

# Hertsmere Homelessness Review 2018

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## **1. Introduction**

The Council published a Homelessness Strategy in 2008 and again in 2014 providing a plan for tackling homelessness in the borough. With the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and new duties to prevent and relieve homelessness, the 2014 Homelessness Strategy is no longer fit for purpose.

In order to develop a new Homelessness Strategy the Council has carried out a review of homelessness in the borough, taking into account the requirements of the Homelessness Act 2002 and the new Homelessness Code of Guidance. This review therefore covers the following key areas:

- National and regional context
- The levels, and likely future levels of homelessness in the borough
- A review of activities to prevent homelessness
- The needs of vulnerable groups
- A review of temporary accommodation
- Housing Register and Allocations Policy
- Implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- New housing supply
- Staff structure and resources

The findings of this review will provide the basis for formulating the Council's Homelessness Strategy 2019 - 23 and accompanying Action Plan.

## **2. National Context**

Homelessness and rough sleeping and the demand on homelessness services is a growing trend. In Autumn 2017 it was estimated that 4,751 people slept rough on a typical night which was up by 15% from Autumn 2016<sup>1</sup>.

There have been a number of key changes and policies which will affect homelessness in the borough and our approaches to supporting those in need.

### **2.1 Homelessness Reduction Act 2017**

The new legislation places new legal duties for local authorities to provide meaningful support and advice to everyone is homeless or at risk of homeless, irrespective of their priority need.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2017), Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn 2017, England (Revised)

It also introduces the Prevention and Relief duties of support, both of which can last 56 days which increases the level of contact the applicant has with the Homelessness Prevention Officer. Each individual who approaches under the Act must receive a Personal Housing Plan and this offers more responsibility for the individual to engage and cooperate throughout both stages of support.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 requires certain public authorities to refer those who are, or are at risk of, homelessness to the housing authority under the Duty to Refer.

## 2.2 Rough Sleeper Strategy 2018

In August 2018, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published a Rough Sleeper Strategy focusing on eradicating rough sleeping across the country. The Strategy sets out a 2027 vision focusing on Prevention, Intervention and Recovery. Improving understanding of groups more susceptible to rough sleeping and working on affordability in the private sector are all outlined in the Prevention vision. A number of new funding streams, additional resources and new innovative pilots such as Somewhere Safe to Stay are the focus on the Intervention stage and further funding and additional specialist resources for example in every Jobcentre Plus are the focus of the Recovery stage, ensuring people have support in place to move into sustainable accommodation.

## 2.3 Making Every Contact Count

The report, written by the Ministerial Working Group, provides information on the Government's commitments from tackling troubled childhoods to reducing involvement in crime and sets out 10 local challenges that each local housing authority should strive towards. If adopted the 10 challenges should ensure the Council is delivering a gold standard service. We have demonstrated our commitment to the 10 challenges in one of the priorities in our Strategy.

## 2.4 Local Housing Allowance freeze

The freeze to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates is continuing to affect the ability for those in housing need to access the private rented sector. Locally this is impacting the ability for us to use the private rented sector to prevent homelessness and discharge our main Section 193 duty.

<sup>2</sup> South West Hertfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2016)

## 2.5 Care Act 2014

The Care Act 2014 ensures suitability of accommodation is a key priority in meeting

The support needs of older or vulnerable people. Suitable housing advice should take these requirements into consideration and housing related support or services should be available to those who need it. Close partnership working with Adult Social Care is required to ensure an individual receives the support they need to secure appropriate housing.

## **3. Regional context**

In 2016, the South West Hertfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment set out future development needs for housing across the Housing Market Area (HMA) which consists of Hertsmere, St Albans, Three Rivers, Dacorum and Watford.

### 3.1 Population and expected growth<sup>2</sup>

The population in the HMA in 2013 was 575,800. The projected household growth in the HMA between 2013 - 2036 is 68,167 with 13,224 highlighted in Hertsmere, equating to 593 dwellings per annum.

Between 2001 – 2011, the area has seen a notable reduction in the number of homeowners and a similarly large increase in those in the private rented sector. Alongside this, rent prices in the HMA are higher than the national average which reflects the geographical position near to London.

### 3.2 Affordable housing need

In the HMA, there is a net need for affordable housing for 2,391 households per annum which incorporates current need, newly forming households and existing households falling into need. The current supply only meets the demand for 1,550 households.

## **4. Local context**

### 4.1 Hertsmere

Hertsmere is a borough located north of London in Hertfordshire covering 38 square

miles with a population of approximately 103,500. The number of households in the borough is projected to grow from 41,000 to 54,000 from 2013 to 2036. This would be an increase of approximately 13,000 (approximately 33%) over the 2013 figure<sup>2</sup>.

The main settlements are Borehamwood, Bushey, Potters Bar, Radlett and Shenley. There are a number of smaller settlements in rural parts of the borough. The tenure split in Hertsmere broadly reflects that in Hertfordshire overall with 67.62% of households owner occupiers, 29.95% living in rented accommodation with the remaining 2.43% living in other tenures (living rent free, in hospital, army barracks etc.)<sup>3</sup>. Hertsmere transferred its 6,070 units of housing stock to two housing associations in 1994 and do not now manage any general needs social housing stock.

The average house price was £332,950 in 2013/14<sup>2</sup> and the average gross income was £22,080 in 2015<sup>5</sup>. The average rent in Borehamwood is in the region of £1,500 per month which is out of the reach of many local people<sup>4</sup>. With 80% of Hertsmere consisting of green belt land, excellent rail links with London, attractive settlements and good facilities it is a desirable location for households wishing to move out of Greater London.

Competition for housing between long-term residents and incomers is significant, with consequential effects on house prices and rent levels. In migration is partially characterised by the growth of vibrant minority ethnic and faith communities who wish to move to the borough because of excellent proximity to cultural facilities. The Jewish and Muslim communities in the borough in particular are thriving.

<sup>2</sup> South West Hertfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2016)

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, (2011) Census

<sup>4</sup> Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (2015), Office for National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/nesscontent/dvc126/>

<sup>5</sup> Local Housing Allowance (List of Rents) for South West Herts, <http://lha-direct.voa.gov.uk/ListofRents.aspx?SearchResultsPageParameters=true&LocalAuthorityId=267&LHACategory=999&Month=12&Year=2018&SearchPageParameters=true&Brmaid=98>

## 5. Current levels of homelessness

### 5.1 Homelessness Acceptances

The number of homeless applications where a full housing duty has been accepted has varied over the last few years with a particular increase seen in 2017/18.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number</b>
2014/15	139
2015/16	135
2016/17	107
2017/18	153

This can largely be explained by the increasing lack of homes that are affordable in the privately rented market, and the reluctance of private landlords and letting agents to rent to households on low incomes and/or in receipt of Housing Benefit. Households, especially families, who were previously able to access accommodation independently now have to approach the Council for assistance.

### 5.2 Reasons for homelessness

The three main causes of homelessness in the borough are:

- Parents no longer willing to accommodate
- Other friends/relatives no longer willing to accommodate
- Loss of private sector tenancy, usually an Assured Shorthold Tenancy

This has remained the same for a number of years and reflects the national picture.

<b>Reason for homelessness</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>	<b>Total 17/18</b>
Parental eviction	16	7	6	13	42
Other friends/relatives eviction	9	6	2	6	23
Loss of private tenancy - Assured Shorthold Tenancy	10	6	9	4	29
Other	6	3	10	4	23
Violent relationship breakdown	1	2	2	2	7

Loss of private tenancy - other	3	3	2	0	7
Non-violent relationship breakdown	2	0	0	4	6
Other forms of violence	0	0	2	2	4
Mortgage arrears	1	0	1	0	2
Rent arrears – social tenancy	2	0	0	3	5
Left hospital / prison/care	1	1	2	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>153</b>

### 5.3 Breakdown of homelessness acceptances by household type

<b>Table 3: Homeless acceptances by household type</b>					
Household type	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total 17/18
Family with children	42	23	24	29	118
Single People	7	3	10	9	29
Couple	2	2	2	0	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>153</b>

The majority of households accepted as homeless are families with children. The social housing stock in Hertsmere contains a high percentage of one-bedroom homes so for single people affordable housing is more readily accessible through the Housing Register.

### 5.4 Breakdown of acceptances by priority need

<b>Table 4: Homeless acceptances by priority need</b>					
Priority Need category	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	17/18 total
Emergency (fire flood, etc)	0	0	0	0	
Dependent children	38	23	24	25	110
Pregnant	6	0	2	4	12
16/17 years old	0	0	0	0	0
Care leaver	1	0	0	0	1
Physical disability	2	0	1	2	5
Mental illness/disability	2	1	4	3	10
domestic violence	0	1	0	0	1
Violence (non-DV)	0	0	3	1	3

Old age	0	2	0	2	4
Drug/alcohol	1	0	0	0	1
other	1	1	2	2	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>153</b>

As indicated in the Table 4, by far the highest category of priority need is due to dependent children or pregnancy. This is unsurprising given the lack of alternative housing options for households in the borough.

Another priority need to note is the relatively high incidence of homeless acceptances for those with mental health problems. In order to be classed as priority need through poor mental health there needs to be quite significant health issues that impact on a person's ability to fend for themselves and cope if they are roofless. It is also noted by officers that many parents with children also have some mental health issues, but as this isn't their main priority need this can go un-noted.

The absence of any 16/17 year olds accepted as homeless can be explained by the excellent partnership working with Herts Young Homeless Service to whom all young people are referred for support and assistance.

#### 5.5 Breakdown of acceptances by age

<b>Table 5: Homeless acceptances by age</b>					
<b>Age</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>	<b>Total 17/18</b>
16 - 24	13	6	6	5	30
25 - 44	28	17	21	21	87
45 - 59	9	2	8	10	29
60 - 64	0	1	0	2	3
65 - 74	1	2	1	0	4
75 and over	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>153</b>

It is clear from the table above that there is not a problem of homelessness amongst those over the age of 60. This is mainly due to the availability of sheltered housing in the social housing stock and the fact that older people are more likely to be settled in secure accommodation, either owned or rented.

It is significant that 20% of households are under 25 years of age reflecting the difficulties for young people in finding accommodation they can afford. With property



prices escalating all the time it is not surprising that young people find it difficult to get onto the property ladder.

#### 5.6 Breakdown of acceptances by ethnic origin

Ethnic Origin	2011/12		2017/18	
	No.	%	No.	%
White	51	64.6	73	47.7%
Black	3	3.8	17	11.1%
Asian	1	1.3	1	0.006%
Mixed	7	8.9	6	0.03%
Other	1	1.3	6	0.03%
Not given	16	20.3	50	32.6%
Total	79	100%	153	100%

NB: percentages have been rounded therefore may not equal 100% exactly

It is clear that the majority of households accepted as homeless are white. It is a concern that there is a significant (32%) for which there is no ethnic origin stated. This could be due to applicants not providing the information, although with such a large percentage it may be related to operational practice of not recording the information. We must ensure relevant information is provided to all households in need and in a format that is appropriate and useful for the individual.

#### 5.7 Homeless acceptances

Area	Q1	Q2	Q3
All England	0.61	0.65	0.58
London	1.10	1.20	1.01
Rest of England	0.52	0.55	0.50
<b>East of England</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.57</b>
<b>Hertsmere</b>	<b>1.21</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>0.85</b>
East Herts	0.21	0.36	0.13
Dacorum	0.77	0.34	0.37
Watford	0.94	0.79	0.59
Stevenage	0.51	0.46	0.59

The number of accepted households was compared with other authorities using a per 1000 household analysis. The table above shows that Hertsmere is accepting a duty to slightly more households than other Councils both in the East and in Hertfordshire.

## 5.8 Demand on the Housing Options team

The Housing Options Service is based in the Council offices in Borehamwood and is available during normal working hours providing both a drop in and appointment system. An out of hours service is provided by the Housing team.

Demands on the housing service continue to rise and in 2016/17 there were 467 approaches for housing advice. This increased to 474 in 2017/18. The current trend since April following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 shows this is likely to increase again this year.

Some limited data is available on the number of approaches since the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force in April 2018. April – June 2018 showed less approaches compared to the same month in 2017. However in July 2018 there were 67 approaches for housing advice compared to 50 in July 2017. This could suggest that the impact of the Act is only recently starting to become apparent. There has been a significant impact on the Homelessness team with the average caseload now of over 35 compared to a maximum of 15 prior to the Act. This is due to the requirement to engage in ongoing homelessness prevention support for those meeting the new 'homeless in the next 56 days' criteria.

## 5.9 Future levels of homelessness

It is difficult to predict future levels of homelessness; however it is predicted to continue to rise nationally. The introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act will ensure that advice and support is delivered to anybody facing homelessness to try to prevent homelessness in future.

The following factors are likely to impact on the demand for services:

- Welfare Reform including the roll out of Universal Credit
- Escalating private rent levels
- Further in-migration from London
- Lack of new affordable housing supply

With a renewed emphasis on preventing homelessness and Government funding to help relieve rough sleeping, it is hoped that current levels can be maintained if not reduced.

## 6. Review of activities to prevent homelessness

### 6.1 Homelessness prevention outcomes

The statistical returns to the Government have for some years included information on numbers of homelessness prevention cases. The table below shows the position in Hertsmere.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Total
Prevention activity successful	31	19	16	14	80
of which: helped to remain in a private sector tenancy	20	10	8	2	40

As can be seen from the table above, compared to the numbers of approaches (467 in 2016/17) the number of preventions is relatively low, although these are the official numbers reported on the Government statistical return and therefore not necessarily providing a full picture of all housing advice outcomes. The new Homelessness Reduction Act will ensure a more robust (although procedurally cumbersome) reporting system recording and monitoring prevention activity and outcomes.

### 6.2 Housing advice

The Council provides its own Housing Options Service from its main office in Borehamwood, delivering frontline housing advice and information to people approaching the Council in housing need. The Customer Services Team previously provided an initial triage service, giving information and signposting clients to other agencies, referring on to Homeless Prevention Officers for more detailed case work intervention and support in appropriate cases. However with the Homelessness Reduction Act coming into force recently this has now changed. The frontline triage is now carried out by the Housing Options Officers referring on for casework to the Homelessness Prevention Officers where the individual is, or is at risk of becoming, homeless.

The Homelessness Prevention team includes officers who specialise in a variety of specific service areas: working with young people, private sector housing law, domestic abuse, etc. Home visits are carried out in cases of threatened homelessness from family or friends.

### 6.3 Housing Register and Allocations Policy

Social housing in the borough is provided by a number of housing associations. Clarion Housing Group owns around 4,000 affordable homes which were transferred in 1994 through a stock transfer. Aldwyck Housing Group owns approximately 1,700 homes, transferred at the same time. Together these two associations own 91% of the affordable housing in Hertsmere.

A number of other registered social landlords are active in the borough, including Paradigm, Metropolitan, Hightown Housing Association, Notting Hill Genesis, Stoneham and Home Group. The total stock is around 7,430 (figures as of 2017).

Anecdotally there are a high number of one-bedroom homes within the affordable housing stock so single people and older people tend to be housed through the Housing Register reasonably quickly when given sufficiently high banding.

Housing options advice will include applying to the Housing Register, ensuring applicants' needs are correctly assessed, that they receive appropriate priority banding, and information and advice about how the current housing register process works.

The Council's Allocations Policy was reviewed and updated in March 2018 in three key areas. To remove community contribution as a recognised housing need; to amend the size of property a household is allocated; and amend the local connection rules. The revised policy is designed to make better use of limited affordable housing stock and reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation. The new policy will also ensure a better supply of one-bedroom accommodation to assist the Council in meeting the new duties prescribed in the HRA.

Recommendation 1: Carry out a review of size and type of affordable homes in the borough to use as a tool to support the Housing Options team and to inform understanding about where new housing provision (and what size/type) should be located.

### 6.4 Debt and money advice

The local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) offers a high quality advice and information service to people who live and work in the community. They are equipped to respond to any issue, including benefits, consumer, relationships, housing or employment and they have a dedicated team of Money Advisors to help with debt issues. Advice is delivered face to face from five locations across the borough including community halls and food banks as well as via phone and email. The CAB is funded by the

Council to provide generalist housing advice and a specialist money advice and debt service. They also receive funding from Clarion Housing for the money advice and debt service which is available to both tenants and the general public. The CAB will also support clients wishing to challenge the Council's decisions.

Hertfordshire Welfare Assistance Scheme is run by Hertfordshire County Council which can be accessed for financial or practical assistance in particular severe hardship.

### 6.5 Deposit Bond Scheme and Private Sector Leasing Scheme

The Council runs a Deposit Bond Scheme to assist local homeless people who are unable to afford a deposit and who meet certain criteria to access housing in the private rented sector. The scheme:

- Provides a guaranteed bond equivalent to two month's rent to the landlord
- Provides a complete inventory at the start of the tenancy
- Refers tenants to private landlords without charging any fees

The primary objective of the scheme is to help prevent homelessness in the borough and it is offered to all private landlords and potential tenants who meet the criteria. Unfortunately due to increasing rent levels and ongoing reluctance from private landlords to let to tenants on low incomes only two Bonds were provided in 2017/18.

The Council also offers a Private Sector Leasing Scheme in coordination with Notting Hill Genesis who coordinate management of tenancies for private sector landlords. The rents are in line with the Local Housing Allowance rates.

The Housing team works effectively with Housing Benefit colleagues on a day to day basis holding informal case reviews for housing clients and considering whether Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) would be appropriate to prevent homelessness. The DHP Policy seeks to:

- Alleviate poverty and prevent Hertsmere residents from experiencing an unmanageable level of debt
- Safeguard Hertsmere residents in their homes
- Help those who are trying to help themselves
- Support vulnerable people in the local community
- Help claimants through temporary hardship & difficult events in their life.
- Achieve cost effective way forward towards collection

DHP should always be considered as a short term emergency fund and is not a method by which claimants can seek to permanently resolve a rental shortfall.

## 6.6 Private Landlords and Letting Agents

While the number of landlords working with the Council directly to meet housing need is low, steps are being taken to develop the relationship with private landlords. A Landlord Forum was held in November 2017 arranged jointly with the National Landlords Association. This was attended by 50 landlords some with just a few properties and some larger letting agencies. While this is good progress, the focus was on supporting landlords, rather than persuading them to work with the Council to meet housing need.

One Homelessness Prevention Officer with a legal background specialises in landlord and tenant law and this provides value in terms of advising clients on their rights with regard to private tenancies. A number of successful preventions have been achieved as a result.

Recommendation 2: Continue to develop the Landlord Forum and Housing managers to attend to present information on Private Sector Offer schemes and to provide detail on the type of clients who may approach the Council as homeless to tackle reluctance from private sector landlords to house those in housing need

## 6.7 Access to Flexible Homelessness Support Grant

A Flexible Homelessness Support Grant is available to officers where a one off payment might alleviate or prevent homelessness. This might be for one-off rent arrears clearing or for other small value solutions. This is administered by the Housing Operations Manager who approves payments.

## 6.8 Work in schools

The Community Development team are working with the Herts Schools Partnership to develop joint working and information sharing in schools to deliver early intervention and prevention initiatives around issues affecting young people such as anti-social behaviour and mental health. Herts Young Homeless deliver a schools programme including topics relating to preventing homelessness in future and engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviours.

## 6.9 Social Landlords

There is some anecdotal evidence of partner housing associations failing to notify the housing team of the potential eviction of social housing tenants until very late in the day. This may be due to information sharing issues or for other reasons. With the Homelessness Reduction Act now in force it is important to ensure that protocols are in place with all social housing providers in the borough to allow early intervention and support to be offered.

Recommendation 3: Establish protocols with social housing providers in relation to the eviction of social housing tenants.

### 6.10 Partnerships

The Council has some partnerships with organisations that seek to prevent homelessness. These include Clarion Housing Group, CAB, Herts Young Homeless (to whom all young people are referred), and domestic abuse services including St Albans & Hertsmere Refuge. While some of these are effective, work still needs to be done to build strong partnerships at a strategic level and to improve day to day relationships across staff teams.

A multi-agency Homelessness Forum has met a couple of times but relationships with partners are not well developed and this is an area that will need significant attention in order to develop a true multi-agency approach to preventing homelessness.

Hertsmere Community Safety Partnership provides a Safer Streets information guide which can signpost to services for a number of client groups. Links are being made between the Community Development and Housing teams in order to share information on services across the Council.

Recommendation 4: Hold twice yearly Homelessness Forum to consult and engage on development and monitor implementation of the homelessness strategy.

## **7. Considering the needs of vulnerable groups**

In order to develop effective partnerships and homelessness prevention services the Council has considered what the needs of vulnerable groups in Hertsmere are and what services are in place to support them.

### 7.1 Rough Sleepers

The number of rough sleepers in Hertsmere is relatively low, 6 identified in the estimate in in 2017, and referrals are received through the National StreetLink scheme and referrals from other local organisations. Visits to reported locations are carried out by the Private Sector Housing Officers who signpost to the Council's Triage process for further support.

Those rough sleeping in the borough generally refuse attempts to engage and accept help. These are often people who have complex needs and chaotic lifestyles

and are the most hard to reach group. Currently, in severe weather temporary shelter is provided rather than organised services in coordination with local organisations.

Recommendation 5: Review which officers visit those rough sleeping and ensure they are skilled in engaging with entrenched rough sleepers.

Recommendation 6: Develop Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) working with partner organisations.

## 7.2 Single homeless people / sofa surfers

There are also people in the borough who are not rough sleeping but have nowhere settled to live. Experience elsewhere shows that these are likely to be mainly younger people who move from one friend or relative to another as they are unable to secure a permanent social rented home, and do not have sufficient income to afford privately rented accommodation. The only option for this group is to share with friends, try to access the private sector or hope to be housed through the Housing Register.

## 7.3 Young People and Care Leavers

The Council provides funding for Herts Young Homeless, an organisation that works with young people aged 16-25 who are threatened with homelessness. They provide advice services and carry out needs assessments as well as providing emergency night shelters. They have a directory of services, deliver mediation and also work in schools. The group can also bring in Social Services where necessary if they consider a young person to be at risk. The focus of their work is homeless prevention but also to ensure that the Council's duties towards young people who are homeless are properly carried out. Each year there is a target of 700 young people in Hertsmere to be educated through the services provided.

The Council also signpost individuals to hostels in neighbouring boroughs such as One YMCA in Watford and Welwyn Garden City, who provide hostels to combat single homelessness where people can stay for up to two years

Hertfordshire County Council has recently reviewed the 16/17 year old Joint Young People's Protocol with other Hertfordshire borough and district councils in light of the new Code of Guidance for local authorities on young people at risk of homelessness. However they report that Hertsmere have not been involved with the review having not attended the meetings. This is of concern as without a place at the table the issues relating to young people in Hertsmere are not being included.

A number of Supported Housing projects are in place within the borough including



Townsend House a hostel for young women and young parents run by Sapphire Housing. In addition, Aldwyck Housing Group runs a LOTs Scheme for single people aged 16-25 with low support needs who are homeless or in housing need. This project also accepts young pregnant women and single parents with children who have a local connection to Hertsmere. These are listed later in the Review.

Recommendation 7: Ensure senior homelessness staff attend multi-agency partner meetings with Hertfordshire County Council.

#### 7.4 Vulnerable families

Families who are at risk of homelessness or who become homeless and have to move into temporary accommodation have a variety of support needs. They may have to move away from their usual family support networks and children may have to change schools. This combined with a relationship breakdown or financial worries can result in households with support needs of one type or another. Financial support can be offered through arrangements with the local CAB.

The Council has links with and is able to refer to the Families First initiative run by Hertfordshire County Council Children's services. They can also refer to Home Start and the Children's Centres who provide general support to families and can offer Family Support Workers if there are particular support needs.

In the Council's temporary accommodation at Shenwood Court managed by Clarion Housing Group and Hepburn Court managed by Sapphire Independent Housing, support is provided on an ad hoc basis by the on site management on a day to day basis. This is low level but well received as the households occupying the accommodation are mostly young parents with small children. This project delivers excellent accommodation and support for this client group.

#### 7.5 Victims of domestic abuse

Incidents of domestic abuse leading to homeless presentations are regular although not particularly high in number, but generally require a multi-agency response to keep victims safe. The Council has good links with domestic violence services including St Albans & Hertsmere Women's Refuge which aims to provide a safe comfortable, conflict free environment for women and women with children who are suffering domestic abuse. The Herts Domestic Abuse Helpline provides a confidential, free support and referral service for anyone affected by domestic abuse. It is a registered charity and has been operational for 15 years.

Homelessness Prevention Officers are involved with multi-agency partnership working around domestic abuse including attendance at the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) which aims to reduce the risk of serious harm to

high-risk victims and their children by sharing information.

#### 7.6 People with mental health needs

Access to services for people with a mental health challenge can often be difficult. The Housing Team reports that relationships with the Hertfordshire Partnership Foundation Trust who provide the Hertsmere Community Mental Health Service are strained, with Officers often finding themselves without access to support for very vulnerable complex needs mental health clients.

Herts MIND Network is a charity which provides a variety of services to clients with mental health issues including Community support, complex needs, counselling, peer mentoring, etc. Officers state they often refer to the MIND Community Support Worker to access support for clients.

Recommendation 8: Establish a relationship at a senior level and ensure both teams are aware of the services and appropriate pathways into these.

#### 7.7 Offenders, former offenders and those at risk of offending

There are historically few approaches from offenders or former offenders however this may change in light of the HRA and the new prevention and relief duties for people released from prison or youth detention accommodation. There is hostel for former offenders in the borough which offers move on supported housing for ex-offenders who are a medium to high risk.

Officers report that Probation is hard to engage with and it is recommended that this is explored further and protocols put in place for probation clients.

The Hertfordshire Police & Crime Commissioner funds a Community Support Worker to work with those at risk of getting involved with criminal activity and/or drugs and alcohol and links with this service would be beneficial.

#### 7.8 People with substance misuse or drug and alcohol problems

People with substance misuse issues haven't historically approached the Council for assistance in great numbers although those that do often have complex needs, including mental health problems and can be hard to engage and work with. Services include Turning Point and A-DASH provide support for drug and alcohol misuse for young people.

### 7.9 Older people

The number of older people becoming homeless is minimal due to the availability of sheltered and general older persons housing. Older people can usually be housed through the Housing Register into suitable accommodation before homelessness occurs. Housing Options Officers sit on the sheltered housing and flexi-care housing multi-agency panels with a focus on meeting the housing needs of older people.

### 7.10 People with a learning or physical disability

Numbers of people approaching the Council with either physical or learning disabilities are low. Hertfordshire County Council's Supported Accommodation Strategy 2017 – 2027<sup>6</sup> sets out a priority to actively reduce long stay residential care home places with a great investment focused on supported living type services where individuals have their own tenancies.

The Council would engage with Adult Care Services if it was required to support the individual fully.

### 7.11 Former Armed Forces personnel

The Council is a partner to the Hertfordshire Armed Forces Covenant. While this doesn't commit the Council to any increased legal duties, it does commit the partners to ensure Fair Access to Services which includes Housing, Health and Schools. As a result, provision is made within the Allocations Policy to support those leaving the armed services within the borough. Applicants without a Local Connection are allowed onto the Housing Register provided they have a housing need. Households being discharged from the Armed Forces where they have served a minimum of two years and they also have a local connection are awarded Band B (Very High Housing Need) priority for re-housing.

### 7.12 Modern slavery and human trafficking

People who are threatened with homelessness or are actually homeless may be more vulnerable to exploitation and becoming victims of modern day slavery and human trafficking. The Council has strong links locally with the service run by the Salvation Army to deal with this issue. If cases come to the attention of officers then referrals are made through the National Referral Mechanism.

<sup>6</sup> Hertfordshire County Council Integrated Commissioning, Ten Year Supported Accommodation Strategy 2017 – 2027

### 7.13 Identifying what supported accommodation is available

There are a number of supported housing accommodation schemes in Hertsmere as shown below:

<b>Client Group</b>	<b>Number of support units available</b>	
	<b>Accommodation based</b>	<b>Total</b>
Young People	Sapphire Independent Housing - Townsend House	18
	Aldwyck Housing Group – LOTs Scheme	8
Domestic Abuse		0
Ex-Offenders	Home Group - Stoneham	15
Substance misuse / Drug & Alcohol		0
Generic Floating Support		0
Homelessness	Clarion Housing Group - Shenwood Court	24
	Sapphire Independent Housing – Hepburn Court	12
Learning Disabilities	Hightown Housing Association - Sandy Lodge	7
Mental Health	Hightown Housing Association - Woolmerdine Court and Greatham Road	6
Older People	Clarion Housing Group - Fountain Court, Flexi Care	45
	Aldwyck Housing Group – Bushey, Flexi Care	82
<b>Total</b>		<b>217</b>

The table above highlights some gaps in support provision especially for victims of domestic abuse, those suffering with substance misuse and generic floating support. Hertfordshire County Council's Supported Accommodation Strategy 2017 – 2027<sup>6</sup> details the provisions at a County responsible level with a priority of floating support rather than residential stays.

<sup>6</sup> Hertfordshire County Council Integrated Commissioning, Ten Year Supported Accommodation Strategy 2017 – 2027

### 7.14 Move on arrangements from supported housing

The Allocations Policy provides that people living in supported housing within Hertsmere who are ready to move into independent accommodation (and this can be verified by their Support Worker) will be awarded Band B (Very High Housing Need) priority. This ensures that there is a regular throughput of households within the supported housing that is available and that people don't become 'stuck' in accommodation indefinitely. This policy and its effectiveness in helping households to move on needs to be regularly reviewed at meetings with supported housing providers to ensure that it continues to be effective.

## **8. Review of Temporary accommodation**

### 8.1 Summary of Temporary Accommodation Review

A Review was carried out in February 2018. The conclusions are summarised below:

- There is no doubt that in the short term at least demand for temporary accommodation will remain high. Ultimately the aim of the Homelessness Reduction Act is to reduce the number of households that become homeless, but it will take some time to see results in Hertsmere, as the service develops and staff become accustomed to the new ways of working
- The current temporary accommodation stock provides a mix of arrangements, with hostel accommodation well managed by housing association partners and suitable for smaller younger families in need of low levels of support.
- Properties within the Council's own stock provides the best value for money in terms of cost although the management and rent recovery practices requires improvement if the numbers of properties in this portfolio is to continue to increase
- Nightly let arrangements with private providers are the most costly, and provision is often located outside of the borough. The procurement of these contracts is subject to a separate Audit, but the direction of travel should be to reduce these over time (especially out of area) as new local properties become available
- Management of properties both in terms of systems and rent collection is weak and requires some dedicated and robust management in order to bring these aspects of the service up to date. At present there is not full confidence in the accuracy of the figures being reported on
- A strategic review across council departments of the use of the new Government funding to support homelessness services and planning for the future will help develop a more corporate approach

- More use could be made of strategic partnerships with other statutory organisations (including neighbouring housing authorities) and housing association partners to ensure they are aware of the needs of the council and the willingness to work together to meet those needs
- With an increasing temporary accommodation budget and concerns about future demand it is crucial that a 'spend to save' approach is taken in future making full use of the Government funding provided and ensuring that homelessness prevention remains a high priority
- It is hoped that the new Homelessness Strategy will encompass some if not all of the recommendations contained within this report and that efforts can be re-focused onto a more pro-active strategic approach in future

The Review came up with a number of recommendations and a plan has been developed to deliver these. In the meantime on a practical level, steps have been taken to improve day to day record keeping and management of existing accommodation.

## 8.2 New temporary accommodation supply

Concerns about increasing costs and placements outside of the borough have resulted in a project to deliver more directly managed temporary accommodation within Hertsmere. A new development for 28 modular home temporary accommodation units on a disused site owned by the Council received planning consent in February. It is anticipated that this will be completed in July 2019 and that the new staffing structure will allow for robust management of these and other Council managed temporary accommodation units.

In addition to this plans are underway to procure new accommodation providers for nightly let properties through a framework agreement to replace the ad hoc arrangements currently in place.

Recommendation 9: Carry out the recommendations from the Temporary Accommodation Review and keep under annual review.

## **9. Implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017**

### 9.1 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA)

The HRA places new legal duties on English local authorities, so that everyone who

is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless will have access to meaningful help, irrespective of their priority need status; as long as they are eligible for housing assistance.

The Act largely amends Part VII of the Housing Act 1996. It redefines the meaning of threat of homelessness by extending the period of threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days. There are six key aims of the Act which include:

- a) Prevention – Duty to provide casework intervention to resolve threatened homelessness. Local authorities will work with applicants to draw up a personalised housing plan tailored towards their individual circumstances to help identify the best solutions in each case rather than standard advice
- b) Relief - Homelessness relief occurs when an authority has been unable to prevent homelessness but helps someone to secure alternative accommodation, even though the authority is under no statutory obligation to do so. An example of relieved homelessness cases includes; non-priority and intentional homelessness cases
- c) Duty to provide advisory services - Local authorities must provide free homelessness advice and information to any person in their local authority area. This should include advice and information on preventing homelessness, securing accommodation when homeless, the rights of homeless people or those threatened with homelessness, the help that is available from the local authority or others and how to access that help. It also requires advice services to be designed with certain vulnerable groups in mind
- d) Full Homelessness Duty - The full homelessness duty of settled accommodation for priority need households where prevention or relief duties have failed still remains in place
- e) Cooperation - Applicants will be expected to cooperate with local authorities as the duties outlined can be ended if applicants are found to have deliberately and unreasonably refuse to cooperate. Priority need households cannot have all duties ended without being offered accommodation
- f) Duty to Refer - There will be a new duty on other public services to refer people to homelessness teams if they are working with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This comes into force in October 2018

## 9.2 Hertsmere progress on implementation

In Hertsmere significant progress has been made to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This has included:

- ✓ A review of the Housing Service and a staffing restructure bringing in additional fixed term team leader posts to support the staff team with the changes.

- ✓ New triage procedures on the front line.
- ✓ The purchase of an IT system to monitor and review cases.
- ✓ The adoption of best practice template plans and letters for applicants.
- ✓ A Homelessness Review and plans to update the Homelessness Strategy.
- ✓ Renewed focus on strategic partnerships and developing new services.
- ✓ Plans to increase temporary accommodation in the borough.

This Review forms part of the progress to date. The new Homelessness Strategy will identify the Council's priorities and include recommendations for further changes to meet the requirements of the Act and deliver a pro-active homeless prevention service.

## 10. Housing supply

### 10.1 New affordable housing

The Council adopted their Core Strategy in January 2013 which covers a plan period from 2012 – 2027. The Strategy outlines the requirement for new affordable housing on development sites within the borough and includes a target to deliver 1,140 affordable homes in the plan period, equivalent to 76 affordable dwellings each year.

The number of new affordable homes in the development pipeline is approximately 70.

The following table shows the level of affordable housing completions in recent years:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Homes completed</b>
2014/15	20
2015/16	35
2016/17	20
2017/18	46

It is evident that more affordable housing is required to meet the target set out in the Core Strategy.

## 11. Staffing structure

### 11.1 Restructure of Housing Services

As mentioned above, the Housing Service has undertaken a re-structure to ensure a robust approach to the ongoing HRA implementation and build on the strategic



resource available for housing at the Council. The revised structure includes a new Housing Strategy Manager post to lead the private sector and temporary accommodation teams, develop new strategic partnerships and develop a new programme of affordable housing delivery. This resource will also allow the Council to develop a new Housing & Homelessness Strategy to take forward its priorities over the next five years.

Team Leader roles in fixed term posts funded from the Government Flexible Homelessness Support Grant have been brought in to support the team to manage the change required by the new legislative framework and implement the recommendations in the temporary accommodation review. The new structure should be in place by summer 2018.

## **15. Resources**

### 15.1 Income and Expenditure on homelessness services

In 2017/18 the Council spent £1,539,607 on temporary accommodation costs with a rental income of £1,223,421. The net cost of the temporary accommodation was therefore £316,186.

The Flexible Homelessness Support Grant is used in a number of ways:

- To 'top-up' the temporary accommodation costs which are not covered through the 90% LHA rate that can be claimed by the household
- To fund a number of fixed term positions within the Housing team to manage the demand on the statutory services
- To provide the Council the opportunity to use innovative ways to prevent homelessness and use of small grants to households to prevent evictions e.g. clearance of a percentage of their rent arrears, providing one months rent up front to allow them to access to private rented sector

## **13. Consultation**

### 13.1 Homelessness Forum

A Homelessness Forum was held in November 2017 attended by representatives from local statutory services and the voluntary and community sector. A workshop was held to understand the challenges for Hertsmere in terms of homelessness.

In summary, we found that although a variety of challenges exist in Hertsmere there are also opportunities to work in partnership and tackle these helping to inform the Homelessness review and strategy.

Challenges in Hertsmere include:

- Welfare Reforms, such as Universal credit and Benefit Cap
- Local Housing Allowance not being linked to rental prices in Hertsmere (prices are higher than the LHA making it often unaffordable)
- The supply of affordable housing, difficulty to agree with developers 'affordability criteria' and affordable privately rented accommodation
- Increasing numbers of people suffering with mental health problems, debt and complex needs.
- Lack of suitable size accommodation for volume of need as well as shelters and supported accommodation.
- Increasing demand, due to availability of suitable housing, population growth, employment, money management skills and relationship breakdowns.

The partnership also considered what actions could be undertaken to tackle these issues, which will form part of the Homelessness Strategy for Hertsmere.

### 13.2 Elected Members and the Community

We also consulted with elected members and the wider community including residents and community groups through an online survey on the Strategy and homelessness needs in the area.

## **14. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### 14.1 Conclusions

Demand for homeless prevention services in Hertsmere is likely to grow due to the increasing cost of housing in the area. There will be many challenges for the Housing Team in seeking new solutions to prevent homelessness in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act. However the new structures and renewed energy within the team provides a solid foundation on which to build a strong prevention service in future.

The main cause of homelessness is eviction from family and friends, therefore a priority is to develop a service that provides early home visits from officers skilled in mediation, who take a holistic approach to the whole household's circumstances and seeks innovative ways to resolve the issues that may lead to homelessness. Solutions should be sustainable, and if homelessness is inevitable to work with people to plan a move into alternative housing rather than have to deal with a crisis.

A priority is also to further develop the relationship with landlords, both private landlords/letting agencies and housing associations to ensure that any problem with

tenants is identified at an early stage. Developing protocols to refer tenants to homelessness prevention officers at a much earlier stage will allow solutions to be identified before tenancies are put at risk.

In order to seek solutions to support people with complex problems a multi-agency response is required and priority should be given to developing partnerships with both statutory, voluntary and community organisations in order to ensure people receive the support they need, not only in terms of accommodation but ongoing support to maintain it.

Numbers in temporary accommodation continue to rise and increasingly households are placed outside the borough. Plans are in place to develop more accommodation in the borough and once this is in place to carry out a further review of out of area accommodation and develop a plan to reduce this over time.

New supply of affordable housing is required and further work is needed to develop a pipeline of affordable homes in Hertsmere to meet future need. The focus should be on working with partner associations and other internal departments i.e. Planning to deliver affordable homes in the main areas of need.

## 14.2 Recommendations

The recommendations following the Homelessness Review have been outlined throughout and will form the basis for the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Action Plan.