

## **East Dorset District Council**

### **Local Context**

East Dorset District covers an area of just under 137 square miles and is seen by both residents and visitors as a lovely place to live or visit. The district has grown rapidly from a population of 51,500 in 1971 to 85,163 in 2005 making it the second largest populated area in the shire of Dorset. The age profile is increasingly towards the older groups and has the second highest population of older people in the Country.

East Dorset has the second highest number of dwellings in the county at 38,092 as at March 2006. 85 % of these dwellings are privately owned which is much higher than the national average of 69 % but the proportion of private rented sector dwellings at 7% is below the national average of 12 %, leaving 8 % in the Social Housing Sector. External demand is virtually inexhaustible and there is a continuing pressure for new build and the change in the age structure has led to an increasing need for flats and smaller dwellings.

East Dorset District Council has six main strategic themes of which health and housing is one and has led to the development of Key Priorities, including the provision of affordable housing. The whole issue of affordable housing has been scrutinised by members of the Environmental and Health and Housing Scrutiny and Policy Development Sub Committee resulting in a wide range of recommendations. The East Dorset Community Partnership has produced a Sustainable Community Strategy which shows housing as a major issue.

The aims of East Dorset within the context of homelessness remain the same as in July 2003:

- To prevent homelessness
- To ensure there is sufficient, appropriate accommodation for those who are, or may become homeless
- To provide support for people who are or may be homeless and to support those who have previously been homeless to prevent them becoming homeless again.

### **Housing Services**

East Dorset District Council's strategic housing function is placed in the Legal Division with only 1.5 full time equivalent members of staff carrying out the roles required. The council hosts a number of housing themed groups attended by officers, councillors and a variety of individuals and agencies from the private, statutory and voluntary sectors that deal with a range of client groups. The council uses these groups to consult on housing matters. Strong relationships have been formed with agencies working in the area to assist in identifying the housing needs of the community and also to ensure that we are working effectively to address needs in a holistic way. A number of internal officer meetings have been introduced since 2003 between housing, planning, benefits and public health ensuring a corporate approach in meeting the housing needs of the community.

East Dorset Housing Association (EDHA), to whom the council transferred its stock in 1990, administers the statutory housing services of advice, homelessness and allocations on the council's behalf. This service is monitored by the council who commissioned an independent Shelter Review early 2006 as part of the ongoing work to ensure that robust systems were in place to prevent homelessness and give appropriate advice, guidance and information.

The review exercise was made up of the following main elements:

- A telephone mystery shopping exercise aimed at providing an assessment of standards of access, initial information and advice provision, customer care and appropriate throughput to available housing options or signposting to other council or external services.
- An on-site reality check, including a peer review audit of a random sample of homelessness application files to assess standards of advice, quality of decision making and policy and procedure in line with statute, guidance and good practice.
- A survey of a small number of the services users whose files had been audited to obtain their views on the standard of service delivery and outcomes.
- A survey of a number of key stakeholders in the district.

The summary report produced in March 2006 found poor performance in terms of providing a full and comprehensive advice service to the mystery shoppers; a broadly reasonable standard of file management; a reasonable level of satisfaction from service users and a mixed response in respect of joint working with other agencies. The outcome of the Shelter report was action planning to address the areas of concern in partnership with EDHA. The report also highlighted the need for additional staff which was supported and a temporary Housing Options post was achieved in October 2006. A further review of the Housing Services provided by EDHA on the council's behalf is due to be completed during October 2008 by the housing enabling section. This will include a further mystery shopping exercise to be conducted by Shelter.

Since 2003, the Housing Advice Service has seen a steady increase in the number of clients approaching for assistance with 200 substantive cases between 1 April 2002 and 31 March 2003 and 358 between 1 April 2007 and March 2008. In addition to these substantive cases, there were 1,395 incidents of 'one off' advice given either by telephone or by interview. There has been a particular increase in applications from those with multiple problems, especially around debt and the ability to manage their affairs. The increasing complexity of cases highlighted the need for a post to provide intensive tenancy support work and the council successfully approached CLG for additional funding and a 3 year Housing Support post commenced in March 2008, based at EDHA.

There has been an increase in the past 2 years of young people who have chaotic lifestyles and sometimes with multiple needs who are difficult to find accommodation for

due to their age and the support they need. Whilst there are 22 units of supported accommodation in the District for the under 25's, this is not nearly enough to deal with the numbers requiring such assistance. It is unlikely that any new provision will be forthcoming due to the restrictions on the Supporting People funding which pays for the revenue support. An analysis of the housing register as at 30 June 2008 shows that there are 56 young people in the District requiring supported accommodation.

The council is working in partnership with other agencies and introduced multi agency assessment panels for young people with supported housing needs in November 2007 which will assist in identifying correctly unmet need and gaps in services, alongside the work of the Dorset Young Persons Housing Strategy Group. The emerging Dorset Young People's Housing Strategy has a detailed plan which highlights actions to be taken to increase the provision of affordable housing options for young people and the Dorset Homeless Strategy also identifies actions to make the best use of existing provision.

The council is particularly concerned on how it will meet the Governments target of no 16 or 17 year olds being placed in Bed and Breakfast emergency accommodation from 2010, although it is hoped that the proposed Nightstop Dorset scheme will assist.

### **Homeless Prevention**

Official homelessness returns show that East Dorset has taken on board the prevention agenda and has not accepted anyone as statutorily homeless since January 2007 although it is predicted that this trend will not continue. The following table details the number of homeless applications and acceptances over the past four years.

|                       | 2004/2005 | 2005/2006 | 2006/2007 | 2007/2008 |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Homeless Applications | 164       | 137       | 134       | 59        |
| Homeless Acceptances  | 89        | 75        | 55        | 0         |

The reduction in homeless acceptances has enabled the council to reduce its use of temporary accommodation as required by the Government. The target is to reduce the use of temporary accommodation by 50 % by 2010 from a baseline of 46 as at 31 December 2004. At 30 June 2008 the figure has been reduced to 24.

The main recorded reasons for homelessness for the past 3 years are detailed below –

|   | 2004/2005          | 2005/2006         | 2006/2007         |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Parents no longer willing / able to accommodate                   | Second main reason | Main reason       | Main reason       |
| Other relatives / friends no longer willing / able to accommodate | Fourth main reason | Third main reason | Third main reason |
| End of AST  | Main reason        | Second main       | Second main       |

|   | 2004/2005           | 2005/2006          | 2006/2007          |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|   |                     | reason             | reason             |
| Violent breakdown of relationship involving partner | Third main reason   | Fifth main reason  | Fourth main reason |
| Non violent relationship breakdown with partner     | Seventh main reason | Fourth main reason | Fifth main reason  |

Homeless prevention has been achieved in a number of ways but mainly through –

Increased use of Rent Deposit / Rent In Advance Scheme –

2004/2005 – 44 clients assisted with a gross cost of £43,958  
 2005/2006 – 38 clients assisted with a gross cost of £39,152  
 2006/2007 – 43 clients assisted with a gross cost of £36,482  
 2007/2008 – 56 clients assisted with a gross cost of £45,358

Deposits are paid direct to the landlords and are returned at the end of a tenancy and the Rent in Advance is loaned to the client and repaid on a monthly basis.

Introduction of a Homeless Prevention Fund in 2003 under a Spend to Save Initiative –

Assists with payments of rent and mortgage arrears, 'top up' of rent etc to prevent a person losing their home which has assisted 31 households between 1 April 2003 and 30 June 2008.

Provision of a DV Outreach service with Christchurch Borough Council -

Since December 2003 providing support and practical assistance to those suffering from DV which has prevented 60 cases of homelessness in the East Dorset area and is managed by Bournemouth Churches Housing Association through a service level agreement. The two councils have also jointly facilitated a multi agency Domestic Violence Forum since November 2003.

Provision of Sanctuary Schemes since September 2006 –

Assisting three clients as at 31 March 2008 to remain in their own homes with varying levels of enhanced security.

Capital Funding of £75,000 for Tenants Incentive Scheme –

Used to address under-occupation in RSL stock and resulting to date in 11 moves with a further 134 households expressing an interest

Introduction of CBL October 2006 –

With clients who have been assessed as homeless or facing homelessness being afforded the highest 'gold' banding.

Grant funding to bring empty properties back into use tied into nomination rights –

Providing four family sized housing units as at May 2008.

## Expansion of Private Sector Leasing Scheme to increase properties available from 35 at 2003 to 72 as at April 2008 -

This scheme will continue to be expanded to assist in homelessness prevention.

It must be recognised that using official homeless statistics is not as in previous years as many clients have their situation resolved before a homeless situation occurs. East Dorset District Council is ensuring that vital information on what problems clients are approaching with are recorded, as this information would be lost if the case is not going to need an official homeless decision. This information is vital to inform future service provision and a new monitoring system was introduced in April 2008.

## **Emergency Accommodation**

### **Bed and Breakfast**

Up until January 2003 the council had been able to avoid the use of Bed and Breakfast (B & B) style accommodation but this situation has changed as predicted in the 2003 Strategy. Recent years have shown an increase in its use mainly due to the increasing number of clients approaching for assistance who leave obtaining advice until it is too late to keep them in their current accommodation and also because of the increasing difficulty to place some clients into the private rented sector. Unfortunately there is no B & B accommodation available to the council in the area and so clients are usually placed in such accommodation in Christchurch, Bournemouth and Weymouth.

The gross cost of B and B has doubled between the year 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 with a further 50% increase expected for 2008/2009 due to the main provider increasing their charges by almost 50% from 1 March 2008.

The past two years usage of B and B has been:

22 households placed from 1 April 2007 to 1 March 2008 (20 single households, one couple and one family). A total of 989 nights were spent in B and B between these 22 households, averaging 6.42 weeks stay each. The shortest stay was three nights and the longest was 138.

19 households placed from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 (15 single households and four families). A total of 719 nights were spent in B and B between these 19 households, averaging 5.41 weeks stay each. The shortest stay was one night and the longest was 126.

### **Hostels**

The council has nomination rights to the four hostels managed by East Dorset Housing Association which provide 22 bed spaces. In 2002/2003 a total of 43 households were accommodated in hostels with an average stay of just under 12 weeks. During 2006/2007, a total of 49 households (34 accepted as homeless) were accommodated in hostels but the average length of stay had increased to 14 weeks which reflects the increasing demand and the problem in finding appropriate accommodation to move onto.

However, this was a decrease in length of stay during 2005/2006 which produced an average stay of 46 weeks between 34 households (32 accepted as homeless). During 2007/2008, a total of 44 households were accommodated in the hostels with an average stay of 13.4 weeks but with actual stays ranging from a couple of weeks to over a year. Lack of movement within the hostels has led to increased use in B and B.

## **Housing Supply**

### **Existing Social Housing Provision**

East Dorset has 3244 units of social housing, of which 868 are for the elderly. The number of households registered on the council's waiting list has risen from 1805 in April 2003 to 2321 as at 31 March 2008. The council has operated a Choice Based Lettings Scheme since October 2006 which has proven to be very successful with clients being able to bid for properties which become vacant as opposed to having a property allocated to them. Unfortunately fewer properties are becoming available for let year on year with most properties going to those with the highest need in the 'gold' band. Between October 2006 and July 2008, a total of 203 households have been awarded a gold band, with 122 still being current.

During 2003/2004 there were a total of 260 lettings within social housing stock in the EDDC area which has reduced to just 120 during 2007/2008. It could be many years before the majority of applicants on the waiting list are successful in their bid for re-housing.

As at 31 March 2008 the waiting list can be analysed as follows -

Total households registered – 2241 including 389 transfers, of which-

1168 required one bedroom (of which 452 are older people)

651 required two bedrooms (of which 60 are older people)

376 required three bedrooms (of which 9 are older people)

45 required four bedrooms

Of those registered, 249 households were in the Gold Band; 1220 were in the Silver Band and 719 were in the Bronze Band

405 households required one extra bedroom (of which 96 are transfers) and 27 households required 2 extra bedrooms (of which three are transfers).

### **New Social Housing Provision**

The council's lack of resources to assist in the development of social housing has resulted in it not being able to meet its target of 40 new homes per year. Affordable housing is a major issue with the 2007 Fordham Housing Needs Survey showing a programme providing 363 dwellings per annum is needed in addition to the backlog of 386 units required. The provision of affordable housing in the District presents a

particular challenge due to the lack of sites large enough coming forward to trigger a planning quota and the fact that building is limited due to the proximity of protected heathlands which prevails in large areas of the District. These factors, coupled with the high price of land at £2 million per acre, has meant that only 18 units of general needs affordable housing has been achieved in the past three years, although there are a number of potential larger schemes in the pipeline over the next three years.

### **Supported Housing**

The District Council is a member of the Dorset Supported Housing Group which looks at the supported housing needs of the Dorset Community. The Supporting People team are currently refreshing their strategy and are using a number of client themed housing sub groups to scrutinise the current supported housing provision and to ensure it meets the needs of those needing assistance. Since 2003, when the Supporting People regime emerged, the total budget for Dorset has decreased making it very difficult to provide new services without cutting back on others already in existence, although efficiencies have been made. It is of particular concern in East Dorset that the increase of approaches from young people to whom we have a duty since 2003 means that the 22 units of supported accommodation available for this client group is just not sufficient.

There are two frail elderly schemes in the District for older people providing over 100 units of accommodation provided in partnership with East Dorset Housing Association. The council has also assisted in the provision of four one bed flats for young single mothers in partnership with East Boro Housing Trust.

### **Market Housing**

The nature of East Dorset's housing stock, combined with demand from incomers with their relative wealth, is reflected in high house prices showing an average of £284,263 which is 37 % higher than the national average of £210,116 and well above the average of £250,000 for the whole of Dorset. Prices start at around £142,000 for a one bedroom property (compared with £79,950 in 2003) up to £318,000 for four bedrooms meaning a large affordability gap for those dependent upon local wages. The District has the tenth highest ratio of house prices to local incomes and ranks ninth nationally in terms of the proportion of households unable to buy a home. The 2007 Housing Needs Survey estimates an additional 375 units of market accommodation will be required in the District over the next few years.

### **Private Rented Sector**

Entry level weekly rents in the private rented sector start at £133 for a one bed to £254 for a four bed property. As the private rented market is comparatively small there is great competition for properties coming on the market to rent. Many landlords and agents require prospective tenants or their guarantors to have gross incomes in excess of £30,000 which is making it more difficult to assist many of the clients seeking accommodation who are facing homelessness. Some landlords are now also asking prospective tenants for two months rental deposit in addition to one months rent in advance making private sector rented housing even more difficult to access for many of our clients.

The council is working hard towards furthering relationships with private landlords and has recently revamped the Landlords Forum to hold meetings in the evenings to ensure maximum attendance and interaction with this sector. Financial incentives of £500 are being offered to private landlords in return for a 12 month tenancy for clients facing homelessness. Officer time has also been set aside to go out to talk to individual landlords and letting agents to assist in bettering relationships with the private sector and to publicise the grant systems and leasing schemes as it is recognised that the majority of those approaching for assistance need to access private sector accommodation due to the lack of other housing options.

## **Support**

Support in the general term of advice and guidance is provided through the Housing Advice Team at EDHA although they will refer clients onto more specialist assistance, such as the domestic violence outreach worker, drug and alcohol services and the community mental health team, where required.

The council has had access to the county wide floating support service since October 2006 provided by Southern Focus Trust under a Supporting People Contract which provides support for a maximum of two years and up to six hours per week for those who are homeless or facing homelessness. Referrals can be made to this service by a wide range of organisations but the referrals from the East Dorset Area have been at the lowest end at 9.5% of the countywide contract and this is being addressed at partnership meetings. This service is welcomed and is often working to full capacity with 390 clients being supported county wide as at 30 June 2008.

The need for a dedicated tenancy support worker was recognised to work more intensely with a number of clients who have multiple issues to deal with in order to assist them in remaining in their current accommodation or assisting in finding new accommodation and sustaining it. A proportion of a new post recruited from March 2008 for three years will take on this work after the council secured extra funding from CLG.

Support to victims of Domestic Violence has been provided since December 2003 by a dedicated outreach service in partnership with Christchurch Borough Council as previously detailed and this service will continue to be funded as long as the council continues to receive grant funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government.

## **Consultation**

Since 2003 the council has increased local consultation on its Homelessness and Housing Advice services through various multi agency forums and meetings. It has also recently conducted a survey of 18 partner agencies on housing in general and the housing service provided by EDHA on the council's behalf. Ten agencies responded providing the following main headline information-

- Private rented sector accommodation is not affordable
- Some housing is unsuitable

- There is a lack of social housing, in particular three bedroom properties
- Unfairness around number of children allowed to share one bedroom in social housing
- Overcrowding is a problem which leads to health and social problems
- There is a lack of supported accommodation for young people at all support levels, including high risk clients
- Move on accommodation is scarce and more partnership working is needed to address this
- Many clients have debt issues and complex needs
- There are not enough housing opportunities for single people
- Properties are too expensive to buy
- The CBL bidding system is not accessible to all those who need to use it.
- Good working relationships generally prevail in the area although there is room for improvement
- Lack of resources causes frustration for agencies and clients alike.
- Comments on the Housing Advice Team range from unprofessional to extremely helpful and proactive
- Lack of accommodation for 16/17 year olds
- Rurality causes difficulty especially in accessing services
- 63% of agencies felt the Housing Services provided by EDHA on the council' s behalf were good or above
- 13% of clients of the above agencies felt that the Housing Services provided by EDHA on the council's behalf were good or above.

The council also consults regularly internally with other departments on homelessness and housing advice, such as with the Benefits department on the use of DHP; the forward planning section on sites becoming available which will trigger new affordable housing provision and the public health department on bringing empty homes back in use.

The council also liaises with the wider community through the Community Partnership Strategy and the work of the Housing Theme Action Group.

