B&B special

All but a handful of local authorities have hit the government’s target of moving families out of bed and breakfast accommodation.

David Blackman finds out what’s behind this remarkable turnaround and, overleaf, Samantha Thorp meets some of the people who have benefited

No time for complacency

Alan Matthews, assistant director of housing at Croydon Council, emphasises that while the B&B battle has been won, there is still a huge effort needed to tackle the spiralling numbers living in short-term housing.

“We are still rehousing people in temporary accommodation at record numbers," he says. “It’s important to put this into context. We can’t afford to let the government think that the problem has gone away. It does not take away the cause for permanent housing. People’s lives are still on hold because they are being temporarily rehoused.”

Nevertheless, at a time when the public sector’s ability to deliver what its sets out to do is being constantly questioned, meeting the B&B target ought to give housing professionals a rare chance for self-congratulation. As Ms Mapstone at Westminster says: “You don’t come into housing to get people into B&B. To have the ability to do this is tremendous.”

The council fulfils its social obligations while remaining pragmatic. Brent’s chief housing officer Frances Mapstone says the expansion of the private rented market over the last two years has made tackling B&B problems part of a wider effort to tame the problems generated by a housing market where spiralling numbers living in short-term housing.

B&B is far from the end of the story. Authorities are now legally bound to stick by the six week limit for homeless families in B&B even though there is no guarantee of continued financial support from the B&B list after the end of this financial year.

Ms Mapstone at Westminster says: “We are still rehousing people in temporary accommodation at record numbers." she knows of only one other county, Shropshire, which has similar countywide arrangements in place.

Better news, according to Devon housing aid centre manager Brian Moore, is that what he describes as the culture change within local authority homeless services since the passage of the Homelessness Act two years ago. “It’s forced them to work with people they have not worked with before,” he says, citing the voluntary sector and small landlords. A similar culture shift now needs to take place in social services departments, according to Mr Moore. Mr Agnew says: “One person turns up to one meeting and then you don’t see them [again].”

Mr Moore says that in Devon the achievement of the B&B target has inevitably placed pressure on the existing stock. “It’s not as if extra housing is being magicked up from nowhere,” he says, adding that North Devon Council’s homeless services has already tightened up its admittedly generous procedures for adjudicating homelessness applications. He says pensioners have been denied assistance in recent weeks.

Mr Bennett says that Shelter has no evidence yet that single homeless people and couples are looking out as a result of the focus on families. But it is something that the homeless charity, already worried about the record numbers of single people and couples in temporary accommodation, will not want to keep a close eye on.

There are underlying concerns about the poverty trap created by the high rents for families in temporary accommodation.

One extreme to the other

At the other end of the scale is the London borough of South Hams in Devon’s district council of South Hams. It has made tackling B&B problems part of a wider effort to tame the problems generated by a housing market where the cost of the average home is 110% to its £20,000 level of the average wage.

People in temporary accommodation will benefit from the £105 permanent units that the authority will be funding annually through its new second homes council tax levy. South Hams housing resources and development manager Andrew Fiske says the authority has also been investing in more immediate solutions by buying up houses on the open market. The debt free authority has used set aside capital receipts to buy five homes for use as temporary accommodation. Mr Fiske says South Hams is now planning to spend £1.5 million on buying another 10 homes for the same purpose. The council fulfils its social obligations while remaining pragmatic. Brent’s chief housing officer Frances Mapstone says the expansion of the private rented market over the last two years is forcing the market to address the homes are appearing in value. ‘Like everybody we are all trying to see an increase in the value of our investment,’ says Mr Fiske. He admits there is a down side to this approach. ‘It’s taking low cost property out of the market,’ he says. ‘We are sensitive to that.’

But other small rural authorities will struggle to keep pace with the dues laid down in the Homelessness Act 2002, warns Jo Agnew, who is employed by Devon’s eight district and borough councils to draw up a joint homelessness strategy for the county. The 1 April deadline is far from the end of the story. Authorities are now legally bound to stick by the six week limit for homeless families in B&B even though there is no guarantee of continued financial support from the B&B list after the end of this financial year.

Ms Agnew’s appointment is designed to help smaller authorities cope with the demands of the act. ‘The reasons for people becoming homeless are the same across the board,’ she says. And homeless people do not recognise local authorities, as any large centre demonstrates. But the council fulfils its social obligations while remaining pragmatic. Brent’s chief housing officer Frances Mapstone says the expansion of the private rented market over the last two years is forcing the market to address the

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