

REPORT TO: Cabinet

DEPARTMENT: Department of Community Services

DATE: 20 September 2006

REPORTING OFFICER: Head of Housing
(Keith Watts, ARCH Mediation Manager)

SUBJECT: HowzTalk and Family Mediation Service

WARD/S AFFECTED: All wards

FORWARD PLAN REF: N/A

1.0

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

1.1

Update the position regarding the funding of the ARCH Mediation's HowzTalk and Family Mediation service beyond 31 December 2006.

1.2

Advise the Cabinet of the outcome of a report considered by CMT on 15 June 2006, with further discussions taking place on 10 August 2006. A one-off growth bid of £6,375 was approved to fund the service between January 2007 to 31 March 2007, to be funded from corporate under-spends. It was also agreed that a growth bid would be submitted as part of the 2007/08 budget round.

1.3

Request agreement in principle to budgetary growth of £26,320 in order to fund the service in 2007/08.

2.0

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Cabinet supports the principle of the post of HowzTalk Project Worker becoming part of the Council's staff establishment, subject to approval of a growth bid in the 2007/08 budget setting process.
- 2.2 That the Cabinet supports the principle of the HowzTalk and Family Mediation Service becoming a core service of the Council with annual funding of £26,320 from the General Fund, subject to approval of a growth bid in the 2007/08 budget setting process.

3.0

RECOMMENDED REASON FOR DECISION

- 3.1 Existing funding for this service ends on 31 March 2007. Second homes funding was secured from North Yorkshire County Council via the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) for the period 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2006. There is no prospect of further second homes monies for this project.

4.0

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND RECOMMENDED FOR REJECTION

- 4.1 Not to continue with the HowzTalk and Family Mediation service after 31 March 2007. The service has made a significant impact in the reduction of homelessness and has facilitated alternative solutions for accommodating young people faced with homelessness. The service now forms a key part of the Council's homeless prevention strategy and is regarded as a core service.

5.0

BACKGROUND

- 5.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 encouraged much greater emphasis to be placed upon the prevention of homelessness. The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) has set a target for all local authorities to reduce by 50% the number of people in temporary accommodation by 2010.
- 5.2 The largest group of people becoming homeless is 'young people being asked to leave home by family or relatives'. This currently accounts for approximately 40% of all homeless acceptances in the Harrogate District. Detailed guidance and advice has been given to the Council by the DCLG regarding ways to reduce homelessness. Mediation is seen as a key service that councils should be providing in order to prevent homelessness in this group (see Appendix 3).

In addition Housing, and especially homelessness, forms a significant part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment district council framework from 2006 onwards.

- 5.3 In response to the growing homelessness problem the Cabinet Member (Housing) and the Human Resources Committee agreed to introduce a homeless mediation service (branded HowzTalk as part of ARCH Mediation) during 2005. For the calendar year 2006 £31,000 was earmarked for homeless mediation, (£23,300 from North Yorkshire County Council, £5,500 DCLG grant and the balance of £2,200 from the Council's General Fund).

6.0

THE HOWZTALK AND FAMILY MEDIATION SERVICE

- 6.1 The HowzTalk and Family Mediation service can help support young people to remain or return home, where this is appropriate, thus avoiding homelessness. It can also help potentially homeless households by creating a period of respite during which a properly planned move can be made. The target group is primarily 16 and 17 year olds. This is one of the groups to which the Homelessness Act 2002 extended the Council's statutory duty to secure accommodation.

6.2

HowzTalk undertakes one-to-one meetings with the young people to discuss their situation and to identify their needs and what support can be given. The sessions act as a reality check on what homelessness means and how the young people are going to cope with living in temporary accommodation. The sessions may be followed by meetings with the parents and by referrals to other support agencies, including counselling, Women's Aid, HADA, Connexions, Barnardos and ARCH's Family Mediation service.

6.3

Around a third of the HowzTalk clients have a history of abuse, neglect, domestic violence, drugs and alcohol misuse and mental health problems within the family. By facilitating support, HowzTalk is helping young people to deal with these issues, plan their futures and to avoid the spiral of debt and anti-social behaviour. In this way HowzTalk can be seen to reduce the burden on the Council and to other agencies such as the Police, Social Services and the Health service.

6.4

A close working relationship has been developed with the Barnardos' Supported Lodgings for Young People scheme (SLYP). This has resulted in SLYP increasing the amount of their supported accommodation from 6 to 12 units, thereby reducing demand for council temporary accommodation.

6.5

The current staffing for the HowzTalk and Family Mediation service is:

- One part-time HowzTalk Project worker (22.5 hrs/wk)
- One part-time administrative officer (4 hours per week)
- Mediation Manager (7.5 hours a week)
- A team of mediators (currently 8), who are paid on a sessional basis to

undertake family mediations.

7.0 HOWZTALK AND FAMILY MEDIATION PERFORMANCE

7.1 The HowzTalk And Family Mediation service has developed significantly since its inception in April 2005. HowzTalk had 72 referrals during 2005/06 and prevented homelessness occurring in 21 cases. The use of temporary accommodation was delayed in a further 5 cases. However, the full benefits of HowzTalk are much broader than that of reducing numbers in temporary accommodation. Performance statistics are contained in Appendix 1.

8.0 FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

8.1 CMT approved on 10 August 2006 a one-off growth item of £6,375 for the current financial year, funded from 2006/07 corporate under-spends, to provide funding for the service from 1 January to 31 March 2007.

8.2 CMT at its meeting on 15 June 2006 gave support, in principle, to the proposal to put forward a growth bid to fund the service in 2007/08 and beyond. In order to maintain the service provision at the present level, (making an allowance for inflation), a budget of £31,820 would be required in 2007/08. The service receives £5,500 from the DCLG as part of the Homelessness Grant. This leaves the balance of £26,320 to be met by the General Fund. There is the risk of a potential increase in the cost to the General Fund in future years should the Council cease to receive the DCLG grant.

9.0 HOMELESSNESS – THE COST TO THE GENERAL FUND

9.1 Considerable progress has been made by the Housing Needs section in the reduction of the number of people to whom the Council accepts a homeless duty; with a reduction from 317 acceptances in 2004/05 to 142 acceptances in 2005/06. However, the cost of providing temporary accommodation to homeless households continues to be a heavy burden to the General Fund, largely because of the low turnover rate of suitable permanent accommodation (both council and housing association).

9.2 Temporary accommodation costs have risen significantly over the last few years. Between 2001/02 and 2005/06 the net cost to the General Fund of temporary accommodation rose from £25,940 to £362,773. However, from April 2006, the charges paid by people in temporary accommodation have been restructured to maximise the amount of housing benefit received in order to reduce the net cost of temporary accommodation to the General Fund.

9.3 For young people made homeless by relatives and friends, the number of acceptances has reduced from 142 in 2004/05 to 75 in 2005/06 and the HowzTalk service has been a major reason for this achievement. On average homeless young single people stay 7.32 weeks in Bed and Breakfast; then transfer to a council hostel where they will stay an average of 19.28 weeks.

10.0 HOWZTALK SERVICE – POTENTIAL SAVINGS TO THE GENERAL FUND

- 10.1 The net cost to the General Fund for a young single person to stay in a Bed and Breakfast is between £112 and £629. It is predicted that the HowzTalk service will prevent 25 young people from becoming homeless in 2006/07. The minimum direct savings as a result of HowzTalk's work is likely to be a minimum of £2,800 (25 x £112) and a maximum of £15,725 (25 x £629) in bed and breakfast charges.
- 10.2 Further significant savings can be achieved through the work of HowzTalk reducing the number of young people in hostel accommodation. Hostel units can be more advantageously used for families and older people who will be able to go straight into hostels, rather than other forms of temporary accommodation. This can markedly reduce expenditure on Cascade accommodation in Leeds and private sector leasing accommodation. Based on current temporary accommodation charge figures, and assuming HowzTalk will prevent 25 young people from becoming homeless, the estimated potential cost savings for 2006/07 of reducing the number of young people in hostels is likely to be in the region of £25,500 (excluding savings in Housing Needs staff time and administration - see Appendix 2).

11.0 CONCLUSION

- 11.1 The HowzTalk and Family Mediation service makes a major contribution to meeting one of the Council's key objectives in the prevention of homelessness and Department of Communities and Local Government's target that the number of people in temporary accommodation should be halved by 2010 and should be a core service.

SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT / POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

		Implications are		
		Positive	Neutral	Negative
A	Economy	✓		
B	Environment	✓		
C	Social Equity			
i)	General	✓		
ii)	Customer Care / People with Disabilities	✓		
iii)	Health Implications	✓		
D	Crime and Disorder Implications	✓		

If all comments lie within the shaded areas, the proposal is sustainable.
