

Partnership Works... A Case Study

Households in Temporary Accommodation

Historically, East Sussex has had a high number of residents living in temporary accommodation. To help address this issue, National Indicator 156 (number of households living in temporary accommodation) was included in the Local Area Agreement (LAA). At the end of the first year of the LAA (2008/09 performance) all councils in East Sussex had demonstrated a significant and sustained reduction in the use of temporary accommodation, with just 314 households living in temporary accommodation, against a target of 461.



The Challenge

In recent years the number of homeless households making applications to the five District and Borough councils in East Sussex (Eastbourne, Lewes, Hastings, Rother and Wealden) has increased. Each authority has a duty to ensure that applicants have a place to live, meaning that in the majority of cases, applicants who are allocated to Band 1 (the highest priority and in urgent need of housing) are placed in temporary accommodation.

Central Government defines temporary accommodation as any form of residence that is provided to a homeless household by a Local Authority and is not secure or long term. This includes bed and breakfast, hostels, women's refuges and, in many cases, properties rented from a private landlord. Living in some types of temporary accommodation, especially bed and breakfast, can lead to feelings of insecurity for residents. This is a particular problem when there are children living within the household and there is limited space, for instance, with nowhere for homework to be completed and often no access to a garden. In many cases there will be nowhere to do laundry or cook a meal.

Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that people have somewhere to live and housing benefit does not always cover the full cost of providing accommodation. This can have serious implications for council budgets. Having high numbers of households in temporary accommodation also means that there is a risk to meeting national and local targets. This was a particular concern for East Sussex after the introduction of NI 156 in the LAA.

Prior to the introduction of NI 156 in 2008, information was not recorded until households had been moved into permanent accommodation, and then it reflected only the length of time that residents spent in bed and breakfast. This meant that there was often a large time delay in measuring figures, for example a household could have lived in bed and breakfast for six weeks, and then in accommodation rented from a private landlord for three years, before being moved into a council owned property. The previous target would have measured the fact that a household was homed in bed and breakfast accommodation for six weeks, but this would not have been reported until over three years later, when they were moved to permanent accommodation. This caused significant challenges to councils because the time lag between introducing and recording service improvements meant there was a barrier to effective performance management.

The Action

There is no such thing as a stereotypical homeless household and there are many reasons why people find themselves in need of housing. This includes family evictions, the loss of assured short-hold tenancies, the need to escape

domestic violence, mortgage repossessions or relationship breakdown.

With waiting lists for council houses in some areas of the county peaking at ten years it was clear that more needed to be done to help households find permanent accommodation. Some tenants do not wish to be housed in privately rented accommodation as an assured short-hold tenancy means that they can be evicted, so there is element of insecurity. By remaining on the council housing waiting list and ultimately being housed in council owned property means they have a secure tenancy and provided they do not breach conditions, they have a house for life. However, the demand for social housing is far greater than the supply, and households could therefore face very long periods in unsuitable temporary accommodation.



In order to address the problem, councils in East Sussex decided to investigate good practice from elsewhere. They worked closely with Housing Partnerships and Housing Forums and engaged all agencies including private landlords and voluntary groups to help to identify the causes and blockages to housing residents in permanent accommodation.

One problem with securing private rented accommodation was the need for residents to put down a deposit in advance. There was also a general perception held by some private landlords that homeless people would be difficult tenants. To try to overcome these issues, councils started to work closely with landlords to educate them about the benefits of housing these households. Some councils now make interest free loans to cover a deposit, as well as working with Housing

Benefit departments to guarantee rental payments, by paying landlords directly each month when the household is particularly vulnerable. Eastbourne Borough Council has launched a 'one stop shop' for landlords, providing a full time member of staff who they can contact with any queries.

Communicating with partners identified many barriers and a variety of new working practices were introduced by councils in East Sussex:

- Tackling problems earlier - high workloads for council staff meant people often had to wait a significant amount of time to see an officer, during which time their problems got worse. A Triage system has been introduced in some councils to ensure immediate intervention.
- Faster referrals - trying to prevent homelessness happening. People are now referred to other agencies quicker, for example the Citizens Advice Bureau provide money advice surgeries in some council offices and housing officers run housing surgeries at other organisations i.e. Salvation Army.
- Changing staff perceptions - staff training has encouraged them to look at things differently. Helping people into private sector accommodation is giving people the best opportunity of getting the most suitable accommodation.
- Customer perceptions - changing the view that private renting is 'insecure' and tenure of the last resort. Working to stress the degree of choice and quality compared with much temporary accommodation including avoiding lengthy waits to be housed in council property with very limited choice as to its type and location
- Cash deposit schemes - introduced by most councils after hearing of landlords having problems with the previous 'Bond' scheme. In Eastbourne applicants have to set up a direct debit for repayment and the money is 'recycled' to provide more loans for future tenants.
- Appointing a private landlord liaison officer in some councils to build relationships and support private landlords, as well as developing a portfolio of available properties.
- Establishing a Landlords Forum as a platform for sharing information, sorting out problems and breaking down barriers with representatives from housing, housing benefits and environmental health.

Although much work and communication has taken place on a countywide basis, the duty for housing lies with district and borough councils. Working groups have been established to ensure that all East Sussex councils were working, as far as possible, in the same way to ensure quality and continuity of service.

The Impact

Staff now have more varied and interesting work and are actively encouraged to work creatively in finding solutions to meet local housing needs. This has involved a greater degree of partnership working across the county and has led to the development of a far more pro-active approach that has 'prevention of

homelessness' as its key objective.

Customers are now more readily able to understand that being housed in council owned property is not a realistically achievable outcome of making a homelessness application, as demand far outstrips supply. The new practice helps people to access a suitable home of their choice and shows residents that the private rented sector offers the range, choice and availability that the social sector cannot and is therefore the ideal, and often only, solution to effectively meet their immediate housing needs.

Landlords now have a ready supply of potential tenants for their properties and have access to targeted support to help them overcome any problems or issues they may have with their tenants.

The new way of working has had a major impact on performance against NI 156. For example, in Eastbourne, from September 2008 to August 2009 there was a 45% reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation overall, including 77% reduction in the number of households in bed and breakfast accommodation. At the conclusion of Year 1 of the LAA (2008/09 performance), the target of 461 households living in temporary accommodation had been significantly exceeded, with a final figure of 314.

Lessons Learnt

- Engage all staff at a very early stage to help them adapt to change
- Publicise meetings as widely as possible, using the local press to encourage greater attendance. Schedule meetings at times to suit the audience, for example, most landlords work and so prefer evening meetings
- Be pro-active in your approach to difficult issues
- Learn from others - implement ideas that have worked successfully in other areas
- Aim to be cost neutral – e.g. the savings on bed and breakfast costs have been reinvested to cover the bad debt provision for the new loan service
- Managing the expectations of the customers and advocacy agencies that are intent on getting their client into a council tenancy regardless of the practicality of this, has at times been a challenge. Greater communication and education of all involved has been the key to overcoming this.

Organisations Involved

Eastbourne Borough Council
Lewes District Council
Hastings Borough Council
Rother District Council
Wealden District Council
Citizens Advice Bureau

Salvation Army
All housing advocacy agencies in East Sussex

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Further Information

Pride of Place is East Sussex's Sustainable Community Strategy. It sets out the long-term ambitions for the county which local organisations, from councils to community groups, are working towards for 2026.

Reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation is a target (NI 156) in Local Area Agreement 2 (2008 – 2011).

For more information on what issues are being prioritised in East Sussex, please visit the East Sussex Strategic Partnership at www.essp.org.uk

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