



Katy Shorten
Devon Homelessness Co-ordinator
Devon Strategic Housing Group
C/o Plymouth City Council
Floor 1 (Supporting People)
Midland House
Notte Street
Plymouth
PL1 2EJ

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Dear

Devon Homelessness Managers Group (DHMG) Response to the Housing Corporation Tackling Homelessness Consultation Paper

The DHMG is a sub group of the Devon Strategic Housing Group (DSHG). Alongside the Devon Homelessness Co-ordinator the DHMG takes forward a sub regional action plan on homelessness.

The DHMG welcomes the Housing Corporation's Tackling Homelessness consultation paper. Housing Associations have a key role to play in reducing homelessness through prevention and in increasing the housing options available for those in temporary accommodation. It is crucial that the Housing Corporation raises this kind of work up the agenda of Housing Associations (from Chief Executive level down to operational staff) and places more importance of the delivery of outcomes that tackle homelessness. Encouraging Housing Associations to work more proactively with Local Authorities will be crucial to meeting key government targets on reducing homelessness and reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation.

Objective 1: Co-operation and Partnership

Local Authority Homelessness Strategies have been in existence for 3 years. We recognise that in some areas Local Authorities could have done more to involve Housing Associations in the development of Homelessness Strategies. However, if after 3 years, Housing Associations are not yet fully engaged and signed up to working with Local Authorities to deliver against outcomes within those Homelessness Strategies they should be considered as failing.

With the deadline to review Local Authority Homelessness Strategies by or before 2008 there is a real opportunity for the Housing Corporation to ensure



that Housing Associations and Local Authorities improve the way they work together in tackling homelessness. Because of the large number of Local Authorities and Housing Associations working in Devon it is recognised that there is risk of too many meetings and too many strategies, therefore the DHMG would advise the Housing Corporation to encourage more sub regional working.

Many Devon Local Authorities have carried out Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) meaning that all social housing is provided through Housing Associations. It is particularly important in these areas that Housing Associations are involved in the renewal of the Homelessness Strategy.

Local Authorities and Housing Associations already collect statistical information about nominations, refusals and evictions. It is recognised that this information can be flawed and is not always consistent. The DHMG feel that instead of collecting and reporting new information, work should be done to “clean up” those existing data sources and ensure they become more reliable.

The DHMG are aware that there is inconsistency in the performance of Housing Associations with regard to nominations, refusals and evictions. The DHMG would welcome the publishing of this information to encourage Local Authorities and Housing Associations to report this information more accurately and to ensure that this information is monitored and used effectively to improve services and practice. We are already trying to do this through the South West Regional Housing Strategy Homelessness Delivery Group.

The DHMG would welcome the raising of the minimum requirement for % of net lettings to go to homeless households, however we are also mindful of the sustainable communities agenda and recognise that a satisfactory balance to be made. The DHMG would also like to suggest that the Housing Corporation set minimum criteria for Housing Associations wishing to refuse nominations; in Devon we have had an examples of Housing Associations refusing nominations because of relatively small recharges from a number of years previously. We feel that this is unacceptable.

Lack of support packages has been noted as a key reason for Housing Associations refusal of nominations. It is crucial that the Housing Corporation lobby the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) about the importance of the Supporting People programme for prevention of homelessness and reduction in the use of temporary accommodation. The budget cuts are unhelpful.

The DHMG would also encourage the Housing Corporation to look into ways that Housing Associations can increase the amount of support they provide



internally to tenants including wider partnership links such as education, employment and training.

The DHMG would welcome the production of model protocol agreements for information and housing benefit liaison.

The DHMG would also welcome a nominated champion on homelessness within Housing Associations who is accountable and a point of contact for ironing out any issues locally.

Objective 2: Sustainable and Mixed Communities

The DHMG recognises that Housing Associations have to achieve a balance within their communities and cannot therefore accommodate all homeless households. However there is a feeling that this can be used as an excuse for refusing to accept Local Authority nominations. The DHMG feel that there is a real need for the Local Authority targets to be jointly owned by the Housing Associations to ensure that they do their best to help meet them.

Objective 3: Prevention of Homelessness

Housing Associations have a key role to play in preventing homelessness; they need to be more aware of when tenants start to have problems and more proactive at dealing with them. Again the DHMG have come across conflicting targets i.e. Housing Corporation targets around keeping rent arrears low which encourage Housing Associations to evict vs. LA targets for keeping tenants in accommodation and managing rent arrears.

There needs to be a business case for tackling homelessness, so in the main the DHMG would welcome a target to reduce Housing Association evictions. At a minimum the DHMG would like to see clear guidelines from Housing Corporation regulators about the type of interventions they would expect to see from Housing Associations prior to evictions. The DHMG would like to see the Housing Corporation involving District Judges in the process to ensure that they are aware of what needs to happen *before* an eviction goes ahead.

The DHMG would like to see Housing Associations taking a more pro-active role in the prevention of homelessness as a result of domestic violence e.g. using transfer options within existing stock for households fleeing domestic violence, eviction of perpetrator tenancy clauses, and co-operating with Local Authority Sanctuary Schemes.

The DHMG would like to see better monitoring of Housing Associations use of demoted tenancies, it is crucial that Housing Associations involve multi-agencies to resolve any issues and ensure that demotion doesn't automatically lead to eviction.



Local Authorities are doing huge amounts of work to develop and run schemes to prevent homelessness. We would like to see Housing Associations investing in this work both financially and practically.

Objective 4: Making Better Use of Existing Stock

The DHMG are very keen to see Housing Associations taking on an active role in the private sector and we would welcome the development of toolkits and good practice guidance. In particular, the DHMG feel that sub market rented housing has the potential to help meet housing need, it is important that we understand what demand there is for sub market renting and encourage new ways of looking into provision. It is important that this is done in partnership with Local Authorities to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to develop this sector and do not duplicate.

The Devon Supporting People 5 Year Strategy indicates a move away from accommodation based supported housing provision towards more floating support that can be delivered in a variety of different tenures. Housing related support services that follow the user as opposed to the other way around are considered to be necessary for effective move on out of supported accommodation and temporary accommodation. In some carefully considered instances providers may request flexibility about the use of stock that has been developed as “supported accommodation” to enable it to be reclassified as general needs with the opportunity for support to be floated in.

There is a shortage of family accommodation. The DHMG would welcome initiatives or investment, which would enable accommodation to be extended or converted to provide bigger units.

The DHMG would also welcome the development of more incentives to encourage tenants in under occupied tenancies to move and free up the bigger units for homeless families.

Objective 6: Promoting Best Practice

The DHMG is looking forward to learning from the good practice identified in the Gold Award and would support further roll out of the programme.

Kind Regards

Katy Shorten
Devon Homelessness Co-ordinator



Working for Affordable Homes in Devon