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Introduction

Why we have produced a Homelessness Strategy

The Government published 'More Than a Roof' and set up a new Homelessness Directorate in March 2002. 'More Than a Roof' exemplified a new approach to homelessness, focussing as much on the problems people face as on the places they live. Homeless people can face many different problems and may suffer from more than one at a time. These include family or relationship breakdown, domestic violence, debt, alcohol and drug misuse, and poor physical or mental health.

Other people, even though they are not sleeping rough or approaching local authorities for help, may be at risk of homelessness because they live in insecure, temporary, over-crowded or poorly maintained housing.

Across the country, levels of homelessness have been rising, both in areas with an adequate supply of housing and in those that have a shortage of housing. This makes it clear that personal problems and social exclusion are also contributing factors to homelessness nationally.

The Homelessness Act 2002 placed this understanding at the centre of the new legislation by putting a new duty on every housing authority in England to develop a homelessness strategy, based on a review of homelessness in their district. The objectives of these strategies must be to prevent homelessness and ensure that accommodation and support are available for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The first homelessness strategies must be put in place by 30 July 2003 and thereafter, strategies must be renewed at least every five years.

We believe that this strategy will be integral to the approach to homelessness by all partners in the Brent area. We believe that this strategy will nurture partnership working and provide people and organisations who work with homeless people in Brent with the information they need to make a difference to people's lives. We consider that this strategy will enable homeless people to help themselves by identifying their own particular needs through assessment through the Homelessness Compact. We believe that this strategy will allow the communities of Brent to assist us in the development and delivery of services that are considered excellent and are tailored to the needs of specific groups of people.

How we developed our strategy (Appendix A)

The homelessness review and consultation process that is set out under the Homelessness Act 2002 has informed this strategy. The background to the gathering of information and opinion has taken place both within and outside the London Borough of Brent's boundaries. In May 2002, the council set up the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group to assess the implications of the 2002 Act and to progress the review and strategy process. Three sub-groups of the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group were set up to assess the new priority need categories. In January 2003 the council engaged an officer to research and develop the Homelessness Review. The Review was completed and made available to the Brent community in May 2003.

Between the beginning of February 2003 and June 2003 the council carried out a consultation process. The methods of research used were questionnaire surveys to service providers and users, face-to-face interviews, written research, telephone interviews and input from representative forums. During the review process we consulted other council strategies, existing information and reports and carried out other desktop research. The consultation process engaged the assistance of Brent Homeless User Group to conduct detailed research and to hold focus groups amongst homeless people and families for the council. As services to homeless people are provided through a wide range of organisations, we had to consult a large number of people and organisations in formulating this strategy.

Through the Homelessness Forum and other forums, we have been able to consult service providers and users from the public, voluntary and private sectors. The consultation process also has direct links to other council strategies. In particular, there are links with the Corporate Strategy, Supporting People Strategy, the Local Health Delivery Plan, the Drug and Alcohol Action Plan, Neighbourhood Renewal, the Crime Reduction Strategy, the Unitary Development Plan, the Housing Strategy and the Housing Investment Plan. Through the Supporting People consultation, we had already contacted a large number of organisations that deal with vulnerable people.

In June 2003, we held a series of five workshops, concentrating on the development of the homelessness strategy. A cross-section of Brent's communities responded to the request for information, as did many of our partner organisations in the housing field in London. Altogether, 130 people, including councillors, senior council officers, service users, homeless people, local community organisations and frontline staff attended the strategy development workshops.

The Homelessness Review's main findings

Outlined below is a brief summary of the findings of Brent's Homelessness Review. The Review was carried out by stakeholder consultation. Our Homelessness review is available on the Brent council website on www.brent.gov.uk

Current level of need

- ❖ There are 16,676 families on the **housing needs and transfers register**.
- ❖ The total number of **approaches to Social Services** during the year 2001/2002 was **6,907** to all services.
- ❖ There were **2,408 approaches as homeless** to the Housing Resource Centre in 2002.
- ❖ **1,083 cases were accepted as homeless** and owed a housing duty by the Council. 2002/2003
- ❖ **28%** of the total homeseekers were **found to be homeless but not owed a housing duty**.
- ❖ The Council is currently **assisting 28 homeseekers aged 16 and 17 years old**. This figure fluctuates slightly.
- ❖ **Brent's overall figure for domestic violence** in 2002 was 3,358 Police reported cases.
- ❖ **The homelessness figure in the borough is over twice the number** covered by the Housing Resources Centre when voluntary organisation figures are added.
- ❖ There are **3,984 homeseekers in temporary accommodation** provided by Brent, one of the highest figures in London.

Future need

- ❖ It is estimated that for the next five years, there is a **shortfall of affordable housing** in the Borough of 4,625 homes per year. **To 2007**, this represents a total of **23,125 dwellings**.

- ❖ We received **600 applications** to purchase properties prior to the rule change **on Right to Buy**.
- ❖ The minimum price for a **one-bedroom flat** in Brent was **£31,000 in 1998** and has **risen to £68,500**. **Average prices** for all dwellings in the **least expensive areas** of the borough range from **£68,500 to £129,000** in the **Alperton** area.
- ❖ At the time of the last housing needs survey, the figures for **1- and 2-bedroom properties for rent** were £130 and £204 per week respectively. Rental values for **3-bedroom** accommodation averaged **£259 per week**.
- ❖ **26,307** Brent households are living in **unsuitable housing**.

Population

- ❖ The **population has increased by 22,700** since 1991, **living in 99,991 households** (8th largest increase in London).
- ❖ Brent has the **second lowest percentage of white households (45.3%)** in London and in England and Wales as a whole.
- ❖ Brent has the largest percentage of people (38.2%) born outside the European Union and the fifth highest percentage of people (8.4%) born elsewhere in the European Union.
- ❖ The largest ethnic minorities in Brent are Indian (18.5%), Black Caribbean (10.5%) and Black African (7.8%).

Current service provision

- ❖ There is a **rich variety of services** available in the Brent area to prevent homelessness and **to respond to the needs of homeless people**.
- ❖ Over and above our statutory advice service, there are **over 35 organisations that offer assistance to people** in the borough regarding a variety of issues.

- ❖ Brent is **well served by dentists, pharmacists and opticians.**
- ❖ Brent is well served by the Primary Care Trust, with **many doctors, health centres and clinics.**
- ❖ Personal Medical Services, an **initiative by the Primary Care Trust, started in April and has been set up to address the needs of the homeless.**

Prevention of homelessness

- ❖ We have a **wide range of schemes and advice available to assist in the prevention of homelessness**, ranging from our deposit guarantee scheme to our assured lettings scheme.
- ❖ We have a team of **homeless prevention officers** who offer housing choices to homeseekers.
- ❖ We offer a **lay advocacy service** for homeseekers who have to attend court.
- ❖ We offer a **wide range of written materials** to homeseekers, much of it translated into the five main community languages.
- ❖ We have a **dedicated website for homeseekers**, including young people.

Monitoring the homelessness strategy

The strategy, which is now in its early stages, has a lifespan of five years up to July 2008. We plan to monitor our strategy in various ways and have developed action plans for each section of the strategy. The main ambition of the strategy is to achieve holistic needs assessments and ensure that homeseekers can gain access to all relevant services. Outreach services to schools and faith organisations are also part of the strategy, as are multi-agency monitoring, support for homeseekers and other initiatives. We want this to be a people-centred strategy.

The action plans cover a 5-year period and are set out under short-term, medium-term and long-term projects or initiatives. Significant parts of the opportunities that exist within the action plans remain unfunded at the time of publication of this document.

We take a co-operative partnership approach to funding with organisations in other sectors so that we can maximise the impact on specific projects. With our partners on the Homelessness Forum, we will identify and prioritise projects to be progressed on a year-to-year basis.

Formal monitoring of the strategy will be by the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group. This group includes representatives from Housing, Social Services, the charitable and voluntary sector and service users' groups. The steering group will receive input from the Homelessness Forum and the Forum's health sub-group and will meet bi-monthly. Other council strategies (such as the Crime Reduction Strategy) will inform the strategy steering group.

This review process and strategy will be a living document that can be added to and amended throughout the year through consultation. The strategy will receive a wholesale review on its anniversary and must be re-drawn every five years (Table 1).

Table 1

July 2003 Homelessness Strategy 2003 – 2008 publication
April 2004 Annual review starts
July 2004 Annual review published (year 1)
September 2004 Annual Homelessness Conference
April 2005 Annual review starts
July 2005 Annual review published (year 2)
September 2005 Annual Homelessness Conference
April 2006 Annual review starts
July 2006 Annual review published (year 3)
September 2006 Annual Homelessness Conference
April 2007 Annual review starts
July 2007 Annual review published (year 4)
September 2007 Annual Homelessness Conference
April 2008 Annual review starts
July 2008 Annual Review published (year 5); Homelessness Strategy launch 2008 – 2013
September 2008 Annual Homelessness Conference

Homelessness workshop results

Set out below in Table 2 are the main areas of concern that were identified by the single homeless consultation at Cricklewood Homeless Concern, the multi-disciplinary workshops and the London Borough of Brent staff workshops. A postal/ e-mail consultation was also carried out as part of the Homelessness Review.

The workshops accepted a reality check regarding the affordable housing shortfall within the Brent area of around 23,000 units over the life of this strategy. They identified a number of areas of concerns, primarily around communication and information opportunities. These issues were mentioned more than twice as often as those regarding floating support (and support generally) and the council's statutory advice service. Some concerns were mentioned only once.

This strategy will be led by the concerns that emerged from these consultations and workshops and will therefore be owned by the stakeholders who were involved in expressing them. Many issues were discussed at the workshops and the key points of the participating teams' input have been recorded in written form. All original research is held by the London Borough of Brent and is available for inspection. We see this strategy as a living document and there will be scope for stakeholders to have further input over the first year, as the document will be going through a bedding-in period.

There is some crossover within the different sections of the strategy, such as the housing choices package, which can be interpreted as a preventative measure but could also appear in the operations section. Likewise, the information on increasing incentives to schemes fits in both the preventative section and the accommodation section. Partnership working has its own section but is also mentioned in many other areas.

Table 2

Workshops: number of times issues mentioned	
	Mentions
Communication/ information	28
Support/ floating support	11
Advice service	11
Incentives	8
Joint training	7
Early intervention/ young people	7
Joint working/ protocols	6
Empty homes	4
Housing options package	4
Planning	4
Housing Benefit issues	4
Move-on accommodation	3
People with disabilities	3
Housing Resource Centre environment	2

Part 1 Operations management

Housing Resources Centre, homeless persons team

Service opportunities

Shelter's quality team and Vantagepoint consultants, who assessed the Housing Resource Centre's administrative and legal practices found the homelessness assessment service to be sound and evidence based. They did however pointed out a number of opportunities to enhance the Housing Resource Centre's service. Some of these have already been put into practice, as outlined in our Homelessness Review document and restated below.

Shelter Quality Team

This exercise comprised an in-depth peer review audit of a significant number of recent homelessness case files. It represented a more rigorous examination than either the Council's own pilot best value review or the case file analysis performed by the Housing Inspectorate as part of their inspection in 2002.

The recommendations from Shelter are generally in accordance with the findings of these earlier exercises and make some detailed suggestions as to how the homelessness team can build on existing areas of strength and attain more consistency and efficiency in a very demanding environment.

The audit revealed that fundamentally, the team is successful in what is a very pressured area of work, against a backdrop of a very limited supply of long-term housing solutions available within the borough.

The audit goes on to say that 'the team's overall performance is all the more creditable, since the inherent difficulties of finding solutions to people's housing and homelessness problems do not seem to have affected the objectivity of the team in its approach to its duties under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996'.

Vantagepoint and Shelter recommended a number of actions to the Housing Resources Centre management team. Some of these are at present being introduced and we are currently assessing others.

We will monitor repeat cases of homelessness through our current database system as an early intervention scheme to identify trends in homelessness.

We will monitor the change of priority on second approach as homeless.

We will raise the number of homeseekers who are regarded as homeless at home by 20%.

We will introduce revised procedures and systems to improve the speed of decision making on homelessness cases.

The out of hours service

This is a service offered when the Housing Resource Centre is closed. We will review our out of hours service to highlight and identify any service opportunities.

We will explore and progress joint training for out of hours staff.

We will liaise closely with Shelter London on a cross-London out of hours service.

Advice service

High quality advice at the onset of any difficulty, whether homelessness or otherwise, is essential in assisting people and giving them options and choices. The advice can include reality checks and advice on the consequences of choices. Quality advice can help people to go some (if not all) of the way towards resolving their own problems. We believe that people who are experiencing difficulties need to be able to form an opinion on their options and to do this they need to understand their legal rights. Accessible free advice is invaluable, as is the advice service's willingness to refer clients to others when differing sources of advice are needed. A holistic needs assessment approach is needed to cater for people who seek advice, as their difficulties can often be of a very varied nature.

With this in mind, we are reviewing our housing advice contracts. The key findings from consultation with the Housing Resources Centre, the Best Value review and the Housing Inspectorate's subsequent audit highlighted the following weaknesses in our advice service.

- ❖ advice and assistance are given through a number of providers and are neither standardised nor consistent;
- ❖ the quality and effectiveness of the advice and assistance given are not assessed;
- ❖ there is a lack of homeless prevention work; and
- ❖ there is no capacity-building to allow users of the service to get involved in ongoing service development or procurement..

There are a number of items that overlap with the objectives that other groups are attempting to achieve. A major problem identified here is that these forums do not meet on a regular basis to take forward their proposed actions in a timely fashion. There is also some duplication of services being provided. For example, the creation of the Homeless Prevention Team to tackle homelessness has had a huge effect on the number of clients being referred to the new homelessness prevention advice agencies.

The homeless prevention team was set up towards the end of 2002, in the last quarter of 2002/2003 they interviewed 244 households and where unable to prevent homelessness in 43 cases.

During our research into advice provision in other boroughs, we have found that no borough has actually been able to provide a link between the quality of advice provided and the effects of this on the prevention of homelessness.

We will encourage joint working and 'get to know days' to acquire a greater understanding of each other's work.

We are developing a housing options package to promote the schemes that the council offers and provide information for the advice agencies.

We are introducing detailed monitoring arrangements on a monthly basis, dealing with referral problems that were highlighted as a result of customer satisfaction surveys.

A further monitoring initiative that has recently been introduced features referral forms from the agencies to the Private Housing Information Unit.

We will continue successful initiatives that demonstrably reduce the incidents of homelessness in the Brent area.

We will build quality audits into our advice contracts.

We will encourage capacity-building to allow service users to have input to service provision and delivery.

We will produce service guides for both customers and professionals.

With our partners, we will explore the development of an advice and assistance strategy for housing.

We will link business plans and financial probity to contracts awarded.

Consultation process

Communication

A dedicated officer will co-ordinate all relevant duties and act as a primary contact and liaison with external organisations. The voluntary and charitable sector and other stakeholders will have direct access to the officer to raise concerns or address issues regarding projects, such as the single homelessness strategy and the Homeless Compact.

The policy, liaison and strategy development functions and the progressing and monitoring of these are a major consideration. Our action plan for these areas sets out in more detail the mechanisms that we will employ in our homelessness consultation and communication arrangements.

Involvement of service users and advocates

Service users have been involved in the consultations relating to the Homelessness Review. However, there will be a need for more consultation to obtain a more comprehensive analysis of the views of service users and their advocates. Due to the tight timescales and the lack of information regarding lead officers and/or lead contacts, some organisations were not contacted or never responded to our contact. We have also found that the questionnaire sent to service providers was less than satisfactory in that it was too long and complicated.

We will introduce a package of consultation processes that will allow service users to participate fully. The table below outlines some of the things that we currently do and some initiatives that we will be exploring.

Service opportunities
Telephone and e-mail surveys of past/current users
Focus groups, speakouts and citizens' panels for each user group
Customer satisfaction survey of Housing Assessment Team's current decisions
Site visits and site consultations
We will use our Interpretation services to assist people who are experiencing difficulties in this area.
Develop full databases
One-to-one interviews
Customer Satisfaction Survey: general survey of Housing Resource Centre's current and past users (September 2003)
We actively participate in:
Homeless Forum
Homeless Compact
Private Landlords Forum
Hoteliers Forum
Domestic Violence Forum
Tenants' and residents' associations
The Private Housing Forum
Partnership work (see part 6)

Part 2 Prevention of homelessness

As our Homelessness Review outlines, Brent has many innovative schemes for preventing homelessness. The homelessness workshops pointed out that one of our problems is communicating these schemes to stakeholders. Many of the schemes that were put forward by the ideas generation exercise were already in operation in the Brent area. As part of our communications and promotions plan, all these schemes will be gathered together in packs appropriate for individual sections of stakeholders as set out above under advice services.

The packs will fulfil many purposes. They will act as advice packs for homeless or potentially homeless people as well as for advocacy workers. The materials will enable the council to promote its products to private landlords and estate agents and therefore enhance the supply of accommodation available to its homeseekers.

We will work closely with our partners to identify any underlying homelessness trends within Brent and believe that together, we can build systems of prevention, underscored by support services and long-term holistic service access.

We will offer a housing choices interview to every homeseeker who attends the Housing Resource Centre and produce accessible information and materials for other organisations so that they can initiate a similar interview at first contact with the client.

Many of the schemes that we operate at present will be extended and we will explore incentive increases to assist in the eradication of homelessness that is Brent council's main priority and vision.

We will produce guidance packs and an A-to-Z listing of homeless and advice services for stakeholders and hold a yearly information audit.

We will produce tailored information and promotional packs to raise the profile of homelessness amongst banks, building societies, private businesses, landlords and agents.

Sixteen- and seventeen-year-old homeseekers

There will be increased demands on the borough's housing due to this new priority need category. Although this strategy must look at homelessness across the board, we recognise that this new category will lead to more affordable housing being taken out of general circulation by the council to fulfil its duty.

We are currently working closely with our partners to establish funding for a 20-bed respite centre for young people with the DePaul Trust. The centre will have supported accommodation attached for 20 young people and will link in with the DePaul initiatives on training, work, counselling and mediation services.

We will work closely with the relevant agencies to find the best way to progress concerns around 16- and 17-year-old homeseekers.

We will employ a replacement social worker for the assessment of 16- and 17-year-old homeseekers.

We are exploring referral procedures for this section of homeseekers.

We are putting together a training programme for schools and other youth centres with our partners from other sectors as an early intervention tool.

Children under 16.

Many agencies that work with young people point out that mediation with young people aged 16/17 and their families often comes too late, due to established family dynamics. The flare-up often occurs when young people reach their early teens.

This often includes school exclusions, Social Services involvement or early offending behaviour, which are all early warning signals that young people are likely to become homeless.

We will explore with our partners the establishment of a voluntary counselling and mediation service for young people aged 12-16 and their families.

We will work to establish a corporate protocol between Social Services, Education and Youth Offending Teams for referral of such cases to the mediation and counselling services.

We believe that by promoting housing rights to young people in schools and youth centres, we will be better able to target this vulnerable group at an early age and issue reality checks.

The council has a website, Homezone4you, which is dedicated to young people. We feel that this can form the basis of a school training and information model, which can be developed and delivered in partnership with Brent Women's Aid, Brent Homeless User Group, the council and other interested parties.

Young people leaving care and those who have been in care

It is well documented that members of this group of people are more likely to become homeless than the population in general. The needs of care leavers are very diverse and can include domestic skills such as budgeting and shopping, training and social skills development, and coping with peer pressure. We are working closely with our partners in Social Services to develop protocols and a guidance package to inform young people about the skills they need to make their way in the world and where to acquire them. We have in place a work experience programme, administered by Social Services, that enables young people to gain experience, develop their skills and participate in a team environment. There are other options for young care leavers, including family reconciliation, remaining in care until they are 18 years old or foster care. We will continue to fulfil our duty to this section of the new priority need category.

We will investigate the use of specific learning events with our partners, to include supporting former care leavers to set up and run learning programmes for other care leavers.

With our partners in Social Services, we will develop protocols to jointly assess homeless children in need.

Through our housing choices package, we will give care leavers a realistic picture of their housing options in the Brent area.

Through the Supporting People commissioning cycle, we will explore support packages for young people that will address their varying needs.

Domestic violence and those fleeing violence

Although our Government returns on homelessness reasons placed approaches for incidents of domestic violence on the low side, the Police figures for assistance identify this as a major concern in the Brent area. We believe that the lack of housing opportunities in Brent and the sometimes lengthy stays in bed and breakfast or temporary accommodation influence these low approach rates. This issue has been identified through the Crime Reduction Strategy and we are in the process of employing a borough-wide domestic violence co-ordinator.

We are delivering the Sanctuary project provides for women who are experiencing domestic violence to remain in their homes. The scheme provides safety devices and a safe room for those experiencing violence, with access to a dedicated team, who will respond to emergency situations. We will also explore with our partners mechanisms for evicting perpetrators of domestic violence and look to expand this to the private rented sector through the Private Landlords Forum. We will raise the profile of this issue with our partners through community education, training and school and church visits on a rolling programme. The Crime Reduction Strategy will bring domestic violence issues to the forefront of council policy.

We will explore with our partners the employment of a specialist to work amongst refugees, asylum seekers, new entrants to the UK and people with no recourse to public funds.

With our partners, we will forge links with the 'Get London Moving' Team to place people in other areas of London and the country.

We will investigate the recommendations of Gill Hauge's report on domestic violence in Brent.
We will work closely with the Police to explore mechanisms for those fleeing violence and harassment.
We are working with our partners towards the introduction of the 'Sanctuary' project
We will continue to fulfil our duty in the area of fleeing violence

Black and minority ethnic communities

People from black and minority ethnic groups make up just over 7% of the total population of Great Britain. Of these people, 97% live in England, 2% in Scotland and 1% in Wales. Almost half of these people are from the Indian sub-continent. Black people of Caribbean and African origin make up around a third.

Minority ethnic groups are concentrated in certain regions, of which London has the highest proportion. Other regions with high concentrations are the West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside and the North-West (Census 2001).

The small sizes of the black and minority ethnic populations can create problems for sample surveys, which are an important source for understanding changes affecting all groups. Statistics can usually be presented only for the largest population groups and there is relatively little research or data about small or 'new' migrant groups.

Our Homelessness Review confirms the hypothesis that there is no direct correlation between ethnic origin and whether a homeless application was accepted or not in 2001/02. It provides strong statistical evidence that there is no discrimination in the assessment of homeless applications.

As our Homelessness Review showed, Brent has one of the most diverse and concentrated ethnic minority populations in Europe, with over 57% of the population coming from a range of backgrounds including African, Afro-Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Irish, Kurdish and Somali.

With our partners, we will identify issues and conduct further research into the advice, housing and welfare needs of black and minority ethnic communities.

Asylum seekers and their families

We have discovered that some asylum seekers have been treated less equally by some landlords and those who have a 2-bedroom need have been placed in unsuitable properties and made to share kitchens and bathrooms with other families. We are recruiting an experienced Housing Benefit visiting officer who will go to each property where we have placed a family and confirm that they are living in accommodation that meets the needs we have identified. We will work closely with the Audit and Fraud teams and refer suspected cases of fraud.

School-age children initiative

The asylum team has introduced a rolling set of review appointments for all families on its books with children aged 5-8. We have asked the parents of the children to bring letters from school saying when they started school and showing attendance records. We will work closely with our partners at the Local Education Authority to meet the needs of these children.

The asylum team has recently started accommodating intentionally homeless families for Social Services. This has reduced the costs of Social Services accommodation. Social Services are also requesting the asylum team's assistance in developing mechanisms to accommodate those people who have overstayed their visas for the United Kingdom.

People with multiple problems

It has been noted that there is a lack of provision for people with substance misuse issues both in terms of advice provision and accommodation options. This is also the case with those who are suffering from mental health problems. We will work closely with our partners from all sectors to address the high incidence of drug and/or alcohol misuse among homeless people. With our partners we will set up protocols and explore advice services, accommodation provision and floating support services available to this group.

We will investigate the possibility of setting up advice, mentoring and training packages tailored to the needs of this section of the community.

Through the Private Landlords Forum, we will explore the establishment of care and mentoring packages for the private sector for this group of people.

We will link into the Supporting People commissioning cycle to better address the needs of people with multiple problems.

People leaving institutions or the armed forces

The borough will work closely with its partners to establish a proactive approach to people leaving institutions. This is a new priority group under the Homelessness Act 2002, if the homeseeker is deemed vulnerable. In many cases, the person leaving an institution tries to establish vulnerability on the day of their discharge/release. As the threat of statutory homelessness is triggered 28 days before actual homelessness, assessments could be carried out at an earlier stage where appropriate.

We will explore with our partners and other London boroughs the use of outreach surgeries by the Homelessness Prevention Team and, where appropriate, the Assessment Team in London prisons, with people likely to return to the Brent area.

We will also work closely with Her Majesty's Forces to identify mechanisms for those leaving the armed forces who are returning to the Brent area and will explore protocols for people leaving other types of institutions.

Rough sleepers

Through the Homelessness Forum, we will seek to learn more about this group within the borough. We need to ensure that we are meeting Government guidelines to reduce rough sleeping in the Brent area. Our work with this group of people also ties in with others areas of work, such as with ex-offenders and people with substance misuse problems, who form a large percentage of this group.

People not in priority need

Under the Homelessness Act, councils may secure accommodation for those not in priority need. Due to the severe shortage of accommodation in Brent, this is often impossible. There is very little accommodation available in Brent for this group of people. It

is important that single homeless people receive advice and assistance that is appropriate to their needs and are told of the appropriate services and products available to them.

Through the Homeless Compact, we aim to set up a comprehensive needs assessment procedure for people not in priority need, rough sleepers, people who misuse drugs and alcohol, those leaving institutions and those with multiple needs.

In partnership with the Private Landlords Forum, we will explore supported accommodation packages for vulnerable tenants.

Spend to save initiatives

We will investigate the following areas:

Payments to help people keep their tenancies

Financial incentives to delay the eviction of private tenants

Rent arrears payments to tenants

Rent guarantees for Registered Social Landlords to prevent execution of warrant while assessments are carried out

Increased use of Homeless at Home

Housing Benefit team to handle all private rented Housing Benefit claims and expedite Deposit Guarantee Scheme applications

Explore extra incentives to landlords to take vulnerable clients

Explore payment of the shortfall to Housing Benefit

Explore links with mortgage lenders' arrears departments to identify those at risk or in arrears in the Brent area

Save to spend. We will look into setting up a Credit Union to provide cheap loans to participants and cut out 'loan sharks' and unaffordable interest rates.

Part 3 Accommodation for homeless people

As outlined in our introduction, Brent is very short of land to develop for affordable housing and the financial resources are inadequate. Put bluntly, we cannot build our way out of trouble. With our partners in planning, however, we can maximise redevelopment opportunities within the borough and, with our west London partners, look for opportunities outside the borough.

The Locata choice-based letting scheme has been successfully introduced. The scheme allows both homeless people and other households to bid for available properties as many times as they like and to have a choice in the area where they wish to live. The scheme means that homeless people are being extended the same choice as waiting list households, as the council will not operate a one-offer policy for homeless applicants using the Locata scheme. Although there are some minor adjustments to be made to the bidding process, the scheme has proved to be an open and transparent way for prospective tenants to exercise their choice.

Private rented sector

Many of the residents of Brent live in the private rented sector. The council accepted a duty to 200 homeless people in 2001/2002 due to the termination of an assured shorthold tenancy. Our advice services, the homeless prevention team and the homelessness assessment team all offer advice to clients who are or may become homeless due to termination of an assured shorthold tenancy, and our lay advocacy team represents clients in court if requested. The homeless prevention team and our environmental services work closely with private landlords to improve housing conditions. The homeless prevention team offers a service to landlords that encompasses advice on tenancy types and landlord-tenant responsibilities. The team provides a full range of written materials for both landlords and tenants. Through our new Private Landlords Forum, we will be working closely with our partners in this sector to promote best practice and social responsibility.

Our choice-based package also includes our rent deposit scheme, which is on offer to both the homeless and other households seeking accommodation in the area. We feel that this is a viable alternative for certain homeseekers to the long waits that can face families seeking council accommodation. We will contact the National Rent Deposit Forum and explore the use of a number of other schemes so that we can offer a choice, not just to homeseekers, but also to our landlords. These are introductory schemes, with the council acting as an enabler.

Our Breaking the Chain scheme is also a valuable part of our private rented sector initiative. This scheme gives incentives to homeseekers to locate to other parts of the country.

Housing Association Leasing Scheme

We will continue to be innovative with our partners in the way we review our Housing Association Leasing Scheme and Brent Direct, our own private leasing scheme. We will explore mechanisms such as the 'without prejudice' warrant letter from the homeless unit to tenants, and encourage our partners to map repair issues in this sector. We will compare our Brent Direct leasing scheme with other schemes within London and the UK. We will explore alternative leasing schemes run by both housing associations and councils, to identify best practice and value for money.

Homeless at Home

The council's Homeless at Home scheme enables the council to nominate as temporary accommodation the place where the qualifying household is staying on their date of approach as homeless. The scheme is an alternative to bed and breakfast or temporary accommodation. The homeseeker can bid on the Locata scheme in the usual manner and will receive the same weighting as a household in bed and breakfast accommodation. The council sees this scheme as a viable alternative to bed and breakfast accommodation and will review the effectiveness of the scheme as it is presently run.

Other parts of the country

We are members of the London Alliance West and North (LAWN), which is a scheme to place homeseekers outside London. The council acknowledges that there are some difficulties with the out of London schemes. With this in mind, we are going to produce an out of borough pack. This pack will contain information on school league tables, crime rates, training and job prospects, ethnic communities and faith organisations and the council's housing choices products. We will liaise with our partners regarding the pilot scheme for Housing Employment Mobility Services (a new central Government scheme).

Much of the information contained in this pack will also be available to the council as a promotional tool for landlords and estate agents, not only in Brent but also in other regions of the UK, with which Brent will endeavour to forge links.

Temporary accommodation and the homeseeker

As part of our strategy for homelessness, we are also mindful of homeseekers' and landlords' responsibilities. We will consider a system that will allow us to give extra weighting to a Locata bid, should the homeseeker's accommodation be well maintained. This could result in the homeseeker having more choice regarding area or quality of accommodation. We would like to encourage homeseekers in temporary accommodation to help themselves and also improve their home and community environment.

We will continue to work closely with our environmental services colleagues to identify disrepair and unfitness for human habitation and work towards remedying these issues.

We will explore the use of a 'without prejudice' warrant letter, which advises the tenant of their homelessness rights. A homelessness leaflet is enclosed advising the tenant of all aspects of homelessness.

We will explore the Shelter and Citizens Advice Bureau best practice documents with regard to rent arrears. We will also ask our partners and other sectors to do the same through the usual forums.

We will explore the use of different types of rent deposit schemes through the National Rent Deposit Forum.

As part of this strategy, we will consider a new mortgage deposit product (to be piloted by the London Borough of Brent).

With the assistance of environmental services, planning services and our partners in the Registered Social Landlord sector, we will explore environments that combine accommodation and tenant services for homeless people.

In partnership with the voluntary and charitable sector, we will investigate the facilities of the Self-Build Agency's refurbishment section to purchase and refurbish accommodation as part of training programmes.

We will work closely with our Property Services empty homes team to assist in identifying vacant properties.

We will work with our partners in the private rented sector to promote sharing of accommodation and incentives to landlords for those receiving Housing Benefit.

Move-on accommodation

We are currently reviewing the move-on accommodation available in the borough for all groups of homeless people. The results of this review will be available in the short term. This type of accommodation caters for people who need to move out of hospitals, women's refuges and other temporary situations. It is also for people who need to move to independent living from hostels and similar environments.

16- and 17-year-olds

We are at present working closely with the DePaul Trust to establish a 20-bedroom unit in Willesden. We will explore move-on options for these young people so that we can free up the hostel places for other young people who seek our assistance.

We will encourage private developers to assess the risks and benefits of shared accommodation schemes and set aside a percentage of new-build housing as accommodation for sharing (or erect purpose-built hostel accommodation).

As part of our accommodation strategy, we will continue to use bed and breakfast in emergency situations. We will continue to work creatively with our partners where appropriate accommodation becomes available.

We believe that the above schemes can form part of our strategy to help homeseekers to fulfil their responsibilities as tenants. We also believe that some of the schemes will offer a greater choice to homeseekers. Access to legal remedies will be available through our advice service, the homeless prevention team and other support services.

We believe in corporate social responsibility and we will work with the Planning Department, the Private Housing Unit and developers to outline our position regarding affordable housing options. We will work to procure both permanent and temporary housing (with temporary housing leased to the council on a long-term basis). We will use our negotiation and mediation skills to access this sector on behalf of our customers.

Part 4 Health Services

The Personal Medical Service scheme has been running since the beginning of June 2003 and will be rolled out across the borough over the next 12 months. The scheme identified a number of issues relating to health and homelessness. The Homeless Forum health team is working closely with the Primary Care Trust Personal Medical Service team and will keep the Forum updated as to progress. This forum will in turn advise the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group. In addition, Brent is part of a Health Action Zone. The Personal Medical Service pilot will participate in all current and proposed Health Action Zone projects that impact on the needs of this client group, including chronic disease management, disease prevention and closer working with social care services.

The Personal Medical Service initiative was set up to address the health needs of homeless people, asylum seekers and refugees. We have a dedicated officer who works closely with our partners in this area to feed the council's views into the process. The Personal Medical Service team will pilot a number of models for access to health care and changing perceptions of these groups. These include portable records held by the individuals concerned and training for general practitioners and their staff.

We are working closely with our partners to develop strategies that will link into the Primary Care Trust's initiatives. Our asylum team is working with the Trust to design and administer a health questionnaire to find out whether asylum seekers are having difficulties accessing doctors and other medical services. The results of the questionnaire will be used to help the Primary Care Trust design a general and nurse practitioner service that is sensitive to the needs of asylum seekers, refugees and homeless people.

We will continue to work closely with our partners in this area to enhance the health and well-being of homeseekers.
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Part 5 Homeless support

Supporting People has a vital role to play in terms of support for homeseekers, with links into the homelessness strategy through our mutual partners. We will work closely with the Supporting People team to find opportunities for input to their commissioning cycles and to identify areas where they can provide financial support to schemes for those who are experiencing difficulties.

Support in the home or a key workers' contact system or 'hub' can act as a valuable homelessness prevention tool. Through the Homeless Compact, we will be piloting and developing full needs assessments with strong referral, signposting and seeing a case through to completion. These assessments will be used to tailor support services to the needs of the client. For example, if the client needs money advice or budgeting skill training, then the Compact team can deliver support and training and advise of potential mentors, seeing the case through to its conclusion.

Where other specialist professional advice is needed, the mentor can encourage, set up and attend appointments with the person requiring assistance. (A more detailed outline of the Homeless Compact can be found in part 6.) Our Homelessness Review shows that we offer floating support to families in temporary accommodation. We believe that helping people to keep their tenancies is one of the most effective ways to prevent homelessness. As we advocate a holistic approach to services, this is very cost-effective when compared to the costs of temporary accommodation.

We will review the way we work with our partners in the Registered Social Landlord sector, to identify any areas of concern or opportunities that will benefit homeseekers.

Together with our partners, we will explore mechanisms for providing more support to our many client groups. One mechanism will be through the development of the Family Centre.

We will encourage all partners to work with us to agree realistic goals and outcomes in homeless support.

We will explore Shelter's work in this area and make comparisons with other agencies' policies.

We will investigate home visits and outreach surgeries by the Homeless Prevention Team to clients as one of the ways to prevent homelessness.

Part 6 Partnership working

This is a crucial section of our strategy. If we are to fulfil our long-term vision and provide holistic services to homeseekers and their families, it is paramount that we agree joint visions, goals and outcomes. The overall figures in our review show that around 19% of our community are suffering from or threatened with homelessness. This figure includes many children whose health and well-being are adversely affected, some of whom are already in contact with the Social Services children at risk team.

It is imperative that these fundamental exclusions from society are dealt with in a joined-up way. Through the review it has become apparent that work is not joined up and indeed there are barriers to change. Although we are mindful of the need for consensus when working in other professionals areas, change blocking is destructive. The same can be said of the current funding and grant regime, which sees many voices clamouring for limited resources. We would like to see grant seekers taking a co-operative approach to facilitate partnership funding approaches to agreed projects.

Joint mutual secondments and training sessions can help stop change blocking and nurture understanding. The secondments allow staff from each area or sector to 'get to know' other partners' areas of work and understand the pressures and stresses of their working day. We believe that this leads to greater understanding of the individuals concerned and greater team spirit. It is easy to criticise if you don't know what's happening on a day-to-day basis, and we believe that the secondments will help to break down barriers and reverse negative perceptions of homeless people. We believe that establishing joint training sessions in cooperation with our partners is a valuable team-building exercise which allows staff to meet in a less formal situation than when on secondment.

Protocols

While we work very closely with our partners in Social Services, there is a critical need for protocols relating to particular areas of concern. We are at present developing these protocols and are looking to set up a dedicated team to work on them. Through our officer who liaises with the health services, we aim to feed into protocols that alleviate bed-blocking at our hospitals, and through our mental health team and Social Services, we will feed into protocols around mental health issues.

We believe that protocols can be a cost-effective way of developing better co-ordination between the borough's services and other homelessness services. In particular, we will be investigating protocols with the Housing Benefit department with regard to cases where a possession order has been obtained by Brent Housing Partnership or a Registered Social Landlord.

Homeless Compact

The Homeless Compact was negotiated by the council through consultation in 2001. Brent Homeless User Group (supported by the London Borough of Brent and our partners) will run the Compact. It will be administered by homeless people for and on behalf of homeless people. The council encourages social enterprises of this nature and will seek to support similar initiatives.

Capacity-building

To be successful in any participation strategy, individuals or groups need to have the capacity to become actively involved. The Compact recommends a programme of training for single homeless people and other users, focusing on areas such as confidence building, participating in meetings, understanding how provider agencies operate, and life skills.

The first stage of any capacity-building exercise will include an assessment of the needs and abilities of clients by Brent Homeless User Group workers, through a needs assessment and a series of focus groups.

The training programme will be developed based on the results of the needs assessment and will include the type of training required and the delivery methods, including location, time and incentives to take part. Learning assistants will be drawn from the homeless user population to assist in programme delivery. Many of the opportunities mentioned in this strategy can be built into the training and educational programmes that will be developed for the individuals who participate in the scheme, such as the early intervention educational model for schools and other partners. There will also be an exploration of businesses in the Brent area, with a view to secondments and corporate social responsibility.

Through the existing structure of the Housing and Social Services Liaison meetings we will work towards setting up protocols with Social Services covering children's issues and other areas of concern.

Through our partnerships with Brent Housing Partnership and local Registered Social Landlords, we will work towards

implementing protocols for tenants, particularly those who are vulnerable.

Through the Private Landlords Forum and other groups, we will work towards raising awareness among private landlords and setting up protocols for vulnerable people.

With our partners, we will work towards setting up pre-eviction multi-agency panels for assessing vulnerability.

With our colleagues in the Business Brokers project, the Brent Into Work initiative and the voluntary, statutory and charitable sectors, we will seek to build sustainable partnerships with local companies for work-based experience for homeless people.

Through the Homelessness Forum, we will encourage our partners to assess the issues in the Brent area and agree a joint vision. Through this vision, we believe that our partners can work with us towards joint goal setting and achievable outcomes.

We will enable agencies to co-ordinate their approach to grant applications and build partnership applications year on year to address identified objectives.

We will promote the external accreditation of service providers and encourage corporate social responsibility.

With our partners, we will explore sponsorship arrangements with the corporate sector.

Part 7 Neighbouring areas

We plan to work closely with our neighbours in West London to develop a joint approach to homelessness. This will include input to the London-wide approach to homelessness. We will also explore approaches to hostel accommodation for single people across West London and London and encourage cross-border nominations.

There are many opportunities for working in partnership with our neighbours to develop a more strategic role in grant applications and agree jointly targeted funding to voluntary and charitable agencies. It may be possible to co-ordinate our grant funding and target projects year on year. The brand image of Locata has attracted interest, not only from a number of sources in the London

housing sector, but also from other regions of the country. By taking this forward with partners from other areas, we will give homeseekers a greater choice in the areas in which they want to live.

We will contact and link up to other councils who operate choice-based schemes, such as Bolton, and negotiate with them to provide us with property vacancy lists and for our homeseekers to be placed on their waiting lists.

We will use existing meetings to discuss common issues with our neighbouring boroughs.

We will continue to discuss the extension of Locata to other providers and in other regions of the country.

We will encourage the use of a more targeted approach to grants across West London.

We will use the NOTIFY service to inform our neighbours and stakeholders of any homeseekers we place in their area.

We will continue to work with our partners to establish a West- and all-London approach to homelessness.

Part 8 Areas of further research

Our test of equality on the homelessness acceptance rate showed no discrimination in our decision-making process with regard to institutional prejudice. The Homelessness Review, however, identified some areas for further research.

The Review revealed a skewing of data concerning the ethnicity and gender of 16- and 17-year-olds whom we are currently assisting with accommodation. We feel that this must be investigated.

The Review figures also indicated that some members of the black and minority ethnic communities were far more likely to have a housing need of three bedrooms or more.

The overall needs of black minority ethnic communities and their needs (both quantitative and qualitative) needs further research.

The needs of non-priority homeless people also merit further investigation to determine what resources are available to assist them in Brent and surrounding areas.

Qualitative research needs to be carried out to ascertain some real -life experiences of our services.

As this is a developing strategy, further research issues will emerge during the review process. We will continue to investigate the causes of homelessness identified by our partners and ourselves and will act on these findings to inform our reviews.

Together with our partners on the Homelessness Forum, we will agree areas for further research and prioritise the research.

We will continue to conduct desk research and investigate initiatives that may be applicable to us.

We will conduct one major research project a year.

Appendix A

Developing the strategy

Process flow	Date
Steering group set up	May 2002
Researcher engaged	Jan 2003
Agency questionnaire	Sent February 2003
Service user questionnaire	February/ March 2003
Single homeless survey	February/March 2003
Primary Care Trust health survey	February/ March 2003
Desk research	January/ March 2003
Health service consultation	April 2003
Publication of Homelessness Review	May 2003
Post/ e-mail consultation	May 2003
Single homeless consultation	June 2003
Homelessness strategy workshops X 5. Four external organisations and LB Brent staff.	June 2003
Strategy development	June/July 2003
Strategy publication	30 July 2003