

4. Housing needs in East Devon and steps being taken to address them

There is no simple or single clear indicator of housing need and as a result this analysis relies upon information from various sources to determine the condition of and need for housing in the district. The indicators used include:

- Housing Needs Surveys and Rural Housing Needs Surveys
- public sector stock condition data and Private Sector House Condition Survey
- homelessness, housing advice, housing register and transfer list
- shared ownership interest
- Supporting People data
- Census data
- Office for National Statistics data
- housing data from partners.

Much of this information is gathered as part of the day to day housing activity in areas like homelessness, housing advice, inspection of properties for housing assistance grants and enforcement. However, for a broader assessment of housing need, we undertake periodic housing needs and stock condition surveys, such as the Exeter and Torbay Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007¹ (ETHMA). This ensures that relevant changes in the housing stock and the needs of our residents are taken into account, using guidance published by Communities and Local Government department and good practice advice.

4.1 Local housing needs

Affordable housing (see Glossary of terms) is required by a significant number of East Devon residents due to the local disparity between incomes, house purchase and rental costs, and the lack of capital assets held by many residents. The intention of this strategy is to set out measures that will promote the outcomes sought, including to enable those with sufficient incomes to gain access to housing of their choice and for those who require subsidised accommodation, because they are unable to meet the cost of open market rents, to secure accommodation at an affordable cost. We also want households to be able to exercise a degree of choice over their housing.

The first comprehensive Housing Needs Survey in East Devon was completed by Fordham Research in 2001 and the findings influenced our previous 2004-2007 Housing Strategy. This was updated by Fordham Research in 2005². Then in 2007 Opinion Research Services (ORS) was commissioned by us, in partnership with the other authorities of the Exeter and Torbay housing sub-regions, to undertake a comprehensive and integrated strategic housing market assessment for the housing market areas of Exeter and Torbay³ (ETHMA). This provided individual local area reports for each district.

The ETHMA Local Area Report for East Devon⁴ found that:

- 28% of all established households renting from a social landlord are living in unsuitable housing (over 50% of the cases due to disrepair).

¹ Exeter and Torbay Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007 (ETHMA), Opinion Research Services

² 2005 Housing Needs Survey Update March 2005, Fordham Research – www.eastdevon.gov.uk

³ Exeter and Torbay Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007 (ETHMA), Opinion Research Services

⁴ Exeter and Torbay Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007 – Local Area Report for East Devon District Council 2007, Opinion Research Services

- 1046 households are currently living in technically overcrowded housing – though as many as 505 of these households (48%) consider their home to be about the right size.
- 9% of households reported at least one serious problem with their property.
- East Devon requires an additional number of social rented properties:
 - 18% more one bedroomed homes
 - 62% more two bedroomed homes
 - 9% more three bedroomed homes
 - 11% more four bedroom plus homes.
- The net requirement for affordable housing totals almost 1250 units over a five year period, equivalent to 38.7% of the overall housing requirement (this is 38.7% of housing requirement as set out in the ORS study as opposed to the requirement set out in other documents).
- The 40% affordable housing policy adopted in the Local Plan⁵ is clearly justified in relation to the amount of identified housing need in the district.

The very high level of housing need being experienced is consistent with the large numbers on the housing register (see Section 4.3) and is in part the justification for the affordable housing policy in the Local Plan. For many households in housing need the only realistic option for them is subsidised housing for rent, as even low cost home ownership opportunities are beyond their means.

4.2 Homelessness, temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation

Homelessness is recognised as being the most acute form of housing need, and continues to be a significant problem in the area. Homelessness is directly related to the inadequate supply of affordable housing sufficient to meet housing needs. Tackling homelessness is and will continue to be a high priority aim of the Housing and Social Inclusion Service and we have just issued our Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013⁶.

- In East Devon there were 108 households accepted as homeless in 2007/08 and it is anticipated that around 100 will be accepted as homeless in 2008/09.
- The majority of homelessness acceptances in East Devon are from three main groups:
 - people who have been excluded by family and friends
 - people losing rented or tied accommodation
 - relationship breakdowns.

	National	Regional	East Devon
Family, relative and friend exclusions	37%	34%	23%
Relationship breakdown	20%	17%	9%
Loss of private rented accommodation	14%	21%	34%

(Source: Government P1E Return 2006/07)

- Government target of reducing our use of temporary accommodation by 50% from 234 in 2005 to 117 by 2010 has been achieved. As at 30 March 2008 there were 114 households in temporary accommodation.

⁵ East Devon Local Plan 1995-2011 Adopted July 2006 www.eastdevon.gov.uk

⁶ East Devon Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013 – www.eastdevon.gov.uk

A significant 'step' reduction in homelessness acceptances in 2006/07 was achieved by:

- improving the homelessness service at EDDC
- introducing a rent deposit/rent in advance scheme
- funding a worker with Young Devon to provide alternative accommodation and prevent homelessness among young people
- funding a worker with CAB Honiton to provide proactive money and debt advice/intervention to people at risk of losing their home
- by working closely with other agencies working with homeless households.

The priority must be to continue to prevent homelessness wherever possible. The Council will work closely with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the private rented sector to prevent homelessness and increase access to social and private rented accommodation in East Devon.

The overwhelming homelessness problem in East Devon is exacerbated by the lack of social rented sector housing and other forms of affordable housing and the inability of agencies, particularly the Council, to meet identified housing need for families and single vulnerable people. Every effort should be made to increase the provision of social rented housing in East Devon and RSLs should be encouraged to meet the housing need of existing tenants by improving, adapting or extending existing accommodation to reduce overcrowding.

A three pronged approach has been adopted to contribute to reducing the use of **temporary accommodation**:

- Encouraging those in temporary accommodation to accept a secure tenancy of their current accommodation.
- Tougher action on those in temporary accommodation who breach tenancy conditions, for example rent arrears or antisocial behaviour leading to possible eviction.
- Direct allocation to homeless households outside the Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

The government target to eliminate the use of **bed and breakfast accommodation** (B&B) for families has been successful with very few local authorities now reporting families in B&B for more than six weeks. A similar target has been set by government for 16/17 year olds to be implemented by 2010. We now only use B&B accommodation in emergency situations and have no more than one or two households in such accommodation at any one time.

Where households have to be offered temporary B&B we will ensure that the establishments used meet minimum environmental health requirements.

Government expects all councils to continue to achieve:

- an end to the use of B&B hostels for homeless families with children, except in emergencies, and even then for no longer than six weeks
- maintaining or reducing levels of rough sleeping that are two-thirds below the levels recorded in 1998
- reducing levels of repeat homelessness
- reducing levels of homelessness against main causes
- reducing the inappropriate use of temporary accommodation
- reducing the use of temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010
- an end to the use of B&B type accommodation for young people by 2010.

We are committed to meeting these targets.

Our Homelessness Strategy⁷ sets out a series of action points aimed at preventing homelessness and improving the service provided for homeless people. The Homelessness Strategy complements the aims and targets contained in this strategy.

The Homelessness Strategy 2008 has adopted the following key performance measures:

- reducing homelessness acceptances to below 100 by December 2010
- maintaining a 10% reduction in the number of homelessness acceptances year on year from 2010
- reducing the average time spent by homeless households in temporary accommodation by 50% by March 2009
- increasing the current number of homes available to meet housing need by 100 units each year
- reducing the cost of homelessness over the life of the Homelessness Strategy by 30%
- reducing levels of homelessness against main causes - family and friends exclusions, loss of private rented sector tenancies, and relationship breakdowns
- reducing the average time taken to process a new housing benefit claim by 10% by 2009
- fully using the available funding for Discretionary Housing Payments to prevent homelessness.

We are committed to exploring the various options available to ensure that homeless families are housed in the most appropriate form of temporary accommodation, and are actively seeking to increase the number of permanent units available within the RSL and council stock. We and our partners have the long-term aspiration of avoiding the use of temporary accommodation all together.

4.3 Housing register and transfer list

We hold a housing register which is the way in which we prioritise and allocate social housing to those in need of affordable housing in the district.

At the end of March 2008, there were over 4500 households on all known waiting lists (council and RSL) needing accommodation within the district. Many of the applicants are households with or expecting children, seeking affordable rented accommodation in the district. Of the households on our housing register just over 1000 are currently considered to be in urgent need and are placed in the 'gold band' (1057 as at 1 September 2008). During 2008/09 we will be undertaking a review of all applicants within this band.

Type of accommodation required		Age profile of housing register applicants	
1 bedroom	2720	Under 25	663
2 bedroom	1135	25-34	1049
3 bedroom	704	35-44	1040
4 bedroom	116	45-59	935
4+ bedroom	26	60+	1013

We have a policy on **nomination arrangements**, setting out our position and procedures and seeking to maximise opportunities to nominate to housing association stock, particularly where a scheme has been funded with Local Authority Social Housing Grant or secured through a Section 106 planning agreement. Nominations to housing association homes are an essential factor in our ability to meet our statutory obligations and ensure that those in

⁷ East Devon Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013 – www.eastdevon.gov.uk

acute housing need are provided with suitable affordable housing. We aim to provide a suitable nomination within the timescales required by the RSLs.

In 2007 we set up a new **mutual exchange register** to facilitate council or housing association tenants living in the district to swap their homes. There are currently about 100 people on the register and during 2007/08 36 exchanges took place. Details of the scheme are available from our Housing Needs team and on our website. There is also the national register 'HomeSwapper'⁸ for tenants who want to swap their homes.

4.4 Re-letting empty properties and reposessions

The re-letting of empty properties is a core function of our service. Our aim is to provide efficient and effective services to minimise the time properties are empty. A significant reduction in the letting of empty properties has been achieved. The average re-let time for the last quarter of 2007/08 was 27 days compared to the target set of 30 days. A target of 28 days has been set for 2008/09 and it is expected that this target will be met and possibly exceeded by 31 March 2009.

The time taken to re-let empty properties is influenced by:

- the tenancy termination process, and proper use of the pre-void period
- the time taken to carry out repairs and modernisations
- the allocations and lettings process.

Our '**voids**' **procedure and standard** aim to ensure that all these processes are carried out effectively to reduce the time properties are unavailable for letting and ensure that the properties are re-let in good condition.

During 2007/08:

- 300 council properties were re-let of which:
 - 154 were general needs
 - 30 to applicants from the waiting list
 - 46 to existing tenants who required a transfer
 - 78 to applicants who were considered homeless
 - 146 were sheltered
- 49 housing association properties were let to households from our Housing Register.

4.5 Choice Based Lettings and Devon Home Choice

Most of our properties are allocated through the Choice Based Lettings scheme which was introduced in February 2006 and revised in January 2008. This scheme places applicants in gold, silver, and bronze bands, reflecting their priority for re-housing. Further details on the scheme are given on our website.

In June 2008 we began to openly advertise the properties available for letting in local papers, local libraries, town and parish notice boards as well as on our website. Tenants who wish to be considered for the tenancy of one or more property express an interest to the Housing Needs team. The advertisements show the type, size, location and other features of the accommodation, rent, service charges and the band of applicant who can bid. This is a more open and transparent system of allocating social housing requiring the applicant to take the initiative.

Local authorities have also been asked to link together and a Devon wide choice based lettings scheme, Devon Home Choice, is being worked up. This will give a Devon wide allocation policy and a common assessment framework. How properties will be advertised

⁸ www.homeswapper.co.uk

has yet to be decided but it may not include local papers. It is anticipated that the Devon wide scheme will go live in September 2009. The scheme will eventually include RSL nominations.

The advantage of a Devon wide scheme is that people can move more easily throughout Devon. However, where needed, we will still be able to operate a 'local connection' requirement through a revised East Devon Local Lettings Policy.

4.6 Rent Deposit/Rent in Advance Scheme

We have a scheme to assist homeless households and others in priority housing need access private rented accommodation by providing funds for a deposit and rent in advance. We are keen to make effective use of the private rented sector and the scheme can overcome the financial barriers many of the households in need face in the district. During 2007/08 we helped 125 households access private rented accommodation through this scheme.

4.7 Downsizing

We actively promote a scheme to encourage tenants to 'downsize' to smaller properties to release family size homes. If a tenant moves from a general purpose house to a one or two bedroom flat or bungalow we will pay up to £1,100 (as at July 2008) to help with the move. Moving to a smaller property can have many advantages to tenants, including savings on rent and council tax, and easier maintenance. During 2007/08 18 tenants moved using this scheme. We will be reviewing the scheme during the lifetime of this strategy.

4.8 Private Sector Leasing Scheme

Working in partnership with the Exeter Empty Homes Partnership, this scheme, to lease properties from private owners, is designed to provide good quality temporary accommodation for homeless households. A management and maintenance service is provided for owners. Twenty properties are in management with a further ten in the pipeline for October 2008. These are providing an essential supply of homes for homeless households. Further details regarding this service can be found in both our Empty Homes and Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategies.

4.9 Empty Homes Strategy (EHS)

Empty homes are considered to be a wasted resource and we and our partners are committed to using best endeavours to bring empty properties back into use, using house renovation grants, housing association leasing schemes and by providing advice to owners of vacant properties. The Private Sector House Condition Survey 2006⁹ revealed that empty homes represent 3.1% of the housing stock (1780 properties).

The Empty Homes Strategy (currently in draft) aims to:

- identify empty homes within the district and to make enquiries as to the reasons why empty properties remain empty
- make the best use of existing empty properties within the district by encouraging a range of initiatives, including enforcement, designed to bring empty homes back into use as an alternative option for the provision of homes for households in housing need
- target the "problematic empties" and improve the condition of "eyesore" properties to create a better environment.

In 2007/08 91 empty properties were brought back into use as a direct result of local authority action (BVPI64). This was against a target of 30. This was due in the main to the success of the Rent Deposit/Rent in Advance Scheme.

⁹ Private Sector House Condition Survey 2006, June 2007, Professional Partnership Services Group

Targets set out in the EHS are also identified within the PSHRS.

4.10 Enforcement Policy

The Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy is being updated to reflect new codes and guidance aimed at ensuring transparency and proportionality. The policy will dictate the most appropriate course of action to improve housing conditions, including houses in multiple occupation, in the private sector. It will also determine whether the use of **empty property management orders** to bring empty homes back into use is appropriate.