Vulnerable Persons' Strategy for Housing

2014 - 17

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Key objective 4	To develop housing related support services for older people that promote independent living and encourage planning about future housing options.

1.   Introduction to the strategy

1.1   The Council's corporate vision from 2015 - 2020 has been:

The Council is committed to working in partnership to create a borough which enables the communities of Dacorum to thrive and prosper. This requires us to play a leadership role in bringing together a range of organisations and individuals to support and sustain good conditions for local growth.

1.2   The Council believes that strong and sustainable communities are inclusive of those who are vulnerable. It recognises that vulnerability may relate to complex and interacting needs. In its approaches to vulnerable people the Council will seek to minimise stigma attached to vulnerability.

1.3   The Council will work with its partners in supporting residents to achieve independence, and recognises that a person's independence may be realised through the provision of assistance and support when, and how, it is needed.

1.4   Through its housing service the Council can support vulnerable people to learn skills to remain in their home and sustain a tenancy, to become more active members of their community, and to gain access to social care, health, doctors and community organisations, as well as education, training or employment.

1.5   The Council recognises the important business case for addressing the needs of vulnerable people. Many of the risks faced by those who are vulnerable get passed on to the Council through increases in serious housing need and homelessness, rent arrears, poorer maintenance of properties, and increased tenancy turnover. It is in the Council's interest to help its residents meet their housing needs, sustain their tenancies, and maintain their homes.

1.6   Dacorum Borough Council has an overall shared vision for its Housing Service:

We will provide good quality, affordable homes, help maintain tenancies and prevent homelessness – and be honest about improvements we still need to achieve.

1.7   The vision for this three-year Vulnerable Persons' Strategy for Housing reflects the above commitment to service improvement:

> ***We will enhance the Council's housing service to improve the identification and assessment of, and responses to, the needs of vulnerable people.***

1.8   This new Vulnerable Persons' Strategy forms part of the Housing Service framework, containing the strategies and policies that take forward housing provision and services within the borough.

1.9   This strategy was first published in 2014 and has been subject to an internal review in February 2016.

1.10 To drive forward change and improvements that will support the Council's strategic objectives, this Vulnerable Persons' Strategy sets out four key objectives.

Our key objectives

The Council will:

- Provide a responsive service for people who are homeless or in housing need, which operates within the legislative framework, while protecting and reaching out to those who may be least able to protect themselves.

- Provide a joined-up welfare and tenancy sustainment package, triggered by assessment either at the point of a homeless application or commencement of a new tenancy, to prevent vulnerable people losing a tenancy in the first year.

- Improve the service delivered to existing tenants and leaseholders who may be vulnerable, by increasing identification and reporting, and by providing a joined-up, enhanced housing service in response to identified needs.

- Develop housing related support services for older people that promote independent living and encourage planning about future housing options.

2.   Identifying vulnerable people

2.1   The Council has corporate definitions of certain terms, and for vulnerability it has stated:

> *There isn't a single definition of vulnerability, but it usually refers to people who cannot take care of themselves or protect themselves from harm or exploitation. Different groups can become vulnerable in different circumstances.*

2.2   There are both situational and personal aspects of vulnerability, which will interact differently for different individuals. Vulnerability can be thought of as occurring at the point when threats to an individual, from either the environment or from personal circumstances, become greater than the ability to cope with those threats. Understanding those threats, and how individuals can increase their resilience to threats, will help the Council to respond proactively to vulnerability across its housing service.

2.3   Currently the Council has a mix of formal and informal processes across its housing service for identifying and responding to vulnerability, including the corporate safeguarding procedures and domestic violence policy.

2.4   Beyond the Council's corporate procedures and policies, current identification of many cases of vulnerability relies on informal verbal or written reports of evident signs of vulnerability. This is likely to mean that problems are only being identified once situations are already at, or close to, a crisis. At the point of crisis, the needs of the individual will often outstrip resources available to respond effectively.

2.5   The Council does not currently have a rigorous approach to identifying signs that may indicate possible vulnerability, and which could be used to trigger further assessment of needs and help the Council to act pro-actively.

2.6   One of the key roles of this strategy will be to set out within its objectives the implementation of a number of triggers to identify possible vulnerability. The intention is to develop a framework of triggers using indicators that can be taken directly from the Council's existing systems, and then later made more sophisticated with system advances. If an individual or household hits an indicator it will not be assumed that there is vulnerability, but rather that further assessment should be carried out to identify whether there are any vulnerabilities and associated risks.

3. Background

3.1 <u>National context</u>

The Government's Housing Strategy, *Laying the foundations: a housing strategy for England* (November 2011) made a commitment to helping vulnerable people, specifically in relation to the provision of social housing:

> *Social housing should provide support for those who need it, when they need it, and should help vulnerable people to live independently. And opportunities for wealth must be open to all, with housing choices helping rather than hindering people's ability to build assets and find employment.*
>
> *In times of economic hardship it is more important than ever that social housing helps the vulnerable in society.*

This commitment is made at a time when reductions in central and local government spending have resulted in cuts to some services, including those which may have previously supported vulnerable people. This has increased the pressure on local housing authorities to be innovative and proactive in finding ways to enhance their services to better support those who are vulnerable.

Rising housing need, occurring nationally, has been reflected in local increases in people approaching the Council as homeless, applying to the Council's housing register, and requiring additional support from the Council as a landlord to make rent payments and maintain their tenancy. These trends have been detailed in the Council's recent Housing Strategy 2013-2018, Homelessness Strategy 2013-2018, Older Persons' Housing Strategy 2014-2020, Housing Revenue Account business plan, Financial Inclusion Strategy 2012-2015 and Annual Service Plans.

3.2 <u>Dacorum Borough Council's Housing Service</u>

The Council's housing service is made up of three service areas:
- Strategic Housing
- Tenants and Leaseholders
- Property and Place

Through the provision of these services areas the Council takes on a number of roles in the lives of many local residents:
- Assessments of housing need, including homelessness
- Provider of temporary accommodation
- Provider of deposit guarantees for private rented accommodation
- Allocations into social housing
- Assessments of need for homeless people and tenants and provider of targeted welfare and support
- Provider of housing related support for older people
- Rent collection
- Tenancy management, including anti-social behaviour
- Estates management
- Property repairs and improvement

The Council's supported housing service has long provided a dedicated support service to older people. This service has received grant-funding from the Supporting People fund. Although this fund has reduced, and is set to reduce further, the Council

recognises the key role that this level of support, related to a person's housing, can play in achieving successful tenancies and communities.

The Council has also long provided a welfare and support service to homeless households to help these households manage while in temporary accommodation, and then transition successfully into settled accommodation.

In 2013 the Council's tenant and leaseholder service recruited two Financial Inclusion Officers dedicated to supporting tenants who experience difficulties in maintaining their home due to financial difficulties. These additional resources have been identified within the Housing Service's Financial Inclusion Strategy and have proved very successful in minimising tenancy failure and addressing financial exclusion. It is recognised that addressing exclusion purely from a financial perspective does not always address tenant's needs and therefore a more holistic approach to exclusion/vulnerability is required.

In 2015 the Housing Service set up a new Tenancy Sustainment team within the service area 'Property and Place'. This team benefits from technical property-related expertise, which complements officers specialising in the provision of intensive tenancy support. Referrals to this team are made when households hit a set number of 'triggers', which could be identified pre-tenancy or at any point during a tenancy This team has been successful in supporting tenants to access benefits and grants, find work and training opportunities, and engage with external agencies to access other welfare and support packages. The technical expertise within the team has made it possible to support tenants to maintain their homes as well as sustain their tenancies. Since the implementation of the Tenancy Sustainment team, officers have worked with over 130 tenants and reduced rent arrears by £17,525. At February 2015, of those cases closed six or more months ago, 28 of 29 tenants were still managing their tenancy.

3.3   Existing Strategies

Dacorum Borough Council's Housing Service has developed a series of strategies which seek to address the needs of some vulnerable groups or groups who may become vulnerable. These include:

- Older Persons' Housing Strategy 2014 - 2020
- Homeless Strategy
- Financial Inclusion Strategy

These strategies recognise the increasing demand for services designed to support vulnerable people and identify that existing services need to be both enhanced and reshaped in order to ensure outcomes for vulnerable people are effective.

4. Service Review

4.1 Service review introduction

The purpose of undertaking a service review has been to understand the current service, and how to achieve the change necessary in the delivery of Housing Services to ensure that vulnerable people can access our services effectively. The sources used in this review were:
- Deprivation Corporate Working Group: Recommendations for Action 2014.
- Service gap analysis report by the Vulnerable Persons' Strategy working group using:
  - a 'kick start' strategy launch event,
  - journey mapping across all operational housing services.

The four key objectives (see Section 4 "The Objectives") set the direction in which this strategy needs to drive the service forward.

4.2 Deprivation Corporate Working Group: Recommendations for Action

A number of the recommendations for action from the deprivation corporate working group have implications for the housing service and cross-over with this strategy. This strategy has incorporated these recommendations into its strategic objectives, in order to provide the framework and long-term planning for their implementation by the housing service.

Recommendations for action from this work, and which have a bearing on the housing service, are stated below. The objectives in this strategy that these actions relate to are identified by each.

To take advantage of the re-launch of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) to shape it as a coordinating mechanism for services which need to be involved around the child and the needs of the wider family.	Key objectives 1, 2 and 3
To take advantage of the Customer Service Unit's *Single View of the Customer* project.	Key objectives 1 and 3
To take forward Strategic Housing's Joint Front Door initiative by looking for opportunities to link with other services such as HCC's LINK Family Services.	Key objective 1
To include signposts to learning and skills support when advice and services are delivered to families.	Key objectives 1, 2 and 3
To improve engagement with housing associations in Dacorum as significant numbers of people in some areas where poverty is high live in housing association rather than council homes.	Key objective 2
To take advantage of volunteer support programmes for families, such as HomeFirst, and other information services.	Key objectives 2 and 3
Engage with JobCentre Plus through the Universal Credit implementation agenda.	Key objectives 2 and 3

Use the Health and wellbeing Corporate Working Group to identify relevant areas based on evidence and on priorities identified through partnership work with health and social care agencies.	Key objectives 2, 3 and 4
Use existing engagement routes and community expertise, including linking with Community Action Dacorum's current training which is aimed at helping particular Black and Minority Ethnic groups access services, and communicating with the Pakistani community via Muskaan, Global Pindd and Hemel Mosque.	Key objectives 1, 2, 3 and 4
Use existing evidence on disability groups (gained through Equality and Diversity led focus groups) and engage with Hertfordshire County Council Carers' support networks and Young Carers network, to identify needs of carers.	Key objectives 1 and 3
Review the Council's own employment practices to see if we can do more to support disabled people into employment, e.g. flexible work opportunities, increasing awareness of the Access to Work scheme across the Council, disability awareness training for staff, and advertising vacancies via disability groups to invite applications from them.	Key objective 2 and 3

4.3   Service gap analysis by the Vulnerable Persons' Strategy working group

This service gap analysis used a 'kick start' strategy launch event, journey mapping by each of the housing operational teams to identify both opportunities for enhancing the service to meet the needs of vulnerable people and any 'holes in the net'.

This strategy will provide the framework to make long-term plans in-line with strategic objectives that respond to the potential opportunities and risks.

Risks:
- Reductions in services provided by partners (for example, social services and mental health organisations) due to constraining resources and budgets, leaving gaps in services.
- Housing Allocations Policy change which means that every new tenant receiving an introductory tenancy either has had a housing need or has been homeless.
- Lack of procedural clarity for officers when responding to certain situations relating to vulnerable people (including situations where previously officers may have relied on a partner agency and now this service has been reduced).
- Unclear understanding of remit of role in relation to 'vulnerable' people.
- Lack of procedural clarity when more than one officer is involved in a situation with a vulnerable person.
- Unclear about how 'complex needs' should be met.
- Concerns about officer capacity if large numbers of people meet a 'vulnerable person' definition.

What's already working:
- Officers felt that the six week tenancy visit works because: it has to happen; there is a checklist; it is monitored; there is a clear purpose.

- Officers stated high levels of confidence in the anti-social behaviour policy due to its detail and clear processes and requirements of officers, including signposting and safeguarding.
- Effective use of an IT system to monitor support plans for older people.
- A vulnerability checklist already used by Housing Advice and Options Officers in deciding whether a person is vulnerable according to the homelessness legislation.
- Access to tenancy sustainment training for prospective tenants.
- Repairs and maintenance officers report properties where they cannot carry out repairs due to the state of the property, which picks up potential vulnerability issues.
- Maintenance provider 'Concern' cards.
- The 'Love Your Neighbourhood' model and project-specific partnerships that have been developed with housing associations, which has been a successful engagement approach with hard-to-reach households.
- Homeless directory of services to support both officers and residents to identify the range of homeless and housing advice services available across the borough.
- Partnership with Environmental Health (for example, dog chipping and pet policy) to identify potentially vulnerable people in contact with these services.

Opportunities:
- Development of new procedures for situations involving vulnerable people.
- Clear internal and external referral routes.
- A process of visiting all properties where vulnerability indicators have been identified.
- The new maintenance contract and future work with the contractor to enable vulnerability concerns to be identified and reported.
- Partnership with Environmental Health who visit private sector properties to assess disrepair, to identify potentially vulnerable people in housing need in the private rented sector.
- Implementation of adapted properties through choice based lettings to make best use of existing adaptations and properties identified as adaptable, which will increase the number of people whose housing needs can be met who have a disability and associated vulnerabilities.
- Review of the Domestic Abuse Policy implemented in 2013 to make sure that this policy has been successful in protecting vulnerable people fleeing violence.

5. The objectives

KEY OBJECTIVE 1

To provide a responsive service for people who are homeless or in housing need, which operates within the legislative framework, while protecting and reaching out to those who may be least able to protect themselves.

To meet Key Objective 1 this strategy commits to:

1) **Being proactive in identifying and understanding the housing needs of vulnerable people**

   The Council's housing advice and options service comes into contact with people who may be experiencing housing need for a great variety of reasons, and with a variety of different needs. Homelessness is known to have a complex interaction with vulnerability, and there no straightforward cause-and-effect pathway.

   Although homelessness can happen to any individual or household, regardless of status or wealth, cases presenting to the Council are often from lower income households, and long-term deprivation is known to be another interacting factor with both homelessness and vulnerability.

   The Council's officers interview and contact many individuals and households over a day, and the signs of vulnerability can be subtle and not immediately obvious. The Council needs to make sure that officers have sufficient time to spend on cases, as well as the necessary training, to identify vulnerabilities that may be present.

   Evictions from the private rented sector have been increasing, and delays or gaps in benefit claims can be a trigger for eviction. With universal credit due to be implemented over the next few years councils are having to think about how they act to prepare residents to sustain tenancies once claims are all processed online and payments become monthly.

   To achieve Key Objective 1, the Council will:

   - Target housing advice surgeries to areas of known deprivation;
   - Provide officers with training in identification and reporting;
   - Review the adaptations service provided to those who have a physical disability or limited mobility;
   - Include and recognise housing as playing a key role in the corporate digital inclusion project; and
   - Engage with JobCentre Plus through the Universal Credit implementation agenda.

2) **Reviewing the accessibility of the housing advice service and temporary accommodation, acting on any identified vulnerable groups who may be 'under the radar'**

The Council has seen recent increases in the numbers of individuals accessing its housing advice, homelessness, and temporary accommodation services. However, little is understood currently about the make-up of groups accessing these services, and whether there are any barriers that may prevent some groups seeking support from the Council.

To achieve Key Objective 1, the Council will:

- Analyse the customer profile of the housing register against the local population;
- Review the profile and make-up of households in temporary accommodation, and those households who seek a homeless application but choose not to stay in Council-provided temporary accommodation.

This objective also has a specific link to one of the recommended actions from the corporate deprivation working group:

- Use existing engagement routes and community expertise, including linking with Community Action Dacorum's current training which is aimed at helping particular Black and Minority Ethnic groups access services, and communicating with the Pakistani community via Muskaan, Global Pindd and Hemel Mosque.

3) **Improving the accessibility of the choice based lettings system for vulnerable adults**

The Council operates an online choice based lettings system, which is used for the majority of allocations to home-seekers and transferring tenants. This system requires an applicant to have an active online housing register application, and then to view property-adverts.   An applicant has to register their interest in suitable properties by placing up to three 'bids' for properties each week.

An up-to-date equality impact assessment was carried out prior to the introduction of a new Housing Allocations Policy in November 2013.

This equality impact assessment identified that:
The service has not been formally assessed for non-take-up, however it is considered likely that individuals with lower levels of English and from ethnic and cultural minority groups may well be underrepresented on the housing register.

To achieve Key Objective 1, the Council will:

- Carry out a full review of the accessibility of the online choice based lettings format and various methods for bidding on properties (text message, phone call, online etc.);
- Follow up applications on the housing register that have high points totals, but where the applicant has not been placing bids; and

- Develop Housing Advice Officers' knowledge and understanding of available signposting routes to get support for people to assist them in accessing the system.

This objective also has a specific link to one of the recommended actions from the corporate deprivation working group:

- Use existing evidence on disability groups (gained through Equality and Diversity led focus groups) and engage with Hertfordshire County Council Carers' support networks and Young Carers network, to identify needs of carers.

4) **Being innovative in improving the Council's first responses to people in housing need who may be vulnerable**

With increasing numbers of individuals and households presenting to the Council in housing need, the Council's officers have come under pressure to manage their caseloads while responding to crisis events that may occur. This situation can sometimes lead to gaps in the quality of the Council's first response to people, including those who may be in desperate need.

At a time of increasing workloads it is often easy to invest less time in the development and implementation of service improvements and new ways of working. The Council recognises that the pace of change in legislation and government guidance as well as significant increases in demand, mean that it is essential to always maintain a focus on improving how services are delivered and structured.

To achieve Key Objective 1, the Council will:

- Review the effectiveness of the Domestic Abuse Policy implemented in 2013; and
- Assess its frontline services to review whether officers take a sensitive and victim-orientated approach when responding to people approaching the Council fleeing any form of violence or harassment, or as victims of crime; and
- Maintain an up-to-date directory of local homelessness and support services.

This objective also has specific links to two of the recommended actions from the corporate deprivation working group:

- To take forward Strategic Housing's Joint Front Door initiative by looking for opportunities to link with other services such as HCC's LINK Family Services; and
- Take advantage of the Customer Service Unit's *Single View of the Customer* project.

To meet Key Objective 2 this strategy commits to:

1) **Developing an assessment process across the service that feeds into person-focused support for those who are vulnerable**

Balancing the needs of the most vulnerable groups with improving outcomes for the wider resident population is a challenge.

Many people may struggle to maintain a tenancy in the first year after signing-up to their new home. This can be for many different reasons, and different households will require very different levels of support to make sure the first year of a tenancy is successful.

Some households may have come through the homelessness route and have one or more vulnerabilities, which could include factors that contributed to the homeless situation, and which may have then been worsened by the experience of being homeless. Some people may have come from a settled home, but lead chaotic lives, with complex patterns of vulnerability. Others may simply be unprepared and therefore not pay attention to important aspects of maintaining a tenancy. Others may have physical vulnerabilities caused by disability or limited mobility.

The key for the Council will be to implement an assessment process at the point of a homeless application, and at the point of a new tenancy commencing, which can be used to identify the appropriate level of support necessary, based a person-focused approach.

To achieve Key Objective 2, the Council will:

- Provide officers with training on carrying out initial assessment visits;
- Set out clear handover processes between officers and teams, particularly when homeless applicants receive a new tenancy;
- Review and rationalise officer and team involvement in different case types, to make sure that officer time is being used effectively; and
- Offer one point of contact for the most vulnerable.

2) Monitoring the quality and effectiveness of support provided or procured by the Council

Welfare and support services are often provided in residents' own homes and for much of the time support workers are left to manage their caseloads, appointments and paperwork themselves, outside of the main office environment. In some cases this can make it hard to track the consistency, quality and type of support being delivered.

To achieve Key Objective 2, the Council will:

- Fully implement an online system to hold the support plans for homeless applicants and other households identified as vulnerable at the start of an introductory tenancy, with an emphasis on effective data entry by officers and reporting mechanisms for managers;
- Set up job shadowing between officers as part of a peer-review approach to reviewing the consistency of delivery;
- Determine performance indicators for support planning that will drive improvements in service delivery;
- Regularly review the effectiveness of internal team structures, in particular tenancy sustainment, help to rent, and the welfare and support for homeless applicants;
- Develop consistent standards for support workers and complex case workers; and
- Developing written guidelines and codes of practice for support workers and complex case workers.

3) Preventing duplication of effort both internally and externally, and taking advantage of work, projects and initiatives already taking place

It has been recognised by the Council that awareness of all the different services and projects it carries out is not always shared across all its teams, and that this can lead to some duplication of effort, planning and delivery. In addition to this, local charities and voluntary groups may already be set up to provide support to certain groups, and it is in the Council's interest to maximise referrals to these services, so that it can appropriately target its own resources.

Officers working within housing may not be aware of projects, campaigns and initiatives relating to vulnerability, which are being carried by its customer service unit, housing benefit and council tax teams, and so on.

To achieve Key Objective 2, the Council will:

- Develop a comprehensive register of all its in-house expertise in welfare and support, as well as current support services and projects;
- Work alongside partnership organisations to streamline referrals to and from these services; and
- Work together with other council services and external organisations to apply for funding and deliver support services to new and existing tenants.

This objective also has specific links to two of the recommended actions from the corporate deprivation working group:

- To take advantage of volunteer support programmes for families, such as HomeFirst, and other information services.
- To improve engagement with housing associations in Dacorum as significant numbers of people in some areas where poverty is high live in housing association rather than council homes.

4) Being responsible in the use of the private sector in housing people who may be vulnerable

In November 2013 the Council brought in new powers to discharge its homelessness duty into the private rented sector. Previously, private rented allocations were only offered to cases being supported at the prevention stage, prior to homelessness. This has taken away the guarantee of a council or housing association property for a household with a homeless application that has received a positive decision. This change in policy was made in order to recognise that not all households experiencing homelessness necessary need a social home. However, this could mean that more vulnerable households are being placed into the private rented sector without the security of tenure they would have received in the social sector.

To achieve Key Objective 2, the Council will:

- Monitor officers' use of suitability checklists that should prevent unsuitable households being offered private sector accommodation;
- Provide welfare services, alongside tenancy support, for homeless applicants moving into the private rented sector; and
- Develop the relationship between the housing service and Environmental Health to assist with both the rapid identification of, and response to, poor conditions in the private rented sector.

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KEY OBJECTIVE 3

Improve the service delivered to existing tenants and leaseholders who may be vulnerable, by increasing identification and reporting, and by providing a joined-up, enhanced housing service in response to identified needs.

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To meet Key Objective 3 this strategy commits to:

1) Early identification of possible vulnerability through use of 'triggers'

As discussed in Section 2 'Identifying vulnerability', a key role of this strategy is to drive the formation of triggers within the Council's systems, which will provide officers with reports identifying those households who may have one or more vulnerabilities.

Initial work as part of this strategy's development has indicated that this will necessarily be a complex process, requiring contributions from across the housing service of data sets that get collected on a regular basis. Data will need to be handled sensitively so that data protection rights are not breached through the act of 'flagging' someone within a system without informing them.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Explore the possibilities provided by the Council's IT systems, and work to achieve cross-service census of key 'triggers' that will lead to a more detailed officer assessment of vulnerability (for example, '50 repairs calls within three months').
- Take a 'phase one' and 'phase two' approach. Phase two will need to involve planning ahead and informing future system developments, in order that reports become more sophisticated and able to provide more targeted information.

2) Building officer confidence to recognise situations that should result in action

Frontline officers come up against vulnerability as they deal with tenants and their families on a day-to-day basis. As well as the proactive identification of potential vulnerability through triggers, the Council also needs to make sure that its officers are as confident as they can be in identifying vulnerability and knowing how to respond.

In addition to the Council's officers, a number of the housing service's operations are carried out by contractors, particularly within the repairs and maintenance service. Contracted staff going into tenants' homes on behalf of the Council act as representatives of the Council, and it is important that these staff are equally as confident in identifying and reporting vulnerability.

Officers may witness signs of vulnerability, or experience concerns over a situation or condition of a person's home, and it is important that officers both report these signs or concerns, and know how to highlight cases requiring urgent action.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Implement an 'in the field' assessment form for assessing vulnerability and determining that action is needed in any situation where an officer may feel that a person is vulnerable;
- Extend awareness and understanding of the 'Concern' cards given to contractors to report concerns; and
- Provide officers with training through both a core training schedule, and some specifically tailored courses for officers who come up against certain situations or clients more frequently.

3) Developing new procedures for situations involving vulnerable people where officers are expected to take action

Building officer confidence in reporting vulnerability needs to go hand-in-hand with increasing officer confidence that action can, and will, be taken if concerns are raised. If officers feel that nothing is likely to be done, or that they do not have the resources necessary to act, then they may be less likely to make a report.

In addition, poorly defined procedures around situations relating to vulnerability can result in officers spending extra time working out what to do in each case. Without any guidelines or information about possible services to access or available budgets, this work can be very time intensive, which exacerbates the already time intensive nature of working with vulnerable people.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Identify commonly occurring situations and work with officers to develop detailed, clear and understood procedures;
- Set repairs and maintenance priorities for certain groups of vulnerable people;
- Work through targeted 'task and finish' groups for specific issues, particularly where a cross-service response is required within a procedure;
- Develop information sharing protocols with other agencies; and
- Provide training for officers on delivering difficult messages to vulnerable people.

4) Promoting an environment in which people feel able to raise concerns, complaints or grievances, and respond promptly to issues raised

It is absolutely essential that all officers and contractors feel that they are able to raise any nature of concern, complaint or grievance, about anything they have witnessed, and have their report taken seriously.

Officers witnessing events involving vulnerable people may need support to cope with the emotional stress, and the Council needs to promote a strong ethos of protecting and supporting its staff in situations that can be very distressing.

In addition, residents must feel that they are safe in making a confidential report to the Council, and that they will not receive any negative treatment after making a report.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Provide practical support and guidance for staff via the Council's intranet;
- Provide a framework for front-line staff that will assist them to recognise and report any suspected abuse towards either children or vulnerable adults;
- Publicise the names of senior managers who can receive reports confidentially from officers or customers who may feel uncomfortable speaking directly to officers already involved in a case; and
- Periodically promote awareness and sources of support via the tenants and leaseholders newsletter

5) Developing the customer profiling information held by the Council to better understand the needs of its tenants and leaseholders

The more the Council understands its resident base, the more it can plan its services and meet the needs of its tenants and leaseholders. Customer profiling can help the Council to paint a picture of its residents and could identify certain groups with high or low needs, leading to improved targeting of services.

Customer profiling can only ever be a good as the data within the Council's systems. For this reason it is essential that the Council sets and maintains a commitment to keeping up-to-date and accurate data on its tenants and leaseholders.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Maintain comprehensive profiling data on tenants and leaseholders;
- Analyse profiling data in order to make recommendations for how to tailor services to the individual needs of vulnerable people and identify trends across the resident base as a whole;
- Maintain links with statutory agencies and keep up-to-date with current guidelines on customer profiling; and
- Make links to the corporate deprivation project and evidence-based decision-making.

6) Genuinely seeking to engage vulnerable tenants and leaseholders both in decisions affecting them directly and more widely concerning the services they receive

Vulnerable tenant and leaseholder groups are often some of the least likely to be actively involved in consultation and participation activities. This may be because it is harder to attract vulnerable individuals to typical tenant involvement activities (for example, focus groups, tenant forums etc.), and written information may be harder for some vulnerable tenants to access.

Vulnerable individuals may need support to get involved, and may need to have activities specially tailored to meet their needs. The Council recognises the extra care and attention that needs to go into making sure there are opportunities available for vulnerable people to engage in consultation.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Publish client group specific information in service literature and within housing schemes, e.g. Young Parents Service Guide, sheltered housing schemes notice boards, etc.;
- Ensure there are representatives on tenant groups and panels who have experienced, or are experiencing, vulnerability;
- Ensure tenants and leaseholders feel supported and protected by the service's procedures, by reviewing existing procedures alongside the development of new procedures;
- Incorporate into the internal audit process carried out with BSi, an assessment of how effective procedures are for reaching / supporting vulnerable people; and
- Get feedback on communication methods used by the Council and link into the corporate digital inclusion project.

7) Actively seeking partnership working arrangements and funding opportunities from external sources to improve the service's flexibility and capacity to meet the challenges presented by supporting vulnerable people.

In 2015, the Tenancy Sustainment team were awarded £32,886 after a successful bid for funding from the Public Health District Offer. This will be used to fund a project in 2016 to proactively contact young tenants in areas of deprivation and poverty within the borough. These tenants will be assessed for a low level support package to help them maintain their tenancy and avoid crisis.

The Council recognises the impact on its Housing Service from not meeting the needs of vulnerable people, whether tenants or households in the private sector. By investing resources in seeking funding and partnership working arrangements with external organisations, the Council believes it can make savings in its crisis services such as the provision of temporary accommodation, and action for arrears or other breaches of tenancy.

To achieve Key Objective 3, the Council will:

- Bid for funding from external sources e.g. Public Health, NHS, etc;
- Seek partnership working arrangements with external organisations to support households in need of support (both tenants and households in the private sector);
- Make links with Partnership Strategy to be written in 2016 and explore joint commissioning deals with NHS.

KEY OBJECTIVE 4

To develop housing related support services for older people that promote independent living and encourage planning about future housing options.

To meet Key Objective 4 this strategy commits to:

1) **Developing a community-based housing related support service to older people outside of the Council's sheltered schemes**

   The Council's older population is increasing, with more over-60s now living in general needs stock across the borough, as well as the Council's 31 sheltered schemes.

   There is national recognition that low level preventative support services can help people stay independent in their homes for longer, and reduce the need for emergency hospital admissions. Support services can pick up potential problems and vulnerabilities prior to crisis and help to get the necessary health or social care services in place to manage the situation.

   The Council is committed to moving away from an accommodation-based model of support services focused on sheltered schemes, and is moving towards a more flexible support model that can respond to the needs of older people who may be vulnerable, across the community.

   To achieve Key Objective 4, the Council will:

   - Review its support services in order to successfully plan the provision of flexible, floating support services;
   - Maximise the use of an online system for creating support plans to provide effective support to older people in their own homes; and
   - Carry out an equality impact assessment of older persons' services to make sure that the service is being accessed by all groups who need it among the older population living in council homes.

2) **Making best use of sheltered schemes as central 'hubs' for support for older people**

   While the Council is moving towards making its support services more flexible in order to meet the needs of those who do not live within its sheltered schemes, the schemes still provide the Council with valuable community assets, as well as being homes for many older people in the borough.

   The Council needs to maximise use of the communal areas and facilities offered by its schemes, and work with partners to extend the use of these facilities to provide a range of services. In addition, the Council needs to further promote the activities and services being offered, to the local communities that surround each scheme.

To achieve Key Objective 4, the Council will:

- Use schemes to hold awareness events to promote older persons' housing options;
- Develop an action plan to advertise activities and services taking place at sheltered schemes to the surrounding local communities; and
- Work with existing residents of sheltered schemes to make sure that residents are welcoming and supportive to members of the community using services based on site.

3) Ensuring that existing residents of sheltered schemes are provided with general information on living alongside tenants with higher care needs.

The average age of occupants of sheltered schemes, has changed since many of these schemes were constructed in the 1970s and 80s. Original resident populations had a majority of tenants in their 60s, who were often active and participated in the running of the scheme. These tenant populations have since got older, and new tenants moving into schemes are also often older, as people are now more likely to choose not to move into a scheme until they are less able to manage their family home.

Age ranges in sheltered schemes are therefore now much greater and in some cases this can result in frictions where very different expectations are formed about the extent to which tenants should be prepared to participate in the running of the scheme and contribute to its social environment.

To achieve Key Objective 4, the Council will:

- Improve residents' general understanding of the range of the needs and wishes within a scheme; and
- Use supporting planning to identify residents who wish to assist neighbours with higher support needs and make sure that scheme managers feel able to support their efforts.

4) Developing the relationship with Hertfordshire County Council adult services, police and fire services, and exploring opportunities for joint commissioning with the Hertfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board

New opportunities are arising for multi-agency working through the formation of new strategic boards that have been set up by central and local governments, in order to try and coordinate service delivery and rationalise some elements of commissioning services.

The Council needs to be an active partner in local discussions that will shape future service delivery, in order to make sure that its priorities in terms of meeting the needs of its vulnerable residents can be met.

To achieve Key Objective 4, the Council will:

- Maximise use of local partnerships to provide joined-up services and to raise awareness of issues affecting older people.