

# **Report of an Overview and Scrutiny Advisory Panel on the Affordability of Housing, Levels of Housing Benefits, Poverty and Homelessness in Hyndburn.**



## **Panel Membership:**

**Councillor D Hayes (Chair)**

**Councillor B Dawson**

**Councillor Mrs M Haworth**

**Councillor M Pritchard**

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

An Advisory Panel was set up in July, 2005, with the remit to review the Affordability of Housing, the current levels of Housing Benefits, Poverty and Homelessness in Hyndburn and report back its findings to a future Joint meeting of the Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The need and reasons for such a review had originally been raised by a Hyndburn Councillor at an Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held in February, 2005. As a cross-cutting topic, both the Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees considered the request for and agreed to the inclusion of such a review in their Work Programmes for the 2005/2006 Municipal Year.

Advisory Panel Members received a background information pack in September, 2005 which included evidence from the 2003 Housing Needs Survey in Hyndburn; a report on Strategies against Poverty, and current policies and information on the levels of Housing Benefits in the Borough.

The Panel met on five occasions. An inaugural meeting was held on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2005 to receive the background information and agree the consultation process and methodology for the Review. A second meeting was held on 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2005 which received verbal and written evidence from Councillor G Jones, Hyndburn Borough Council and submissions of written evidence from individuals/organisations which had been invited to contribute to the Review. A full day of evidence gathering interviews was undertaken by the Advisory Panel on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2005 whereby the Panel Members met 11 people – a list of witnesses is set out at Appendix 'A'. Further meetings were held on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2006 whereby the Panel considered all the evidence received and formulated a number of recommendations based on their findings.

A summary of the findings of the Advisory Panel, based on the evidence it received, is included in Section 3 of this report.

Section 4 of the report explains the key factors emerging from the Witness/Documentary evidence considered by the Advisory Panel during the course of the Review.

The Panel's final recommendations are set out at Section 5 of the report.

These recommendations will now be submitted to a future Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting for consideration and approval. Agreed recommendations will then be presented to Cabinet and/or Council as appropriate.

## **2. INTRODUCTION, TERMS OF REFERENCE AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Background to the Review**

The Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees agreed to the inclusion of a review in their Work Programmes for 2005/2006.

The need for such a review had arisen following a request from an Overview and Scrutiny Councillor who had outlined concerns about the Affordability of Housing, Levels of Housing Benefits, Poverty and Homelessness in Hyndburn.

As a result, following a Joint meeting of the Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2005, it was decided to appoint an Overview and Scrutiny Advisory Panel to review the Affordability of Housing, Levels of Housing Benefits, Poverty and Homelessness in Hyndburn to assess the current situation and ascertain what future actions were required.

### **Terms of Reference of the Review**

The Joint meeting of the Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees held on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2005 agreed the terms of reference of the review as follows:

1. To examine the affordability of housing, the current levels of housing benefits, poverty and homelessness in Hyndburn.
2. To present a report on the Advisory Panel's findings to a Joint Meeting of the Community Safety and Well-Being and the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees in November 2005.

In undertaking the review, it soon became apparent to the Advisory Panel that, in order to examine the many issues arising on this cross-cutting topic in detail, the originally agreed November 2005 date for the submission of a final report to a future Joint meeting of the Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees would not be a realistic timetable for completion. Accordingly, and in accordance with Hyndburn Borough Council's Constitution (Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules C9(c) - Appointment of Panels), the Advisory Panel sought and was granted permission by the Scrutiny Management Forum to exist and continue for a specified period beyond six months.

### **Establishment of Panel**

It was decided to establish a Panel of 4 Non-Cabinet Members to carry out the review and report back to a Joint meeting of the Community Safety & Well-Being and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees. All four Non-Cabinet Members appointed to the Advisory Panel were Members of one or more of the Council's three Overview and Scrutiny Committees

The Advisory Panel was also politically balanced, as required by Hyndburn's Constitution.

## **Meetings of the Panel**

The Panel met on five occasions. An inaugural (halfday) meeting was held on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2005; a second (halfday) meeting was held on 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2005; a third (full day) meeting was held on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2005; and fourth and fifth (both halfday) meetings were held on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2006 respectively.

The Panel received verbal contributions from 12 people in total at the meetings held on 27<sup>th</sup> October and 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2005 (Appendix A lists all the evidence considered by the Panel).

The Housing Projects Manager, Strategic Housing acted as Lead Officer and Advisor to the Panel and the Head of Benefits and Customer Services provided professional advice and support on the Housing Benefit issues. The Overview & Scrutiny Officer acted as Clerk to the Advisory Panel and provided additional support.

The Advisory Panel, at its final meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2006, assessed all the evidence received, reached its conclusions and formulated recommendations.

## **Modus Operandi**

At the first meeting of the Advisory Panel held on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2005, the Chair agreed with other Panel Members the method of working they would adopt. This consisted of:

- an agreement that Panel Members would not apportion blame for decisions made in the past. The aim of the Panel is to learn from the past, but with a view to improving things for the future.
- an agreement that the Panel would avoid political debate during the duration of the Advisory Panel.

## **Thanks**

The Advisory Panel would like to record its thanks to the individuals / organisations and Council Members and Officers who took part in the consultation on this scrutiny topic.

The Advisory Panel would also like to express its appreciation and thanks to the undermentioned individuals who contributed their time and expertise during the information gathering interviews stage of the process:-

Councillor Graham Jones, Hyndburn Borough Council.

Brendan Lyons, Chief Planning and Transportation Officer, Hyndburn Borough Council.

David Foster, Dorothy McGregor and Dave Bishop, Maundy Relief.

Belinda McGough and Helen May, Accrington What Now? Information Centre.

Steve Todd, Chief Environmental Services Officer and Ian Halliday, Senior Environmental Health Officer, Hyndburn Borough Council

Jim Devereux, SHELTER.

Joe Treacy, West Accrington Residents Association.

Michael Hall, the Rent Service.

Cliff Eggar, Citizen's Advice Bureau

### **3. THE PANEL'S MAIN FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Regional and National Context – Evidence Considered**

The Advisory Panel in considering the regional and national context for this scrutiny topic, and as background information, examined a report entitled “Strategies against Poverty – a shared road map” by Donald Hirsch, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The Panel also considered a document prepared jointly by the Lead Officer and Advisor to the Panel and the Head of Benefits and Customer Services which outlined the new legislation to be introduced in the Housing Act 2004, and explained the effects of the Housing Benefit (General) Regulations 1987 and the Government’s planned Housing Benefit reforms.

Following the Advisory Panel meeting held on the 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2005, Members requested and received evidence from the Chief Planning and Transportation Officer which detailed Regional Planning Guidance on the subjects of “Living in the North West ensuring a strong, healthy and just society”, “Building Sustainable Communities in the North West” and “Regional Priorities for Housing”. The Advisory Panel also gave consideration to the following policies:-

- Policy L1 – Access to Health and Education Services
- Policy L2 – Understanding Housing Markets
- Policy L3 – Existing Housing Stock and Housing Renewal
- Policy L4 – Regional Housing Provision
- Policy L5 – Affordable Housing

The Advisory Panel received Witness Evidence at the Panel meeting held on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2005 from both SHELTER and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). The Advisory Panel also received, as written evidence, a number of copies of CAB News which were tabled at the meeting on the themes of:-

- SERIOUS BENEFITS – the success of CAB benefit take-up campaigns
- JUSTICE MATTERS – Citizens advice service and publicly funded legal services
- PRESCRIBING ADVICE – Improving health through CAB advice services

#### **3.2 Local Context – Evidence Considered**

The Advisory Panel in considering the local context for this scrutiny topic, identified and wrote to a total of 42 individuals/organisations seeking their views on the affordability of housing, levels of housing benefits, poverty and homelessness in Hyndburn in order to assess the current situation and ascertain what future actions were required. The individuals/organisations consulted included a number of Officers and Councillors of Hyndburn Borough Council; voluntary and statutory organisations and agencies; a Residents Association; Housing Associations and individuals/companies providing Private Rented Sector (PRS) Housing.

Following this consultation, a total of 12 written responses were received from individuals/organisations. Additionally “witness” evidence was also received in person from a total of twelve people at interviews conducted at two of the Advisory Panel meetings.

The existence and remit of the Advisory Panel was also publicised via a media release in September 2005 which was published in the local press. The work been undertaken by the Advisory Panel was also broadcast and publicised on a local Radio Station.

## **4. FACTORS EMERGING FROM THE WITNESS/DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE CONSIDERED BY THE ADVISORY PANEL**

The Advisory Panel reviewed and examined in detail witness/documentary evidence submitted on the current issues affecting the affordability of housing, levels of housing benefits, poverty and homelessness in Hyndburn and considered a number of proposals for change. These are discussed below. The Panel's recommendations are summarised in section 5 of the report.

- 4.1** The Chief Planning and Transportation Officer, Hyndburn Borough Council reported on the Local Development Framework (LDF) and explained that the LDF was the physical implementation of the Community Strategy and therefore must incorporate measures to address priorities to be delivered by the planning system. He also reported on the complexity and number of layers in Planning Regulations and Guidance.
- 4.2** Maundy Relief informed the Advisory Panel that 45% of homeless people seeking assistance were under 25 years of age; that Benefit Levels for Under 25s frustrated this age group's access to rented housing and that there was a need for properly joined up tenancy and support packages.
- 4.3** Lancashire County Council (LCC) Info Centre for Young People reported that repeat presentations (of young people at the Centre) were increasing as their needs were not being properly met first time round. They felt it was very hard for those (young persons) who wanted to escape from their itinerant "edgy" lifestyle to do so, given the low level of educational input and tenancy support.
- 4.4** Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) explained that there was a need to ensure that people understood the importance of dealing with rent arrears at a very early stage, perhaps requiring the issuing of a simple to understand first letter. It was also felt that the greater use of attachment to benefits orders would increase a person(s) commitment to repay arrears.
- 4.5** The Chief Environmental Services Officer and the Senior Environmental Health Officer (Private Sector Housing) explained that in order to inspect proactively, dedicated resources would need to be provided. A total of 63 property inspections had been undertaken in the six month period (01/07/05 – 31/12/05), following which thirteen Section 189 Improvement Notices had been served on unfit properties.
- 4.6** SHELTER stressed that early intervention and prevention work was essential and stated that Stock Transfer Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) had tended to become more robust in their arrears policies.
- 4.7** West Accrington Residents' Association reported that whilst properties might be available at a comparatively low price in Hyndburn, until the low-wage economy in Hyndburn changed, properties would still remain relatively unaffordable to many people. Reference was also made to the current benefits regime, which it was felt discouraged work/employment for many.
- 4.8** The Rent Service informed the Advisory Panel of the statutory legislation and procedures that they had to undertake as part of their duties inspecting properties. Arising from the Rent Service's witness evidence, it was suggested that further co-operation on the exchange of information between the Rent Service and the Council should be pursued.

## **5. THE PANEL'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

That the Council endeavours to make the most of the powers available to it under the Housing Act 2004, particularly in respect of:-

- considering the selective licensing of poorly managed properties in the private rented sector;
- taking a proactive approach to the inspection and improvement of poor condition properties using the Housing Health & Safety Rating System.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

That the Council encourages partner agencies involved with homelessness to work together in order to prevent homelessness occurring wherever possible, to provide:-

- properly co-ordinated intelligence about the nature and incidence of homelessness;
- co-ordinated and targeted follow-up of individuals through support provision and ongoing casework.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

That the Council approaches the Rent Service to ascertain the possibility of that organisation making a more effective contribution to the identification of, and subsequent action taken to improve sub-standard houses.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

That, through its partnership in Elevate East Lancashire, the Council maximises the investment available to encourage access to good quality housing which is affordable to those on low incomes.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5:**

That, a publicity campaign be undertaken to reach tenants in all rented sectors, in order to get across the message that tenants should seek help at the very earliest stage of being unable to pay their rent, to include leaflets sent with all rent arrears correspondence, housing benefit letters, etc, and possibly utilising a radio slot.

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## **APPENDIX 'A': List of Evidence Considered by the Panel**

### **Written evidence:**

1. Lead Officer, Overview and Scrutiny Advisory Panel - Briefing Paper outlining some of the issues on the affordability of housing, current levels of housing benefits, poverty and homelessness in Hyndburn as at September, 2005.
2. Hyndburn Borough Council 2003 Housing Needs Survey – a summary report containing the results from an assessment of housing needs conducted by DCA Housing Regeneration Consultants on behalf of Hyndburn Borough Council.
3. Strategies Against Poverty – A Shared Road Map – report of Donald Hirsch/Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
4. Hyndburn Borough Council documents – Hyndburn's Housing Strategy 2004-2007; A profile of Hyndburn 2004 and Housing Strategy 2004-2007 – Customer Summary.
5. Head of Benefits and Customer Services - Hyndburn Borough Council – information on caseload, average eligible rents and average awards of Housing Benefit as at 11<sup>th</sup> August, 2005.
6. Councillor Graham Jones – Details of types of properties and costs of rental properties at three Hyndburn Letting Agents – October, 2005.
7. Chief Environmental Services Officer/Senior Environmental Health Officer (Private Sector Housing), Hyndburn Borough Council – written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
8. Strategic Housing Manager, Hyndburn Borough Council - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
9. Strategic Housing (Homelessness), Hyndburn Borough Council - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
10. Strategic Housing (Urban Renewal), Hyndburn Borough Council - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
11. Community Advice Centre, Hyndburn Borough Council – written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
12. Hyndburn Homes (Tenancy Services) - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
13. Derek King, Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
14. Miss B McGough – Information and Advice for Young People, 3 Abbey Street, Accrington - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation. Casework details and photographic evidence of a rental property in disrepair
15. East Lancs Moneyline – written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
16. Charlotte Lynch, St Vincent's Housing Association - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.
17. Eric Best – Best Property Services - written response to the Advisory Panel Consultation.

18. Chief Planning and Transportation Officer, Hyndburn Borough Council – policy document – Living in the North West ensuring a Strong, Healthy and Just Society “Building Sustainable Communities in the North West and Regional Priorities for Housing”.
19. Head of Benefits and Customer Services, Hyndburn Borough Council – Examples of Housing Benefits Notification Letters.
20. Information received from Salford City Council detailing their proposals for the development and implementation of Landlord Licensing.

**Verbal evidence:**

The Panel considered verbal evidence from the following witnesses:-

21. Councillor Graham Jones, Hyndburn Borough Council.
22. Brendan Lyons, Chief Planning and Transportation Officer, Hyndburn Borough Council.
23. David Foster, Dorothy McGregor and Dave Bishop, Maundy Relief.
24. Belinda McGough and Helen May, Accrington What Now? Information Centre.
25. Steve Todd, Chief Environmental Services Officer and Ian Halliday, Senior Environmental Health Officer, Hyndburn Borough Council
26. Jim Devereux, SHELTER.
27. Joe Treacy, West Lancashire Residents Association.
28. Michael Hall, the Rent Service.
29. Cliff Eggar, Citizen’s Advice Bureau