Buckinghamshire Council – Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2022 - 2025

Foreword

This is a consultation draft of our new homeless prevention and rough sleeping strategy.

Buckinghamshire is an attractive area with high employment, and high housing costs. The availability of good quality affordable accommodation to rent and to buy is key to preventing homelessness. A stable home makes it easier to secure and sustain employment, and to manage physical and mental health. As a new local authority, we have set four key priorities, one of which is to reduce homelessness. This strategy will make a significant contribution to reducing homelessness across Buckinghamshire, as well as supporting our other key priorities: to strengthen our communities, protect vulnerable households, improve the environment and increase prosperity.

This strategy represents the first single homelessness strategy document for the Buckinghamshire Council following its creation from 1st April 2020. The strategy has been drafted following on from the intensive work undertaken by the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government's 'Everyone In' campaign during 2020/21 required all local authorities to take urgent action to house rough sleepers, and those at risk of rough sleeping, in order to protect people's health and reduce wider transmission of Covid-19. This required 'self-contained' rooms with minimal sharing of facilities to enable people to practise social distancing and self-isolate, as appropriate. Partnership working between local authorities, voluntary-sector organisations and partners within the localities supported rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping into the most appropriate type of accommodation available. Over 300 individuals were accommodated across Buckinghamshire during the "Everybody In" campaign as a result of this work 'Everybody In' and the Council and its partners has supported the majority of these persons to subsequently move on to alternate accommodation, including supported housing and private rented accommodation. Providing both this immediate and longer term accommodation is a key part of an overall response evidenced to have prevented deaths and hospital admissions among those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. In September 2020, there was further allocations to local authorities to pay for immediate support to ensure that vulnerable people supported during the pandemic did not return to the streets. To date, the Council has moved clients on to a wide range of accommodation options.

As well as the options that were already in place pre-pandemic, the Council has successfully bid for funding from the Government's NSAP (Next Steps Accommodation Programme), RSAP (Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme), RSI 4 (Rough Sleeper Initiative 4) and the Accommodation for Ex-Offenders Scheme in order to deliver new and additional accommodation. This includes the Ardenham House scheme in Aylesbury which provides 9 self-contained units for medium/high support needs clients opened in April 2021 and was a project delivered by Hightown Housing Association and supported with funding from NSAP.

Within Buckinghamshire, our already strong history of working with our stakeholders: the many voluntary and charitable sector organisations who deliver vital services, including our housing association partners enabled this pandemic response to house our most vulnerable to operate a smoothly as possible. This has built upon the strong foundations of our regularly held Rough Sleeper core group meetings in High Wycombe and our two Homelessness Forums, which operate in the North and the South of the county. The Homelessness Forums allows regular policy and performance updates from the Council to be shared with stakeholders and partnership agencies. This sits alongside regular monitoring, intervention and scrutiny as part of the Rough Sleepers Initiative and demonstrates the Council's commitment to and participation in measures to prevent homelessness wherever possible and relieve homelessness where necessary to do so.

In 2020/21, the first full year of operation for the new authority, around 2,000 households approached us for help. This number was no doubt reduced because of the impact of Covid and some of the temporary safety nets which were put in place. The Covid legislation that initially delayed evictions (except in the most severe cases of antisocial behaviour) and was later amended to require landlords to provide 6 months' notice prior to evicting households, had an impact on these figures. These factors may have a bearing on an increase in evictions in future months following to end of the safety net measures and associated support needs which will be required.

Of those households who approached the Council for assistance during 2020/21, we were able to prevent over half becoming homeless, through interventions with landlords, assistance with debt and arrears, and mediation to allow people to remain in their homes for longer. We were able to 'relieve' homelessness with a planned move to alternative accommodation for around a third of households. The numbers who became statutorily homeless and were owed a main duty under the legislation were, therefore, relatively small. But the impact of homelessness affects a much greater number of people: families, friends and others in the community who work to offer support. It also negatively impacts on other public services, particularly the health and criminal justice services. Homelessness adversely affects employment, education and the quality of life for the residents of Buckinghamshire.

This Homelessness Strategy builds on strong foundations put into place by the former local authorities who came together to form the new Buckinghamshire Council. It will reflect the wider shared priorities and goals that will come forward within the forthcoming

planned Buckinghamshire Housing Strategy This forthcoming strategy will act as guide for potential investment and a framework for housing project management, meeting locally identified accommodation needs, including the addressing wider support needs that contribute to individual experiences of homelessness. It is aligned to various health and wellbeing priorities, at a national, and local level, because good housing is a closely linked healthy communities.

The Homelessness Strategy and the future Housing Strategy will also feed into the construction of the Buckinghamshire Local Plan which must be produced by April 2025. One of the central functions of the Local Plan is to ensure an adequate and continuous supply of land for housing development but must also recognise that any new housing development is consistent with the Green Belt and other environmental objectives of the Plan. To this end, the Council is seeking to identify further sites for housing on brownfield land, which might be suitable for redevelopment or regeneration, to ensure the optimum use of surplus land and facilities to accommodate need.

The Homelessness Strategy also builds on the strong partnership history with stakeholders and partner agencies, who have provided valuable contribution to this during its consultation process. Working together with our partners we can successfully prevent homelessness for many households, and ensure that necessary support is in place for those households who do face losing their home. We will also identify suitable options and work with partner agencies to support our most vulnerable residents and address their support needs appropriately. This includes effective joint working across different Council service areas such as Housing and Social Care. One example if this is the Council receiving funding to employ a Housing Occupational Therapist to work within the Housing Team to assist with timely adaptations and plans for changes to accommodation to assist those with health and disability needs (potentially averting a potential homelessness situation at a later date to accommodation no longer being suitable to occupy)

1. Introduction

It is a statutory requirement that every local authority has a strategy for preventing homelessness and rough sleeping. This strategy has been drawn up from a robust evidence base, which looks at patterns and trends in homelessness, the personal and structural factors that lead to people becoming homeless, and the effectiveness of different interventions in preventing homelessness. The evidence base is published alongside this draft strategy.

This strategy has been developed to reflect and conform to statutory requirements, including the updated Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities 2018.

The Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) sets the statutory framework for the Council's homelessness duties. The ethos of the HRA is to:

- Prevent more people from becoming homeless in the first place by identifying people at risk and intervening earlier;
- Intervene rapidly if a homelessness crisis occurs, so it is brief and non-recurrent; and
- Help more people to recover from and exit homelessness by getting them back on their feet.

This strategy reflects the requirements of the HRA and the recognised need to continue to intervene at the earliest possible stage to prevent homelessness.

2. Key challenges

In order to prevent homelessness effectively, the strategy needs to tackle the root causes. These are many and often complex; ranging from financial issues and employment challenges to broader lifestyle issues, which might impact on tenancy sustainment. The Council and its partners are working to ensure that everyone in Buckinghamshire has secure and affordable housing, access to employment, and support where needed.

The evidence base highlights some key challenges including:

- The number of people, particularly young people, being asked to leave by family and friends. Many of these have never held a tenancy in their own right;

- The number of households with debt and financial challenges affecting their ability to pay their current rent;
- The number of households threatened with homelessness when their private sector tenancy is ended;
- The number of people threatened with homelessness as a result of a relationship breakdown, many involving domestic abuse;
- Encouraging those threatened with homelessness to make early contact with the service in order to resolve the situation and prevent homelessness;
- Increasing the proportion of households where homelessness can be prevented either by retaining the existing tenancy or making a planned move;
- To virtually eliminate rough sleeping
- Continuing to manage temporary accommodation tightly; minimise the use of B&B type accommodation; and ensure move-on from temporary accommodation at the earliest possible opportunity to affordable, sustainable, settled accommodation; and
- Ensuring appropriate support is available for vulnerable households. We will continue to ensure consistent and appropriate support for mental health needs across the Buckinghamshire area

3.   What the data review is telling us

As noted above, in 2020/21, almost 2,000 households approached the Council for advice and support in relation to homelessness. The Council had a statutory duty to assist (i.e. to prevent and/or relieve homelessness) in over 90% of cases. Homelessness was successfully prevented in over half of these cases, meaning that the household was able to remain in the existing accommodation with support and/or intervention from the Council. Around one third of cases were supported to make a planned move to alternative accommodation, generally either a private sector let or social housing (including supported housing).

The majority of those where a housing duty applied were single people without children. The HRA requires the Council to prevent and relieve homelessness for this group and there is no test of vulnerability or other threshold criteria at this stage. The next largest group were single parents. Not surprisingly, most of the heads of households were aged 25 – 44. Just under one third were in work; around one third were unemployed. One in ten were unable to work due to a disability.

The main reasons people became homeless were:

- Friends/family no longer willing to accommodate
- Ending of private sector tenancy
- Non-violent relationship breakdown
- Domestic abuse
- End of social rented tenancy
- Other reasons include leaving an institution (prison, hospital etc) harassment and eviction from supported housing

In many cases, there are underlying reasons for homelessness; often these include debt, ill-health, or another vulnerability.

Most households threatened with becoming homeless live either in the private rented sector, or with family or friends. A smaller number live in social rented housing, are homeless on leaving an institution, or have no fixed abode. Some will have been rough sleeping.

Many households threatened with homelessness have a support need. The main reasons for needing support include:

- Mental health
- Physical health and disability
- Domestic abuse
- Offending history
- Repeat homelessness
- Drug/Alcohol dependency
- History of rough sleeping
- Learning disability
- 18-25 requiring support to manage independently

4. Vision and Priorities

Our vision is:

That everyone has a secure and affordable place to live; advice and support is available for those threatened with homelessness; effective early intervention means that no-one becomes homeless or has to sleep rough

Our priorities are:

- To provide advice, information and support on housing and related issues to enable those at risk of becoming homeless to take steps to remain in their accommodation where feasible and appropriate, or to undertake a planned move if required
- To identify those at risk of becoming homeless at the earliest possible stage, and to intervene proactively to prevent them becoming homeless
- Where a household does become homeless, to support them to find appropriate alternative accommodation as quickly as possible
- To prevent anyone having to sleep rough
- To maximise the supply of affordable rented accommodation

In addition to these priorities, there are two cross-cutting themes to which we will continue to address with associated plans and ideas. These are:

- Making best use of resources
- Partnership working

In delivering the above priorities, we will always be focussed don ensuring that the services provided are appropriate and consistent across the Buckinghamshire area, but ensure the individual needs of different areas are recognised.

5. How we will measure success

These will be refreshed once the new strategy has been adopted; measures may include (but are not limited to):

- To continue to increase the proportion of people for whom homelessness can be prevented each year. As the proportion of achievement is already high, the year-on-year increase may be 1 – 2%
- To continue to increase the proportion of households where homelessness can be relieved each year. Again, the proportion is already high so the year-on-year increase may be 1 – 2%
- To continue to refer to complimentary priorities within the proposed housing strategy and local plan
- To virtually eliminate rough sleeping and support anyone who finds themselves at risk of rough sleeping.
- To minimise accommodating homeless families in B&B accommodation and where this is unavoidable to ensure that placements are for no longer than 6 weeks
- To minimise the amount of time in temporary accommodation for those with disabilities and requiring adaptations
- To continue developing effective joint working between the Council's Housing and Childrens' Services including joint protocols and considering joint measures to ensure young people can manage tenancies.
- To continue working towards improving outcomes for our young people in care, ensuring they are best equipped and able to manage their tenancies.
- To ensure that victims of domestic abuse are able to access safe accommodation and ensure that all those in the refuge as a result of domestic abuse achieve a planned move to long-term accommodation within an agreed timescale.

6. Action plan

Key to the delivery of this strategy is the collaborative work across the council and its partners. We are committed to maintaining and building on existing partnership working to support people to stay in their properties, or to find lasting and affordable housing options.

The strategy will be underpinned with an action plan which will be flexible and respond to emerging needs, trends and policy changes. The three-year strategy below is therefore more detailed for year one and indicative thereafter. Although significant progress has been made in bringing the former District Council homelessness services together within the Housing Service re-structure, the action plan recognises a need for a Year 1 of 'consolidation,' where we ensure that services are consistent across the Buckinghamshire Council area, while still being sensitive to individual needs in different locations. We will continue to ensure that the Council and its partners are achieving a 'one door' service, where a household will be given the same service regardless of the first point of contact.

We will build on this with a Year 2 of 'foundation' where we ensure effective working practices, including awareness, information-sharing and shared risk assessments. This will ensure that by Year 3 of the action plan we can begin to 'innovate' from a consolidated position of strong foundations.

The following high level action plan is split into priority areas with each specific action linked to Year 1, 2 or 3 for delivery.

Priority One: To provide advice, information and support on housing and related issues to enable those at risk of becoming homeless to take steps to remain in their accommodation where feasible and appropriate, or to undertake a planned move if required

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
1.1	Review and develop on-line housing options information by updating signposting and self-delivery systems on the website. Consideration to be given to launching an online Homelessness Triage service	One Council approach; increase customer confidence in ability to resolve own issues	1

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
1.2	Ensure consistent access to services across the area with appropriate thresholds and eligibility criteria.	One Council approach; simpler for customers and partners to understand what's available	1
1.3	Ensure on-line advice includes tailored information for those being asked to leave private rented sector accommodation, with signposting to other services as appropriate	Increase the number of households able to resolve own housing issues and remain in existing accommodation	1
1.4	Continue to raise awareness of mediation services and ensure they are offered at earliest possible opportunity for intervention.	Greater use of mediation could enable more people to remain with family or friends:	1
1.5	Continue to work with the DWP to ensure homelessness is prevented and that the Council and its partners can intervene and support clients as early as possible. Explore direct rent payments to landlords where there are known financial risk factors.	Increased number of households enabled to remain in existing accommodation	1
1.6	Review the need and develop possible options and expansion for existing tenancy sustainment services.	Increased number of households enabled to remain in existing accommodation	2
1.7	Increase awareness in other frontline services around how to help people with mental health difficulties; ensure that appropriate housing officers are trained in mental health issues	Empathetic and effective services for those with mental health difficulties	2
1.8	Explore a gap analysis of homelessness prevention education delivered through schools, colleges and youth services	Earlier intervention leading to reduced numbers becoming threatened with homelessness.	3

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
		Improved knowledge and awareness	
1.9	Develop longer-term monitoring of outcomes to identify and respond to repeat homelessness	Establish baseline for repeat homelessness if possible then set target to reduce	2
1.10	Roll out the financial inclusion partnerships money advice campaign 'Back on Track' to the whole area	Increase the number of households able to resolve own issues and remain in existing accommodation	1
1.11	Continue to work with services for children and young people to review options for early education around financial issues, especially for young people (including those in care)	Establish good financial habits and awareness to prevent people getting into difficulties that affect rent/mortgage payments	3/2

Priority two: To identify those at risk of becoming homeless at the earliest possible stage, and to intervene proactively to prevent them becoming homeless

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
2.1	Develop agreed indicators of early signs of potential homelessness to promote and encourage early referrals to service	Short set of agreed indicators used by all relevant agencies/partners	1
2.2	With RPs and other partners, develop a 'tenancy ready' approach which incentivises those who have not had a previous tenancy, or whose previous tenancy failed, to undertake appropriate preparatory work for their tenancy;	Fewer tenancies failing in first 2 years	2

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
2.3	Continue to work with health partners to maximise impact of self-referral services, befriending, social prescribing and other initiatives in support of homelessness prevention.	Support created for households with low level mental health issues including isolation	2
2.4	Review data sharing process with partner agencies	Agreed criteria for risk of homelessness and support needs, used by all relevant agencies/partners	2
2.5	Continue to work with partners to develop and implement a 'tell us once' referral pathway for victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse, including exploring a Safeguarding Information Sharing Agreement	Improved service for victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse (linked to the Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy)	2
2.6	Ensure housing officers are trained and aware of the potential complexities of dealing with domestic violence and abuse in LGBTQ+ communities, with male victims, minority ethnic groups and other minoritized communities	Improved service for victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse (linked to the Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy)	2
2.7	Together with the Community Safety department team and in line with the Domestic Abuse Strategy, conduct a comprehensive needs analysis of housing options for survivors of domestic violence and abuse Ensure a wide range of safe accommodation options are available to victims, survivors and their children.	Improved service for victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse (linked to the Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy)	2

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
	This may include refuges, sanctuary schemes and specialist accommodation as required		
2.8	Encourage landlords to contact the Council at an earlier stage. Consider improving options for direct contact and discussion. Continue to negotiate with landlords to secure retention of the tenancy wherever possible	Preventing homelessness for more households where private sector tenancy is coming to an end	1
2.9	Improve application and review process of the Council's Homelessness Prevention Fund to help address rent arrears as soon as practicable.	Preventing homelessness for more households where private sector tenancy is coming to an end	1
2.10	Continuing to work with mental health services to identify clients at risk of becoming homeless	Preventing homelessness for more people with mental health issues	2
2.11	Review eligibility criteria for rent deposit schemes to maximise their impact	More people able to access private rented sector	3
2.12	Ensure that 'Duty to Refer' policy is fully understood and being implemented by all statutory agencies	Earlier notice where people are likely to be homeless	1
2.13	Explore and investigate links with probation and prison resettlement teams to enable engagement with ex-offenders at risk of becoming homeless.	Improved service for ex-offenders	2
2.14	Continue to work with partnership agencies to enable accommodation for offenders to be sourced prior to release	Improved service for ex-offenders	1
2.15	Investigate further options for emergency accommodation on release	Improved service for ex-offenders	2

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
	from prison or other institution for both male and female medium to high risk ex-offenders		
2.16	Work with prisons to encourage an assessment of housing options when people first go into prison, including options for retaining a tenancy where appropriate	Improved service for ex-offenders	3 -
2.17	Continue to work with armed forces champion and ensure clear information is available for those who've served in the armed forces (and make every effort to identify applicants who are serving or have served in the armed forces at an early stage)	Continue to supports our commitment in the armed services covenant and ensure service personnel and their families can access all available homelessness and housing services	3
2.18	Continue to operate and follow shared protocols between Housing and Children's Services and continue to improve joint working between Housing and Children's Services to ensure a clear understanding of the responsibilities of both services both internally and with partners	Better understanding for officers and partners of respective roles. Improved joined up services	2
2.19	Continue to operate close and effective joint working between the Housing Service and Adult Social Care teams within the council to improve joint working, provide staff training. Explore shared protocols where this will improve the service to clients.	Better understanding for officers and partners of respective roles. Improved joined up services	2

Priority three: Where a household does become homeless, to support them to find appropriate alternative accommodation as quickly as possible

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
3.1	Continue to work proactively with partners to find effective ways to prevent homelessness and to intervene and support clients as early as possible.	Fewer households becoming homeless	On-going
3.2	Where homelessness cannot be prevented, work proactively to relieve homelessness within the timescales set by law	Homelessness relieved wherever possible	On-going
3.3	Ensure an appropriate supply of emergency and temporary accommodation; ensure that those in emergency and temporary accommodation are supported to find a permanent home as quickly as possible	Able to house those requiring emergency and temporary accommodation while moving people on quickly	On-going
3.4	Minimise the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and other temporary accommodation with shared facilities. Where it is unavoidable, limit its provision to emergency and short term stays only.	Self-contained emergency and temporary accommodation wherever possible	On-going

Priority four: To prevent anyone having to sleep rough

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
4.1	Continue to work with partners to sustain and build on the arrangements already in place, from initial outreach through a variety of support services to finding accommodation and preparing people for employment	Virtually eliminate rough sleeping by early earning and quick assessment; assist ex-rough sleepers to obtain appropriate accommodation as quickly as possible with support as required	On-going

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
4.2	Deliver the Housing First initiative to provide supported accommodation for rough sleepers; review after six full months of operation	Clear understanding of costs and benefits and long-term plan for taking forward if agreed	1
4.3	Review accommodation options for ex-rough sleepers, including whether additional provision is needed for those with high and complex needs, and whether there is a requirement for additional long-term supported accommodation for this group	Appropriate accommodation for wide range of needs; no-one returns to sleeping rough	3

Priority five: To maximise the supply of affordable rented accommodation

(Note – Some aspects of the actions below are linked to the development and delivery of the Council's wider Housing Strategy and Local Plan)

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
5.1	Explore ways to access more privately rented accommodation at an affordable rent, including options for incentives to encourage existing private landlords to work with us	Increased supply of accessible and affordable private rented accommodation for clients	2
5.2	Re-establish the private landlords forum	Engagement with a wider range of private landlords and increased supply of accessible and affordable private rented accommodation for clients	1
5.3	Work with RPs and other partners to increase supply of affordable rented accommodation; consider whether any existing stock can be used more effectively	Increased supply of social housing/affordable rented housing for clients	2

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
5.4	Research the feasibility of a social lettings agency to increase the supply of affordable rented housing	Increased supply of affordable rented housing	3
5.5	To explore additional one bedroom accommodation need within Buckinghamshire	Increased supply of affordable housing	2
5.6	To explore provision for large families with registered providers and private landlords	Increased supply of affordable housing	3

Cross-cutting theme 1: Partnership working

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
6.1	Continue work of two homelessness forums (North and South); continue to share data to monitor trends and outcomes; work with partners to flex services in response to changing need	Greater understanding of underlying causes of homelessness and current trends	On-going
6.2	Provide partners with an updated database of contacts within the housing service following restructure and any new appointments.	Partners find it easier to contact the person they need	1
6.3	Participate in exploring potential new protocols with Registered Providers; could cover a range of areas including early warning of potential evictions, possible asset management strategy to reflect local needs	Reduced number of households evicted from social housing	2

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
6.4	Review options to work with credit unions to help households to achieve financial stability	Fewer households getting into debt	2
6.5	Improve our working in partnership with appropriate agencies who can supply furniture packs etc to enable people to set up home	Tenancies established more quickly	1
6.6	Contribute to cross-service training to ensure a better shared understanding of different services and the contributions made to preventing and tackling homelessness	Greater understanding across the Council and partners	1
6.7	Ensure all staff (Council and stakeholders) are trained in any information-sharing policies and procedures	Ensure information-sharing protocols are understood and used	1
6.8	Extend information-sharing protocols and shared risk assessments to all appropriate partners	Wider range of partners involved	3
6.9	Develop innovative solutions with partner agencies in the employment and charitable sectors to support clients to access volunteering and employment opportunities.	Active engagement with wide range of partners and clients supported to access employment opportunities to help them sustain themselves going forward	2

Cross-cutting theme 2: Make best use of resources

Ref	Action	Target/outcome	Year
7.1	Ensure that Discretionary Hardship payments continue to prevent or relieve homelessness where appropriate	Fewer households becoming homeless	1
7.2	Continue to maximise external funding, exploring opportunities to bid for funding as they become available	Maintain external funding at current levels where possible	On-going