

# Vulnerable Adults' Housing Policy

**2010**

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# 1. Aim of the Policy

Dartford Borough Council's Housing Service owns and manages 3,761 general needs properties and 585 supported housing properties (for older people) and provide housing advice to all residents in the borough. Housing Services also has a private sector housing team who seek to improve the quality and suitability of homes in the private sector, from owner occupied homes and caravans to privately rented flats and houses in multiple occupancy.

Housing Services aims to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access and benefit from its services, but realises that for a minority of residents who are vulnerable, barriers may exist which may prevent participation.

## The objectives of this policy are to explain:

- How vulnerable people are identified
- How vulnerable people can access the housing service
- How Housing Services has adapted to meet the needs of vulnerable people.
- The safeguards which are in place to protect vulnerable people when they face legal action
- How Housing staff will signpost and refer vulnerable people to other organisations, when they require additional support.

### 1.1 Policy links

This policy links with the Council's Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, Private Sector Renewal Strategy, Domestic Abuse Housing Strategy, Rent Arrears Policy and Anti-social Behaviour Policy. It also links in with the Council's Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Policy and the Council's corporate aim 'to meet the housing needs of the Borough and to promote self reliant communities.'

## 2. Vulnerable adult definition

For the purpose of this Policy, a vulnerable person is defined as:

***Anyone over 18 yrs or aged 16/17 with a guarantor; who needs community care services or an enhanced housing service***

It should be noted that individual teams within the Housing Service use other definitions of vulnerability (see box below). For instance homelessness legislation has a definition which is used to determine whether or not a local authority is required to secure alternative accommodation for a person.

This Policy is not bound by legislation and because of this we have adopted a general definition of 'vulnerability' which will be used broadly across all service areas, for the purpose of identifying service users who may require a tailored or enhanced housing service (such as extra visits or correspondence in braille) or who require signposting to other services. The definition will not replace legislative definitions.

### **Homelessness legislation: (Housing Act 1996 sVII (189))**

The Act considers that a person may be vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or

handicap or physical disability or other special reason, or with whom such a person resides or might reasonably be expected to reside.

The Government's code of guidance states that it is a matter of judgement whether the applicants circumstances make him/her vulnerable: "A person is vulnerable if when homeless, the applicant would be less able to fend for him/herself than an ordinary homeless person so that he or she would suffer injury or detriment, in circumstances where a less vulnerable person would be able to cope without harmful effects"

#### **Housing Renewal Assistance (promoting decent homes):**

A vulnerable person will be defined as a householder:

- Aged over 60, which is in receipt of one or more means tested benefits
- With a child under 16 or pregnant woman, which is in receipt of one or more means tested benefits
- Who receives a benefit and has an income of less than £15,050

The Council recognises that someone can be vulnerable for a number of reasons, these may include:

- Mental health problems
- Learning disability or difficulty
- Sensory difficulties
- They are frail and elderly
- They have alcohol or substance misuse problems
- They are a ex offender
- Because they are experiencing domestic abuse or harassment
- Because they have left care
- English is not spoken, or spoken only as a second language

Vulnerability can occur at different points in a person's life, for instance someone may need support following bereavement for a temporary period, whereas another may require support permanently.

#### **Signs of vulnerability:**

There are a number of signs that someone may be vulnerable. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- Falling into arrears
- Being the perpetrator of antisocial behaviour
- Being the victim of antisocial behaviour or harassment
- Disputes with neighbours
- Damage to the person's home
- A detrimental change in the person's physical appearance
- A failure to respond to correspondence or to answer the door when visited
- Hoarding or other behaviour which results in the person's home/ and or garden becoming damaged, neglected or otherwise unfit for occupation.

### **3. How vulnerable adults are identified**

When a person contacts Housing Services there is an opportunity to identify whether the person is vulnerable. Because someone can become vulnerable at different stages of their lives it is essential that identification of vulnerability is not just at the point of first contact, but is picked up whenever contact is made.

Vulnerability issues can be identified by staff in a number of ways:

- Vulnerability checklist which is part of application forms for the Council's housing register, homelessness prevention form, disabled facility grants and private sector leasing scheme.
- During initial sign-up or during other home visits
- Over the phone
- Notification from relatives, neighbours or friends
- During 6 monthly reviews for Dartford Borough Council supported housing residents
- Housing support concern card. If a repairs or gas servicing contractor has concerns that someone may require some extra support, they fill out a 'concern card' and then return it to the Housing Officer. The Housing Officer then contacts the tenant to resolve any unmet need.
- Notification from Occupational Therapists, Care Managers, or GP's

### **3.1 What happens when a person is identified as vulnerable**

When a person is identified as vulnerable (according to Housing Services definition) by a member of staff, the member of staff will seek to support the person in a number of ways, which are highlighted in section 4 of this Policy.

The member of staff will also record the nature of the vulnerability; how the person has been assisted e.g. 'signposted to MIND' and any other agencies working with the person. These details are recorded onto the Housing Services database system. The purpose of this is to ensure that when any future contact with the person is made, the system will be able to flag up the level and type of vulnerability and enable the member of staff to act accordingly. Staff may also liaise with agencies who are working with the person to resolve any housing issues.

If a person is identified as vulnerable by someone other than a member of staff, for example a relative who reports it to a member of staff, then a Housing Officer or a Housing Options Officer will carry out a Housing Checkup (which may be a phone conversation or a visit), where they will investigate the person's support needs and if appropriate refer them to the relevant organisation. The person's privacy will be respected and the person is under no obligation to discuss their needs or to disclose problems such as mental illness or alcohol dependency. If the person does not wish to discuss or confirm their vulnerability, the officer will make a note on the system that contact has taken place and the person has confirmed that they do not need additional support. However the person will be made aware that they contact the housing service at any time in the future should they require help.

Each year staff will review those who are listed as 'vulnerable' to check that the information held is up to date and accurate.

### **3.2 Data protection**

When the Council uses and stores information about customers, it complies with the requirements of the Data Protection Act, which states that all information will be:

- Fairly and lawfully processed
- Processed for limited purposes and not in any way which would be incompatible with those purposes;
- Adequate, relevant and not excessive
- Accurate and kept up to date
- Not kept for longer than necessary
- Processed in line with the data subject's rights
- Kept secure
- Not transferred to a country which does not have adequate data protection laws

## 4. How vulnerable adults are supported

### 4.1 General signposting & referrals

When a member of staff identifies a vulnerable person they will seek to signpost or refer the person to appropriate support if it is needed. A list of current support services which includes health services, voluntary agencies and social services is available to all staff members.

#### 4.1.1 Safeguarding vulnerable adults

If a member of staff identifies that a vulnerable person is a victim of abuse, be that physical, sexual, emotional, financial or neglect, then they will take action to refer the person to social services following the Council's Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults' Policy.

### 4.2 Communication

Housing services communicates to its customers in a variety of different ways:

- Face to face, which includes: home visits, appointments at the Civic Centre, estate surgeries
- Phone
- Letters
- Through the Link (tenants newsletter)
- Email
- Texts

Documents are available in other languages, braille, large print and audio and all staff will provide assistance to complete forms when requested. Customers can also ask that correspondence is sent to someone who will act on their behalf.

Customers are asked to convey any communication difficulties when they first approach Housing Services (questions are posed in the vulnerability checklist) but also at other opportunities during their tenancy. This ensures that Housing Services can communicate with the customer in the best way possible and in a way that is tailored to their individual needs.

### 4.3 Available services and safeguards for vulnerable people

#### **Housing Options and Advice**

##### **What they do:**

Housing Options and Advice are responsible for administering the Council's housing register and providing assistance to customers in finding a home using Kent Homechoice, the Kent wide choice based lettings system. The team work closely with specialist housing providers in the borough, to nominate people with disabilities/difficulties or mental health issues to supported or extra care accommodation. In addition, a representative from the team attends regular meetings with health and social services to find housing placements for people who have specialist needs.

The team also provide general housing information, advice and assistance to anyone in order to prevent homelessness. The team can be contacted by phone and face to face appointments can be made.

##### **How do they assist vulnerable people?**

- Service users can nominate an advocate to bid for properties on their behalf or request that a member of the housing options and advice team bids for them.
- Each year the team reviews the bidding history of vulnerable people in order to offer

support or advice if it is needed.

- Home visits are available for those who cannot access the Council's offices.
- Interviews operate a trigger system so that when issues are identified e.g. drug/alcohol abuse, mental health issues etc, the Housing Advisor can signpost the person to appropriate support services.
- The Council has ensured that one unit of emergency temporary accommodation is suitable for a person with a physical disability.
- There are a range of housing options for victims of domestic abuse. Women victims can be referred to a Women's Refuge. There is also the Sanctuary Scheme, which provides extra security for those who wish to stay in their own home. An anonymous PO Box is also available, if victims wish to keep their address confidential.
- The Council has signed up to the following protocols, which seek to prevent key vulnerable groups from becoming homeless:
  - ➔ West Kent Hospital Discharge Protocol (hospital leavers)
  - ➔ Settlement and Housing of Offenders
  - ➔ Protocol between Kent Community Mental Health Teams and Local Authority Housing Services to address Homelessness (people with mental health issues)
  - ➔ Joint protocol to address the needs of homeless young people aged 16 to 21 in Kent

## Supported Housing

### What do they do?

Housing Services has 14 supported housing schemes for people aged over 55 yrs with a recognised support need. Each resident has their own flat, with kitchen and bathroom facilities. There is also a communal lounge, guest room, laundry and gardens. The schemes are managed by a team of mobile Supported Housing Officers.

### How do they assist vulnerable people?

- Supported Housing Officers are available to provide housing related support to tenants, this includes:
  - ➔ The provision of an emergency alarm system with 24 hour monitoring
  - ➔ Help in maintaining independence
  - ➔ Monitoring well being
  - ➔ Contacting the GP or emergency services
  - ➔ Gaining access to other services, such as, hands-on care from social services or requesting aids and adaptations to make life easier and safer.
  - ➔ Guidance on personal safety and security
  - ➔ Advice on benefit claims
  - ➔ Advice on getting repairs done
- All residents have personal contact with a Supporting Housing Officer (SHO) at least once a week and a daily morning call. Residents can also request additional contact with their SHO for assistance or advice.
- SHO's complete a Support Plan with residents every 6 months, which is led by the tenant and identifies the options available to support the resident to remain independent

## Housing Management

### What do they do?

The Housing Management team manage the Council's general rented accommodation. The team pursue rent arrears, sign up new tenants, resolve anti social behaviour and

ensure that neighbourhoods are safe and socially inclusive spaces. The team also manage a council owned gypsy and traveller site and the Council's garage stock.

#### **How do they assist vulnerable people?**

- All new tenants are visited 6 weeks after their tenancy has commenced, giving opportunities to resolve any difficulties or sign post to additional services . Tenants are also asked if they would like to continue with follow up visits.

#### **Anti social behaviour (ASB) & other breaches of tenancy conditions**

- The Council recognises that vulnerable people may not only be the victims but also the perpetrators of ASB and that early intervention is a priority.
- Housing representatives will work in partnership with a range of different organisations (such as the police, social services, education, and the Council's dedicated Anti Social Behaviour Co-ordinator) to resolve a tenant's problems. In the most serious cases perpetrators are referred to a Multi Agency ASB Group, hosted within the CSU (Community Safety Unit) to ensure that support needs are met and enforcement action is appropriate.
- When residents are involved in ASB and are threatened with further violence, then depending on the severity Housing Services may enhance the security of property locks, doors, windows etc, and provide further support and reassurance including additional contact via visits and telephone calls.
- Dartford Borough Council funds a free mediation service, which can be used to resolve neighbour disputes.
- Housing Officers will always consider alternative methods to resolve ASB such as anti social behaviour agreements and referral to support agencies, only taking court action as a last resort.
- If a family is experiencing problems and if at least one child is engaged with the youth offending team, then the Housing Officer will refer them to a Family Intervention Worker who will engage the whole family and seek to promote their physical, social and emotional well being, while addressing any anti social behavioural problems.

#### **Rent arrears**

- The requirements for early intervention in the Pre Court Action Rent Arrears Protocol will be followed and action taken to resolve rent arrears before commencing with possession proceedings.
- The Housing Officer will seek to refer those who have ongoing issues with financial management to Supporting People and the Debt Advice Network who are able to give advice and guidance regarding budgeting and applying for benefits.
- If a resident is living in supported housing, then individual contact will be made by the Supported Housing Officer.

#### **Legal action**

- Every attempt will be made to avoid legal action in the first place.
- If court action is taken against a tenant who is vulnerable because of ASB or a breach in tenancy conditions other than for rent arrears a Disability Discrimination Assessment will be carried out prior to the hearing to ensure that the Housing Service is not acting in a discriminatory way.
- Prior to court action a Housing Officer will assess whether the tenant has the mental capacity to defend possession proceedings, and, if not, make an application for the appointment of a litigation friend (CPR 21, Pre Action Protocol for Possession Claims)
- All vulnerable persons who are introductory tenants will be treated as secure tenants when court proceedings are considered.

## **Housing Repairs and Maintenance**

### **What do they do?**

Housing Repairs and Maintenance repair and renew council properties. The team also install disabled adaptations in council properties following a request from the Dartford Occupational Therapist.

### **How do they assist vulnerable people?**

- Housing repairs and maintenance work with an Occupational Therapist to make a home suitable for a disabled person through the installation of suitable adaptations.
- A free Handyman scheme is available to carry out small DIY tasks for tenants who are 65 or disabled, or who live in a supported housing scheme.
- A decoration scheme is offered to households where all members are over 70 yrs old or if a person is physically disabled and living independently. The Council will provide the labour and materials for one room to be decorated every 5 years, free of charge.
- Tenants can request a tradeswoman to carry out a repair or a female chaperone to attend when maintenance repair works are carried out.
- Staff will take into consideration a person's vulnerability and will increase the priority of a repair if required.
- When carrying out major works, the contractor's Resident Liaison Officer will meet with the resident, taking into account their needs and will provide a bespoke service which may include moving furniture, emptying cupboards etc.
- A respite room is available for tenants in the contractor's offices, while work is being undertaken on their property.

## **Private Sector Housing**

### **What do they do?**

Private Sector Housing aim to improve the condition of housing in the private sector in all private sector tenancies and housing types including traditional family homes, homes in multiple occupation/private rented, mobile homes/caravans/tents and houseboats.

### **How do they assist vulnerable people?**

- Provide a variety of financial support schemes to assist in adapting, (including disabled adaptation grants) improving and repairing private sector housing, subject to a test of resources
- Supply a list of vetted contractors and builders in the local area to residents on request.
- Signpost customers to the Home Improvement Agency 'in touch' who are able to help vulnerable people access grants for repairs or adaptations to improve their home. They can also provide a handyman service, gardening service, decorating service carry out home security checks and signpost vulnerable person to other support services.
- Investigate cases in the private sector of alleged harassment and illegal eviction

## **5. Monitoring the Policy**

Dartford Borough Council will undertake annual satisfaction surveys with vulnerable residents to determine their experience of the housing service and to identify gaps in the service and areas of improvement. Any improvements and/or changes will be reflected in future updates of this policy where appropriate.