1. SUMMARY
1.1 This report updates Housing Scrutiny on two key areas of work affecting homelessness.

1.2 It provides an update on the work that has been carried out in response to the recommendations of the Homelessness Prevention and Response Scrutiny Panel which reported back in June 2013 and also gives details of the content of the Council’s new Homelessness Strategy 2013 – 2018 which was agreed by Cabinet on 12 November 2013.

2. BACKGROUND
2.1 Local Housing Authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness to anyone in their district. In addition, they must provide accommodation if there is reason to believe that an applicant may be eligible, homeless and in priority need, while a full assessment is carried out. If the local authority is satisfied that the applicant is eligible, unintentionally homeless and in priority need, then it has a duty to secure longer term accommodation for the applicant.

Homelessness Prevention and Response Scrutiny Panel
2.2 In October 2012, The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee agreed to set up a Homelessness Prevention and Response Scrutiny Panel in response to a proposal from the Chair of the Housing sub-committee, and evidence sessions and panel meetings were held between January and March 2013. The final report was received in June 2013.

2.3 Based on the recommendations of the report, the following actions were agreed:

a) Specialist Outreach Worker to be in place in the Ascham Homes Housing Solutions team from October 2013 for six months over the winter months.
b) A data sharing process to be designed and shared with all local homeless shelters and community day centre services by 1st October 2013 to enable them to ask the Council’s Revenues and Benefits team to check their records for evidence of ID for service users where this is required to enable them to access health and community services.

c) Representatives from adult social services and the mental health teams to be invited to Housing Association Liaison Group by September 2013 to discuss concerns from housing providers regarding problems of responsiveness. Information sheet to be drawn up for housing providers giving details of key contacts within the adult social services/mental health teams, including an escalation process if no response is received - by 1st September 2013

d) Revised nominations agreement to address information provided to RPs about prospective tenants - by 1st October 2013

e) Housing Solutions Team to give a talk at a networking event held by night shelters by 1st December 2013

2.4 As a result of these recommendations, the following actions have been taken:

a) Outreach Worker – an Outreach Worker is now in post in the Housing Solutions team, providing a single point of contact for rough sleepers and a high quality assessment service to establish rough sleepers’ housing needs and options. The post is currently funded until April 2014.

b) Data Sharing – we invited the night shelters and day centres to be involved in a data sharing process with the Revenues and Benefits team. A protocol and referral system is now in place for Waltham Forest Churches Night Shelter to obtain this information from the Revenues and Benefits team. The day centres have decided not to participate, but have been advised that they can get involved in the future if they wish to do so.

c) Social Services and Mental Health teams – a representative from NELFT attended the Housing Association Liaison Group meeting in September 2013 and gave a presentation to the meeting about how the mental health service operates and how housing providers can make contact with the service. Social Services were invited to the meeting but were unable to attend, and will be attending the next meeting in December. Housing Association partners have been advised of contact details for Social Services.

d) Revised Nominations Agreement – all housing association partners have been consulted on what information they would like to receive when prospective tenants are nominated by the borough, and the majority have now signed the revised nominations agreement. We are now including additional detail regarding to applicants’ vulnerability and support needs when making nominations.

e) Night Shelters Networking Event – a senior officer from the Housing Solutions team gave a presentation at the Night Shelters Networking event in October 2013.
2.5 The investigations and recommendations of the Homelessness Panel have provided a valuable opportunity for enhanced partnership working between Housing, Ascham Homes, Social Services, Health Services, housing associations and third sector service providers. This was particularly timely as we were able to use this to inform the development of the Council’s Homelessness Strategy which was agreed by Cabinet on 12 November 2013.

**Homelessness Strategy 2013 - 2018**

2.6 The Homelessness Act 2002 introduced the requirement for local authorities to formulate and publish a Homelessness Strategy every five years based on the results of a homelessness review. The Council carried out this review in 2012/2013.

2.7 As part of the homelessness review, consultation was carried out with a wide range of stakeholders including voluntary sector agencies, Registered Providers, private landlords, supported housing providers, residents’ associations, health service providers and people who had become homeless. Their feedback has informed the objectives and actions set out in the Homelessness Strategy 2013 – 2018 which was agreed by Cabinet on 12 November 2013.

2.8 The Strategy has also considered and taken account of the new legislation and the overall changing landscape that has developed since the last Homeless Strategy was published in December 2007. In particular, the Localism Act 2011 now allows Local Authorities to discharge their homelessness duties by offering accommodation in the private sector which Waltham Forest now uses as a solution. Consideration has also been given to welfare reform changes which will inevitably have a significant impact on homelessness in Waltham Forest.

2.10 Following the review, four key objectives have been identified that form the basis of the Homelessness Strategy 2013 – 2018 which will be delivered in the following ways:

(a) **Preventing homelessness and promoting alternative housing solutions in the following ways:**

- **Keeping people in their existing home** – visiting applicants in own home, signposting for financial support to help them keep their existing tenancy and also working with landlords for a planned move if eventual eviction is inevitable

- **Encouraging residents to contact us as early as possible** – raising the profile of the Housing Solutions Team to increase awareness, carrying out ‘mythbusting’ campaigns about waiting times and awareness that the private rented sector is increasingly used as a way of discharging the Council’s homelessness obligation.

- **Partnership working for people at risk of homelessness** – this includes working with external agencies to help young people leaving care, victims of domestic violence and single homeless people
• **Maximising the supply of suitable housing** – includes procuring more Private Sector Leasing properties and bringing empty properties back into use.

(b) **Developing a response to the Government's programme of welfare reform in the following ways:**

• **A corporate approach to communication and support** – developing joint policies across the Council around digital inclusion, financial inclusion and data sharing as well as having a consistent communications strategy

• **Partnership working and sharing good practice** – working with others such as Job Centre Plus, the credit union and Citizens Advice Bureau to help people get jobs, improve money management skills and receive debt advice. Sharing good practice through the Registered Providers and other Local Authorities and partnerships.

• **Reviewing Policies** – reviewing the allocations scheme if we need to allow people to apply for smaller homes, reviewing the Local Plan in terms of building requirements if we need to encourage smaller homes to deal with increased demand through the under-occupation charge, and reviewing the tenants 'incentive to move' scheme and promoting mutual exchanges in response to the under-occupation charge.

(c) **Providing appropriate accommodation and support for homeless households in the following ways:**

• **Ensuring a supply of suitable temporary accommodation** – Continually reviewing the Council’s temporary accommodation framework guidelines on where families will be placed, carrying out a review of the Council’s hostels and ensuring casework is deal with quickly and effectively

• **Increasing private sector option for homeless households** - Developing initiatives to encourage more property owners to allow their properties to be used for Private Sector Leasing which is the most cost effective way of dealing with households in temporary accommodation (incentives could include grants and energy efficiency initiatives), developing a voluntary out of London scheme for households who are prepared to be rehoused outside London

• **Support and Resettlement** – Supporting vulnerable households when they are in temporary accommodation and when they settle into long term accommodation to prevent repeat homelessness, delivering support services to vulnerable Council tenants when they take up new tenancies

(d) **Supporting vulnerable people through the following ways:**

• **Linking with Supporting People Priorities** – providing targeted support for those with physical and mental health problems, with a particular focus on groups identified as priority groups within the Supporting People Strategy i.e. people with learning disabilities, people with mental health problems, single homeless and ex-offenders.
• **Insisting on lifetime homes** – enabling homes to be readily adapted if a tenants’ circumstances change which also goes towards preventing homelessness.

• **Rough sleeping** – working with agencies like London Street Rescue and providing targeted support where necessary.

2.11 An action plan has been developed for 2013 to 2015 with a commitment to develop annual action plans until 2018.

3. **IMPLICATIONS PARAGRAPHS**

3.1 The Housing Strategy will inform the Council’s approach to dealing with homelessness in Waltham Forest until 2018.

4. **APPENDICES**

4.1 There are no appendices attached to this report.

5. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

5.1 a) Scrutiny Panel’s report on homelessness prevention and response – April 2013  
   b) London Borough of Waltham Forest’s Homelessness Strategy 2013 - 2018

6. **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

6.1 None.