

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Housing
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HOMELESSNESS & ROUGH SLEEPER STRATEGY 2025-2030

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KEY DECISION

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To present a new Stevenage Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for the period 2025 to 2030.
- 1.2 It is a statutory requirement to publish a Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy and it has been agreed with the Ministry of Communities Housing and Local Government that the Council will publish its new Strategy by 31 December 2024.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 To consider the draft Stevenage Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2025 to 2030.
- 2.2 For the Strategy to be put out for public consultation during August 2024, for not less than 8 weeks.

- 2.3 For the final Strategy to be reported to the Cabinet for approval in November and published in December 2024.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Local Authorities have a statutory duty, under the Homelessness Act 2002, to carry out a review of homelessness in their local area and to formulate a homelessness Strategy every five years. Detailed guidance on this is provided in the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.
- 3.2 Homelessness strategies should also have regard to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which introduced additional powers and duties for Local Authorities for the prevention and relief of homelessness and augmented the requirements of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) including additional duties to prevent and relieve homelessness.
- 3.3 Since the publication of the Council's current Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy in 2019, the Council and its partners have responded to wide changes, including the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Council provide accommodation for all rough sleepers under the Government's Everyone In Initiative; additional migration from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria; and the ongoing impacts of welfare reform, austerity and the cost-of-living crisis.
- 3.4 The ongoing housing and cost of living crisis in the UK means that there is a shortage of affordable homes and rising prices, putting additional pressures on the Council and its partners.
- 3.5 Government figures show that the number of families considered homeless in England has increased by 7% in a year. In the first three months of financial year 2023/2024, there were 10,670 families with children identified as homeless and owed a relief duty, a rise of 6.5% for the same quarter from the previous year. The data also reveals that the number of households living in temporary accommodation was 104,150 on the 31st of March 2023 which marked an increase of 10% from the same period in the previous year.
- 3.6 Homelessness is rising locally as well as nationally. In Stevenage, in 2023/24 252 people presented as homeless compared to 177 in 2022/23. The Housing Options team managed 200 prevention cases during 2023-24 and 242 the previous year. The main reasons for homelessness in the borough are overwhelmingly relationship breakdown, friends and family no longer able to accommodate, and the loss of Assured Shorthold Tenancies, which are tenancies usually provided in the private rented sector.
- 3.7 The Council currently has 2500 applicants on its waiting list. Despite the Council allocating circa 400 properties a year to applicants on its housing register, delivering circa 475 new properties since 2014/15 and its future housing development pipeline that will deliver 500 additional new social and affordable homes by 2030, this does not provide enough affordable housing to meet local demand and further consideration will need to be given to how best to provide emergency and temporary accommodation in the future.
- 3.8 During the lifetime of the current Strategy, there have been a number of significant improvements to the approach to preventing and responding to

homelessness in the borough, led by the 2019-24 Action Plan. This has, for example, included:

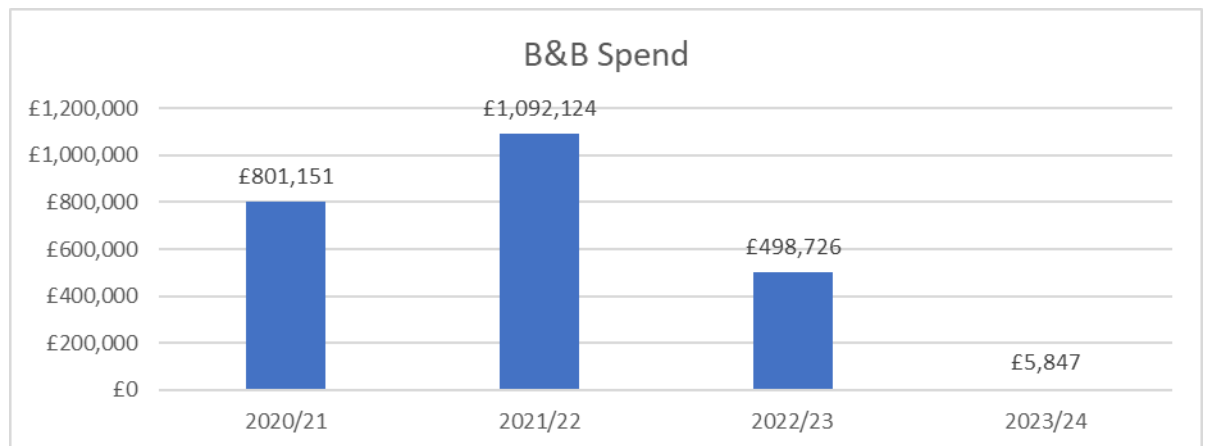
- The provision of new units of emergency and temporary accommodation, through a dedicated acquisitions and new build development programme. This includes the purchase and refurbish of a hotel and the live development of a new hostel at Dunn Close which has ground floor accommodation that will provide emergency provision for homeless people, including those with physical disabilities as well as the introduction of 11 homeless pods.
- Working to make the best use of Council owned land to deliver new affordable housing, including the direct delivery of 475 homes for affordable or social rent since 2014/15.
- Market engagement with strategic Registered Provider partners to facilitate new social housing developments, including helping them to access funding from Homes England.
- The launch of a Housing First initiative, that adopts an approach to ending homelessness through housing and support provision. The scheme provides 25 units of short to medium term accommodation with wrap around support to enable rough sleepers to manage their day-to-day life, address any substance misuse or mental health issues they may be experiencing and ultimately gain enough independence and confidence to obtain and sustain permanent and secure housing, relieving pressure on already stretched public services including the Police and the NHS. Since October 2021 when the scheme started the Council has assisted 25 individuals to move into permanent and secure housing, either through social housing or within the private rented sector, all of which are still sustaining their tenancies, 9 clients have returned to their family homes and 21 have been moved into other supported accommodation.
- Expansion of the Council's Housing Options Team including the introduction of Triage Officers that provide earlier intervention advice and support.
- The establishment and expansion of a dedicated Rough Sleeper Service in 2021 that provides targeted outreach advice and support to those rough sleeping. During 2023-24 the service supported over 150 clients which is a 25% increase on the previous year.
- Cold weather provision for rough sleepers, regardless of priority need.
- Creation of a new Community Advice and Support team, that is offering a single front door, to help ensure more timely and co-ordinated support for households that are homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- The implementation of a number of partnership and multiagency initiatives, this includes Operation Urban, where the Police are undertaking early morning patrols with the Council's Rough Sleeper

Team and The No More Service, a weekly drop-in for homeless clients that would like support and advice and a hot meal is provided.

- Commissioned independent financial and debt advice services for Stevenage residents.
- The holding of professionals' meetings that enables a multi-agency client centric approach to be applied for homelessness individuals or family that have complex needs.
- The implementation of Housing Jigsaw a new full case management system which combines practical support and advice covering all aspects of housing options including homelessness.
- Refreshing our Strategic Housing Market Assessment to help inform a review of the Council's Local Plan and to inform future housing Strategy and policy.

3.9 Since 2017 the Council's housing service has regrettably been required to utilise bed and breakfast and hotel accommodation, when all Council owned emergency and temporary accommodation is in use and suitable for specific needs. This is to provide applicants who are owed an s.188 interim of s193 main duty with temporary accommodation as part of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended). As of June 2024, the Council has been averaging 5 households in bed and breakfast per week.

3.10 Since 2022 the Council has taken significant action to reduce the cost of homelessness and bed and breakfast costs by interventions such as Housing First and building modular units to accommodate people such as at Oaks Cross and the purchase of other accommodation (172 units to date) which has seen Bed and Breakfast costs reduce from a high in 2021/22 of £1Million to just £5.8K in 2023/24, (this does not include housing benefit not recoverable by the Council because B&B rents exceed the Local Housing Allowance claimable by the Council).



3.11 The Council also provides a range of upstream preventative services, including the 'No More' Service that works with partners to offer support and guidance to help people reduce their substance misuse, offending and to help sustain their tenancies. The team supports people by putting together practical solutions to tackle issues that are perceived to be exacerbating

their drug or alcohol use or offending, including the causes and consequences of their substance use.

- 3.12 The Council's Survivors Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) is a service that provides advice, guidance and support to individuals and their families who are or have experienced domestic abuse. SADA also manages refuge provision and over 30 dispersed refuge provisions for victims and survivors that need to access safe accommodation. These safe spaces are used as suitable interim accommodations which can elevate the strain on services such as housing, the Police, primary and acute health care services and social services. SADA collaborates with other services to provide wrap around support to victims and survivors within the community. This includes providing training sessions to partners including, but not limited to Policing Services, local schools, Family Support Teams and Housing Teams to raise awareness and ensure a streamlined approach to support victims of domestic abuse. In 2023-2024 SADA delivered training to 480 colleagues internally and externally. Partnership working is an integral part of the service.
- 3.13 The Council will continue to implement the current Strategy during 2024 to help reduce rough sleeping, provide targeted and timely support to vulnerable clients, increase the number of homelessness preventions, minimise the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and reduce the length of time spent in emergency and temporary accommodation.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Council's current Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy expired at the end of March 2024. The Council has a statutory duty as per the requirements of the Homelessness Act 2002 to develop and publish a new Strategy for tackling and preventing homelessness.
- 4.2 As per Section 2(1) of the Homelessness Act, the Council has undertaken a homelessness review covering:
- a) The level, and likely future levels of homelessness in the borough.
 - b) The activities which are carried out for the following purposes:
 - i. Preventing homelessness in the borough
 - ii. Securing accommodation that is, or will be, available for people in the borough who are, or may become homeless; and
 - iii. Providing support for residents who are homeless or who may become at risk of homelessness; or who have been homeless and need support to prevent them becoming homeless again; and,
 - c.) the resources available to the Council, the social services authority for the area, other public authorities, voluntary organisations and other persons for the activities outlined above.

4.3 The review has been used to inform the new draft Stevenage Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for 2025 to 2030, as seen in appendix A. The Strategy retains a clear focus upon early intervention to prevent homelessness; or if prevention is not possible, to end homelessness at the earliest opportunity.

4.4 The vision of the draft Strategy is:

Working co-operatively to prevent and reduce homelessness and to end rough sleeping in Stevenage.

4.5 The Strategy outlines the following 4 summarised priorities over the next five years:

4.6 **Priority 1: Prevention and Relief of Homelessness**

- Work collaboratively with strategic partners at a strategic and operational level to improve homelessness prevention and relief services. This includes working with Change Grow Live and Mind in Herts to ensure support and advice is provided to vulnerable clients, many of whom have complex needs.
- Avoid unnecessary evictions and recurring homelessness by maintaining a dedicated resource to provide private rented sector tenancy sustainment support.
- Ensure that all customer contact is managed effectively and advice and support is provided in a timely manner.
- Ensure the viability and ongoing delivery of the Council's Housing Futures (Formerly known as Housing First) Scheme, which provides accommodation for rough sleepers and wrap around support.

4.7 **Priority 2: Provision of Good Quality Temporary Accommodation**

- Enhance the Council's emergency and temporary accommodation portfolio to ensure needs are met and to reduce the use of inappropriate bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Deliver a new specialist emergency and temporary accommodation scheme in Dunn Close, which will provide suitable accommodation for those with physical disabilities.
- Provide debt and financial advice and support to clients in temporary accommodation so they can manage their finances more effectively.
- Deliver value for money services and increase the transparency of service charges.

4.8 **Priority 3: The Delivery of new Affordable and Social Rented Homes**

- Deliver 500 new Council owned social and affordable rented properties over the next 10 years.
- Utilise private sale schemes within the HRA to cross subsidise other affordable housing schemes.

- 4.9 **Priority 4: Support for Homeless Households**
- Provide targeted welfare and debt advice and support that enable families and vulnerable adults to maximise their household income and mitigate the effects of welfare reforms.
 - Provide tenancy sustainment support to reduce incidences of homelessness.
 - Continue to provide specialist support through the Council's Housing Management, Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse and No More Services.
- 4.10 It is recommended that the draft Strategy is put out for consultation, for no less than 8 weeks commencing in July 2024. Further targeted consultation with key stakeholders, including focus groups with users of Homelessness and Housing Options services, those in temporary accommodation and those who have previously slept rough will be undertaken during the consultation and engagement period.
- 4.11 The Council will also continue to collect service data to help understand customer journeys, understand gaps in service provision and future resourcing requirements over the summer months.
- 4.12 The Executive Housing Working Group and the Community Select Committee will have the opportunity to review the draft strategic priorities and associated action plan, taking into account the feedback received from key stakeholders, that will in turn help inform the final version of the Strategy.
- 4.13 It is recommended that the final version of the Strategy is presented to the Cabinet for approval in November 2024, prior to being formally published in December 2024.
- 4.14 The action plan linked to the Strategy will be reviewed on an annual basis.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 5.1 It is important to ensure that the Council has sufficient arrangements in place to prevent homelessness and to ensure that we reduce the costs associated with providing emergency and temporary accommodation and to limit the use of hotel and bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 5.2 The Homelessness function is a cost to the General Fund and as such, the net cost of the service is funded via Council Tax and direct Government grants.
- 5.3 The delivery of the Housing Futures (Housing First) Scheme and the expansion of the Council's Homelessness, Housing Options and Rough Sleeper services has been heavily reliant on external Government funding which runs to March 2025. At the point of writing this report the Government has not given any funding guarantees post this date, and therefore consideration to funding these services will need to be considered as part of the General Fund and HRA Budget setting process for 2025/26.

Legal Implications

- 5.4 Section 3 of the Homelessness Act 2002 requires the Council to develop and publish a Homelessness Strategy for:
- a) Preventing homeless in its district
 - b) Securing that sufficient accommodation is and will be available for people in its district who are or may become homeless.
 - c) Securing the satisfactory provision of support for people in their district –
 - i. who are or may become homeless; or
 - ii. who have been homeless and need support to prevent them becoming homeless again.
 - d) Keep the Strategy under review.
- 5.5 **Section 3 (7A)** Homelessness Act 2002 provides that in formulating or modifying a homelessness Strategy, the Council must have regard to
- A. its current allocation scheme under section 166A of the Housing Act 1996,
 - B. its current tenancy Strategy under section 150 of the Localism Act 2011
- 5.6 Section 3 (8) Homelessness Act 2002 provides that before adopting or modifying a homelessness Strategy the authority shall consult such public or local authorities, voluntary organisations or other persons as they consider appropriate.
- 5.7 In exercising its functions relating to homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, including the development of its Homelessness Strategy, the Council must have regard to the Homelessness Code of Guidance Guide for Local Authorities issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

Risk Implications

- 5.8 The identified risk within the Strategy relates to the budgets available and continuing government funding. If funding is no longer available, the Council would not be able to maintain a staffing level which can match the current case level demands. This will affect the Council's ability to provide a full service which is a statutory obligation.
- 5.9 Due to Stevenage's location and good transport links, there is a risk of an increase of homeless people coming to the area from London including those placed here by other local authorities. This could reduce the number of properties available in the private sector and could create a shortfall and consequently increase of cost of supply.
- 5.10 There has been an increased demand for services due to the use of hotels to house Asylum Seekers and Refugees, to mitigate against this a contracted post for an initial 24 months will be created during 2024.

Policy Implications

- 5.11 The Homelessness & Rough Sleeper Strategy outlines the Council' approach to tackling homelessness in its local area. It is consistent with the Council's Corporate Plan objectives to promote sustained economic growth, job creation, provision of affordable homes and housing growth and to deliver value for money. The Strategy also fulfils the Council's co-operative principles through partnership working and inclusivity; and upholds the Council's values by responding to homelessness through group problem solving, innovation and openness.

Staffing and Accommodation Implications

- 5.12 Staffing implications relate to funding and growth bids - reduced staff levels could lead to increased caseloads, failure to deliver an effective service and staff and customer dissatisfaction.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 5.13 A full Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed, considering the implications of the Strategy for all communities. A copy of this Assessment is attached at Appendix 2.

Service Delivery Implications

- 5.14 Service delivery relies on grant funding. If this grant funding is reduced, the delivery model may need to be reviewed further and the service tailored accordingly. This in turn may impact on service delivery and the Council's ability to retain staff.

Information Technology Implications

- 5.15 Through the transformation work in the Housing and Investment team the JIGSAW system has been implemented, there is also an opportunity to purchase a further platform to support the work of the Rough Sleeper Team. There is an additional cost to this of £10,000 that will need to be considered as part of the budget setting process for 2025/26.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- 1.1 All documents that have been used in compiling this report, that may be available to the public, i.e., they do not contain exempt information, should be listed here:**

- BD1 Housing Act 1996
BD2 Homelessness Act 2002
BD3 Localism Act 2011
BD4 Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
BD5 Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities 2019

APPENDICES

- A Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy 2025-2030
- B Equality Impact Assessment