

7. Providing advice and support

This strategy reflects a commitment to the principle of supporting and enabling people to stay in their homes by direct provision and working with other agencies and housing providers to enable this to happen. Our housing partners are involved in a number of different initiatives and projects to ensure that this objective is achieved. In many cases homes are suitable but residents need care or support to live a fulfilling life in the community.

In some other cases residents may wish to consider moving to a smaller property and in these cases we have a 'downsizing' package to help tenants with the costs incurred in transferring to another property (see Section 4.7).

We give a high priority to accurate, comprehensive, and timely advice in relation to housing matters, and to fully involving all stakeholders in matters affecting all housing services.

7.1 Housing advice

The main objective of our Housing Advice Service is to actively prevent homelessness and inform people who live and work in the district how they can gain access to information about housing. This approach is intended to enable people to improve their knowledge of their housing options and rights and find solutions to their housing problems.

Customers approach our Housing Advice Service with a wide range of housing problems from relationship breakdown, mortgage arrears, renting in the private sector, to welfare benefits and debt counselling. We have developed a range of options for people with housing problems by working closely with the private sector, making shared ownership opportunities available, and being more pro-active in offering housing advice by operating surgeries and developing a comprehensive housing advice pack.

During 2007/08 our Housing Needs team dealt with approximately 100 face to face and about 500 telephone enquiries each week.

In 2007 an additional housing advice office was opened in the Exmouth Town Hall, a service which has proved to be very well used. Also officers from the Housing Needs team attend drop in sessions, organised monthly at different locations throughout the district.

We will continue to work closely with housing associations and other agencies in the district providing pro-active advice on the prevention of homelessness and securing suitable affordable housing accommodation.

7.2 Tenancy sustainment

The role of our Tenancy Sustainment Officer is to work closely with staff managing the Choice Based Lettings scheme and also with outgoing and new tenants. This includes undertaking pre-termination visits, joint inspections of properties with repairs staff, accompanied viewings with prospective new tenants and post tenancy visits, particularly for vulnerable tenants.

A key time to recognise an individual's personal needs is at the time of letting a property and we have recently introduced '**sign up**' interviews. Staff introduce new council tenants to their accommodation and help them to access other support services if appropriate. These interviews are conducted by the Housing Needs team. From these interviews we have more information about the customers, including how they want to pay their rent, whether they are applying for housing benefit and if they are having any financial problems. This information is a very useful tool in prevention work.

We actively seek to assist any tenants with rent arrears and the focus of the work is on prevention. We use the services of floating support agencies funded by the Devon Supporting People team. They offer a range of free and independent services. Courts expect that tenants should be given the opportunity to receive such help before they grant a possession order. We currently have approximately 50 tenants receiving such help and the number is steadily increasing.

7.3 Council estate management

We are committed to effectively managing council owned housing stock and meeting the reasonable expectations of tenants in relation to estate management and compliance with tenancy conditions.

Between January 2007 and December 2007 we received 1275 estate management complaints. These estate management issues related to:

Request type	Number of cases
Untidy gardens, dirty and verminous properties, parking offences, misuse of garage	636
Antisocial behaviour, noise, harassment, nuisance, vandalism, and the behaviour of children	269
Dealing with rubbish	103
Abandoned properties	76
Keeping of pets	51
Abandoned or unlicensed vehicles	50
Bonfires, litter, boundary disputes	46
Subletting, lodgers, extended absences	23
Eviction	19
Squatters, trespassers and unauthorised occupants	2
Total	1275

We have introduced a regular programme of ‘**estate walkabouts**’ when tenants, councillors and staff walk around one of our estates to look at issues such as rubbish, graffiti, and abandoned cars. We are also committed to supporting the Community Action Days organised by the Community Safety Partnership.

We have a corporate policy to deal with allegations or discovery of antisocial behaviour (and acts which are antisocial in nature) and have adopted an **Antisocial Behaviour Statement** and associated policy setting out our approach to tackling antisocial behaviour in relation to council housing. We have made a commitment to sign up to the **Respect Agenda**¹.

We run an ‘**out of hours**’ service for noise issues which happen outside normal working hours. The service operates 24 hours on the weekend and bank holidays and between 5pm and 8.30 am on weekdays.

In September 2007 a **revised secure tenancy agreement** was introduced for new tenants and issued to all existing tenants. The revision has ensured that the agreement is up to date in relation to recent laws and government regulations. Some policy changes were made as a result of consultation, such as changes to the regulations regarding the keeping of pets. In May 2008 we revised our **non secure tenancy agreement** to ensure that the conditions are clear and meet current legislation. Copies of our tenancy agreements can be seen on our website www.eastdevon.gov.uk.

¹ www.respect.gov.uk

Demoted tenancies, introduced by the Antisocial Behaviour Act 2003, give local authorities a further way of dealing with antisocial behaviour. A tenant on a demoted tenancy does not have the same rights as a secure tenant. There are two stages to the process:

- the landlord applies to demote an otherwise secure tenancy
- during the demotion period (usually one year) the landlord may seek possession of the property, following the statutory procedure.

To date we have not demoted any of our secure tenancies but the ability to do so will be an important factor in tackling breaches of tenancy conditions.

At present we have chosen not to use **introductory tenancies** but will continue to review this decision.

Repossessions: We took 138 rent arrears cases to the County Court during 2007/08 to seek possession orders and five orders were enforced and properties repossessed. During 2007/08 our Estate Management section also took seven tenants to court and three properties were repossessed.

7.4 Neighbourhood Assessments

Our Environmental Protection team coordinates the Neighbourhood Assessments initiative which began in May 2007. Consultations were carried out across the seven main towns in the district, Axminster, Seaton, Honiton, Sidmouth, Budleigh Salterton, Ottery St Mary and Exmouth.

Environmental Health staff, police officers and police community support officers carried out door to door surveys, visiting 1873 properties across the seven towns. Overall 776 residents took part in a short survey where they were asked to comment about their neighbourhood, the Council and their town in general. Comments ranged from noise, crime, dogs, housing problems, energy efficiency advice and pests, to traffic, litter, recycling and requests for additional facilities. Results of these assessments can be seen on our website².

Further assessments will be held later this year in seven small village locations in the district.

7.5 Leaseholder services

We hold the freehold of 176 leasehold flats (as at April 2008). We are responsible for maintaining the structure and exterior of the building, maintaining and keeping communal areas clean and well lit, and insuring the building against loss, storm, flood, fire and subsidence. Our Business Unit is responsible for overseeing the management of our leasehold properties.

Each year we produce service charge bills which are sent out to every leaseholder listing the works that have been undertaken and the amount each leaseholder has to pay towards these. We also produce a Leasehold Home Owners Handbook³ which is a guide to the services we provide.

We are keen for leaseholders to be involved in decisions made about the services provided to them. During 2008 we will be looking to set up a Leaseholder Service Review Group and we are actively seeking leaseholders to be involved in our 'key players' register.

If, and when, all flats within one block have been purchased we will consider the options available for future ownership of the freehold.

² www.eastdevon.gov.uk/neighbourhood_assessments

³ www.eastdevon.gov.uk/google/leasehold_manual.pdf

7.6 Council housing services for older people and people with support needs

We have a valued and effective sheltered housing service, developed over many years, with 25 Scheme Managers and Mobile Support Officers providing support to our tenants living in approximately 1400 sheltered properties. The Scheme Managers and Mobile Support Officers provide support and assistance to older and vulnerable residents. This has a significant effect on the quality of life of service users. We have adopted and work to a Safeguarding Older People Policy⁴ which can be seen on our website.

We aim to ensure that older people or people with support needs, living in the district, are well housed, enjoy a good quality of life and are seen as an important part of achieving thriving, balanced communities. This is consistent with the corporate policies and the aims of this strategy.

We have made significant changes to our support services for older people in the past two years in response to changing tenant aspirations and pressures from Supporting People. We are providing a more professional and flexible mobile support service which involves moving from a service based around resident Scheme Managers to one which makes more use of Mobile Support Officers covering one or several sites. Each client has a personal Support Plan and Risk Assessment so enabling the services we provide to be better tailored to their needs.

The Supporting People (SP) programme provides £700k of funding for housing related support in sheltered housing. This is a substantial contribution towards the cost of employing Scheme Managers, Mobile Support Officers and providing the Home Safeguard community alarm service. Investment is being spent on adapting homes to make them suitable for our tenants with mobility problems and physical disabilities. £4.3 million has been set aside within the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan to fund work to bring our sheltered schemes up to a standard which will meet future expectations.

The Supporting People Joint Commissioning Body has developed an Older Persons Commissioning Strategy⁵ and sees “the future service model based on floating support that could reach all parts of the community, as opposed to just those residents in sheltered housing”. Supporting People also proposes that “the support charge for floating support would be separated entirely from accommodation charges”. Our developments must be in line with this ‘direction of travel’.

We are therefore currently working on:

- moving towards a fully mobile support officer service
- preparing for the separation of housing related support from the tenancy agreement (a Supporting People requirement to be achieved by 2011) such that support services can be provided regardless of the type of council property occupied
- the review of sheltered housing and decommissioning of schemes which do not or cannot achieve the required standards.

During 2008 we will review the conditions, standards and use of our sheltered housing stock. All schemes will be reviewed to ensure they continue to meet the needs of existing and future tenants, represent the best use of our assets, and take into account the requirements under the Supporting People (SP) programme.

Decommissioning of sheltered housing is about changing its current designated use and removing the housing related support from the scheme or units of accommodation. The decommissioning of a property or housing scheme gives greater flexibility in allocating the property for different client groups. We could still use the decommissioned properties for

⁴ www.eastdevon.gov.uk/google/housing_policies_and_strategies

⁵ www.devon.gov.uk/jcb_08_153_op_100308.pdf

older people who do not require support. Equally we could use the decommissioned properties for non elderly households. Some properties such as our bungalows can easily be re-designated. Other properties may need a more radical solution such as demolition or disposal. We estimate that up to 20% of our sheltered stock may need to be decommissioned.

A consideration in favour of decommissioning sheltered housing is the significant number of tenants in sheltered housing who have low support needs. They are fit and active people over 60 years of age who live quite independently. The Supporting People Administering Authority (Devon County Council) understandably is questioning why revenue funding is being paid for housing related support to be provided for these clients with low or no support needs.

We have been commissioned by Supporting People to undertake a piece of work exploring the demand for a **mobile support service in the private sector**. Initial findings suggest that there is considerable opportunity to provide a visiting service to older people living in the private sector, or general needs council housing. This feasibility study will be completed by March 2009.

We work closely with other agencies and are currently involved with a PCT falls prevention initiative. We are also working with Devon County Council on delivering an extra care sheltered housing scheme in Exmouth and have been improving several of our sheltered schemes by installing aids and adaptations.

7.7 Community centres and guest bedrooms

Throughout the district we have 13 community centres situated on or near our sheltered accommodation.

We have also recently carried out a **review of our community centres** and suggested proposals for wider use and more effective management of these valuable community resources. We are currently consulting with users of the centres and will be updating the fixtures and fittings during 2008/09. Assessments of the centres' accessibility for people with disabilities, and their energy efficiency are almost completed.

Some of our sheltered schemes also have guest bedrooms which tenants can book for the use of their visitors. These are also currently being refurbished.

7.8 Community alarm service – Home Safeguard

We operate a community alarm system which has in excess of 6000 customers. The operators at the control centre in Sidmouth take calls from:

- residents living in our sheltered accommodation (1400+)
- private users (4600+) who have had an alarm unit fitted within their own property (in some cases there is a small charge for this (as at April 2008 - £2.88 per week for those under 80 and not in receipt of benefit))
- emergency calls from East Devon residents who are ringing the Council 'out of hours'.

	Average number of incoming calls per month (user to Home Safeguard)
Residents in our sheltered accommodation and private users	5843
Out of hours emergency calls	155

We are currently exploring ‘**Telecare**’ opportunities to assist older and disabled tenants maintain their independence and optimise the use of our community alarm technology. ‘Telecare’ are devices connected to a call centre by technology such as a phone line. Examples include pendant alarm or pull cords, fire and flood detectors, chair occupancy sensors and movement sensors. It is seen as the future for independent living and the key to keeping people in their own homes for longer.

We are producing a proactive marketing plan and actively pursuing accreditation from the Telecare Services Association which will enable us to tender for larger contracts.

7.9 Council individual garden maintenance scheme

If tenants are unable to manage their garden due to ill health or disability, we have a garden maintenance scheme which assists and prevents gardens looking uncared for. At the end of March 2008 there were approximately 560 tenants on this scheme. It currently costs £164 per garden per year to provide this scheme. During 2008/09 we will be undertaking a full review of this scheme.

7.10 Supporting People (SP)

The SP programme offers vulnerable, elderly and disabled people the opportunity of improve their quality of independent living by providing housing related support services in their own home. This enables each service user to have greater independence and control in making choices in their lives. The programme in Devon amounted to £21 million in 2007.

We are involved in shaping future services with SP in the county and are represented on the SP Joint Commissioning Body and various officer groups. We are working in partnership with community based agencies, other local authorities, housing and support providers across the county to ensure all vulnerable people with support needs have those needs met.

We recognise the opportunities for the future to improve support and related services for vulnerable people. The Devon Housing Support Strategic Partnership (DHSSP) is the group accountable to the Joint Commissioning Body and responsible for overseeing the planning of supported housing accommodation and support services for vulnerable people across Devon to promote their quality of life, well-being and independence.

The DHSSP will be putting its efforts into ensuring any current and future Older Persons Support Strategy implementation is effective. This includes implementing a Supporting People Locality Statement at district and county level that will map existing services and look to meet the future needs of vulnerable groups needing housing related support.

We and our partner agencies consider that, as well as services for older persons, there are other priorities for housing support and these are summarised in the following table.

Learning Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased choice of supported accommodation. - Move on accommodation from ‘training houses’ for independent living.
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emergency homeless provision, with support, for vulnerable single people with mental health difficulties, and drink and drug related difficulties. - Floating Support provision. - A range of supported accommodation including supported housing/lodgings. - Assessment unit with available ongoing housing support services.

General Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emergency accommodation for homeless families. - Supported lodgings. - Potential decommissioning of an existing sheltered housing schemes. - Floating support for clients with complex needs.
Younger People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emergency homeless provision, with support, for vulnerable single people with mental health difficulties and drink and drug related difficulties. - Emergency short-term accommodation for homeless people. - Development of a Foyer project to provide supported units, move on accommodation with floating support services. - Supported Lodgings.
Domestic Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outreach services from the Safehouse and Womens' Refuge. - Provision of a Sanctuary Scheme. - Move on accommodation to women from the Safehouse.
Drug, Alcohol, Multiple Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emergency homeless provision, with support, for vulnerable single people with mental health difficulties and drink and drug related difficulties. - Increased numbers of supported lodgings. - Floating support services. - Access to local rehabilitation facilities.

7.11 Housing assistance and Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Our housing assistance policies have been geared to reflect the findings of the Private Sector Stock Condition Survey⁶ and the resources available. We considered a wide range of options for the use of grants and have introduced a policy that targets grants to address health and safety, disrepair, assisting the elderly, disabled, and householders on a low income.

Policies have also been devised to make grants available as widely as possible and meet specific objectives, such as energy efficiency and encouraging owners of empty properties to bring them back into use.

We administer DFGs to ensure that adaptations are provided to clients in accordance with the timescales agreed by all Devon local authorities, Home Improvement Agencies and RSLs. Major adaptations should take no longer than 40 weeks from beginning to end and minor or handyman improvements should be carried out in less than 30 days.

We receive two government subsidies which can be used to provide adaptations in private dwellings. One is for the Disabled Facilities Grant (£382,000 for 2008/09), and the other for private sector renewal generally (£419,000 for 2008/09). Our estimated spend for these two areas this year is £512,000 for Disabled Facilities Grants and £393,000 for other private sector grants. This means that we have an overall budget shortfall of £104,000 which is met from our own capital resources.

More details regarding housing assistance and DFGs can be found in the Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy and its associated action plan.

7.12 The Home Improvement Agency – Devon Care and Repair (DC&R)

Devon Care and Repair (part of Devon and Cornwall Housing Association) has a five year contract with Devon County Council to provide a Home Improvement Agency Service which includes providing services to the elderly and disabled to assist with applying for DFGs and

⁶ Private Sector House Condition Survey 2006, June 2007, Professional Partnership Services Group

renovation grants across Devon. It continues to provide a highly valued service to elderly and disabled private sector residents within the district and our housing assistance grant policies have been formulated to be sympathetic to their clients.

The contract outlines 7 service elements:

- **Providing general advice and information** to elderly clients about possible sources of funding for undertaking repairs, adaptation work or improvement works in their own homes.
- **Co-ordination** - this involves acting as the client's agent when they are eligible for accessing a grant.
- **Repairs and improvements** – undertaking work appropriate to the DFGs and renovation grants.
- **Major adaptations** – through DFGs. DC&R will oversee the work from the initial financial assessments through to completion of the work and payment of the contractor.
- **Minor adaptations** - this involves fitting handrails, grab rails, ramping, widening of door frames, installing bed raising systems, fitting wall fixed shower seats, raising sockets and fitting lever taps.
- **Handyperson Service** - this service, covering basic DIY tasks, is available all across Devon. There are two different hourly rates depending on whether the client is in receipt of benefits or not.
- **Home Safety Assessment** – DC&R provides these free to clients who are in the eligible service user group. This is primarily falls prevention work and is used for clients who are being discharged from hospital after a fall or for those who have fallen at home.

In 2007 the agency assisted 1300 clients with repairs, adaptations or improvements to their home.

Future developments will concentrate on the social enterprise of the business. This will mean that DC&R can offer plumbing, painting and decorating services to a range of clients. There will also be a service for RSLs offering technical and caseworking assistance for bathroom adaptations, with a fee payable to DC&R.

7.13 Community Safety (Crime and Disorder)

The East and Mid Devon Community Safety Partnership Plan 2008-2011⁷ has been drawn up by the local Community Safety Partnership Steering Group.

The Partnership is committed to making East Devon and Mid Devon safe places in which to live, work and visit, and comprises a multi agency Steering Group, whose members include:

- Chief Executive of East Devon District Council
- Director of Community Services, Mid Devon District Council
- Police Commander for East and Mid Devon
- Devon County Council's Partnership Officer for East and Mid Devon.

The Steering Group meets every six weeks to monitor and oversee the work of the local action groups in Exmouth, Honiton, Axe Valley, and Sidmouth and Ottery St Mary, as well as the action groups tackling domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues and diversity issues.

The East and Mid Devon Community Safety Partnership Plan 2008-2011⁸ seeks to address similar issues to previous crime and disorder reduction strategies but in a much more

⁷ www.eastdevon.gov.uk

⁸ www.eastdevon.gov.uk/cssp_plan_08-11.pdf

targeted and locally focused way. The Partnership will therefore concentrate on three priorities, each of which have measurable targets.

Priority One	Tackle violent crime by concentrating on two types of offences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. reduce by 5% offences of violence in a public place b. reduce by 5% minor assault offences, namely common assault and assault occasioning actual bodily harm
Priority Two	Tackle serious acquisitive crime (theft) by concentrating on two types of offence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. reduce by 3% offences of burglary from dwellings b. reduce by 5% offences of theft from motor vehicles
Priority Three	Reduce antisocial behaviour across the two districts by concentrating on:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. reducing by 5% incidents of rowdy, inconsiderate or nuisance behaviour b. reducing by 3% offences of criminal damage c. perceptions of antisocial behaviour d. satisfaction with the way the police and local Councils deal with antisocial behaviour

All communities across the two districts will receive a high standard of support to reduce the effects of these crimes. Analysis has shown that Exmouth, Honiton and Tiverton suffer disproportionately against these priorities and will therefore receive additional support.