

Homeless Reduction Act (HRA) update 29 March 2018

Introduction

The Homeless Reduction Act comes into force on 3 April 2018. This is one of the most significant changes to homeless legislation since the introduction of the original Act in 1977.

The Act will mean that all local authorities will be required to:

*prevent more people from becoming homeless in the first place by identifying people at risk and intervening earlier with solutions which work

*intervene rapidly if a homeless crisis occurs, so that it is brief and non recurrent

*help more people recover from and exit homelessness by getting them back on their feet

* Detailed advice factsheets designed for the specific vulnerable groups listed below:

- Care leavers
- Former armed forces
- People leaving custody
- Victims of domestic abuse
- People leaving hospital
- People with mental health issues

These factsheets will be included on our website shortly. They will expand the advice and information duty to all people and ensure that advice is tailored, clear and specific.

*ensure all applicants who may be homeless or threatened with homelessness have an assessment of their circumstances, housing needs and support needs carried out

Implications for Dover District Council:

The introduction of the new Act will mean an increase in workload and duties for staff. It is anticipated that there will be:

*more applications

*more decisions

*changes in case management requirements

*an increase in review points

*a new Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government data collection requirements

*a new focus on prevention, to help households to retain their accommodation, where it is safe to do so.

Preparatory work undertaken to date:

A great deal of preparation has been taking place in the background and a summary of the action taken to date is below;

- Meetings have been held with various internal and external agencies in order to bring all our partners on board and discussions have started about closer joint working. This will be an ongoing action.
- A landlord forum was held last month to start dialogue with our landlords. Availability of private rented sector properties will be key to our success as this will provide some of the move on accommodation which is required.
- The duty to refer element of the Act will formally come into force in October 2018. An agency awareness forum is planned for 24 April 2018. engage with all our voluntary and statutory agencies. A member of staff from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will facilitate this session.
- A meeting is being set up with estate agents to discuss early intervention in terms of rent arrears, ASB and any other tenancy breaches in private rented properties. The message is that the earlier we start working with people, the easier it may be to help people to retain their existing tenancy hence preventing homelessness.
- A meeting with East Kent Housing has also taken place to discuss closer working, notifying us of tenancy breaches, Court action, eviction proceedings, etc. at a very early stage. Early intervention is the key to ensure people stay in their homes with the required support.
- All policies, procedures and processes have been reviewed to ensure they are HRA compliant and/or new ones written where required.
- The website has been reviewed to ensure the information is HRA compliant and where required information has been reviewed, updated or included. This is an ongoing action as the website is being overhauled.
- All staff have attended many HRA training sessions and webinars. Factsheets, process maps and flow charts have been devised in order for staff to have practical reference points.
- It is estimated that a housing options interview may take approximately two hours per person. We are looking at ways of reducing this without compromising the time spent with each customer allowing them sufficient time to put their case across.
- Staff are booked on motivational interviewing techniques training in order to ensure they ask the right questions, in the right way in order to get the information they require to make the right decisions.

- The first point of contact and triage has been reviewed to ensure effective early intervention and homeless prevention. All contact will initially be via the website.
- The discharge of duty into a six month assured shorthold tenancy is also key to the success of this Act and negotiations are underway with Ashford Borough Council to work with them to secure private rented accommodation via their social lettings agency.
- IT is another key area and Locata was completely rebuilt to take on board all the changes of the Act. This has made the process much easier as although staff will still have to learn a new system, however, it broadly follows the same path as the Act.
- All staff have been trialling the personal housing plans with existing applicants and they have also been using the Locata test system in order to be prepared for 3 April 2018.

Challenges:

A key challenge is changing the culture of the team.

Staff have to let go of the “old way” and learn the “new way.” This is essential to improving the customer experience as the approach is completely different. It is so easy to slip back into the “old way.” This will be closely monitored.

Various team building sessions and quizzes have been held and discussions about our approach. This will be an ongoing action.

This new environment is unknown territory and we cannot predict whether there will be a rush or a hush – huge demand for our services or business as usual.

There is a positive atmosphere in the office. Staff are understandably a bit apprehensive about the changes but they are also excited about the changes and are willing to make it work.