

# Housing Services



## Annual Report Annual Report Annual Report



*Karen Dragovic  
Head of Housing*



Welcome to the first edition of the Housing Services Annual Report.

Following the Housing Options Appraisal, which gave us the opportunity to meet many of you, I felt it was important to provide you with information on our key achievements during 2005/06 and to give you details of new initiatives and specific actions that will be undertaken in 2006/07.

I hope that you find this report interesting and informative.

## Affordable Housing



During 2005/06 46 units of affordable housing were completed in partnership with local housing associations. This included 4 rented bungalows at Francis Avenue and 6 two bedroomed flats at Rainbow Close in Redbourn. In addition 18 shared ownership properties were also completed in St Albans.

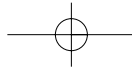
Over the next two years housing associations will receive nearly £5.5m in funding from the Housing Corporation to deliver 156 additional units of affordable housing in the District. The Council has also set aside its own funding to

enhance this sum making the overall total nearly £8m over the next two years.

A pilot Cash Incentive Scheme was also implemented in 2005/06. This scheme provides a payment of up to £30,000 to assist tenants who are unable to purchase in the private sector without this grant.

In total 4 applications were completed and further applications will be progressed in 2006/07.





# Homelessness and Allocations



During 2005/06 a number of homelessness preventative services were implemented.

A Rent Deposit Scheme was launched on 6 March 2006 to give homeless families more options if and when they become homeless. The rent guarantee scheme aims to help families into alternative accommodation in the private rented sector by working with private landlords and Housing Benefits to guarantee rents up to 4 weeks and to ensure that landlords are compensated for any damage to their property.

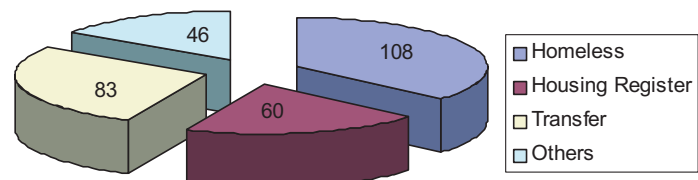
A Crash Pad and Mediation Scheme was introduced to provide more support for 16/17 year olds. The scheme is a specialist service targeted at teenagers offering both mediation and accommodation for a period of 21 days when young people become homeless. The scheme is delivered by Herts Young Homeless Group who operate across Hertfordshire in liaison with Social Services.

A homeless summit was held by Councillors of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Community Services in November 2005. A large number of interested parties attended to give feedback to Councillors on our homelessness services. The outcome will be used to update our homelessness strategy.

In August 2005 a survey of our homelessness services was carried out with those households in our temporary accommodation. The result of the survey showed a good level of satisfaction with our temporary accommodation and access to services. During 2006/07 we will be making further improvements in service delivery and building further on the preventative services implemented in 2005/06.

During 2005/06 297 lettings were made within the Council's housing stock. These are broken down as follows:-

**Breakdown of Lettings By Category**



During October 2005 a new satisfaction survey was launched covering the allocation and sign up process. The key results for the period October 2005 to March 2006 are shown below.

85% of those who responded found the process of applying to the waiting list easy or satisfactory

98% of those who responded found it easy or satisfactory to get information about their application after it had been registered

85% of those who responded found that the offer pack contained enough information about the property.

Homeswap scheme is more comprehensive and focused to meet the needs of tenants wishing to exchange.

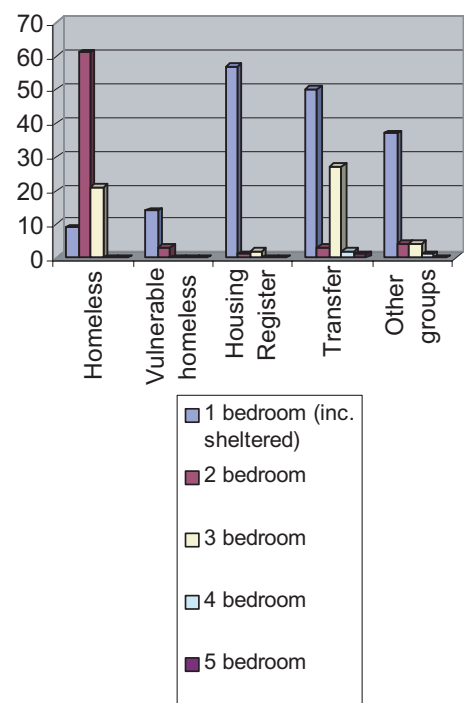
In May 2005 the medical panel database was implemented, this meant that staff are now able to provide clearer information to applicants on how their medical information has been assessed.

During 2006/07 a number of other initiatives will be implemented. These include nomination agreements for young people leaving care, to ensure they are supported into new tenancies. Customer service standards will also be drawn up in consultation with tenants and work will start on submitting a bid to the government for funding to implement a Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

Alongside this, work has been completed on a Local Lettings Scheme for Pat Lerner House. Other schemes are also being considered for Local Lettings Schemes. (These schemes enable applicants to apply directly for

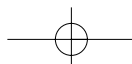
properties and to broaden the allocation criteria to ensure a well balanced community.)

**Breakdown of allocations made during 2005/06**




The allocations policy was updated in February 2006 and a letter was sent to all applicants on both the transfer and Housing Register.

In April 2005 the Homeswap and Mutual Exchange list were joined together. The




# Estate and Tenancy Management

## Anti-Social Behaviour

 The management of Anti-Social Behaviour was identified as a key priority by tenants during the Housing Options Appraisal. The Council has supported the funding of a dedicated officer to manage this aspect of service delivery. A number of initiatives were implemented during 2005/06. For example the Anti Social Behaviour Unit works closely with the Council's Youth Action Programme. This programme provides activities during school holidays for all young people in the area. It specifically targets those at risk of offending. During 2005/06 activities included paintballing, football, graffiti competition and snowboarding.



*Football match with ASB unit, Police and local young people*

 In 2005/06 a disused youth club was refurbished in Sopwell, St Albans and is currently used for a variety of community activities such as, five-a-side football matches, a summer programme of activities with the Youth Action Programme.

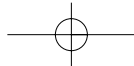
The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit working in partnership with the Police won a special award in 2005/06. The award is given to the best problem solving initiative in the County, which on this occasion was the work done to obtain the first Drug Closure Order in the County. A community involvement day was held in the Cell Barnes area afterwards and residents reported an 80% drop in nuisance in the area.

Staff in the team work closely with Management Officers,


to respond effectively to complaints of nuisance/anti-social behaviour. Equipment has been purchased which includes a wireless surveillance package which will assist in gathering evidence in relation to serious cases of anti-social behaviour.

Another issue which led to complaints during 2005/06 was the nuisance caused from irresponsible use of mopeds and mini-motos on estates. An information leaflet was produced for parents and young people giving details where mini-motos can be ridden. Staff have worked closely with the Police in seizing bikes where nuisance has been caused.

2006/07 will see further initiatives programmed to deal with anti-social behaviour.



# Tenant Participation Tenant Par

 A number of initiatives have taken place during 2005/06 to enhance the level of tenant participation.

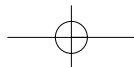
An estate level agreement was implemented at Batford. This sets out service standards and response times for responding to (for example) dumped rubbish, anti-social behaviour and complaints. Quarterly meetings

with the steering group, staff and Ward Councillors are held to monitor the agreement.


The third Residents Conference was held in September 2005 at the Alban Arena and Council Offices attended by over 100 tenants and leaseholders. The conference also increased participation from "hard to

reach" groups with over 30 black and minority ethnic tenants attending the event for the first time.


Workshops during the day covered anti-social behaviour, allocations and lettings and repairs. Feedback from the conference was very positive and the event will be repeated again in September 2006.



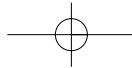
# Participation Tenant Participation

 The Asian Family Health Group celebrated its 11th year in July 2005 at St Lukes Church in Cell Barnes Lane. The group meets every Monday to welcome 18 - 20 women from the local area. Housing staff work closely with primary care staff in providing a forum which covers health, housing and education issues. In partnership with the Asian Womens Group, Oaklands College and Asian Ladies Residents Association, communication and information technology and English language training is provided at Mandeville School in Cottonmill for local women, the majority of whom are tenants.




 The revised Tenant Participation Compact was also completed in 2005/06. The compact is a working document which sets out how we plan to improve tenant participation in the District over the next three years. A steering group of tenants monitors the compact which was produced by tenants through a series of focus groups.

During 2006/07 other initiatives will be implemented to improve tenant consultation and participation. These include the setting up of a youth forum with Community Safety staff in Wheathampstead, focus groups in all retirement housing schemes, Housing staff attending local events to publicise and consult on housing issues, estate walkabouts with staff and tenants when requested, dedicated leaseholder workshop sessions at the Residents Conference, development of core standards for all service areas, and the completion of a Tenant Satisfaction Survey.



# Repairs and Improvements

 During 2005/06 the Council spent over £4 million on responsive repairs to the housing stock. Over 28,000 orders were raised during the year and over £5 million was also spent on larger improvements/maintenance to the housing stock. This included the installation of 245 boilers, 171 properties received kitchen and bathroom improvements, 370 adaptations for disabled persons were completed and replacement uPVC windows. A door entry system and CCTV were installed at Telford Court and Abbots Avenue West in St Albans.


Other works carried out included electrical rewiring, estate improvements, cavity/loft insulation, and external wall insulation and re-roofing to 11 properties at Wistlea Crescent, Colney Heath. This latter project has brought us closer to achieving our target of insulating all properties with solid wall construction by 2014.

A successful partnering agreement was implemented with Apollo London, contractors for the kitchen and bathroom improvements. The partnering agreement includes a dedicated residents' liaison officer, which has helped to improve consultation with tenants whose homes were affected by this work. The contractor, as part of the agreement, has also carried out health and safety talks in local schools in the areas where work has been carried out.



Satisfaction levels with improvement work remains high. The results are summarised in the table below:-

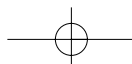
Kitchen and Bathroom refurbishment works Phase 2 A&B	93%
Installation of new double glazed windows	100%
New external wall and roofing works at Wistlea Crescent	89%
Repairs to gas appliances and installation of new boilers	95%

 Further improvements will be carried out to the housing stock during 2006/07 totalling £6.6M.


Of particular interest is the pilot 'Eco House', an initiative to enhance both energy and water conservation features. Works include timber framed windows which are highly insulated, solar panels, recycled rain water, low energy water taps, condensing boiler, dual flush toilets and an energy monitoring

system. When the works have been completed an assessment of fuel costs will be carried out with a similar property to identify those areas which could be incorporated into future programmes.

During 2006/07 work will also be carried out at Riverside Road, St Albans to replace a flat roof with a pitched roof. (This is the first time that work of this type has been carried out to the Council's housing stock.)



# Overall Performance

 Each month, the Housing Service collects and reviews information and statistics covering a range of issues and actions to tell us how well we are delivering the services.

Every quarter this information is passed to elected members (Councillors) of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The information is also reported back to the Government at the end of each financial year and is checked by Auditors from the Audit Commission.

The Housing Service has a total of 5,294 properties which currently either have tenants or are empty and having works carried out in between tenancies. In any one year, about 300 of these properties become empty and are re-let either to people on the transfer list or homeless people in temporary accommodation and hostels.

We aim to keep a close watch on empty properties and monitor closely just how long it takes to carry out work and re-let them to new tenants. At present, it takes an average of 26 days to do this. It is very important that we do monitor our vacant properties closely because when properties are empty no rent is being paid.

The annual rental income we should have received in 2005/06, if all properties had been let for the whole year, was just under £18 Million, however 1% of this was not collected due to properties being empty and awaiting re-letting and a further 1.9% was not collected due to rent arrears.

Our Housing Service is one of the top performing landlords in the country for rent collection. We take action promptly to ensure rent is collected and that tenants who do have rent arrears are dealt with in a firm but fair manner.

We have in place a range of initiatives to prevent tenants falling into rent arrears and help those who do have

arrears and debt problems get back onto an even keel.

This includes :

- The CAB Money Advice Service, a confidential service which helps tenants claim all the benefits they are entitled to and helps them deal with their debts.
- The Housing Benefit Visiting Officer Service who helps tenants sort out benefit problems by visiting them at home to help with their benefit claim.
- The Tenancy Support Service which helps tenants who may have a range of problems due to mental or physical health issues, drug or alcohol dependency or may simply need help getting back on their feet after being homeless.

Despite this help and support, 80 Court Possession Orders were obtained against tenants in 2005/06 and a total of 11 tenants were evicted.

One of the main areas which the service is judged by both tenants and the Government is how it carries out repairs, how much is spent and how long it takes to carry out repairs.

In the last year 2005/06 the service carried out **28,530** repairs - **over 5 repairs per property**. These repairs are all given a target time in which we expect contractors to complete them. In 2005/06 an average of 91% of repairs were completed within the target times which had been allocated to them.

In addition to this, there are some repairs which are classed as the "Right to Repair", eg. heating breakdowns in winter, lack of electricity or hot water. These repairs are monitored separately and last year almost 95% of these were dealt with in the target timescales set by the Government.



Every time a repair is ordered for an individual property, a confirmation letter is sent to the tenant complete with a tear off slip for tenants to let us know whether or not they are satisfied with the repair and the contract. In 2005/06 29,677 of these letters were sent out and from the satisfaction slips returned, almost 90% were satisfied with the quality of the repair and with the contractor. (We are currently looking at ways to encourage more tenants to return these slips to give us more comprehensive feedback on the repairs service for future improvements).

One of the statutory responsibilities of the Housing Service is to deal with homeless applications. Certain categories of homeless people have a right to a Council or Housing Association tenancy and the Council has a duty to keep them in temporary accommodation until it can offer them a more permanent home.

In 2005/06 128 households were accepted as homeless by the Council and were therefore entitled to temporary accommodation while awaiting an offer of permanent accommodation. In any one month during 2005/06, there were between 71 and 123 families in temporary

accommodation. We aim to offer these families a permanent home as soon as possible. Temporary accommodation can be very stressful to family life and can have a particularly bad effect upon children, their health and education.

The average length of stay in hostel accommodation during 2005/06 was 31 weeks. The Housing Service is committed to reducing the number of people placed in hostels and the length of time they have to stay in hostels. This is a Government target to be achieved over the next 3-4 years.

At the start of 2005/06 one of the Council's targets was to eliminate the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for homeless families. This was achieved and no families have been placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation during the year.

These are just a small example of the range of performance indicators we monitor throughout the year, more comprehensive feedback can be provided to tenants on request by contacting the Housing Service directly.

We welcome your comments on this edition of Housing Services Annual Report.

Would you like more information? If so, about which area of the Housing Service?  
Please send in your views and suggestions for future reports.

You can contact can us on 01727 819494 or 01727 819411 or

by Freepost No. SB234  
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