced use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and also more frequent availability of vacancies in temporary accommodation. This has often enabled staff to accommodate emergency homelessness households within a more supportive environment. Furthermore, during 2005/6 we began to record the numbers of households where housing advice casework prevented homelessness. The numbers of such cases increased each quarter and in total 430 households had their homelessness prevented through casework over the year.

Regional context

A Housing Strategy was produced for the North West Region during 2005. This strategy recognises the diversity of housing needs and issues across the region. The strategy's priorities include tackling the shortage of affordable housing and meeting the needs of the North West's diverse communities and those individuals needing support.

The consultation in preparation for the strategy found that homelessness was more of a pressing issue in 2005 across the North West than it had been in 2002. The region saw a big increase in statutory homelessness, which peaked in March 2004 at a level 48% higher than four years earlier.

However, as the impact of prevention strategies become more evident, homelessness has begun to reduce regionally. 4072 households were accepted as homeless in the North West as a whole in the last three months of 2004, a fall in the number of acceptances compared to 2003/4. 61% of homeless households across the region contained dependent children and/or pregnant women, and 17% of homeless acceptances in 2003/4 involved the breakdown of a violent relationship.

The regional board recognise that reasons for homelessness are 'varied, complex and often interlinked'. Furthermore, that 'a lack of affordable or appropriate housing in areas people choose to live causes homelessness, as does the ability of individuals to own or manage their accommodation.' During 2006 a regional homelessness strategy will be produced.

National context

In March 2005 the Government published 'Sustainable Communities: Settled homes, Changing lives'. This begins by stating:

'Homelessness has no place in a sustainable community. Like poverty and disadvantage, our aim should be to eradicate it.'

The report advised that the number of people sleeping rough on the streets had fallen by more than two-thirds since 1998. It advised that homelessness levels had been falling since 2003 when local authorities were asked to put in place a strategy to prevent homelessness and to provide accommodation and support. In 2004 the Government set a target for Local Authorities to end long-term use of cramped B&B hotels to house homeless families with children.

By March 2005 over 80% of the people accommodated under the homelessness legislation were placed in self-contained homes. However, the temporary nature of this leads to a lack of certainty over how long they will live there, which makes it hard for them to call where they live a home. This prompted the Government to set a challenging target to halve the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 2010.

In June 06, ODPM reported that there had been 20,730 homelessness acceptances nationally during the period January to March 2006, 23 % lower than in the same period in 2005. The total number of acceptances during 2005/6 was 93,980, 22 % lower than in 2004/5 and below 100,000 for the first time since 1985/6. It also reported that numbers in temporary accommodation on 31 March 2006, arranged by local authorities under homelessness legislation were 96,370, 5% lower than at 31st March 2005. 85% of these were in self-contained accommodation, and 15% were in accommodation with shared facilities. The Government attributed this success to local authority homelessness prevention strategies. Shelter

expressed their concerns about the 750,000 households living in unfit housing and the 500,000 households who live in overcrowded conditions who, whilst not homeless, do not enjoy satisfactory housing conditions.

Nationally, between January and March 06, for 39 % of homelessness acceptances, the reason for homelessness was that parents, relatives or friends were no longer able or willing to accommodate. A further 19% of households were accepted as homeless following the breakdown of a relationship with a partner, with around two-thirds of these cases involving violence. A further 13% of households were homeless because an assured shorthold tenancy had ended.

In March 2006 the Government produced a further policy briefing ' Sustainable Communities: settled homes and changing lives. One year on.' This outlined the key areas of achievement over the previous 12 months and emphasised the expectation that every local authority will be expected to achieve a 50 % reduction in households in temporary accommodation by 2010. In April 06 the Housing Corporation produced a consultation paper on how Housing Associations can contribute to tackling homelessness. This paper addresses partnership working, reducing eviction rates, nominations and exclusion policies, concerns about under occupation and empty properties, targeting of investment funding and promoting and sharing good practice.

What have we learnt whilst implementing the last strategy

- By working together we can improve services and achieve results
- Homelessness **can be** preventable
- Service user consultation plays a key part in effective shaping of services
- The main reasons for homelessness do change over time and services need to be flexible to respond to these changes
- Monitoring and Reviewing services can raise standards and highlight issues

What was achieved in last strategy

- The Homelessness Strategy group oversaw the implementation of the Action Plan of the previous homelessness strategy, alongside effective and innovative spending of ODPM Homelessness Grant
- A multi agency Rough Sleepers Count took place across Oldham in December 04 - no rough sleepers were found

- Multi agency working has contributed towards better and more co-ordinated services for homeless customers
- Multi agency training on key issues, which has not only informed delegates but also promoted a better understanding of the demands and constraints placed on different services.
- Homelessness Forum established in November 2004 and Homelessness Development worker appointed in January 2005 to co-ordinate the Forum.
- Housing Options moved to Media Square in May 05 - providing a less formal reception area and the benefits of access to a range of specialist services and advice. Furthermore, the proximity to the rehousing and customer finance sections within First Choice Homes Oldham enables better delivery of advice and support to customers.
- A speak out event was held in March 05 - led by Threshold Housing Partnership and assisted by Housing Strategy - which provided useful feedback from service users, particularly in issues including repeat homelessness
- We piloted a family mediation service in partnership with NCH. The pilot was thoroughly reviewed and recommendations made for the re-launch of the service in 2006.
- A Service User Involvement and Consultation Strategy was developed in partnership with the Supporting People team, the action plan of the strategy is now being implemented
- A pilot project was run in a local secondary school to promote awareness and understanding of homelessness issues. This will be available in future for all schools in the Borough.
- Leeds and Burnley Local Authorities visited us in August 05 in order to hold a Peer Review of our homelessness services. Their experience and advice was invaluable and helped us to improve our data collection and monitoring systems in particular.

Chapter 1

Temporary Accommodation

Objective one: to reduce the use of temporary accommodation and improve the quality and range of temporary accommodation for those who need it, including the aim to minimise the use of B&B accommodation

The Government want Local Authorities to reduce homelessness by offering a wider range of preventative measures and increasing access to settled homes. They want to see a halving of the numbers living in temporary accommodation by 2010.

Bed and Breakfast accommodation

Prior to June 2004, it was very rare for Oldham to place households in B&B. However, the reduction in FCHO stock as a result of stock transfers, the Right to Buy, the competing priorities of those affected by the HMR programme as well as homeless households and a reduced turnover of stock have all contributed to the situation where there are not vacancies readily available for households who have priority for being rehoused.

Use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation peaked during the first three months of 2005/6 when 76 households were placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, of which 22 had dependent children or pregnant family member, at a cost of £26,859. FCHO, on behalf of the Council, found increasing difficulty in placing households in B&B within Oldham and frequently households were placed outside the Borough, most commonly in Manchester, Tameside or Rochdale.

The working group established in March 05 to address the issues of reducing use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and tackling homelessness levels, acknowledged that use of Bed and Breakfast was far from ideal but occasionally necessary depending upon the availability and appropriateness of other temporary and permanent accommodation. It recognised the need to broaden the options available for homeless and potentially homeless households.

In the first three months of 2006/7, 42 households were placed in Bed and Breakfast, which exceeded the performance target set out within the Local Area Agreement. Work will continue to enable us to reduce use of Bed and Breakfast for homeless households.

Temporary Accommodation

Over the last 18 months, in response to the increased presentations as homeless and increased use of Bed and Breakfast, improvements have been made to the quantity and quality of temporary accommodation.

In October 04 the basements at Swift Court were converted to provide temporary accommodation for single people. Each basement provides 3 'pods' - self-contained bedroom with shared facilities and a sofa bed in the lounge. This accommodation was originally intended as emergency provision but has often been used for longer periods and has proved popular with young people. Other 2 bedroomed flats at Swift Court have been adapted to include two lockable bedrooms and shared facilities in the remainder of the flat. This has been undertaken in response to the large numbers of single person households presenting and being accepted as homeless.

Recent work has ensured that Swift Court complies with the Decent Homes Standard and that the communal facilities comply with requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Some homeless people are accommodated in Supported Lodgings which provide them with the support they need within a family setting, with the eventual aim of enabling them to move on to sustain a tenancy of their own. Often ongoing support is given to help them settle into and establish their own tenancy.

The voluntary sector also provides essential temporary housing, which meets the needs of vulnerable and homeless people. Both Threshold Housing Project and Oldham Family Crisis Group make a significant contribution to the provision of specialist housing and support for vulnerable and homeless people with specific needs. The rebuilding and reopening in 2005 of the project in Spring Street, providing temporary accommodation for homeless men was a welcome addition to the range of supported accommodation provided by Threshold Housing Group.

Building work to the eight flats at the Porter Street project was completed in September 05. The project provides temporary accommodation for young people aged between 16 and 25 years and was developed by West Pennine Housing Association and managed by the De Paul Trust. This is a welcome addition to the range of temporary accommodation available within the Borough for young people. Furthermore, it allows us to accommodate young people within Oldham who might otherwise be placed outside the Borough, which has the dual benefits of young people being able to live in their own authority area and has major cost savings.

Nine properties from the FCHO housing stock have been in use as dispersed temporary accommodation, which has been ideal for households where Sholver is not an appropriate location and for larger households who are difficult to accommodate or those with support needs that are best met by a different location.

A scheme of 9 flats has been developed at Napier St for single, homeless young people aged 16 years to 25 years old and is managed by Threshold Housing Project's Resettlement Team. All tenants at this scheme are expected to be actively involved in education, training or employment and also to continue to work towards living independently and sustaining tenancies. The need for such a scheme was recognised in the focus group held in October 05 to discuss young women's housing and homelessness issues.

Despite these improvements to the range and quality of temporary accommodation it is recognised that not all those with specific support needs can be appropriately accommodated within the temporary accommodation available. There is some evidence that some households are deterred from approaching the Housing Options Centre as homeless because they believe that the temporary accommodation available is either in an inappropriate location or the support provided will not meet their needs.

A review of temporary accommodation in the Borough has begun, and in future, provision of small units of temporary accommodation designed either to deliver a short term assessment of needs or to meet specific support needs may better address the identified gaps in current provision.

What next?

The need for additional emergency accommodation for the homeless, available on a direct access basis, has been highlighted in the Supporting People Strategy as one of four agreed priorities for development with Housing Corporation funding. The proposed project will be intended to house single people or couples aged between 16 and 65 who become homeless and have chaotic lifestyles or vulnerability issues due to complex and multiple needs. Consideration is being given to this project providing two stages of accommodation - both emergency accommodation where an initial assessment of and addressing of needs will be made, and some move on units for those who require longer term support that is not available elsewhere. Manchester Methodist Housing Group has been selected as development partner for this project.

Another of the needs prioritised in the Supporting People Strategy, identified through the research undertaken in the production of the Supported Accommodation Strategy, is the need for accommodation that provides support to people with alcohol misuse issues who are not ready to give up use of alcohol at the time of crisis in their housing needs.

It is hoped to develop some dispersed temporary accommodation in the private sector, through a private sector or housing association leasing scheme. This would help to encourage households to see the private sector as a viable and good quality solution to housing needs. It would also provide a wider range of locations across the borough for those in need of temporary accommodation to enable them to be closer to family or friends for support.

Oldham are also considering developing a Night Stop project which will provide very short term emergency accommodation for the homeless within the supportive environment of a volunteer's home whilst the Council or its partners work with them to resolve their homelessness on a more permanent basis.

It is hoped that these sources of alternative temporary accommodation will eventually replace the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and existing accommodation at Swift Court, to provide housing and support solutions that are appropriately located and designed to meet the needs of vulnerable homeless households in the 21st Century.

In conclusion, more short-term temporary accommodation is necessary in the assessment of support and housing needs. Further specialist provision of temporary accommodation is needed for people unable to sustain a tenancy during a time of crisis or due to multiple needs. However, the needs of many homeless households are best met by provision of an affordable, settled home. The broadening of longer term housing opportunities across all tenures, together with support to resettle into or sustain those homes where needed, should be the overarching aim for the Borough.

Chapter 2

Preventing homelessness and sustaining tenancies

Objective two: to minimise the numbers of presentations and acceptances as homelessness by sustaining accommodation for both potential service users and former homelessness service users, preventing homelessness wherever possible. Furthermore, to maximise the numbers of households for whom homelessness is prevented as a result of housing advice casework.

The prevention of homelessness was a key objective of the Homelessness Strategy 2003 - 2005 and an important aspect of the Government's approach to tackling homelessness across the Country. It is also important that local authorities develop approaches to reduce the incidence of repeat homelessness so that households who do experience homelessness move on to sustain their future housing rather than becoming homeless again. Some people need help with settling into their new homes and others need longer-term support to prevent them from becoming homeless again.

The Council, working in partnership with a range of different agencies now provide a wide range of projects which will help both prevent homelessness from occurring and help to prevent people from losing their accommodation in the future. The focus of these projects and services is on finding long term solutions to housing needs and not about preventing households from gaining access to Council tenancies.

The Council recognises the negative impact of homelessness on the lives of families and single people and seeks to maximise the number of people for whom homelessness can be prevented. Shelter estimates that on average the cost to the public sector of a household becoming homeless is £6000. By preventing homelessness we improve both the individuals' personal well being together with providing benefits for sustainability of the communities in which they live.

Projects which currently prevent homelessness

A range of staying put and tenancy maintenance initiatives are being encouraged because they can prevent homelessness from occurring or enable those who have to move to do so in a planned way. It is important that these services address the needs of households with low-level support needs as well as those with higher level or complex needs. If low level needs can be addressed early and effectively then homelessness and other crises may be prevented. These initiatives include:

- Family Mediation - a pilot scheme was operational between July 2005 and November 05 with the mediation provided by NCH. The scheme was developed in partnership with FCHO and Connexions and aimed to reduce homelessness resulting from parents telling their children

to leave home. The scheme was reviewed in December and remodelled and has been re-launched in July 06 with Threshold Housing Project delivering the new service. Customers of the pilot service valued its independence but the pilot also highlighted the need for closer joint working, information sharing protocols and a shared understanding with all partners to the project. These concerns have been addressed in the development of the new mediation service.

- Tenancy Relations Service - mediation between private sector landlords and tenants has been provided at FCHO since 2002. The service includes advice on disrepair, harassment, lack of supply of accommodation, rent shortfalls and rent increases, notice to quit, illegal eviction and general advice and assistance. This service will be further developed and the relationship with Private Sector Housing team expanded upon to build links with the Landlord Accreditation scheme, regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation, management of empty properties and the Rent Deposit scheme. Changes in legislation introduced in the Housing Act 2004 will enable enforcement action to be taken to bring empty properties back into use.
- Bond Scheme - In 2004/5, 11 bonds/rent deposits were issued to enable households to take up tenancies in the private sector. The operation of the scheme was reviewed and remodelled. The Bond scheme is now to be re-launched, based within the Housing Options Centre and managed by the Private Sector Housing Team. This will enable housing options for homeless households to be more effectively and efficiently broadened.
- Accredited Landlords scheme - this was initially developed in the area covered by the first wave Housing Market Renewal areas but it is intended to expand the scheme to include landlords throughout the Borough. Accredited Landlords meet bi-monthly with officers from the Private Sector Housing team to share information and hear about new policies, regulations or incentives to accreditation. Recently two accredited landlords have been invited to join the local Housing Partnership.
- Sanctuary schemes for domestic violence - this scheme is co-ordinated by the Community Safety unit and received funding for 2005/6 from the ODPM Homelessness Grant. The Homelessness Strategy Group agreed that the scheme is valuable and that money should be made available specifically to add security measures to properties, thereby enabling families who choose to remain in their existing housing following domestic abuse to do so in safety. In 2006/7 and 2007/8 the scheme will be financed via a grant from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.
- Specialist support for families under threat of losing tenancies due to Anti Social Behaviour is provided by NCH Oldham Families project. This project receives Supporting People funding and also funding from the Community Safety Unit. The project works intensively with small numbers of families to seek to prevent current threats of homelessness and increase the likelihood of success of future

tenancies by addressing issues around the behaviour of family members. This project is seeking further funding to identify and address the needs of BME households for this service as they are currently under represented in existing referrals.

- Oldham currently assists around 40 households with Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). This is a sum of money allocated to Local Authorities to allow them to help households find homes or remain in their homes without causing financial hardship. We will be working with colleagues in our Housing Benefit section to ensure that DHP is used more effectively to prevent homelessness. Training was provided in January 06 on DHP for a range staff from different agencies who advise households who are threatened with homelessness.
- Money advice - FCHO customer finance section offer financial advice to people threatened with homelessness due to debts. Whilst their primary focus is on customers with debts to OMBC / FCHO, they do fast track customers to the debt advice service provided by the CAB.
- Tenancy support - support is provided to vulnerable households both on resettlement and to sustain existing tenancies. There are a range of both specialist and generic (housing) floating support schemes in place based both within FCHO and the voluntary sector. Government grant was used in 2005/6 to support the Asian women's outreach support service provided by Oldham Family Crisis group to support Asian women who are experiencing domestic abuse but choose to remain in their own homes. Another specialist support service for asylum seekers and refugees has recently been commended for its work.
- Oldham runs two supported lodging schemes, one for young people and one for people with mental health problems.
- Choice Based Lettings - it is expected that the recent introduction of full Choice Based Lettings under the new Allocations Policy will assist in preventing homelessness by offering improved choice and information to customers and a more accountable method of letting vacant homes.

Preventative schemes - piloted and planned

- A pre tenancy skills project is being developed and will be launched during the autumn of 2006/7. Our consultation with service users suggests that they will welcome this. It is hoped that a range of agencies will be supported to run this training so that it can reach a wider range of service users, including some of those currently housed in long term residential care and needing to move on into a tenancy.
- We plan to develop a private sector or housing association managed leasing scheme. It is intended that this scheme would develop to provide both emergency accommodation and settled homes. A private sector leasing scheme could offer an alternative housing option to

meet housing need particularly in locations that may not be available in the social housing stock.

- We aim to further explore the feasibility of developing a Night Stop Scheme. Night Stop is the provision of emergency accommodation for homeless 16 - 25 year olds exclusively in the homes of approved volunteers. As at July 2005, 42 such schemes were affiliated to Night Stop UK, who provides support and training to affiliated groups. Linked to this initiative would be the need to provide a daytime drop in facility for young people using the Night Stop scheme.
- We intend that the links made with Housing Benefit will be further developed both to assist service users and agencies in calculating entitlement and identifying, supporting and possibly fast tracking claims and renewals for vulnerable households. It is hoped that closer working links can be made with agencies supporting vulnerable people both to ensure that Discretionary Housing Payments are used to prevent homelessness and that households are supported with both moves into the private sector and sustaining private sector tenancies.
- Home visits should become an integral part of the advice service provided to homelessness applicants, and inform the investigations into individual households' homelessness.
- In July 06 we introduced a pilot 'Spend to Save' budget; such a budget has worked well and been considered to be good practice in preventing homelessness in other local authority areas.
- During 2006/7 we aim to work with existing and new partners to develop a furniture recycling scheme which may assist some people to set up homes following homelessness
- We have recently developed a forum specifically for those agencies that provide floating support, in order to discuss the particular issues raised in providing of this type of tenancy sustainment.
- We recognise the need to raise awareness on the importance of preventing homelessness and sustaining tenancies with frontline housing officers. This work was begun with the seminar held in February 06 which was attended by 65 frontline housing and related services staff, and will be developed further with training, information bulletins and via the Homelessness Forum. In June 06, around 50 representatives from a wide range of agencies watched DVD's of Best Practice in Homelessness Prevention by the Beacon authorities for homelessness.

Housing advice

Housing advice has been proven to prevent homelessness and the Council now collects information of the numbers of people who have been helped by housing advice, and the range of local authority funded services that provide this advice. In the period 1st April 05 to 31st March 06, 430 households had their homelessness prevented as a result of housing advisers working with them to retain their housing or find alternative housing without becoming homeless. The importance of Housing Advice in

preventing homelessness is reflected in the Local Area Agreement where targets have been set to achieve successes in preventing homelessness as a result of housing advice casework. Between April and June 2006, we exceeded our target performance with 132 households having their homelessness prevented during the 3 month period.

Housing Advisers are being recruited to work within the Housing Options service in order to advise those people who approach FCHO because they are threatened with homelessness. This service will compliment the existing housing advice services available from the Housing Advice team at the CAB and the Tenancy Relations Service (already within the Housing Options Centre), which works with the Private Sector Housing team to advise private sector tenants and landlords. The first housing adviser was appointed to this new role in July 06.

The way that we provide homelessness services is changing. When customers first approach the Housing Options centre they are initially given housing advice and assistance, to see if their possible homelessness can be prevented.

Only after other options have been exhausted will people be referred to the staff who process homelessness applications.

The Council recognises the impact of homelessness on the lives of families and single people and seeks to maximise the numbers of people for whom homelessness can be prevented.

Chapter 3

Making effective use of private sector housing to increase housing options

Objective three: to broaden the housing options available to potentially homeless applicants by continuing to develop a range of initiatives which encourage access to private sector housing

Private sector housing can play an important role in meeting housing needs and broadening the options available for households facing homelessness. The Government's 5 year Strategy 'Homes for all' highlights this importance and identifies landlord accreditation and rent deposit schemes as examples where local authorities can work well with the private rented sector, together with linking private sector lets to Choice Based lettings. In her paper 'Settled Housing Solutions in the private rented sector' Helen Keats highlights how improving access to the private rented sector can enable local authorities to meet wider corporate objectives such as regeneration and economic development, particularly when linked to targets to bring empty properties back in to use.

Empty Properties

There are approximately 3000 empty private sector properties in Oldham. If a proportion of this available housing stock were brought back in to use it could significantly increase the housing options for households in housing need. The Housing Act 2004 has given local authorities additional powers to take control of empty properties, known as Empty Dwelling Management Orders. When an EDMO is in force, the local authority has the right to possession of the property but does not become legal owner of it. Targets have been set within the Local Area Agreement for bringing empty homes back in to use in Oldham.

Private Sector Leasing

Many local authorities have used private sector leasing schemes to provide temporary and longer-term accommodation for homeless households. This has been identified as a priority for Oldham too, with an aim to develop a private sector leasing scheme by April 2007. Such schemes can enable the provision of temporary accommodation in areas not covered by social rented housing; enable provision of temporary housing of a suitable range of sizes to meet varying needs; and provide a good quality private sector alternative to social rented housing. Regional Homelessness Champions, Leeds, enjoy widespread provision of private sector leased properties that broaden housing options for households threatened with homelessness.

Advice for private sector landlords and tenants

The ending of assured shorthold tenancies accounts for 20% of all homelessness acceptances nationally. In Oldham more than 10% of homelessness presentations in the period from 1st October 2005 to 31st December 2005 were as a result of the end of a private sector tenancy. Better quality housing advice for both private sector landlords and tenants such as that provided by the Tenancy Relations service and Private Sector Housing team can be effective in preventing homelessness by mediating between the parties, providing information on rights and responsibilities and preventing illegal eviction. Between August 05 and December 05, 144 private tenants and 51 private landlords received advice from the Tenancy Relations Service. The advice included intervention to tackle disrepair, advice on unaffordable rent increases, and reinstatement following an illegal eviction. The service is well used by all of the communities in Oldham with over a third of users being of BME heritage.

Landlord Accreditation Scheme

Oldham's Private Sector Housing team manage the Borough's Landlord Accreditation scheme and plan to expand the numbers of landlords and properties covered by the scheme over the next few years. As at August 06, 28 landlords who manage around 80 properties are included in the scheme. The Accreditation scheme requires landlords to provide a good service and a reasonable standard of accommodation. Such schemes have been found to significantly improve property standards and the quality of property management wherever they operate on a borough wide basis. The accreditation scheme promotes a proactive approach to working with landlords and provides them with the support and skills to manage their tenancies well. It is recognised that some people seek private tenancies because they have been excluded from access to other housing and that landlords may need support to provide housing to some of these groups. The aim is to expand the number of accredited landlords across the Borough to improve standards of management and maintenance services in the private rented sector.

Bond / Rent Deposit Scheme

The Bond Scheme in Oldham was reviewed and remodelled in Autumn 2005, and is to be relaunched in 2006 being based within the Housing options centre and managed by the Private Sector Housing team. Based at Media Square it will provide an accessible and realistic option for potentially homeless households for whom there are decreasing numbers of available socially rented housing stock. The remodelled scheme will be broadened out to a wider range of households and seek to extend the affordable options available to households threatened with homelessness.

Affordable Housing

A range of initiatives is being piloted to make alternative housing options more affordable, particularly within the Pathfinder areas of Oldham, to those affected by the clearance programme. A relocation equity release scheme has been developed to assist with access to existing and newly built housing for those who have to move due to clearance. Part or shared

ownership can also meet the needs of some households, particularly those who have equity to invest but a relatively low income. New build properties in the Pathfinder area will benefit from improved energy efficiency and high quality design to both properties and their environment, which should promote long-term desirability and affordability.

It is recognised that the needs of other groups across the Borough could be addressed through increasing the range of affordable housing. Provision of leasehold properties for elderly people, with or without housing related support, could provide an attractive option for those wishing to 'trade down,' or with mobility problems seeking level access accommodation, and thereby free up family housing for those with children.

We have recently undertaken research into the choices and preferences of households who live in the Pathfinder areas which will help us to better meet the needs of those communities and inform future plans for developing more affordable housing both within those areas and across the Borough.

Section 106 Agreements

Oldham is also using Section 106 agreements to maximise the numbers of affordable homes across the Borough. Section 106 agreements have produced 31 homes for sale at a discount to Council nominees in 2002 - 2004. They were targeted at people who couldn't afford to buy at full market value, and are sold under a resale covenant to protect the discounted prices. 56 more low cost home ownership homes, using S106 agreements have been developed during 2005-6 giving 30% discount on full market value.

Housing Benefit / Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

It is hoped that the links made with Housing Benefit will be further developed both to assist people and the agencies supporting them, in calculating entitlement and identifying, supporting and possibly fast tracking claims and renewals for vulnerable households. By closer working, links can be made with agencies supporting vulnerable people both to ensure that DHP is used to prevent homelessness and that households are supported with both moves into the private sector and sustaining private sector tenancies.

It is recognised that Oldham needs to be prepared for the possible introduction of local Housing Allowances to the Borough and have the mechanisms in place to address any difficulties which arise through effective partnership working.

Improved quality of private sector housing

A better understanding of the quality of private sector housing will become available as a result of the Housing Stock Condition survey. This together with increased powers to act on poorly managed or maintained properties

will also drive up standards in private sector housing. The Housing Act 2004 will introduce the Housing Health and Safety Rating system, to replace the old fitness standard and help to address the most serious hazards found within those properties. The new assessment takes account of the most vulnerable occupant who currently occupies the property and also takes into account the potential occupants. The Act also strengthens the powers of Local Authorities in the regulation of standards of Houses in Multiple Occupation, introducing mandatory licensing for properties that are either three storeys or more, occupied by at least 5 persons and occupied by two or more households.

The introduction of increased powers to address the issues around empty, poorly managed and maintained properties will improve those areas that are blighted by poor quality private sector homes.

The private sector has an important role to play in broadening housing choices as the numbers of socially rented homes continues to fall. It is important that we work effectively with private landlords, estate agents, builders of new homes and other partners to ensure that this sector provides attractive alternatives and choices for customers.

Meeting needs of vulnerable people and need to reach groups

Objective four: to ensure that appropriate services are in place for the most vulnerable homeless people, including those with multiple needs, and to continue to monitor and minimise the numbers of people who sleep rough

For the purpose of this strategy, we have adopted the definition of 'Hard to Reach' or 'Need to Reach' groups as defined in a recent Government funded research project. These individuals often do not have contact with statutory services and often have no fixed address. They may either consider that they are not entitled to statutory services or chose to exclude themselves from those services. Often they do have contact with voluntary sector agencies, who play an important role in reaching these individuals. Those defined as being 'hard to reach' included individuals who were:

- Homeless people
- People with alcohol and/or substance issues and addictions
- Women escaping domestic violence
- Young people, often with histories of being in care
- People from Black Minority Ethnic groups including gypsies and travellers
- People who have offended or maybe at risk from offending
- Those with complex needs i.e. two or more of the above, and maybe compounded by mental health problems

Sleeping Rough

Oldham undertook a Rough Sleepers Count in December 04 and found no Rough Sleepers, but two possible bedding sites were found. In July 06 we undertook a further Rough Sleepers Count and found two people who were sleeping rough and two additional bedding sites. This confirmed the findings of a survey undertaken between May and July 06 of people who have sought advice from a range of agencies and were either sleeping rough or hidden homeless at the time when they approached the advice or support agency. We know that there are undoubtedly people who sleep rough in Oldham on occasions, often on a short-term basis, whose needs should be understood and addressed. A multi-agency working group has been established to address the issues of both rough sleeping and 'Hidden Homelessness' in Oldham.

Hidden Homelessness

In 2004 Crisis produced a report that highlighted the extent of the problem of hidden homelessness and estimated that 380,000 households were affected by it in England. Hidden homelessness is the term used to define the circumstances of those who move around, sleeping on settees at friend's houses - 'sofa surfing'. Some of these are vulnerable young women who may find a 'partner' for protection and may have substance dependency issues and /or be vulnerable to exploitation. Others may have no recourse to public funds due to age, awareness of entitlement or immigration status. Some people are reluctant to approach statutory agencies and prefer to remain 'anonymous'.

It is important that we can quantify the numbers who are hidden homeless in Oldham and ensure that the appropriate range of services are available for them and outreach services available to advise and support where needed. It is known that Manchester currently provides a wider range of services for both rough sleepers and homeless people with special needs. It is important to work in across local authority boundaries to address some of the needs already identified. In Oldham, 12 months funding has recently been identified which will finance an outreach support service for hidden homeless households and identify and raise awareness of barriers these households face in accessing a range of support services. The multi agency working group will both oversee the outreach support project and report to the Homelessness Forum on its findings and recommendations.

Support for Vulnerable People

The Equality Impact Assessment of the Homelessness Strategy 2003-05 identified a number of vulnerable groups whose needs are not currently fully met within existing services. These include teenage parents and also people experiencing domestic violence, particularly for those whom current refuge provision is not suitable or available, including people in same sex relationships, male victims and young single women. Also people with complex needs, multiple diagnoses, disabilities and medical conditions including HIV and TB are not fully provided for. Those with a history of offending, those with alcohol problems who wish to continue drinking and people with chaotic lifestyles are other groups whose needs are not fully addressed via existing services.

Many of the above needs are best addressed by joint working between the Council and other statutory and voluntary agencies, many of whom have specialist knowledge and expertise in meeting the needs of specific vulnerable groups. One of the strengths acknowledged as a contributory factor in implementing the last Homelessness Strategy was our effective joint working to resolve problems. We intend to continue and build on this with the Homelessness Strategy 2006-2010.

Floating Support

We recognise the value and effectiveness of the network of floating support services, both generic, who provide services to people with a wide range of differing needs; and specialist, who seek to meet the support needs of specific groups. Floating support is delivered to people in their own homes and is often provided when people with support needs are setting up home for example **resettlement support** after living in supported housing, or **outreach support** where households need support to sustain an existing tenancy. We established a Floating Support Forum in March 2006 for front line staff who deliver floating support services so that good practice can be shared and issues of common concern resolved.

Respect Agenda

In January 2006 the Government produced details of its plan to continue to provide help and support for families who face difficulties and may be under threat of homelessness because of their anti social behaviour. Oldham Families Project, run by NCH, provides intensive support to such families with notable success for both the families involved and the communities in which they live. The Governments plan sets out new powers for action against those families who refuse such support or fail to take responsibility for their family's behaviour. The plan sets out a wide-ranging programme to tackle anti-social behaviour and build a culture of respect.

New Supported Housing for those with multiple needs

Some young and vulnerable people will have their support and housing needs addressed by the new project at Porter Street, if they are single and aged between 16 and 25 years old. Others may be helped by the proposed emergency accommodation project, which is seeking funding from the Housing Corporation. The intended service users will be singles and couples of all ages that become homeless and have chaotic lifestyles, challenging behaviour, or vulnerability issues due to complex and multiple needs. The project proposal is currently being reviewed and MMHG have been selected as the development partner.

Further projects are either being piloted or considered in order to meet other specialist needs. These include children who leave Local Authority care; drug users; a project for those who use alcohol and will continue to do so; young women fleeing coercion or abuse within the family home and a project for people with mental health problems. Some vulnerable groups have specific needs that require further research in order to ensure that those needs are comprehensively met across Oldham.

Ex- Offenders

Statutory partner agencies such as YOS, Probation, and ODIP provide support to offenders and ex-offenders, and there have been schemes developed to primarily support prolific offenders and offenders with histories of

substance misuse. There are specialist floating support services funded by Supporting People Grant and provided by both Threshold and English Churches Housing Group to meet the support needs of people with a history of offending when settling into and maintaining their tenancies.

However there is a need to ensure that close working relationships are maintained with agencies who specialise in supporting ex-offenders, that involve developing good information sharing protocols, ensuring that accommodation is sustained and the cycle of homelessness and offending is not repeated.

The Government have reported on national improvements to the housing advice provided to ex-offenders prior to their release from prison; we need to ensure that this is reflected locally. There is also a need to identify particularly vulnerable groups within this category who may have multiple or complex needs and require additional support.

Substance Misuse

Current specific support for people with dependency issues is provided for by day service provision by ADS, DAAT, ODIP, and Oasis. Specific accommodation and floating support is provided by Turning Point. It is recognised that it is important to ensure that there is sufficient re-settlement support for those with dependency problems. After consultation with service providers and service users a need for accommodation for people with long-term alcohol issues, who are currently unable to address their dependency issues, was identified and given priority for Supporting People funding. A project is currently being developed in partnership with MMHG to provide a 'Wet House' to meet these needs.

Complex needs

At present people with multiple diagnoses, disabilities, or medical conditions are limited in the options available to them. Whilst individual agencies strive to provide support to meet individuals' needs, there has been limited research to identify what these needs are and how they can be addressed. Further investigation needs to be undertaken to look at the options for providing specialist support to people with multiple needs

Teenage Parents

It is important to ensure that there is sufficient and appropriate support available for teenage parents who become homeless, together with accessible and appropriate accommodation and support. It has also been clearly identified through consultation with partner agencies and service-users that there is a need to recognise the importance of providing inclusive support to all teenage parents who require it. The focus also needs to be on supporting young parents to develop skills that will enable them to sustain relationships and caring for a child, as well as being able to sustain accommodation.

Current specific provision consists of Glamorgan Place (Threshold Housing Project), a 9-bedded supported accommodation for lone female teenage parents, which also provides floating support to both couples and lone parents. There is also a floating support service provided by Turning Point for pregnant women with substance misuse issues. Currently, consultation is being undertaken to establish whether existing provision is meeting service user's needs and how it could be further developed to improve and progress.

16/17 year olds

16/17 year olds are recognised as being vulnerable, and Oldham has a statutory responsibility to address housing and homelessness issues concerning young people within the 16/17-year-old age group. In order to develop and implement recommendations made by the Young Persons Housing Needs Strategy, the 2003-05 Homelessness Strategy, and Bed and Breakfast Working Group report 'Preventing Homelessness in Oldham', a Sub-group has been established. This group is designed to support and encourage work in partnership across agencies that work with young people in Oldham.

The group is inclusive and consists of a wide-ranging multi-agency approach that promotes effective joint working. Its aims are to: develop, evaluate and co-ordinate a Night Stop scheme; monitor and co-ordinate the family mediation scheme; evaluate and develop Safe Moves scheme; develop, evaluate and co-ordinate pre-tenancy training scheme; develop website resource for 16/17 year olds; address housing and homelessness issues concerning 16/17 year olds and make recommendations to Homelessness Strategy Group. It will address issues, monitor effectiveness of changes of approach and make recommendations upon choices for young people aged 16 /17 asked to leave home by parents and consider the needs of 16/17 yr old asylum seekers.

Young People Leaving Local Authority Care

The 'Every Child Matters' agenda has contributed to an increased awareness of the issues faced by young people in local authority care. National research on looked after children found that they are 60 times more likely to experience homelessness than young people who have not previously been placed in Local Authority Care. Locally, Oldham is focused on improving outcomes for looked after children and care leavers through joint working, service user involvement and promoting a shared understanding of the issues faced by these young people. A Corporate Parenting Manager has been appointed whose role includes providing a link between services and monitoring progress towards implementing improved opportunities for young care leavers. A supported lodgings scheme runs successfully, and existing schemes providing housing and support meet the needs of some care leavers. To complement this we will be looking at developing a supported dispersed tenancy scheme for those who wish to live more independently.

The Homelessness Strategy Action Plan reflects the need for further research and more details proposals to be developed to address the needs of several of the vulnerable groups highlighted in this chapter. Our service user consultation and joint working with a wide range of agencies will help to inform both this research and highlight other unmet needs as they arise.

Chapter 5

Making all homelessness services culturally sensitive and accessible to all, including socially excluded groups

Objective 5: to ensure that homelessness services are accessible by all members of the different communities in Oldham and to develop services that are culturally sensitive and meet the specific needs of diverse groups

An Equality Impact Assessment of the Homelessness Strategy 2003-05 was concluded in June 05 and found that:

'The Homelessness Strategy has not resulted in unlawful discrimination with regard to the key equalities legislation and has no specific adverse implications'

As part of the assessment process a multi agency focus group was held which discussed both the equality impact of the strategy and highlighted several unmet needs of specific vulnerable groups.

A further Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken as part of the preparation of this strategy and is included as an appendix to this document.

Disability

We recognise the need and will endeavour to ensure that appropriate accommodation options are available and accessible to all disabled people and /or those who require extra support. These options should be inclusive and enable disabled people to live independently, with respect and dignity, in their own homes or in supported provision.

In recognising the need for disabled people to have greater choice and control over where and how they live, we will aim to consult with service users and service providers and act on recommendations made in partnership with appropriate agencies throughout the borough. We specifically recognise the need for more temporary accommodation to be both appropriately designed and include the appropriate level of support to meet the needs of people with physical disabilities, those with sensory impairment disabilities and those with other disabilities who may find themselves threatened with homelessness.

Lesbian , Gay, Bi - Sexual and Transgender

National research undertaken recently with results produced in February 2006 show that despite new legislation this customer group still face widespread discrimination and abuse. At present in Oldham there are little or no specific resources , including specialist housing services, for Lesbian, Gay, Bi - Sexual, or Transgender people. In response to initial service user and service provider consultation there has been a recommendation made to engage in further research to identify what provision is required.

National research suggests that over a third of young LGBT people may face domestic abuse from family members or be forced to leave home. The research undertaken by Stonewall and Shelter found that sexuality had a significant affect on young LGBT people's experience of homelessness, with issues of homelessness often compounded by homophobia and lack of specialist support or understanding from housing agencies. Traditionally it has been assumed that potential service users have migrated towards Manchester, for personal or practical reasons and where there are specific services to meet their needs. However this may lead to young people being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Older LGBT people may also suffer social isolation from both their families and other service users, for example in sheltered housing.

We need to determine whether there is a need for specific accommodation provision, floating support service or further training for existing non-specific services. In order to do this we will aim to engage with appropriate service providers and service users to identify what provision is required, and how we best meet their needs.

Gypsies and Travellers

The needs of Gypsies and Travellers are addressed in the Housing Act 2004, which requires local housing authorities to include Gypsies & Travellers in their local housing needs assessments. Nationally 30% of the travelling community live on unauthorised sites because of the lack of provision of suitable authorised sites. Similarly, nationally 80% of planning applications from Gypsies and Travellers are rejected compared to 20% from the settled community. Local authorities are now expected to take a strategic approach to meeting the needs of travelling communities and Oldham has begun to develop a co-ordinated, multi agency approach to improve the way that a range of services including education and health services are delivered to the travelling community. Further work needs to be done to establish the size and location of Oldham's gypsies and traveller populations and to provide suitable sites for these communities. A better understanding of the culture and traditions of the travelling people is required in order to promote cohesive communities within Oldham and address inequalities in service provision. We are committed to meeting the needs of Gypsies and Travellers and will be working with their representative bodies to look at how we best meet those needs, including undertaking a full assessment of needs.

Meeting the needs of people from black and ethnic minority communities

Oldham has a population of 217,273 and approximately 87,824 households. 14% of the population are from black and ethnic minority groups, compared with 5.6% in the North West as a whole. As Oldham's population has a higher proportion of Pakistani (6.3%) and Bangladeshi (4.5%) households than the average for England (1.4% and 0.6% respectively) and an increasing minority ethnic population it is important to consider the impact of homelessness on these communities and the provision of temporary accommodation and other homelessness services in particular. Although BME groups account for

14% of the total population, they make up 24% of the borough's under 25 year old population. Furthermore, 7.3% of households in Oldham are overcrowded compared with 7.1% average across England, but 6.4% in Greater Manchester and only 5.4% of households in the North West.

Consistently over 20% of all customers accessing the homelessness service are from BME households. These include people entering the United Kingdom from the European countries and former asylum seekers. Of those presenting as homeless 24% are from minority ethnic households. 17% of households admitted to Swift Court Homeless Persons Unit are ethnic minority households. Of those people using the Tenancy relations service 35% are from ethnic minority households. (All figures relate to the period 1.10.05 to 31.12.05)

Specific recommendations in the Homelessness strategy 2003-05 relating to the needs of BME households included

- The need to increase the supply of temporary and permanent accommodation that is suitable for larger households.
- The need for research into the appropriateness of homelessness services for BME households was identified.
- A review of the need for temporary accommodation for those without recourse to public funds
- A review of the long term funding for floating support services for asylum seekers and refugees

What have we done to make homelessness services more accessible?

- A dispersed properties scheme has been set up to provide alternative temporary accommodation with support for homelessness households for whom Swift Court may not be an appropriate option. Two of these properties are 3 bedroomed and have been target hardened for those fleeing violence. Further research needs to be undertaken into the effectiveness of this scheme in terms of the location and size of stock used, support provided and the capacity for moving households on to settled sustainable homes.
- A restructure of the staffing team at Swift Court has ensured a 24hour support and response service that further improves the support available to vulnerable households and enables a more thorough assessment process out of hours before households are placed in temporary accommodation
- For women leaving abusive relationships, Oldham Family Crisis Group offer women's refuge provision, move on accommodation, support and advice services to all women as appropriate to their needs and have specialist services for Asian women wishing to remain in their own homes. They also manage Zinda Dil supported housing project for Asian women in crisis. Part of the Asian women's outreach support service has been temporarily funded through Government Homelessness Grant in 2005/6.
- One of the aims of the Oldham Community Strategy 2005-2020 is to 'improve the services provided for refugees and asylum seekers and enable them to be effectively integrated within Oldham'. In July 2004 there were

over 544 individuals seeking Asylum in Oldham who were accommodated either by FCHO or private providers. In October 2004, because of the identified needs, a worker was appointed to work with refugees, families entitled to ILR amnesty and EU accession workers. This service is based within the FCHO Housing Support service and provides support through the processes of getting a decision about refugee status and prevents homelessness by identifying housing options, providing information and registering applications. Resettlement support is also provided which greatly assists the process of integration of refugees into the community. Between October 2004 and October 2005 56 referrals were made to the service of whom 50 were supported. Due to demand, the project is seeking funding for 2006/7 and to expand the service.

- A sub group of the Asylum Seekers Strategy Group looks at the needs of destitute asylum seekers who have no recourse to public funds. Much of the support for this group is provided by voluntary, community and faith groups because the Council's statutory services are not legally able to do so. Destitute asylum seekers are not covered by Homelessness legislation, cannot claim housing benefit nor apply on the Council's Housing Register. Visits have been made to asylum seekers whose period of temporary stay has expired to assess any risks and provide advice. There is a referral mechanism from the sub-group to Social Services where children are at risk.

What more do we need to do?

- Seek mainstream funding to expand the Oldham Family Crisis Group's resettlement and outreach support service for BME women
- Seek ongoing funding from Supporting People or other Government funds to expand the Refugee support service developed by FCHO
- Develop a youth involvement and research project to further understand the changing needs of young people of BME origin in Oldham, a need identified in the Young Peoples Housing strategy
- Address the housing and support needs of older people of BME origin as part of the Older People's Housing Strategy
- Use the stock conditions survey and other such information to better understand stock condition issues and the needs and demands for houses of different sizes in differing locations
- To give appropriate priority to households seeking to move as a result of overcrowded conditions under the Council's allocations policy so that they can be appropriately rehoused under the Choice based lettings scheme and they do not need to approach the Council as homeless in order to resolve their need for housing.
- The needs of teenage parents who become homeless from BME households or with children of mixed race are not best supported by the current housing project because of its geographical location. The viability of either expansion or re-provision to a more appropriate location where all teenage parents can be better supported is to be addressed through the action plan of this strategy.
- The importance of continuing to provide services and information in languages and formats which are accessible for all, making use of local

and national resources, sharing best practice in providing accessible services and supporting and enabling frontline staff to communicate sensitively with a wide range of customers was highlighted by one of the multi agency focus groups held to consider the development of this strategy.

- The need to address the needs of service users who have, for example health issues that are too great for access to some services and not deemed sufficiently severe to access others should be addressed. It is hoped that the planned provision of a social worker within the Housing Options team will help to ensure vulnerable customers access the help and support they need.

Chapter 6

Addressing the housing and support needs of people experiencing abuse

Objective Six: to maintain and build upon a broad range of services to address the needs of those who experience abuse.

Vulnerable people, including some of those who become homeless as a result of unmet housing and support needs are also likely to be vulnerable to abuse. Some people become vulnerable and homeless as a result of abuse from within their home. It is important that the homelessness services provided recognise the impact of abuse and provide support to minimise the likelihood of future abuse.

The Supporting People service, which administers grants that fund housing related support for a range of housing and floating support services, considers how organisations protect their service users from abuse as part of the assessment of the quality of services provided. They expect organisations to have an appropriate and up to date policy, have trained staff in suspecting abuse and dealing with situations where service users disclose abuse and to publicise both their policy / procedures and where service users can contact for further support.

Abuse can damage the lives of people of all ages, from young people who run away from home to older people who become increasingly dependent upon family and carers.

‘Abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, usually occurring within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, and which causes harm or distress to a person.’

The Government’s guidance on policies to protect vulnerable adults from abuse further describes abuse as ‘a violation of an individual’s human and civil rights by any other person or persons.’ Abuse can occur in different forms or combinations of these forms including: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, neglect, discriminatory abuse and also on occasion’s institutions develop practices which allow the abuse of residents and this is recognised as an abusive regime.

Oldham have developed a **Policy on the Protection of Vulnerable Adults in Oldham**, in partnership with the Greater Manchester Police, Pennine Acute Hospital NHS Trust, Oldham Primary Care Trust, Pennine Care NHS Trust and First Choice Homes Oldham. The policy is intended to help agencies and individuals working in Oldham to prevent and protect vulnerable adults from abuse. Social services are the lead agency in prevention of abuse of vulnerable adults and should be contacted for support, training and guidance, even where homelessness agencies are working with service users who choose not to formally refer their case of abuse to a statutory agency. They can also provide access to specialist support services for abused adults.

Crime and Reduction Partnership

The Crime and Reduction Partnership is responsible for the reduction of crime and disorder in Oldham and is known as the Oldham Against Crime

Partnership. Their vision is that 'Oldham will be a safer place in which to live and work due to a reduction in levels of crime and disorder. Furthermore, Oldham's residents 'will not live in fear of crime but in a safe and strong community'. The partnership's priorities for 2005 - 08 are set out in the Community Safety Strategy and include a commitment to reduction in violent crime including crimes of domestic violence.

Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence is the emotional, financial, physical and / or sexual abuse of a person by their partner, family member or someone with whom there is or has been a relationship. It is important to acknowledge that anyone can be a potential victim, perpetrator or witness: - women, men, children, parents, grandparents, the young elderly, same sex partners, married or unmarried. Similarly domestic violence occurs in all socio economic groups and in all cultures.

A new Best Value performance indicator, introduced in April 2005, measures the overall provision and effectiveness of local authority services designed to help victims of domestic violence and prevent further domestic violence. This indicator is also included in the Local Area Agreement for Housing, by which the overall performance of the authority is measured. The indicator not only looks at the number of bedspaces available in refuges but also the advice and information available, partnership working between different agencies, education and training on domestic violence issues, the existence of a sanctuary scheme and other measurable factors which contribute towards an effective approach to reducing and preventing the impact and incidence of domestic violence.

Oldham has developed a three year domestic violence strategy which addresses the needs of all those who experience domestic violence. The strategy aims:

- 1. To increase the ability for those experiencing domestic abuse to access services and make safe choices to improve their quality of life.*
- 2. To provide children and young people with education about domestic abuse so they may develop the knowledge and skills required in maintaining non-abusive relationships.*
- 3. To ensure perpetrators are held accountable and take responsibility for their behaviour and actions*

Discussions held with a range of agencies during 2005 highlighted the needs for housing and support not only for women with children who leave violent or abusive partners but also people in same sex relationships, male victims and young single women.

Oldham is pleased to be able to support the funding of a Sanctuary scheme for people who have experienced domestic abuse but wish to remain in their own home. The scheme provides a range of security measures to make them

and any children feel safer in their home. This scheme enables people who would otherwise become homeless to continue to benefit from their existing support networks in their local area but also provides access to specialist support to address issues they may have as a result of domestic abuse.

Oldham also supports the provision of a women's refuge, move on accommodation and floating support services, which are provided by Oldham Family Crisis Group.

What more could we do?

- To strengthen the resettlement and outreach support services provided to women and children by Oldham Family Crisis group - which are currently oversubscribed with long waiting lists
- To undertake further research into the numbers of young people who are coerced by abuse into forced marriages. (A forced marriage is one conducted without the valid consent of either one or both parties, where duress is a factor. It is a form of abuse and an infringement of human rights, not a religious or cultural practise. Informal information suggests that this is a problem experienced by some young people in Oldham.)
- To support a proposal for a housing project specifically for young single women aged 16 to 19 who flee abusive relationships from family members.
- To ensure that when service users disclose experience of abuse they always receive sensitive and appropriate support and are not passed between services in search of support.
- To continue to fund the Sanctuary scheme and combine it with appropriate outreach support
- To continue a programme of training for housing officers, police, education and social services staff etc that raises awareness and provides guidance on issues around abuse.
- To strengthen and continue arrangements for joint working to tackle abuse.
- Ensure development of sensitive and specialist support services for asylum seeker and refugee women within Oldham who experience abuse.

Chapter 7

Focus on service user consultation, involvement and choice

Objective 7: to increase the involvement of homeless people in the development and delivery of services, in assessing the quality of homelessness & related services and responding to service users needs.

As part of the implementation of the Action Plan of the Homelessness Strategy 2003 - 05, in July 05 a Service User Involvement Strategy for Homelessness services was finalised. The strategy focuses on promoting Homelessness service user involvement through development of effective consultation mechanisms. Both the Housing Strategy and Supporting People teams lead on service user involvement and consultation for this client group, and reflect the Council's strong commitment to involving service users in decision making.

The Service User Involvement and Consultation strategy recognises that not everyone will want to fully participate or be fully involved, and allows for varying degrees of involvement including

- Those service users who limit their involvement to receiving information;
- Active consultation either from written or spoken views expressed;
- Service users participating by sharing in decision making;

Involvement of service users is essential in order to ensure that the services provided reflect the needs and wishes of those people who use them. It also helps to check that the services delivered are of an appropriate quality. Involvement can also have great benefits for the individuals who do participate including developing new skills, raising self esteem and empowerment of those individuals.

The assessment of the quality of services provided as part of the Supporting People service review process involves some checking of service users understanding and views on the services provided. The Quality Assessment Framework also measures service user involvement but this is not one of the six areas of service, which are currently being checked in detail as part of the assessment process.

Service users can and do get involved in a variety of different ways including

- Having an opportunity to say what information they would find useful
- Being involved in developing information materials in accessible formats
- Participating in events and activities where they can express their views and influence decisions made about the delivery of services
- Getting involved in the development and management of housing support services
- Being elected or appointed to serve on a service providers management committee

It is recognised that people who are homeless may have more important priorities than being involved in traditional methods of consultation, however a range of consultation methods can be used to encourage involvement such as activities which use IT, art and drama. Some of these methods were used with success at the Speak Out event run by Threshold Housing Project and the Council in March 05.

Since then, the Homelessness Consultation Working Group and Homeless User Group have been established which involve service providers and service users who will feed ideas and recommendations to the Homelessness Forum. Additionally service users of several different homelessness projects have been consulted on a wide range of issues including the quality of support services, the maintenance of buildings provided at their project, young people at Porter St were consulted about their experience of homelessness and useful information and perspectives on repeat homelessness were gathered at other consultation events over the last year.

Service users of homelessness services, including Aftercare and Threshold Housing Project customers, completed 30 questionnaires in response to key questions about the main objectives of this strategy. There were mixed views on a range of experiences and services together with ideas on how to improve services and their accessibility, which will be used and developed as the strategy is implemented. As a result of the survey, several respondents will be contacted because they have indicated a wish to become involved in planning service improvements. One of the key messages from service users was that people generally need to be more aware of homelessness and that the focus should be on raising awareness of homelessness issues with young people.

What more can we do?

- Continue to develop creative approaches to consulting need to reach groups
- To build the capacity and confidence of front line staff to improve the day to day involvement of service users
- To consult service users widely on changes to policies and procedures which may affect them
- To hold an annual 'speak out' event
- To participate in Greater Manchester service user consultation groups and share best practice

Service user consultation and involvement is essential if we are to shape and deliver services that best meet the needs and wishes of vulnerable and homeless people. It also facilitates a better understanding of the reasons for homelessness and repeat homelessness that helps us to be more effective in preventing homelessness and repeat homelessness.

Chapter 8

Raising Awareness of Homelessness issues

Objective eight: to raise awareness of homelessness issues in order to both prevent homelessness and signpost potential service users to the services available.

A number of initiatives have already taken place in Oldham over the last three years that have contributed to raising an awareness of homelessness issues amongst both the providers of other services and the public, including those who may become homeless in future.

For other service providers these include:

- The establishment of the Homelessness Forum in November 04
- The Rough Sleepers Counts in December 04 and July 06
- Joint working on Homelessness issues by a range of different voluntary and statutory sector partners
- Joint training run on key issues which affect a number of different agencies e.g. Young People Housing and Homelessness, Homelessness Law and the Housing Rights of Asylum Seekers and Refugees
- The seminar held in February 06 on Preventing Homelessness and Supporting People
- Review of and promotion of joint protocols for referrals between agencies

For potential service users these include:

- The development and distribution of leaflets about homelessness and housing advice by the Connexions Service - these leaflets will be updated and relaunched during 2006/7 taking account of the changes detailed in this strategy.
- Improved information available on the Council and FCHO websites
- Promote Shelterline and other national 24/7 advice services for those with specific emergency needs.
- Promotion of the focus on provision of advice to prevent homelessness in Oldham Athletic's Community Programme leaflet and Community Safety Booklet.
- Running of an awareness campaign for local solicitors
- Piloting discussion sessions in schools with local Year 10 Pupils

In future we hope to

- Continue to provide training, seminars and information bulletins to help frontline staff to respond effectively to enquiries where customers are threatened with homelessness
- Roll out the schools awareness raising pilot to all Year 10 pupils across the Borough

- Work with the Oldham Theatre Workshop to develop a homelessness awareness raising theme for some work in schools - planned for September 06
- Work with the Community Safety Team to raise awareness and promote understanding of about domestic abuse in schools
- Produce and circulate advice leaflets that provide details of the range of services available for those who experience domestic abuse, in partnership with the Domestic Violence Co-ordinator.
- Strengthen links with Oldham College and University to ensure students know where they get help and advice on housing and homelessness issues.
- Develop pre tenancy skills training which helps raise awareness of homelessness and helps the participants to gain the skills to maintain a tenancy successfully.
- Work with service users to raise awareness about homelessness with potential service users
- Develop an approach through area committees and other local forums, where each neighbourhood has a role to play in resolving homelessness within its local community and across the borough
- Work with the local press, produce information on websites, hold seminars and use any other appropriate form of media to raise concerns, advise and inform the public about homelessness issues as they affect the communities in Oldham

Chapter 9

Overview and future plans

Objective nine: to continue to evaluate, monitor & review homelessness issues in order to develop and promote understanding of the needs of both potential and current homelessness service users. To do this with a purpose of

further preventing homelessness across the borough and improving homelessness services.

Homelessness Strategy group

The Homelessness Strategy group was established to monitor the implementation of the previous homelessness strategy and its action plan. The group meets bi-monthly and includes representatives from FCHO, Social services - aftercare, vulnerable adults and supporting people teams, connexions, probation, independent housing aid, drug and alcohol services, housing association representatives and voluntary sector agencies. The group also monitor the spending of the ODPM Homelessness grant and the progress with the projects / services which it funds. Having a group to monitor the homelessness strategy together with trends in homelessness in Oldham has proved an effective way of evaluating and reviewing homelessness issues. It is intended that the Homelessness Strategy group continue with this role.

Homelessness Forum

The Homelessness Forum was established in November 04 and is co-ordinated by the Homelessness Development worker and is a sub group of the Housing Partnership. The forum meets bi-monthly and is made up of representatives from a wide range of agencies working in Oldham to encourage solutions to homelessness problems via a broad based approach. The Homelessness Forum seeks to share best practice on advice, information and other prevention initiatives and to improve co-ordination between stakeholders. The Forum seeks to develop non-accommodation based homelessness services and lead on development and implementation of the service user consultation and involvement.

Local Housing Partnership

The Housing Partnership was launched in July 2004 and its role is to take a lead on housing issues in Oldham and to ensure that a comprehensive strategic approach is taken. The members of the partnership come from a variety of agencies that contribute to improving the quality of housing and housing services across Oldham. The Housing Partnership regularly receives reports and makes recommendations on homelessness issues and recently requested a seminar be run for frontline staff on the prevention of homelessness.

Progress made towards achieving the performance targets in the Housing Block of the LAA will be monitored by the Housing Partnership who will receive a quarterly report on performance and any issues arising from the implementation of these priorities.

Performance Management

Quarterly statistics on homelessness performance are prepared and forwarded to Government. These statistics together with locally collected information on performance are reviewed on a quarterly basis and relate specifically to those households who approach FCHO as either homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Furthermore there are a number of specific performance indicators on homelessness by which the local authority's performance is measured, these include: the number of people sleeping rough; the average time spent in temporary accommodation; the percentage change in numbers of families placed in temporary accommodation; repeat homelessness acceptances; the number of potential homelessness cases prevented by housing advice casework and the range of services provided to help victims of domestic abuse.

Local Area Agreement

In April 06, Oldham launched its Local Area Agreement, which includes a housing block that prioritises key targets for improvements to housing services in Oldham.

The Local Area Agreement (LAA) is seen as an enormous opportunity for the Oldham Partnership to 'accelerate the pace of change in Oldham by joint needs analysis, priority setting, delivery, performance management and commissioning.' The Council will use the LAA to move towards more efficient, and effective systems of service delivery and improved use of resources for the benefit of residents. It is expected that the Local Area Agreement will be the key to improving partnership working and redefining the relationship between central and local government.

The LAA will specifically highlight progress against targets set for reducing the level of homelessness in Oldham, including reducing levels of homelessness acceptances; reducing numbers of households placed in B&B; reducing the use of temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010; increasing the provision and effectiveness of services for victims of domestic abuse and increasing numbers of cases where Housing Advice prevents homelessness.

The target of reducing numbers of homelessness acceptances is the stretch target for the Housing Block. The aim is to reduce the numbers of households accepted as homeless as a percentage of total number of households in the Borough. We aim to achieve a level of performance that is above average for northwest local authorities. In 2004/5 Oldham's performance was 9.46 households per 1000 h/hs compared with 6.1 regionally, which we aim to reduce to 5.91 by 2007/8. Performance against this target will be closely monitored, and pump-priming funding may be available and reward funding available if the stretch target is met. Whilst the actual reduction in acceptance levels will be a key task for the Housing Options Team it is hoped that all our partner agencies who work with homeless or potentially homeless service users will contribute to preventing

homelessness and helping to provide settled and sustainable solutions to housing and support needs.

Annual Review of the Strategy

It is intended that the Homelessness Strategy Group will lead on the establishment of an annual review of the Homelessness Strategy and its Action Plan. It will be important to both monitor progress and consider changing needs and priorities, which may arise over the years covered by the strategy.

It is important that the Annual review considers not only the homelessness strategy but also other policies and strategies which may impact upon homelessness services for example both the young peoples housing needs strategy and the Council's allocation policy. The review should also include provision for feedback from service users on homelessness issues and take account of changes in legislation and guidance from Central Government.

Chapter 10: Summary of objectives

Objective one: Temporary Accommodation

- To reduce the use of temporary accommodation and improve the quality of temporary accommodation for those who need it and minimise the use of B&B as temporary accommodation

Objective two: Prevention of Homelessness

- To minimise the numbers of presentations and acceptances as homelessness by sustaining accommodation for both potential service users and former homelessness service users, preventing homelessness wherever possible

Objective three: Private Sector housing

- To broaden the housing options available to potentially homeless applicants by continuing to develop a range of initiatives enabling access to high quality private sector housing

Objective four: Support for Need to Reach Groups

- To ensure that appropriate services are in place for the most vulnerable homeless people, including those with multiple needs and to continue to monitor and minimise the numbers of people who sleep rough

Objective five: Diversity

- To ensure that homelessness services are accessible by all members of the different communities in Oldham and to develop services that are culturally sensitive and meet the specific needs of diverse groups

Objective six: Protection from Abuse

- To maintain and develop a broad range of services to address the needs of those who experience domestic abuse

Objective seven: User Involvement

- To increase the involvement of homeless people in the development and delivery of services, assessing the quality of homelessness & related services and responding to service users' needs

Objective eight: Awareness Raising

- To raise awareness of homelessness issues across the borough, the reasons why people lose their accommodation, housing concerns and other matters which impact on homelessness

Objective nine: Monitoring and Review

To continue to evaluate, monitor & review homelessness performance in order to develop and promote understanding of the needs of both potential and current homelessness service users, preventing homelessness and improving homelessness services across Oldham.