

Sevenoaks District Council
Homelessness Review
August 2022

Introduction

This Homelessness Service Review provides information on the needs of people who have approached the Council's housing service for help since the last Homelessness Strategy was adopted. It considers what we have achieved, what has changed and how this relates to the changing environment and Government Policy. It will inform our Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy from 2023.

Achievements 2016-2022

During the life of the current Strategy the Council have:

- Successfully prevented 1,988 households becoming homeless since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2017.
- Adopted and embedded working practices to comply with the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- Embedded dedicated homelessness prevention support through our HERO team.
- 2 additional officers were appointed to the Council's HERO team to support at risk tenants to remain in their home.
- Between 2016-2017 and 2021-2022, we awarded a total of £6.53 million (before Kent County Council's top slice) in grants to adapt homes to make them more suitable for people with physical disabilities and enable them to remain at home.
- Updated the Housing Allocation Policy in 2022 to ensure it best meets the housing needs within the District and complies with the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act.
- Since 2018, Quercus Housing has delivered a total of 24 affordable housing units in the District.
- Between 2016-2017 and 2021-2022, a total of 434 affordable housing units have been completed in the District in partnership with Registered Providers, of which 219 were genuinely affordable social housing (affordable and social rented tenures) and 192 shared ownership tenure.
- Relaunched our landlord incentive scheme, appointing Help2Rent to extend our offer to landlords.
- Launched a Financial Hardship Working Group and use this to share information with partners and community groups about the help and support available for residents experiencing financial difficulty.
- Worked with Compaid to commission a digital inclusion and literacy support package, including devices, mobile data and training to support households placed in temporary accommodation access support and information.

- Provided grant funding to support voluntary sector agencies working within the District to deliver advice and support services for people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Officers in the Housing Service have developed specialisms in work areas such as domestic abuse, single homelessness, ex-offenders and vulnerable adults to develop and improve links with partners and ensure that key priorities in the Strategy Action Plan were addressed.
- Appointed an Armed Forces Officer Champion as part of our HERO offer.
- Established working relationships with other partners such as the Probation service through the Accommodation for Ex-offenders (AFEO) programme and established best practice in coworking and service referral systems.
- To address the needs of rough sleepers, in 2021-2022 secured almost £300,000 under the Rough Sleeper Initiative 4 and a further £677,230 under Rough Sleeper Initiative 5 for 2022-2023. This funding will provide coordination, outreach and complex needs support to rough sleepers and those in risk of rough sleeping.
- Appointed a Housing Pathway Coordinator to deliver the Rough Sleeper Initiative.
- To address the needs of customers experiencing domestic abuse, appointed a dedicated Domestic Abuse Coordinator to support customers and signpost to partner agencies.
- Published and updated the Housing Advice and Housing Options Guide. This guide includes details of the help available within the District for people who are homeless or rough sleeping, or at risk of becoming homeless.
- Worked in partnership with West Kent Housing Association to enable a total of 4 Housing First units of accommodation at Orchards Close.
- Worked in partnership with West Kent Housing Association and Kent County Council to submit a successful Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme funding bid to deliver 7 units of supported accommodation for rough sleepers, with Kent County Council providing support through their Kent Homeless Connect Service. The Council contributed £269,000 Section 106 monies to help bring forward the redevelopment of the scheme.
- Vine Court Road, supported accommodation completed in September 2022 and 2 residents have moved in. Support for residents is being provided by Look Ahead.
- The increase in our Accommodation Officer capacity has enabled the provision of additional support to households placed in temporary accommodation, assisting them to identify items needed to set up home in their temporary or move on accommodation, and resolving issues whilst living in temporary accommodation.
- Provided in collaboration with West Kent Housing Association and Moat Housing 46 self-contained temporary accommodation housing units, which are cost neutral to the Council and enables households to stay within the District rather than be housed out of area.
- The Council worked with HFT (a charity providing housing and support for adults with learning difficulties) to change the use of an empty property in Edenbridge and provided funding from the Homelessness Prevention Grant to develop safe and secure move on accommodation for up to 6 mothers and

babies. The scheme completed in September 2002 and will welcome the first residents November 2022.

- The Housing Service structure was revised in 2020-2021 and a new manager post was created to oversee both the Homelessness Prevention, Advice and Register/Allocations teams.

Homelessness

National Context

Homelessness Legislation and Policy

The homelessness legislation is set out in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 and provides the statutory framework and duties for local housing authorities to provide assistance to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

The legislation was amended via the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002. These amendments required housing authorities in England to formulate and publish a Homelessness Strategy based on the results of a review of homelessness in their District.

The legislation extended the groups of people who housing authorities had a homeless duty towards, now including homeless 16 and 17 year olds, Care Leavers aged 18 to 20, people who were vulnerable as a result of being in care, the armed forces, prison or custody and people who were vulnerable because they had fled their home due to violence.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 came into effect on 3 April 2018 and significantly reformed England's homelessness legislation by placing duties on housing authorities to intervene at earlier stages to prevent homelessness in their areas. Housing authorities are required to provide homelessness services to every household who is homeless or threatened with homelessness, and not just those who are considered to be in priority need. These duties include:

- An extension to the period that a household is considered to be threatened with homelessness, from 28 days to 56 days, meaning that housing authorities are required to work with people to prevent homelessness at an earlier stage.
- A new duty to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for every household that is threatened with homelessness. This duty can generally take effect for a period of up to 56 days.
- A new duty for those who are already homeless so that housing authorities will take steps to support households to relieve their homelessness by helping them to secure accommodation. This duty can generally take effect for a period of up to 56 days.
- A new duty to refer, where public bodies in England will have a duty to refer an individual's case (with consent) to an identified housing authority.

The Homelessness Reduction Act has reformed homelessness prevention services.

The Government formed a Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018 and an Advisory Panel to support delivery of the Strategy which aims to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027.

There are a number of activities that the Council must undertake in order to meet the requirements of the Act. To provide some context, the following is intended as a brief summary of the customer journey through our services since the Act was introduced and sets out the key activities and duties imposed on local authorities to prevent or relieve homelessness.

A customer approaches the Council directly or is referred by another statutory body under the Duty to Refer, then:

- The Council investigates the housing application to see if the customer is already homeless or may be homeless within 56 days.

If the customer is already homeless then under the Relief Duty the following actions are taken by the Council:

- Reasonable steps to help the customer find accommodation.
- If the customer has no local connection to Sevenoaks District, the Council can refer the customer to another authority under the Power to Refer.
- Works with the customer to form a Personal Housing Plan.
- If homelessness is not relieved, continues to assess the customer's circumstances and apply the remaining tests of homelessness.
- Make a main housing duty decision.

If the customer could become homeless within 56 days, then under the Prevention Duty the following actions are taken by the Council:

- Takes reasonable steps to prevent homelessness.
- Works with the customer to form a Personal Housing Plan.
- If homelessness is not prevented, then a Relief Duty is owed.

If the customer is not homeless now or threatened with homelessness within 56 days:

- Has a duty to provide advice and information.

Changes in Legislation

Since the adoption of the Council's Homelessness Strategy 2016-2021, there have been other substantial, ongoing legislative changes impacting accommodation and provision of services to people in housing need. These are discussed below:

The Tenant Fees Act 2019

This Act prohibits landlords and letting agents from requiring a tenant, licensee, or

other relevant person to pay fees, other than permitted payments, in connection with specified private rented sector tenancies/licences. This would normally come in the guise of renewal fees or credit check fees. It caps all deposits to 6 weeks' equivalent rent. This is a positive change as it makes access into the private rented sector more affordable as upfront fees and rent deposits are minimised.

The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018

This requires a landlord to ensure his property meets minimum safety standards. Violations can range from mould, small, cramped living spaces, lack of adequate sanitation facilities, insecure doors, and windows, excess cold and potential for trips and falls. This Act empowers tenants to obtain redress in the courts for sub-standard accommodation. Poor standard accommodation in the private sector can increase the need for tenants to move to more suitable and affordable social housing.

Renters Reform Bill 2022

This proposed to amend the Housing Act 1988 to abolish Assured Shorthold Tenancies. Thereby disabling a landlord's ability to commit to a fast track eviction under Section 21 of the Housing Act, as this section will be repealed. Although more grounds for eviction will be introduced in the Bill, it will oblige landlords to prove the grounds of the eviction to a Court. Removing the fast track to evictions approach, substantially increases the security of tenure for private renters. The Bill is currently going through the legislative process.

Planning for the Future – Planning White Paper, 2020

The White Paper was launched on 6 August 2020, alongside a Government consultation on changes to the planning system. The proposed changes covered a number of key areas including delivering First Homes.

First Homes are homes for sale to first time buyers, at a discount on market value, with such discount held in perpetuity. The Council does not have an up to date Local Plan, therefore First Homes are required to be included as an affordable tenure. In December 2021, the Council introduced a local First Homes Policy to ensure new homes are available and affordable to as many local people as possible. The local Policy gives priority to those with a local connection to the District, it stipulates a 50% discount compared with the national cap of 30%, and it sets a reduced income cap compared with the national cap. The concern remains that the inclusion of First Homes in the calculation of a developer's contribution to affordable housing under a Section 106 agreement may reduce the number of social rent, affordable rent and shared ownership (part rent/part buy) homes being provided. The local First Homes Policy and wider Affordable Housing Policy are being viability tested as part of the emerging Local Plan process.

The consultation considered the threshold for developer contributions. Planning Practice Guidance Planning states that contributions (including affordable housing) should be sought only for major developments, which for residential development means 10 or more homes or a site with an area of 0.5 hectares or more. The

consultation document proposed to extend the support given to economic recovery by raising the threshold to developments comprising 40 or 50 homes. In Sevenoaks District, any increase to the threshold would have a significant detrimental effect on our ability to provide new affordable housing. Following sustained public concern, the proposal was dropped.

On 2 February 2022, a Levelling Up White Paper was launched. Many of the white paper's provisions such as those for encouraging the use of brownfield land and promoting beauty and good design were foreshadowed in the White Paper Planning for the Future. The potential impact, should the Government's proposals be implemented, would be an acceleration of the delivery of infrastructure and housing development but not necessarily affordable housing.

Homelessness in a County wide context

Kent Homeless Connect

Kent County Council is the lead partner for Kent Homeless Connect, where support is delivered by Porchlight, Look Ahead and a network of specialist providers on behalf of Kent County Council, helps vulnerable people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The service is available to vulnerable adults living in Kent, aged 18 and over, with complex support needs (such as mental health, substance misuse problems, or learning difficulties) who are:

- Rough sleeping
- Homeless
- At risk of becoming homeless
- Impacted by homelessness

In addition Kent County Council help those move away from homelessness for good, by bringing together elements of outreach, supported accommodation and floating support to offer tailored support to:

- Vulnerable people
- Enable them to be healthy
- Find a stable home
- Manage their tenancy or their finances

Kent Housing Options Subgroup

The Council are members of the Kent Housing Options Subgroup. All the Kent Local Authorities and Medway Council are represented on this group, which works together to improve on excellent Housing Option services provided across the County, to monitor performance, share best practice and liaise with partner organisations and agencies.

The aim of this subgroup is to continue to share best practice in terms of homelessness, housing options, allocations, lettings and service delivery. To respond and ensure that services are monitored and developed to meet changes in legislation, to explore solutions and working practice to assist in the delivery of new affordable urban and rural housing.

Homelessness in a Local context

Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping is a priority for the Council and there is a corporate commitment to make real improvements to the lives of local people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, this is reflected in the Council's strategies and plans.

COVID has had a significant impact on the UK as a whole. In Sevenoaks District, there were 16 known rough sleepers at the start of lockdown, however 29 individuals were helped into accommodation in response to the Everyone In initiative, of which 24 individuals were helped to move on once the lockdown ceased. This is a significant success in a period of unprecedented circumstances. However, it highlights the hidden homelessness in the District.

It remains important for the Council's Housing and Health service areas to work collaboratively to find suitable local solutions for providing access and referrals to health and social care services, as well as access to education, employment, training and advice that will help to build housing and health resilience across the District.

There has been a rise in the percentage of pensionable age and elderly people living within the District. This is the fastest rising population demographic in the country and is reflected locally, which will require careful thought about longer term housing and wellbeing solutions that are suitable for an ageing population.

Rough Sleeping

Rough sleeping in the District is traditionally low in comparison to national statistics. All English Local Authorities are required to carry out either an annual estimate or count and report the figures back to central Government about the number of people known to be rough sleeping on a given night. We have seen the numbers of people reported as sleeping rough gradually reduce since 2017 and in November 2021, we counted only 1 rough sleeper in the District during the official count with DLUHC.

We know that many people sleeping rough require more support than just somewhere to live and need help from other services to help manage issues such as mental health and substance abuse. It is therefore critical that we ensure vulnerable people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can access the appropriate help and support.

The COVID Everyone In initiative whereby all Councils were required to accommodate all rough sleepers regardless of duties owed to them, demonstrated in many cases that rough sleepers would take up offers of accommodation if it meant the risk to them was reduced and the offer was more desirable to their aspirations.

Therefore, providing a range of accommodation in the District that will improve the housing offer and meet a wider range of needs, will continue to be our priority and longer term solution for customers in housing crisis.

The Council have commissioned Porchlight to deliver an outreach and complex needs service to identify and support people who are found to be rough sleeping or identified as single homeless in the District. This is funded through the Rough Sleeper Initiative funding.

Since 2017 we have focussed on increasing the options available to rough sleepers and ensuring accurate verification of rough sleepers based on the agreed definition.

From our data we can confirm that over the course of the year 2021-2022 a total of 40 individuals were reported as rough sleeping. Of the 40:

- 16 were verified as sleeping rough
- 24 reports gave insufficient information to attempt or rough sleepers were not found for verification

Of those 16 who were verified rough sleepers:

- 13 were assisted to secure other accommodation or refused/or did not engage with the Council

Verification of any reports received about people sleeping rough requires additional staff time but is vital to ensure that those sleeping rough are engaged with at the earliest opportunity.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol

The Council operate Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) during periods where the weather is forecast to be 0 degrees or lower for 3 consecutive days. This protocol is very similar to the Everyone In initiative but has traditionally only been activated at the coldest times of year.

We provide financial support to anyone wishing to access SWEP beds and provide an opportunity for rough sleepers to engage with other local health and support services, with the aim to reduce the risk of them returning to the streets when the weather improved.

Our data so far indicates that to fully meet the needs of rough sleepers and achieve the Government's goal to end rough sleeping by 2027, we need to:

- Monitor the current levels of rough sleeping, and resource services to tackle this.
- Monitor future likely levels of rough sleeping and put support in place to mitigate this.

- Work with partners to secure appropriate accommodation for those who are rough sleeping or are threatened with homelessness and to help them build housing resilience.
- Review effectiveness and quality of accommodation offers to rough sleepers and develop an improved housing offer.

The Overall picture

Who seeks help with housing?

Whilst the small number of households who are rough sleeping place an urgent demand for housing services, there are a greater number of people who are assessed by the Council as being threatened with homelessness within 56 days or at immediate risk of homelessness. Of the 376 households in 2021-2022 who were owed a statutory homeless duty, 205 were owed a prevention duty compared to 145 the previous year, and 171 were homeless and owed a relief duty compared to 128 the previous year. In 2021-2022 a further 622 were not threatened with homelessness within 56 days and therefore no duty owed however these households would have received advice and information to assist them in finding a housing solution. This demonstrates that most work undertaken by the Housing Service relates to homelessness prevention.

Housing and homelessness enquiries are predominately received through applications made online to join the Housing Register, contact by telephone and email and some direct face to face contact with the duty housing officer. The team provide a triage role for initial face to face and telephone enquiries and assist residents with form filling when necessary. All calls received by the Council for housing related enquiries go through the Customer Solutions Team initially and are passed to the Housing Service when more complex advice is required, or the customer advises that they are at risk of homelessness.

There is a dedicated email address to receive referrals under the Homelessness Reduction Act Duty to Refer, and specified officer in the Housing Service is the single point of contact for such referrals. Households with an open Housing Register application can use their individual registration log in details to email updates on their circumstances direct to the Council's housing case management system. The number of general housing advice enquiries taken is not recorded by the service, but data is available on the number of advice and prevention cases opened (prior to 2018) or registered as a working case through the HCLIC system, post 2018 when Act was implemented. It will be important to improve the monitoring of general housing advice enquiries, to better understand the demand for services and the quality of advice offered at each point of contact.

In the last 3 years, it is estimated that 2,526 people each year approach the Council to request advice and information about their housing circumstances. Some of those approaching only require general one off advice and are then able to independently resolve their housing issue. Other households require intervention and additional support, and prior to the introduction of the Act this was dealt with through advice and prevention work, to help the customer resolve their housing difficulties.

Since the introduction of the Act in April 2018, we have had to change the way cases are processed or recorded and actions closed. Due to this, it is difficult to compare data and trends from previous years. This review has highlighted the potential for variations in how housing data is recorded and the opportunity to record the number of contacts with the service to demonstrate the true demand. The people needing to access our service come from all demographics in Sevenoaks District.

Household composition

The table below shows the household makeup of housing applicants to whom the Council owed a prevention duty as the household circumstances demonstrated that they were at risk of homelessness within 56 days.

Year	Total owed prevention duty	Family with Dependent Children	Single Male Adult	Single Female Adult
2018-2019	342	180	80	82
2019-2020	203	114	46	43
2020-2021	145	72	34	39
2021-2022	205	105	54	46

The highest demand for homelessness prevention services comes from families with dependent children, followed by single male and female adults.

The table below shows the household makeup of housing applicants to whom the Council owed a relief duty as their circumstances demonstrated that they were homeless or at risk of immediate homelessness.

Year	Total owed relief duty	Family with Dependent Children	Single Male Adult	Single Female Adult
2018-2019	81	40	32	9
2019-2020	76	21	37	18
2020-2021	128	43	58	27
2021-2022	171	70	68	33

The highest need and demand for housing and homelessness services is from single male and female adults, both of which require very different accommodation and support solutions. It will be important to ensure the housing offer in the District can accommodate both and that proactive communications are targeted to provide advice and support at the earliest opportunity before crisis happens in order to raise awareness and prevent homelessness.

Support needs

It is recognised that the many customers needing assistance to prevent homelessness or to relieve their homelessness have other support needs. DLUHC data shows that

households did not disclose a support need. The highest support need is that of mental health support. This is explored further below.

Mental Health issues

A household's support needs are considered as part of the assessment of their overall housing need and the duties owed by the Council to relieve or prevent homelessness. Mental health can impact on a household's ability to sustain their accommodation and therefore we work in partnership with mental health services to ensure that customers are informed about the help and support available to them. As a general provider of service in mental health, Kent NHS Foundation Trust delivers NHS mental health services outside of hospital, at home and within the community. The Trust helps those living with mental health needs to manage their current health and live independently.

Physical or Health disabilities

In assessing whether the duty is to prevent homelessness or relieve it, we will consider the individual circumstances and establish if the household's existing home is suitable to meet their needs. Where the property cannot be modified and is unsuitable, there may be a duty to accommodate them (relief duty). If the household's circumstances warrant a prevention duty, this will be established following completion of inquiries and the housing need assessment. Modifications to accommodation to make it suitable to meet the longer term needs of households with disabilities, can be achieved by a disabled facilities grant, small works grant or an adaptation. It may be the case that a referral to Adult Social Services under a Safeguarding Protocol is necessary. To assess the needs of those stating they have physical needs, our assessments are guided by an inhouse Occupational Therapist that works jointly across the Council and Kent County Council.

Drug or Alcohol dependency

If, at the time of approach for housing assistance, an individual is misusing substances and not engaging in specialist support, they are encouraged to engage through a Personal Housing Plan to access and engage with relevant support services (Homelessness Reduction Act duty). This is because stability needs to be established in order to maintain a long term tenancy. A tenant will need to control, manage, or resolve their substance misuse habits in order sustain their tenancy and money management.

As part of Personal Housing Plans, individual households can be referred to support services or can access support themselves via the Council grant funded or commissioned services such as debt and money advice and drop in services provided by Citizens Advice.

Age of applicant

The Council owed a homelessness duty to 387 households in 2021-2022 approximately 200 were aged between 18 and 34 years; 157 were aged between 35

and 64 years and the remainder aged 65 or higher. A snapshot of our Housing Register in October 2021 indicates that the majority of housing applicants across the whole register in the Sevenoaks District are aged between 18 and 64 years with approximately 13% aged 65 or higher, of which there are an increasing number of households in the 80 plus age group. The homelessness duty and Housing Register data largely reflect each other and the local population statistics. It will be important to ensure a continued supply of affordable accommodation to meet all age ranges and needs but due to the impact that Welfare Reform changes have on affordability of accommodation, this will increase demand, particularly for those affected by benefit caps and inability to claim benefit for accommodation that has bedrooms surplus to requirements.

Young people face significant difficulty in accessing accommodation. This is due to life inexperience, parental or home exclusion and poor financial power. Therefore, special attention needs to be given to this age group.

16 and 17 year olds

If a young person aged 16 or 17 presents as homeless, every attempt is made to assist them to return home, where it is considered safe to do so. We consider the home, if safe, to be the most appropriate and effective place for them to be for financial security and support.

All young people in this age category are initially referred to Kent County Council's Social Services who have a Resettlement Team, to try and facilitate a move home wherever possible. If this cannot be achieved, a joint assessment will be carried out to establish whether the young person is to be supported under Section 17 or Section 20 of the Children's Act 1989. Kent County Council identifies that all 16 and 17 year olds at risk of homelessness within the County are assessed under the Children's Act 1989 and ensures there is a pathway for Care Leavers, with housing options available to them. This arrangement has been positive in ensuring that only 1 out of 13, 16 or 17 year olds have needed to be placed into temporary accommodation over the period of the review.

18 to 34 years old Single Person Households

Sevenoaks District is covered by 2 Broad Rental Market Areas (these are areas in which Local Housing Allowance rates are set). These rates have been frozen for all property types since 2012, whilst rental prices have continued to increase annually.

As Welfare Reform changes have meant that single young people under the age of 35 are not eligible to claim the full amount of benefit to cover the cost of rent on a 1 bedroom flat, there is a significant shortfall between the contractual rent and the single room allowance. This has an impact on affordability and increasing demand for more affordable social housing.

Family Households

Whilst families are not impacted by the same benefit restrictions as single person

households, they still face significant issues when it comes to being able to secure accommodation where they are in receipt of low income or are impacted by the benefit cap introduced by Welfare Reform changes. This can make the private rented sector unaffordable for some families and increases the demand on social housing. The number of households applying as homeless as a result of parental eviction or unable to stay with family/friends has consistently been the most common reason for homelessness, falling in front of domestic abuse and loss of an assured shorthold tenancy.

Ethnicity of lead applicant

A snapshot of the Council's Housing Register in October 2022 shows the ethnicity of the lead housing applicant. The majority fall within the White Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British ethnicity group or White any other background group. The second largest group includes White Other origin.

Ethnicity of lead applicant	2021-2022
Asian or Asian British - any other	6
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	8
Asian or Asian British - Indian	5
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	5
Black or Black British - African	13
Black or Black British - any other	0
Black or Black British - Caribbean	9
Chinese	0
Irish	4
Mixed - any other background	2
Mixed - White and Asian	1
Mixed - White and Black African	3
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	13
Arabic	3
Not stated	205
Other	0
Other ethnic origin	4
White Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	680
White - Any other background	38
Total	999

It will be important to ensure our data collection and analysis identifies any gaps in provision of housing services and how we can better target the information and advice to support improved access and understanding. The learning from responses to COVID and input from people with lived experience of homelessness and rough sleeping will help us to better understand how we can reduce any barriers to housing across different ethnicities and cultures.

Prevention and Relief work at Sevenoaks District Council

Enquires, Advice and Closure

The table below shows how data is recorded since the introduction of the Act and the information submitted to DLUHC.

Year	Total number homeless applications assessed	Of which: number of households assessed as owed a duty	Number of households owed a Prevention Duty	Number of households owed a with Relief Duty
2017-2018	1,162	1,162	1,077	85
2018-2019	1,326	573	374	199
2019-2020	1,097	398	204	194
2020-2021	1,180	395	144	251
2021-2022	999	376	205	171

This does not record the total number of households who contacted the service and who were assisted with advice and information, therefore does not provide the full picture of service demand.

Duty Acceptances

As explained earlier the Homelessness Reduction Act places extra duties on Councils towards the public by extending definitions of *threatened with homelessness* and introducing a *Relief duty*, therefore it is important to separate the assistance given under each of the duties and the other cases where advice may have been given and the case closed. Cases where duties are accepted take up the majority of officer time and therefore are an indicator of substantial housing need and homelessness in general.

Number and reason for homelessness approaches for the month of July for years 2019 to 2022:

Reason for Homelessness	July 2019	July 2020	July 2021	July 2022	Total
Domestic Abuse	5	3	8	13	29
End of Private Tenancy	5	9	13	14	41
End of Social Housing Tenancy	3	2	5	4	14
Family/friends no longer will to accommodate	7	39	28	18	92
Left Prison	0	5	3	2	10
Left Hospital	0	0	0	2	2
Disrepair	1	0	2	3	6

Relationship Breakdown	0	2	6	1	9
Other	6	15	9	2	32
Total	27	75	74	59	235

The chart clearly demonstrates the increase in 'family and friends no longer willing to accommodate' in July 2020 (39) at the start of COVID.

A further spike in approaches due to applicants fleeing domestic abuse is shown in July 2022 (13). This increase follows the Domestic Abuse Bill being signed into law on 29 April 2021 which placed the following duties on local authorities:

- A duty on local authorities in England to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation.
- Provide that all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have priority need for homelessness assistance.
- Ensure that when local authorities rehouse victims of domestic abuse, they do not lose a secure lifetime or assured tenancy.
- Provide that all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have priority need for homelessness assistance.

There is evidence of an increase in private tenancies coming to an end in the July 2022 (14) snapshot. This may in part be due to a number of reforms put forward in a new White Paper, including the abolition of Section 21 (non-fault evictions).

Prevention outcomes

The main difference in the actions taken to prevent and resolve homelessness before the introduction of the Act and after, is that the need to assess *priority* and vulnerability at prevention stage has been removed and the level of all service is universal.

Most advice and prevention work is demonstrated in the arena of closed advice given, and interventions followed by case closure. It demonstrates well, the escalation of prevention work and it highlights the need to continue our commitment to provide outreach support and upstream prevention work. For many households, this will reduce the need for them to approach the Council at crisis point.

Methods of prevention

Using internally recorded data, the table below shows the method in which Homelessness Preventions were attained:

Prevention Measure	2020-2021	2021-2022
Mediation and/or counselling	86	24
Other assistance to remain in Social or Private (buying customers food)	1,097	2,037

Conciliation with friends/relatives	29	48
Resolving rent issues in Social or Private (clearing rent arrears)	78	23
Crisis intervention by Mental Health teams	123	234
Secured debt advice (IVA, DRO Bankruptcy)	63	73
Mortgage Holidays	17	1
Information and advice only	1,236	1,464
Total	2,643	3,904

Secured Social Housing

The most effective tool to assist households to move to alternative accommodation is through an offer of accommodation via the Housing Register. As we are working within the Act duties, a formal Part 6 offer to discharge a full homeless duty is now rare. This rise shows that there is a dependence on affordable accommodation being available to help prevent homelessness within the District.

The Housing Register is for people in housing need and who have a local connection to the District. People are assessed against an approved Allocation Policy which provides criteria to assess a household's housing need and their eligibility for social housing in the District based upon their current circumstances. Households are nominated to properties owned by Registered Providers and allocated through the HomeChoice scheme. HomeChoice allows eligible applicants to apply for suitable properties each week that meet a household's housing need, anywhere within the Sevenoaks District. We currently allocate certain properties under specific circumstances to households in reasonable preference groups such as vulnerable homeless households and those fleeing domestic abuse. These households, when owed a homeless duty, are made 1 offer of accommodation. The new Housing Allocations Policy extends the 1 offer only Policy to all applicants, except those seeking 55+ housing or those downsizing. Our recent experiences with Everyone In to deal with the COVID crisis demonstrates we should consider households who are rough sleepers as a reasonable preference group.

Assisted to Private Rented Sector accommodation

Our second highest prevention tool to assist households to move to alternative accommodation is a move to the private rented sector, including support with rent deposit and rent in advance, subject to eligibility. Since adoption of the Core Strategy and the accompanying Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document 2011, over £275,000 Section 106 affordable housing commuted sum monies have been allocated to this area.

Information and Advice only

It is positive that many cases were resolved by issuing advice. Reconciliation with friends/relatives and advocacy were strong avenues of resolution and going forward all Housing Advice Team members will be trained further in such techniques. When mediating between disputing families and giving advice, the team aims to set out realistic expectations of what the Council can offer via a homeless application or the Housing Register.

Homeless Decisions and Acceptances

With the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act, the need to make *main homeless duty* decisions have dramatically reduced as this action is now regarded as a last resort should other duties not be successful. The upstream prevention model traditionally adopted by the Housing Advice Team is now legislated and this has resulted in most cases ending with a prevention action.

Accommodation outcome following acceptance of Relief and main homeless duty

The only Homelessness Reduction Act duties that require an accommodation solution are relief duties and main duties. If a household has not obtained long term secure accommodation within 56 days, the Council is then obliged to make a full homeless decision where a full assessment of events leading to homelessness are considered. In these cases, on some occasions it can be assessed that the household does not qualify for further assistance.

The Council discharged our duty to most of the households we accepted as homeless, following an accepted nomination into social housing provided by Registered Providers. Homeless households, to whom we accept a homelessness duty, are placed on auto-bidding on the HomeChoice scheme and will receive 1 suitable offer of accommodation as per our revised Allocations Policy.

Prevention versus Homeless Relief Duties

Threatened with Homelessness (Prevention Duty owed) Homeless (Relief Duty owed)
Under the Allocation Policy we can add a preference for homeless or transfer applicants, to manage temporary accommodation and meet the specific needs of certain households. However, this is used very sparingly to ensure that other groups are not disadvantaged.

The Council can discharge our duties by way of a Private Rented Sector Offer, where suitable private rented sector property is available.

Use of a Part 6 offer to end homelessness (Reliance on Social Housing)

When a household is housed by being offered accommodation through the Housing

Register, it is known as a Part 6 offer of accommodation (under the Housing Act 1996). This is applied where prevention actions have been exhausted.

This table shows out of all Sevenoaks District housing allocations 21% in 2020-2021 and 27% in 2021-2022 were provided to homeless applicants.

Allocation Type	2020-2021	2021-2022
General	115	95
Homeless	49	58
Transfer	73	62
Total	237	215

The percentage of lets to homeless households has risen by 6% in the last financial year.

Availability of new Affordable Housing Delivery

During the period of the review we have seen the number of allocations to Registered Providers accommodation fall slightly. This is partly due to a reduction in delivery of proposed new builds and a reduction of allocations to homelessness cases demonstrated later.

Year	Number of allocations to Council nominees
2018-2019	357
2019-2020	355
2020-2021	317
2021-2022	209
Total	1,238

The Sevenoaks District is bound by strict planning constraints. It is 93% Green Belt and over 60% Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. These constraints mean the delivery of new homes has never been easy. However, delivery was further severely impacted by COVID, as was the case across the nation. The rising cost of raw materials and labour/materials shortages are continuing to have an impact. If the Government takes forward proposals to raise the site threshold triggering affordable housing contributions, this will further inhibit our ability to secure new homes.

The table below shows that the number of affordable properties delivered over the period of the review:

Type of property	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
All dwellings (net)	378	254	426	213
Affordable Housing (gross)	49	71	206	22
% of affordable to market	13%	28%	48%	10%

The provision of new, onsite affordable housing is only triggered on development sites comprising of 10 or more homes. Provision is subject to viability testing. Owing to the nature of Sevenoaks District, a sizeable proportion of development sites comprise less than 10 homes (small sites). Where small sites are located in Designated Rural Areas (Section 157 of the Housing Act 1985) and comprise 6 to 9 homes, National Planning Policy Framework gives scope for local policy to be adopted. The District Council has adopted local policy, meaning commuted sum payments are triggered in lieu of onsite provision.

There continues to be a gap in the provision of genuinely affordable housing (Social Rented and Affordable Rented housing) in the District and there are actions set out in the Housing Strategy 2022-2027 to address this.

The table below shows affordable housing completions broken down by tenure

Year	Social Rented	Affordable Rented	Shared Ownership	Other tenures	Total
2017-2018	0	23	26	0	49
2018-2019	0	53	18	0	71
2019-2020	0	95	107	4	206
2020-2021	2	0	20	0	22

Other Accommodation Options

With the data showing a drop in allocations to Registered Providers and a fall in new affordable housing completions in future, other ways to fulfil housing obligations are needed. It will be important to make best use of and improve housing conditions in the private rented sector so that this remains an attractive option to households who can afford to rent privately.

Access to Private Rented Accommodation

The private rented sector can be a realistic housing option for households in housing need. Although it is generally more expensive and offers shorter tenancies than the social housing sector, it can respond quicker to demand and provide more flexibility. However, for those on lower incomes, including those in paid employment, the choice of suitable private rented sector accommodation that is affordable can be limited.

With the Government legislating the abolition of non-fault evictions, the economic downturn post COVID and tightening of tenant rights, there is a concern that the number of private rented sector landlords letting properties in the area may reduce. We need to proactively promote the opportunity with private rented sector landlords (through the Landlords Forum or publicity) to let their properties through our Landlord Incentive package. Working with households on our Housing Register via Personal Housing Plans, to explore private rented sector property as a housing option will be important but the cost may, for some households, make this prohibitive.

The high private market rental values in the area is fuelled in part by Sevenoaks being

well placed with good transport links to London. Sevenoaks District is recognised to be one of the most expensive places to live when comparing median earnings to property prices.

For households in receipt of full or part Local Housing Allowance, there is likely to be a shortfall between Local Housing Allowance rates and local rents, as shown in the tables below:

Shortfall between LHA rates and local rents

Property Size	LHA Rate - North West Kent BRMA (£pw)	Average Rent for Swanley (£pw)	Shortfall per week (£)
1 Bed	£155.34	£221.00	£65.66
2 Bed	£195.62	£288.46	£92.84
3 Bed	£241.64	£406.15	£164.51
4 Bed	£299.18	£496.15	£196.97
Property Size	LHA Rate - High Weald BRMA (£pw)	Average Rent for Sevenoaks Town (£pw)	Shortfall per week (£)
1 Bed	£159.95	£248.31	£88.36
2 Bed	£207.12	£412.15	£205.03
3 Bed	£260.05	£573.46	£313.41
4 Bed	£345.21	£690.46	£345.25

Data sourced September 2022 – [Home.co.uk](https://www.home.co.uk)

Property Size	LHA Rate - North West Kent BRMA (£pw)	LHA Rate - High Weald BRMA (£pw)	Average Rent across District 2021/22	Shortfall per week (£)
1 Bed	£155.34	£159.95	£224.31	£68.97/£64.36
2 Bed	£195.62	£207.12	£300.46	£104.84/£93.34
3 Bed	£241.64	£260.05	£379.85	£138.21/£119.80
4 Bed	£299.18	£345.21	£752.54	£453.36/£407.33

Data sourced September 2022 – [Home.co.uk](https://www.home.co.uk)

Whilst the average rent charged within the private rented sector varies based upon demand at any given time, the tables above provide a snapshot of the difference between the market/average rent being charged within the District and the shortfall for residents requiring support from Local Housing Allowance towards their monthly rent. This highlights the difficulty that many people on low incomes have with being able to identify accommodation they can afford and demonstrates why many landlords are reluctant to accept tenants claiming benefits. We are aware anecdotally, of landlords stating that they are unable, as a condition of their insurance, to let to tenants in receipt of benefits and our landlord offer includes cover for this via Help2Rent.

We are aware that affordability issues impact on those claiming out of work benefits and households where one or two members are in paid employment, still find it difficult to afford local rent levels.

Property Standards

Between 2017-2021, the Council issued 45 Enforcement Notices and improved 26 homes through enforcement action.

Houses in Multiple Occupation licensing was introduced in 2006 but extended to more premises from 1 October 2018 when the original requirement that premises only had to have a licence if there were 5 or more tenants forming 2 or more households, and had 3 or more storeys, was changed so that it applied regardless of the number of storeys. The legislative change resulted in an increase of 31% (5) of licensed Houses in Multiple Occupation. The number does fluctuate because of new Houses in Multiple Occupation being created and others ceasing to operate. Licenses typically last for 5 years. Houses in Multiple Occupation with fewer than 5 tenants are not subject to mandatory licensing but are subject to broadly similar standards and are checked periodically.

Between 2017-2021, the Council granted 371 Disabled Facilities Grants. The works carried out with grant funding ensure residents can remain safely in their own homes and continue to enjoy independent living. This prevents residents needing to be rehoused.

Between 2017-2021, the Council granted 173 Safe and Secure Grants which are designed to reduce admissions to hospital and promote independence that could include repairs or modifications to stairs, floors and steps, safety and security repairs or providing additional property modifications to promote independence for customers with a specific disability, diagnosed condition (or written evidence supporting a condition) with a Dementia to ensure they reside in their own home as long as possible.

Between 2017-2021 the Council granted 62 Hospital Discharge Grants which is to provide support to any customer being discharged from hospital. A Better Care Coordinator has been appointed funded through the Better Care Fund. This appointment has ensured that strong links between the Council and Health and third sector organisations have been built which in turn has provided opportunities to improve the lives of vulnerable people and in doing so provide a better service and quality of life.

Landlord Incentive Scheme

The aim of Help to Let scheme is to encourage landlords to work with the Council to help to assist local families in housing need whilst reducing the risk and hassle of private sector renting.

Help to Let will provide a tenant matching service for local landlords from our customer base, this will primarily be households that the Council have a duty to

prevent or relieve their homelessness by securing alternative accommodation within the private rented sector.

In addition to the tenant matching service the scheme will offer the following services free of charge:

- No letting agency fees for tenant finding/matching services
- Right to rent checks carried out
- A full electronic inventory prepared
- Check in and check out
- A single point of contact within our Accommodation Team
- Post – tenancy visit within the first 6 to 8 weeks
- One property inspection per 12 month tenancy
- £500 towards repairs during each 12 month tenancy period

The financial incentives available under Help to Let are flexible and be tailored to our individual households depending on the households needs. The basic financial incentives are as follows:

- Bond or cash incentive (equivalent of 6 weeks rent)
- Free landlord insurance provided in partnership with Help2Rent

These financial incentives support the landlord with the provision of Local Housing Allowance weekly/monthly rates for rental throughout the agreed period. All incentives with our Help to Let scheme are funded through our Homeless Prevention Grant.

28 households have been rehoused under this scheme between April and October 2022. The majority of these households have been under a Prevention Duty.

Supported Housing Options

Many homeless applicants need support to sustain independent accommodation in the long term. Access to supported accommodation, transitional, longer term and crisis support services can reduce the risk of repeat homelessness.

Discretionary Housing Payments and pressure on affordability

Resolving rent issues in social or private rented sector involves the use of Discretionary Housing Payments which are administered by the Council's Revenues and Benefits Team. Discretionary Housing Payments are intended to support households to access or sustain their tenancies and are available to assist households for an interim period whilst they resolve their individual financial circumstances. They can be used to assist with clearing rent arrears, issues of affordability, benefit cap and in some cases for deposits or rent in advance to access new accommodation.

The Revenues and Benefits team work closely with the Housing Service to ensure customers are receiving advice and support where homelessness is identified as an

issue for requesting support with Discretionary Housing Payments. Issues of affordability within the District have consistently been one of the main reasons for people seeking assistance with a Discretionary Housing Payments and affordability affects households in both the social and private rented sectors. In the period of this review, over £736,785 was awarded to residents in Discretionary Housing Payments.

The table below shows the number of payments awarded and the central Government contribution:

Financial Year	Total Discretionary Housing Payments awarded	Central Government contribution
2017-2018	£177,847	£198,116
2018-2019	£185,668	£190,679
2019-2020	£164,004	£164,643
2020-2021	£236,266	£238,106
TOTAL	£736,785	£791,544

If the central Government contribution to the Council is not fully spent, then it must be returned. Therefore, although we may endeavour to spend as much of the allocation as possible, if Discretionary Housing Payments are not made during a financial year's payment run, they will come out of the next financial year's contribution. This explains some of the differences in amounts awarded against contribution total.

Use and availability of Temporary Accommodation

Use of Temporary Accommodation

The Council has a duty to offer Temporary Accommodation to:

- Households that present as homeless where there is reason to believe that they may be in priority need and they have nowhere to stay pending a homelessness decision.
- Households for whom following an assessment, a full homelessness duty has been accepted.
- Households deemed vulnerable and owed a Relief duty.
- Households who present themselves to the Council as homeless, are usually placed in temporary accommodation whilst enquiries are made into their circumstances, and a decision is made as to whether the Council owe a duty to continue to provide accommodation.

The Council works with applicants as far as possible to enable them to remain in existing accommodation until suitable temporary accommodation becomes available; however this is less likely to be possible for households who present at the point that homelessness has already occurred, and these households will be more likely to require emergency or Bed and Breakfast placements. The Council aim to place applicants into self-contained temporary accommodation if this is available. If there is

a need for an emergency placement, or self-contained temporary accommodation is not available, Officers will make placements into Bed and Breakfast accommodation in the first instance. In some cases, households will then move on from Bed and Breakfast accommodation to self-contained temporary accommodation as soon as it is available.

COVID Everyone In impact

Between 23 March 2020 and 4 July 2020 when the Prime Minister announced that lockdown restrictions would end, the Council accommodated around 80 households in temporary accommodation across 7 different locations at a total cost of £184,373. The costs continue to rise whilst some households remain in the temporary accommodation until suitable secure accommodation can be found for them.

Sources of Temporary Accommodation

Bed and Breakfast accommodation

The Council have a small selection of options available to meet the needs of households requiring temporary accommodation. The option used will depend upon the urgency of the applicant's housing circumstances and availability of accommodation at the time of approach.

Where people approach needing accommodation in an emergency or with limited notice that they are to become homeless, the main option is likely to be Bed and Breakfast, which is paid on a nightly basis, or in a hotel.

Where out of area placements are used, we strive to meet the requirements of households with work or school commitments close to our administrative boundaries. Some out of area placements have been made at the request of the applicant, usually for personal safety reasons. These are only used as a last resort for a short period of time, until accommodation within the District can be identified.

Bed and Breakfast is not considered to be suitable accommodation for families and the law says it can only be used in an emergency and for no longer than a maximum of 6 weeks.

Self-contained Accommodation

If a homeless duty is accepted and the household has been placed in Bed and Breakfast or hotel accommodation as an initial placement, the Council will look to move the household into self-contained accommodation at the earliest opportunity.

The Council have an agreement with West Kent Housing Association and Moat to provide 46 self-contained temporary accommodation units in the District.

Time spent in Temporary Accommodation

We work to limit the amount of time households have to spend in temporary

accommodation. We provide support through our Accommodation Officers who visits families to ensure they are maintaining their temporary accommodation and applying for suitable properties available through our HomeChoice system. If households are not applying for all suitable properties available within an advertising cycle, officers will place bids on suitable properties on their behalf, to ensure they move out of temporary accommodation at the earliest opportunity.

During the review period, the number of households who remained in temporary accommodation for over 12 months, increased during COVID and has since decreased during 2021-2022 with 104 accommodated for over 12 months.

The table below shows the time spent in Temporary Accommodation for those owed an immediate emergency accommodation duty:

Time in Temporary Accommodation	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	Total
Under 6 months	78	89	105	92	364
6 -12 months	39	49	72	56	216
1-2 years	110	128	236	104	578

Expenditure on Temporary Accommodation

Households placed into temporary accommodation are charged rent whilst they are staying in the accommodation and can claim Housing Benefit to assist with this if they are receiving a low income.

2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
£77,05.99	£332,773.33	£501,240.88	£860,170.44	£1,483,056.35

Funding towards Homelessness Responses

Homelessness Prevention Grant

Central Government used to give local housing authorities funding for homelessness prevention work via a ringfenced grant. A few years ago, the ring fenced grant ceased, and the funding was incorporated into the Council's wider local government settlement but was visible as a discrete element of the total settlement. The Homelessness Prevention Grant allocation for Sevenoaks District Council is as follows:

2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
£178,842	£264,630	£364,043	£434,897

This funding has been used by the Housing Service to support a range of community and voluntary sector groups to provide services within the District that are focused on supporting the prevention of homelessness. Examples of where this funding has

been used include to assist with rent and mortgage arrears, alongside financial difficulties paying their utility bills.

Rough Sleeper Initiative funding

The Council successfully bid for Rough Sleeper Initiative funding in 2021-2022 secured almost £300,000 under the Rough Sleeper Initiative 4 and a further £677,230 under Rough Sleeper Initiative 5 for 2022-2023. This funding will provide coordination, outreach and complex needs support to rough sleepers and those in risk of rough sleeping and our spend is programmed to deliver:

- Emergency Accommodation
- Housing Pathway Coordinator
- Assessment Resettlement Officer (Porchlight)
- Weekly Drop-in (Porchlight)
- Outreach Officer (Porchlight)
- Personalised Budget
- Private Sector Rented Funding

Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme

The Council successfully bid for Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme funding in 2021 and secured £233,175. This funding has covered the costs of the refurbishment of properties to provide supported accommodation for 2 years with permanent move-on accommodation at social rents.

Accommodation for Ex-Offenders

The service helps build partnership links and create housing pathways at point of prison release, risk of homelessness from family/host (who has offender history in the last 12 months), move on from specialist supported accommodation beds and hospital discharges.

This service is part of the established HERO service, providing support and advice to people at risk of rough sleeping, prison charges, responding to duty to refers and ensuring all customers are assessed for a full homelessness assessment. The Council's HERO service is a responsive prevention service, with mediation, conflict resolution interventions, access to grant assistance for rent deposit and rent in advance private rented sector accommodation.

This service links in with the Council's current outreach and inreach provision funded by the Rough Sleeper Initiative 5, and as the Council upscale the prevention interventions in the District to prevent homelessness.

The service will continue to work to undertake prevention and relief assessments with providing rapid responses to prison discharges ensuring no one sleeps rough and no second night out in the District.

The Council housed 6 ex-offenders and are working with another 12, some of whom are due to be released from prison during November and December 2022.

Using Section 106 Affordable Housing Commuted Sum monies

The Council has used Section 106 Commuted Sum monies totalling £6.269m to deliver 31 new affordable homes in the District, including 27 genuinely affordable homes where rents are capped at local housing allowance levels. Of these, 20 homes have been delivered by Quercus Housing across 2 schemes and 7 by West Kent Housing Association. The homes have been allocated to those on the Housing Register, with 15 homes specifically targeted at homeless households moving on from temporary accommodation and 7 for rough sleepers.

Section 106 monies have been used to fund initiatives which impact, directly or indirectly, on our homeless customers. These include a private rented sector landlords' incentive scheme to secure more homes in the private rented sector (see Assisted to Private Rented Sector accommodation above) and a downsizing incentive scheme to free up family sized social housing for reletting to those in need.

Total Section 106 monies expended on these various initiatives represents approximately 70% of all Section 106 monies spend since 2011.

Working in partnership

Strong and effective partnership working has been key to the successful prevention of homelessness in Sevenoaks. Our partners include:

- Porchlight
- Look Ahead
- CGI
- Priority House (NHS)
- Highlands House (NHS)
- Littlebrook mental health unit (NHS)
- DAVS (domestic abuse services)
- CAB
- Cross Light Debt Assistance
- KSAS (KCC scheme for emergency support needs)
- Abacus for all furniture needs
- Department of Working Pensions
- Royal British Legion
- SSAFA
- IPAG (Kent Police)
- Stalking Charities
- Social Services
- GP Practices
- Probation services for ex-offenders
- CROP (citizen's right for older people)
- Criminal justice system
- West Kent Housing Association

Moat

Strong relationships, referral routes and jointly delivered services will continue to lead to better outcomes for the homeless.

Future Challenges and Priorities

Looking ahead into 2023–2028, the Council with our partners and stakeholders need to assess the content of this review and taking significant national events into consideration, understand the challenges that might lie ahead. We have assessed that the following factors will shape the way in which services are delivered, and any Strategy going forward, should endeavour to tackle and overcome them.

Challenges

Funding

Partnership working can be destabilised by short term funding. Partners need confidence in long term funding to develop and mature services in our favour. Yearly and short term funding approaches can foster short term thinking.

Affordability

A lack of social housing and private rented affordable housing options within the District and accommodation for low income households. There is an overall affordable housing need for 423 homes per year, as set out in the Targeted Review of Local Housing Needs. Between 2017-2021, the annual new delivery averaged at 87 homes. The private rented sector is increasingly unaffordable and the delivery in affordable housing has been impacted by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

To be genuinely affordable, a rent should cost no more than 35% of gross income. This equates to someone on an income of £45k (median income) paying a monthly rent of no more than £1,312. In 2020, rents in the lowest quartile (the lowest 25% of rents) across Sevenoaks District were £1,001, making it necessary for most people earning average incomes, to access some form of affordable housing. The lack of a local definition of what constitutes housing that is affordable to occupiers means that the current supply of new affordable housing may not be affordable to those in greatest need. This could create an increasing threat of homelessness as the supply of social housing is reduced and private rented sector accommodation becomes unsustainable or increasingly unaffordable

Domestic Abuse services in Kent

There is a pooled budget for County Council led commissioning of services to support people affected by domestic abuse.

Customers with support/complex needs/older residents

A need for increased accommodation and support services in the District for people who sleep rough; support for customers to be tenancy supported to enable them to access and sustain their accommodation with social and private landlords. We need to ensure that a range of housing options are made available for younger people who have limited incomes, and older people and people with disabilities who require more support eg provision of additional Extra Care accommodation and accessible homes. The lack of an up to date Local Plan means the Council are currently unable to require homes that meet minimum standards, ie the Nationally Described Space Standards. As social housing tends to be let at maximum capacity, it is very important for homes to have reasonable space standards. Achieving higher building standards to enable us to help customers with accessibility and physical disabilities (Building Regulation Standards M4(2) and M4(3), is an even greater challenge.

Hidden Homelessness

The sudden rise in street homelessness at the start of lockdown on 23 March 2020, indicated many people were in insecure arrangements. This sector is incredibly difficult to quantify as many do not regard themselves as homeless. However understanding that many single males do not approach homeless services until crisis point indicates a need to identify this customer group at an early stage and provide suitable accommodation options and enhance outreach support.

Priorities

Financial difficulty and Financial Illiteracy

Households may experience financial difficulties in being able to access accommodation in the social or private rented sector or in trying to cover their housing costs and maintain an existing tenancy. The challenge of meeting housing costs versus limited household income applies across all tenures.

Rising Cost of Living

Rent arrears and utilities are rising hugely within our communities. Strong consumer demand for goods, rising energy prices and higher costs for businesses are reflected in higher prices within supermarkets, petrol stations and utility bills.

We saw the effects of food insecurity as we went in and came out of COVID, in certain areas of the District we saw malnutrition and hunger which is particularly alarming in the current context with high food demand and energy prices rising.

Requests for assistance with food parcels from our foodbanks within our District have risen to 2,037 since April 2022.

While using the Kent Household Support Fund of £120,000 to assist customers to pay utilities, rent arrears and mortgage arrears (within a limit), across the whole District of Sevenoaks.

Greater demand is currently being seen in the Sevenoaks District for assistance with rent and mortgage payments, assistance to pay utility bills. During the month of August the Council have assisted a customer to gain a mortgage holiday, hence avoiding eviction.

The data shows an emerging trend of hidden homelessness

We need to identify this demographic who cannot, or find it difficult to, access Council support when they most need it to prevent homelessness or rough sleeping. This may include people who find it physically difficult to attend the centre, those who do not know about our services or those who for other reasons feel they cannot access our services.

Improve the financial resilience of our customers

By offering targeted financial support, this will help to address this affordability barrier and should be a key action within the Strategy. We will monitor the costs of affordable housing, encourage delivery of housing at social rents and consider the delivery of shared housing solutions, in partnership with Registered Providers. The Council will need to support solutions to facilitate access into social housing for those households who are not yet tenancy ready but need independent accommodation.

We must work in partnership

With other institutions such as the DWP, Criminal Justice, Health, Kent County Council, and other Kent local authorities to improve homelessness prevention via early intervention and referrals to appropriate advice and support services, joint commissioning, or delivery of services where possible, and improved protocols.

Provide an alternative narrative to those already homeless

Improve the communications to promote our services to those who need them and build trust within the communities of interest. Consult and engage people with lived experience to understand their needs, capitalise on their strengths and codesign solutions.

Ensuring Private Rented Sector is fit for purpose

Most households do not want to secure alternative accommodation in the private rented sector due to affordability and quality concerns. We must ensure that the private rented sector is an attractive alternative housing solution.

Data capture

We need to improve the way we record homelessness and rough sleeping prevention services. This will enable us to use this data effectively to inform service improvements. Nominations agreements and lettings should be monitored, and targets set to drive appropriate actions and behaviours. Staff training will help to

ensure consistency of approach to facilitating and recording the demands on the service but the solutions and positive outcomes.

Maximising delivery of Affordable Housing

Adoption of a new Local Plan will help the Council to maximise delivery of new affordable housing. Policies within the Local Plan will ensure affordable housing is developed which is truly affordable for local residents, meets prescribed standards to meet specific needs and contributes to the Council meeting its net zero targets.

Continued collaboration with existing partner Registered Providers, encouragement of new partners who share our strategic direction and the growing role of Quercus Housing will ensure Local Plan Policy is delivered on the ground.

The use of different forms of housing will assist specific groups, eg micro homes to help the single homeless.

Refreshed and enhanced under occupation scheme to free up more family sized housing in order to create movement in existing housing stock in the District.

Re-invigorated empty homes service to bring homes back into use for local people.