

Test Valley Borough Council

Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020 to 2023



Welcome to Test Valley Borough Council's

Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020 - 2023

“Easy access to the right support, in the right place, at the right time, for the time that you need it”.

Foreword by Cabinet Member for Housing & Environmental Health, Councillor Phil Bundy

In simple terms, ‘home’ means ‘the place where we live’, but a decent home means so much more than that too. For many fortunate people, it is hard to imagine life without a home. And yet for some less fortunate, homelessness will be a reality at some point in their lives.

The threat of homelessness lurks in the shadows. It is pernicious, stalking the edges of health complaints, failing relationships, financial straits, redundancy and more. It can be incremental as well as sudden, not always immediately apparent, and it can brutally damage lives.

It can be easy to take a home for granted and this sense of complacency sometimes prevents people recognising the signs of impending crisis, and stops them seeking help at the right time.

It is also easy to make sweeping generalisations, and this can be another factor dissuading those in trouble from admitting they need help. The media often refers to “the homeless”, inadvertently suggesting those without homes are a collective class, distinct from other people. In reality, homelessness is indiscriminate. It can happen to anyone, and people experiencing it are no different to anyone else. Stigmatisation creates another barrier between people and available help.

So we have embedded a steadfast belief at the heart of this strategy; homelessness should never be allowed to define anyone. Housing crises and homelessness are transitional. People may go through them, but they can and they will, reach the next - hopefully more positive - stage in their lives.

To tackle homelessness effectively, it must be seen as a ‘symptom’ and treated as such. It is a symptom not only of wider economic and social factors that affect our country, but of various, highly individual, underlying causes that converge on people’s lives and destabilise them.

Our strategy aims to catch those people before they fall. Yet we recognise this may not always be possible and so we have married this aim with a firm commitment to work tirelessly to pick people up again and dust them off, hopefully with a renewed confidence, should they fall.

Importantly, this strategy is about believing everyone has potential, and everyone has talent. We will continue to build services that engage people positively, and that help people to move lives forward, enabling them to thrive. These are all ambitions we cannot achieve if the Borough Council acts alone.

It follows that for as long as housing problems are viewed as the Council’s problem, we will fail to address key drivers of homelessness in Test Valley, or to deliver the kind of support that makes a real, sustainable, difference to people’s lives.

We are proud of the positive partnerships we have developed in Test Valley, but we believe that we can go further. So this strategy is outward facing, and it is not really about homelessness. It is about encouraging everyone to think again, to think differently, about homelessness, and to feel a sense of shared responsibility for actively contributing to the prevention and relief of homelessness. Bricks and mortar are not enough on their own to address the enormous range of complex, underlying causes that culminate in individual housing crises.

These views reflect a strategy that has been developed through extensive consultation, research and analysis. It is on that basis that I have set out our ambitions. We are committed to developing evidence led policy and ensuring our approach to tackling homelessness is inclusive.



Four interdependent, targeted themes have emerged from our work, and our strategy is structured around them. In summary, we will:

Preventing and relieving homelessness is a high priority for us. I am very pleased to endorse this strategy on behalf of Test Valley Borough Council.



Improve health & wellbeing, building on skills, empowering communities to thrive.



Drive innovation across the local system of public services through effective partnership arrangements.



Support people to remain in their homes, or to move into the right accommodation at the right time.



Develop local partnerships to ensure no-one has to sleep rough in Test Valley.

Councillor Phil Bundy
Cabinet Member for Housing & Environmental Health

Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 introduced a requirement for local housing authorities to undertake periodic reviews of homelessness in their areas, and to publish strategies based on those reviews.

Building on the Corporate Plan consultation which, during the summer of 2018, engaged over 2,000 people and listened to their views, the Council has, more recently, developed a comprehensive Housing Strategy Evidence Base & Review of Homelessness. The detailed results of this review can be downloaded from the Council's website here: www.testvalley.gov.uk.

This strategy sets out the key priorities for tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in Test Valley over the next 3 years. It has a deliberate focus on preventative measures but also, on supporting people who do experience homelessness in the local area with appropriate and effective services. The strategy is accompanied by a detailed delivery plan against which progress can be measured. It is ambitious and it will be delivered in partnership.

Policy and context

The Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy will ensure that the Council delivers its Housing Strategy 2020 to 2025 promise to “prevent and relieve homelessness and rough sleeping”.

It has been produced against the backdrop of a complex network of both established and emerging national and local policy, and with regard to a range of legal duties and powers.

Whilst the national housing agenda has been summarised in the Housing Strategy Evidence Base and Review of Homelessness 2019, there are 2 Acts of Parliament, in addition to the Homelessness Act 2002 as referenced above, that are key to the Council's role in supporting people either experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness:

1. The Housing Act 1996 – Part 7 of the Act remains the primary legislation setting out how local housing authorities must respond to statutory homelessness, and the rights of people entitled to statutory homelessness support.
2. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 – radically amended Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996. This included introducing legal duties requiring local authorities to prevent and to relieve homelessness, and a duty on specified public bodies to identify and refer people who may be homeless or at risk of homelessness to the local housing authority for assistance.

Whilst there are other Acts of Parliament relevant to local authority homelessness duties, such as the Housing & Regeneration Act 2008 and the Localism Act 2011, the Acts referenced herein represent the most significant primary legislation affecting the way councils respond to the issue of homelessness in their areas.

At Test Valley, the Council goes beyond the requirements of the law, empowering its staff to extend accommodation offers to local people who do not otherwise fulfil the ‘priority need’ criteria. This reflects the Council's commitment to ensuring no-one has to sleep rough in Test Valley. The Council also invests in local services and in a range of flexible and tailored preventative options that have a positive impact on people's lives.

This strategy aims to build on Test Valley's positive track record of investing in front line housing services, and its positive approach to preventing and relieving homelessness effectively. It will directly contribute to the success of the Council's Housing Strategy and in so doing, it will support the Council to achieve the aims of the Corporate Plan, “Growing Our Potential”. It has been developed with due regard to both the Council's Scheme of Allocations and its Tenancy Strategy.

Strategic ambition: transforming services

The Council embraced the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, using it as an opportunity to review how we work with people to address housing need.

The resulting 'developmental pilot' proved that strengths-based approaches work, and that people appreciate being dealt with in a much more strengths oriented way. The additional Council investment of over £100K to support the pilot, bolstered the service and facilitated innovative new ways of working that have benefited hundreds of people. These methods have since become 'business as usual' and the service continues its journey of change.

The Housing Strategy Evidence Base & Review of Homelessness 2019, demonstrated that people who present to the Council for help with their housing situations, have a range of support needs, and that multiple underlying causes resulted in people facing homelessness. It is also apparent that there are multiple touch points across the wider system that occur before people finally present to the Council for support.



Our experience demonstrates that, for those people with significant and/or multiple support needs, the provision of accommodation does not resolve the underlying factors that resulted in the threat of homelessness in the first place. It also demonstrates that many people, including those working in parts of the wider system, do not necessarily have the skills or ability to recognise when someone ought to be seeking advice from the Council about their future housing needs.

In this context the Council has been reaching out to stakeholders in the interests of creating a shared sense of responsibility for preventing and relieving homelessness. We will continue to do so through this strategy.

The Council has invested heavily in local services. In addition to Council funding, we have been able to draw down central government funding to support transformation, including securing funds from the Private Rented Sector Access Fund, to rethink our approach to working with private rented sector landlords and letting agents, and developed our local partnerships through both Rough Sleeping Initiative and Rapid Rehousing Pathways funding.

The Council continues to challenge itself to do better, constantly seeking out new and more effective ways to engage partners, identify people at risk of homelessness at the earliest opportunity, and to support those people at the earliest possible stage. This strategy represents the latest extension of that journey.

The review of homelessness

The Council has undertaken an extensive piece of work to gather and analyse evidence to inform the Housing Strategy 2020 to 2025 and the Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020 to 2023. This included comprehensive data analysis and wide ranging consultation. The full body of evidence can be downloaded from the Council's website at www.testvalley.gov.uk and a very brief summary has also been included in the Council's Housing Strategy 2020 to 2025.

As part of the evidence base, the Council undertook a robust Review of Homelessness. This involved a series of targeted consultation exercises, including with service users who had experienced homelessness in the area and with staff. It also analysed both locally held data along with data from other areas. The latter developed effective benchmarking using experimental data from the first 3 quarters of 2018/19. The benchmarking represented the initial activities of local housing authorities under the new legislative framework introduced by the radical Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Key 'homelessness' headlines arising from the review include:

- The housing market is expensive in terms of access to both rented homes and in terms of accessing owner occupation.
- The Council's commitment to delivering new affordable homes has meant that it has exceeded its affordable housing delivery target by 20% over the past 6 years, yet demand for housing services remains high.
- The Council's Housing Register has approximately 2,000 households registered, with the vast majority in work, but earning well below average income.
- The demand for Housing Services has increased considerably since April 2018 (in excess of 50%).
- The main causes of homelessness are family or friend evictions (26%), end of private rented sector tenancies (25%), relationship breakdown (15%), end of housing association tenancies (15%) and domestic abuse (7%).
- The Council is reliant on the rented sector (private, social, and supported housing) to meet homelessness demand.
- Only 22% of cases triggering the duty to prevent homelessness were successfully supported to remain in their existing accommodation.
- Despite high demand, the Council has successfully reduced main duty homelessness acceptances and temporary accommodation use, and has been actively working to reduce instances of rough sleeping.
- In 2018, the Council experienced a spike in rough sleeping levels, with the official estimate for autumn that year identifying 9 individuals who were sleeping rough. This had reduced to 6 individuals in autumn 2019.
- Significant numbers of people presenting who were either homeless or threatened with homelessness had a support need, with many identifiably having multiple support needs.
- 34% of all cases triggering homelessness duties had a support need associated with a history of poor mental health.

The bullet points above represent a brief summary highlighting particular challenges. The evidence base also identified some excellent practice and positive trends in the Council's approach to preventing and relieving homelessness.

The evidence base is extensive, yet it should not be considered exhaustive. Other existing research, and earlier consultations, were used to help inform this strategy. Further research and analysis will be undertaken throughout the delivery period.

Preventing homelessness and rough sleeping in Test Valley: our priorities

The 4 themes that will inform the strategy's delivery plan are interlinked and interdependent. This section provides a brief summary of each of the key themes.



Theme 1: Improving health and wellbeing, building on skills, empowering communities to thrive

Whilst providing bricks and mortar is fundamentally important, there is much more to effectively preventing and relieving homelessness than solely offering people accommodation.

Theme 1 and its associated action plan focus on ways we can further develop a strengths-based approach, reach out to increasing numbers of people, and support people holistically to achieve sustainable outcomes.



Theme 2: Driving innovation across the local system of public services through effective partnership arrangements

Leading by example, the Council will seek to engage the wider system through various forums, and by engaging in sub-regional and countywide activities that are geared to prevent and relieve homelessness and rough sleeping.

Theme 2 and its associated action plan focus on how we work with our partners and on the successful delivery of government funded projects such as Test Valley Lettings and the local social inclusion partnership's Rapid Rehousing Pathway approach.



Theme 3: Supporting people to remain in their homes, or to move to the right accommodation at the right time

The Council will explore whether it can do more to support people to remain in their current home when they present for advice and assistance. The first priority for the housing team will be to identify whether it would be safe and appropriate for a customer to remain where they are, and officers will be empowered to think creatively with the customer about ways in which the current property could become sustainable.

Theme 3 and its associated action plan focus on ensuring we have the right tools to negotiate sustainable outcomes with those asking people to leave their homes, whilst also ensuring that where people have to leave, there are

appropriate options for them that can be made available at the right time.



Theme 4: Developing local partnerships to ensure no-one has to sleep rough in Test Valley

The Council will continue to take a lead role in preventing and relieving rough sleeping including through working in partnership with statutory and voluntary sector agencies, and continuing to deliver innovative projects. This section of the strategy will review the Council's investment and involvement in local social inclusion services and ensure locally identified need continues to be met.

Theme 4 and its associated action plan are focused on single homelessness, both in identifying and engaging people at risk of rough sleeping, but also in proactively seeking to bring people inside from the streets where homelessness has not otherwise been prevented. We will continue to make offers of accommodation to people on the street, and to try and persuade anyone with entrenched issues to come inside.

Delivering the strategy

This strategy represents a contribution to a cross-cutting agenda and will meet a range of priorities across the public sector, including those associated with economic activity, health, criminal justice and social care. The strategy can only be delivered successfully in partnership, working alongside the private, public, community and voluntary sectors.

In terms of delivering on the Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy priorities, the Council's housing related functions are delivered through a mix of council tax and central government grant funding, along with funding from the Department of Work & Pensions through rebates and Discretionary Housing Payment funding.

The Council has been successful in drawing down additional funding from the Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) and will continue to work closely with the Ministry to meet the aims of named funding streams whilst continuing to be proactive in any further funding rounds, during the life of the strategy.

The strategy will be led by the Borough Council's Housing & Environmental Health Service, but also through the Test Valley Preventing Homelessness Forum, Test Valley Partnership, and a series of multi-agency 'working groups' tasked with delivering aspects of the delivery plan.

Monitoring & review

This strategy has been developed in partnership, including with our service users, and sets out a 3 year plan. It is likely that each of the strategic themes will stand the test of time during the life of the strategy, as a result of the level of analysis and consultation that informed them. New priorities may, however, emerge over the next 3 years. Whilst we can anticipate that key themes will remain relevant, the way we deliver them may need to change.

The Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy will remain under review to ensure it is up to date. Furthermore, the Delivery Plan is a live document, to be updated as necessary and as actions are completed.

An updated version of the action plan will be published on the Council's website in spring each year, setting out the achievements and the challenges of the preceding financial year, along with any significant recommended changes to the action plan that may arise from emerging demand, guidance, legislation or policy.

The strategy will be overseen by the multi-agency Preventing Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Forum. The forum will act as a 'critical friend', partnering the Council in the delivery of its strategic plans. Working groups will also be assigned from the membership of the forum to support the delivery of key actions.

Service User Focus Groups will, periodically, help monitor our progress and keep the strategy in touch with the lived experience of our customers.

The Council's Housing & Environmental Health Service will brief Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSCOM) annually regarding the operations of the Housing Service, and this will include aspects of our work to prevent and relieve homelessness.

The delivery plan

This strategy is deliberately focused on action. The Delivery Plan sets out specific, measurable, achievable and time-phased (SMART) actions that contribute to meeting the overarching aims. The approach to monitoring and review ensures that in addition to SMART actions and targets, there will be regular evaluation and review (SMARTER).

The Delivery Plan has been developed around the key priorities and themes identified in the evidence base and that have been developed through consultation.