

Homelessness Strategy 2015 - 2019



Stafford
BOROUGH COUNCIL

www.staffordbc.gov.uk

Foreword

Stafford Borough Council is firmly committed to preventing homelessness and helping people find suitable housing that meets their needs.

This strategy reinforces our commitment to preventing homelessness rather than dealing with households at the point of crisis. In 2008 the majority of our cases were homeless acceptances, now over 90% of the people we see are prevented from becoming homeless. This is a great success.

The impact of homelessness on an individual and society is high which is why we are working closely with partners across the Borough to provide help and assistance as early as possible. Innovative projects such as the homelessness education in schools, the Rough Sleeper Outreach programme and pre tenancy training ensure that no one has to spend a second night out on the streets and households are provided with the skills to maintain a home.

But that is only part of the picture, increasing the number of homes in the Borough is essential to meeting current and future demand. We have an ambitious target to build 210 affordable homes every year until 2031 and we are working with developers to ensure these are the right type in the right place.

The role of our partners is critical and we recognise all their work in providing accommodation, supporting residents and sustaining tenancies; it is with our partners that we have managed to achieve the success we have.

We will sustain the good work and continue to improve the service we offer residents. This Homelessness Strategy sets the way forward from now until 2019 and outlines the challenges we will be addressing along with way.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Pert'.

Councillor Jeremy Pert

Cabinet Member for Communities

Introduction



Stafford Borough Council has a legal duty to ensure suitable housing is available to households who are eligible, unintentionally homeless and in priority need; fulfilling this duty depends on building excellent working relationships with partners. It is this partnership working that has delivered significant achievements in preventing homelessness and ensuring residents have somewhere safe to live. In 2008/09, when the previous strategy was written, two thirds of households (160 households) assisted by the Council were already homeless and only a third (78 households) were prevented from becoming homeless. By 2013/14 this had been dramatically reversed with 92% of households prevented from becoming homeless and only 8% dealt with as homeless acceptances.

Losing your home is one of the most stressful situations that any individual or family can find themselves in so this shift to prevention has been critical in reducing anxiety for households while delivering a much more cost effective service.

The Council and its partners are continuing to lower the rates of homelessness against a national rise. This strategy can drive further improvements with services being adapted to meet the changing needs of the population and the evolving policy environment. With this in mind, a review of the service has been undertaken to highlight opportunities for better working and to anticipate the future needs of our residents.

This Strategy was drafted following an evidence review on the state of homelessness in the Borough and consultation with key partners through the Council's Homelessness Forum. The Strategy links to the Council's overarching Housing Strategy 2015 - 2019, in contributing to healthy people and communities within attractive and desirable homes and neighbourhoods. Preventing homelessness is key to helping people live healthy lives. When vulnerable households are given support to address their needs, they will be able to contribute to their community and make Stafford Borough a better place to live, grow, work and invest in.

Priorities

The Homelessness Strategy will continue to focus on preventing homelessness and fulfilling the Council's homelessness duties:

1 The prevention of homelessness

We will:

- › Ensure all households understand the housing options that are available to them by providing high quality advice; (Lead: SBC Housing)
- › Invest in transitional support to help struggling households who are actively looking for a sustainable housing solution; (SBC Housing and Benefits)
- › Ensure young people have realistic perceptions of homelessness and knowledge of support services (SBC Housing and YMCA); and
- › Help households remain together where it is safe through mediation and working closely with families (SBC Housing and partners).

2 Ensuring there is sufficient accommodation available for people who are, or who may become homeless

We will:

- › Deliver 210 affordable homes out of a total of 500 new homes in the Borough annually to 2031 (Lead: SBC Housing and Planning);
- › Bring empty homes back into use (SBC Housing);
- › Enable vulnerable households and those on housing benefit to access private rented homes by engaging with landlords (SBC Housing);
- › Help households into the private rented sector by providing assistance, such as the Deposit Guarantee Scheme (SBC Housing);
- › Ensure vulnerable households are appropriately prioritised on the social housing register (SBC Housing);
- › Understand the impact of changing funding arrangements by working with supported housing providers (SBC Housing and Supported Housing Providers); and
- › Ensure the success of the new refuge, working with Staffordshire Women's Aid (SBC Housing and Staffordshire Women's Aid).

3 Ensuring there is satisfactory support for people who are, or who may become homeless, or who need support to prevent them from becoming homeless

We will:

- › Ensure the Housing Options service is well publicised and up to date literature and promotional material is easily available across the Borough (lead: SBC Housing, Partner Agencies);
- › Provide access and signposting to crisis support services such as Homeless Prevention Fund, Crisis Support Scheme, Food Banks and Energy Top Ups (SBC Housing, Staffordshire County Council, Voluntary Organisations);
- › Ensure vulnerable households achieve successful independent living by signposting to the most appropriate support providers and services (SBC Housing, Support Providers);
- › Work with the Citizens Advice Bureau on the Advice Exchange Partnership (SBC Housing and partners);
- › Ensure households are resilient to changes in their circumstances, are claiming all they are entitled to and as a result are able to sustain their housing situation by referring to financial education, debt and income maximisation services (SBC Housing, Citizens Advice);
- › Work with Jobcentre Plus to improve the provision of advice to clients seeking employment (SBC Housing, Job Centre);
- › Provide access to the private rented sector through the Deposit Guarantee Scheme (SBC Housing);
- › Increase the number of successful sustained tenancies in the private rented sector by providing pre tenancy training for customers who take advantage of the Deposit Guarantee Scheme (SBC Housing and Shropshire Housing Alliance);
- › Promote good standards in the private rented sector by inspecting properties in response to complaints and on a proactive basis and use our legal powers where landlords fail to engage (SBC Housing);
- › Support those experiencing domestic violence to remain in their home where safe to do so by ensuring their property is secure through the Sanctuary Scheme (SBC, Staffordshire Police, Staffordshire Women's Aid);
- › Help those sleeping rough get off the streets and into settled accommodation by working with the

rough sleeper outreach team and supporting No Second Night Out (SBC Housing, Brighter Futures);

- › Provide signposting to health and wellbeing support services where ill health might affect a person's ability to maintain a home, such as poor mental health, or addiction (SBC Housing, Staffordshire County Council, other partners);
- › Support specific vulnerable households to sustain their housing situation, or provide alternative housing options if appropriate by engaging in case conferences with partner agencies (all partners);
- › Monitor and report on trends in service demands and make improvements where needed (SBC Housing);
- › Ensure services are responsive to changing demand locally by monitoring and reporting on the impact of welfare reform (SBC Housing and Registered Providers); and
- › Achieve Gold Standard (SBC Housing).



CASE STUDY

Mrs L approached the Housing Options service following the breakdown of her relationship. She had been admitted to St George's hospital and was due to be discharged but had nowhere to go so a homeless application was made.

The Council found Ms L temporary accommodation while it looked into her application. The officer discussed the possibility of renting privately, gave her details of the Deposit Guarantee Scheme and contact details for letting agents.

Ms L arranged a viewing for one of the properties the officer had suggested and after being accepted onto the deposit guarantee scheme she secured her new home.

Ms L gave very positive feedback to the officers dealing with her case, they made her feel welcome, were very understanding and she couldn't fault the service she received.

Background

Evidence

1,689 preventions and 287 acceptances from 2009/10 to 2013/14

210 affordable home completions required annually to 2031 to meet identified need

Homelessness prevention statistics show resolution of Housing Benefit problems, advice on debt, mortgage or rent arrears and the sanctuary scheme for those experiencing domestic abuse are the most common ways of enabling residents to remain in their homes.

Accessibility of services

The Council offers a 24 hour housing options service, seven days a week with a variety of different ways for people to gain the advice and support they need from face to face support, telephone support through to advice through the internet. It has:

- › daily drop in sessions during the week;
- › an email enquiry service; and
- › webpage links to help and advice .

The 24 hour telephone service ensures that those in crisis can access support when they need it most. Home visits are carried out when face to face support is needed and the individual is unable to get into the Council. Regular visits are made to advise young people living in Stafford's supported accommodation on future housing options.

A translation service is made available to those who need it to ensure everyone can fully understand the choices and services that are available to them. A wealth of printed material is available to complement the advice given by officers. Regular feedback from customers is analysed and any accessibility issues raised will be addressed.

Partnerships

Strong partnership working is critical in preventing homelessness and supporting those who do become homeless. As well as day to day working with colleagues within Stafford Borough Council (for example those dealing with Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Housing Standards and Environmental Health), there are strong ties to the County Council who have responsibility for looked after children and social care. Other key partnerships include the police, health service, in particular St Georges Hospital and Stafford

Hospital, Stafford Prison and the probation service, local Registered Providers (Housing Associations), private landlords, lettings agents and voluntary and community groups. These relationships are both operational, discussing specific cases and strategic.

The housing options team at Stafford Borough Council hold regular Homelessness Forums attended by all the partners where key issues, emerging priorities and new initiatives are considered. The review of evidence and production of this strategy was launched at the Homelessness Forum, where discussions were held on what the key priorities should be for the Borough, what works well and what more could be done to improve outcomes for residents of Stafford Borough. Service users and local residents have also had the opportunity to influence the strategy; Focus groups were held with young people at Lichfield House supported accommodation and Eagle House which provides temporary supported accommodation.

Stafford Borough Council is an active partner in the Shropshire and Staffordshire Homeless Prevention Partnership. This was established after funding from Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) was awarded to both county areas. The partnership supports the Rough Sleeper Outreach Service and a private sector leasing scheme to provide supported accommodation scheme for households with low to no need.

There is a strong commitment through the corporate strategy to supporting households that are homeless or threatened with homelessness and although it is no longer ring-fenced; there is Corporate commitment to spending the homeless prevention fund on this activity. Regular briefing sessions are held with the portfolio holder covering performance and both current and emerging issues that will impact on homelessness. The service runs ad hoc member briefings and specifically for new elected members to the Council. Performance data on tackling homelessness is reviewed by Scrutiny Committee and the housing options team hold briefing sessions on an ad hoc basis for partner agencies and the voluntary sector.

Targeted support

Understanding the causes of homelessness is crucial in order to target support at those areas to increase prevention.

The most common causes of statutory homelessness are:

- > loss of rented or tied accommodation;
- > parents no longer willing or able to accommodate; and
- > the existence or threat of violence.

In Stafford, between 2001 and 2011 there has been a 92% increase in households living in the private rented sector (3,749 in 2001 increasing to 7,206 in 2011) and whilst the loss of a private tenancy represents the biggest single cause of homelessness in the Borough, the private rented sector can also offer a valuable option to preventing homelessness.

The Council works proactively with landlords to improve property and management standards in this sector and develop its role as an important provider of homelessness prevention services. We have an active and progressive Landlords Forum and a range of initiatives to encourage landlords to work with homeless households or those at risk of losing their home including private sector leasing, Rent Deposit, Rent in Advance, and Legal Cost cover schemes. We have also recently developed a Tenancy Training Scheme for tenants about to enter the private rented sector with support from the Council to help ensure they are able to sustain their tenancies.

Where landlords persistently fail to engage the Council will use its legal powers under the Housing Acts to protect the health and wellbeing of tenants in this sector.

In preventing homelessness where parents will not accommodate family members, the Housing Options team will work with families to come to a sustainable solution. By the time help is sought however, the position is often untenable, and assistance will therefore be given to find alternative accommodation and provide any related support required. Where people have to leave their homes through violence, the role of the Council's partners is critical in providing support, often offering safe and secure refuge accommodation and working to enable victims of violence to remain in their homes where appropriate.

The majority of statutory homeless households who are in priority need:

- > have children;
- > are expecting children; or
- > are vulnerable due to old age, illness or disability.

The vulnerability of these households demonstrates the importance of working in partnership across a wide range of agencies to address all care and support needs in order to help customers achieve sustainable and healthy living solutions.

The Council places great emphasis on the value of prevention as a tool to combat homelessness and the Homelessness Prevention Grant covers a wide range of schemes to support this. The most common prevention tools are the resolution of housing benefit issues often through transitional support, debt advice and initiatives to help victims of violence remain safely in their own home. The Council's Benefits team who administer Discretionary Housing Payments have a role in preventing homelessness and work closely with the Housing Options Team. These payments can be vital in providing short term assistance, or, in exceptional circumstances, for example, where a property has been adapted, where a spare room is needed for medical purposes or where an occupier with a spare bedroom is in the process of downsizing.

The range of prevention methods demonstrates the depth of partnership working undertaken to achieve the common goal of helping residents to live healthy lives. Households are able to self-refer to some of these services and are therefore prevented from becoming homeless without having to directly access support via the Council. It is recognised that working alone the Housing Options Team may be able to find accommodation for some households, but those who are vulnerable may require further on going health and skills related support in order to make these solutions sustainable.

The Council's responsibility is to accommodate eligible households who are unintentionally homeless and in priority need. We also provide advice to any household in order to help them find suitable housing solutions and avoid the need to sofa surf or sleep rough. When required the Council will place people into temporary accommodation while determining a homeless application or while negotiating a suitable and sustainable housing solution. The Council lease a number of flats for this purpose and only as a last resort will put people into Bed and Breakfast accommodation; not only is this a better temporary solution for the customers but it is cost effective for the Council.



CASE STUDY

The Housing Options Service was contacted by the Safeguarding Team regarding Mrs R and her son.

Mrs R had been the victim of domestic abuse and was receiving ongoing support from Staffordshire Women's Aid to help rebuild her and her son's life. Through no fault of their own, eviction proceedings were started against the family.

The Housing Options Team stepped in and after exploring with Mrs R all her housing choices, they were found a new social home.

They have settled in well to their new home and neighbourhood, Mrs R's son is happy at school and they are able to move their lives forward.

Rough sleeper estimates for the Borough are consistently low (two in November 2014), which is no doubt a reflection of the excellent partnership working through the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team and voluntary agencies such as the House of Bread. With timely and appropriate support most rough sleepers can be helped to access accommodation but partnership working is usually required in order for them to address any health and skill support needs to help make this solution sustainable.

Welfare Reform

Reform of the Welfare System has been introduced to help more people move into and progress in work. Government believes the current system is too complex and there are insufficient incentives to encourage people on benefits to start paid work or increase their hours. The aim of the reforms are to make the benefit system fairer and more affordable, to reduce poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency and to reduce levels of fraud and error.

Welfare Reform may present challenges for affected households who will have to adjust to reduced benefits and increased responsibility for managing their own finances. This could present greater demands on services that residents turn to for assistance as well as presenting a financial risk to landlords who rent to people on benefits. For example, with the anticipated introduction of Universal Credit, households on benefits have increased financial accountability with rent payments made to the claimant rather than their landlord. This may put pressure on some households who are not used to being paid monthly in arrears, and will therefore require increased support around budgeting. Increased demand for crisis support may also be needed if households run out of essentials whilst learning to make the necessary adjustments. The extension of the single room rate of local housing allowance to people aged under 35, coupled with benefit reductions for social housing tenants with spare rooms may result in fewer younger households forming and increased use of smaller, shared accommodation in the private sector. Whilst this represents a good use of stock, this type of accommodation has traditionally suffered from the most acute problems of poor standards of management and property condition. Specific targeted activity aimed at improving standards in this sector may therefore be required.

The introduction of the spare room subsidy has seen an increased demand for smaller properties, of which there is not the immediate supply to accommodate. Affected households may require help and support to find alternative accommodation and to avoid the accumulation of rent arrears.

The Housing Options Team provides regular reports on the effects of welfare reform and works with partners to try and mitigate any impacts. Registered Providers are proactively working with tenants on issues such as financial management and budgeting and are assisting residents to move into smaller properties. The Citizens Advice Bureau provides advice to those in need (assisted by a contribution from the Homeless Prevention Fund) and stronger links are being developed with the Credit Union.

The reforms are also important considerations for the creation of new affordable stock with a rising demand for properties with fewer bedrooms. Whilst there is a need to facilitate the development of new affordable properties, there is also an expectation that market housing can be an appropriate housing solution for many households. This is reflected in the Council's new powers to discharge its homelessness duty in the private rented sector. Whilst these powers are rarely utilised for the statutory homeless in Stafford, the growing private rented sector does play a key role in the prevention of homelessness and efforts continue to engage with more private landlords to ensure the availability of this resource. There is a current opportunity to achieve this with Staffordshire University moving its campus to Stoke-on-Trent. Many private landlords rent only to students, so these properties will become vacant between 2015 and 2016. The Council is working with landlords to develop new business models, which may include housing those who have been prevented from becoming homeless.

2015 sees a General Election and all major parties have committed to eliminating the fiscal deficit relating to current spending in the next Parliament. Depending on the outcome there may be further reform of the welfare system, including a lower cap on benefits, removal of housing benefit for young people and a repeal of the spare room subsidy.

Future Housing Needs

The Council has a recently adopted Plan for Stafford Borough, setting out how market, affordable and specialist housing will be delivered over the next 15 years. The Plan will be the driving force for the delivery of affordable homes through s106 agreements and negotiations with Registered Providers regarding who is nominated to the properties.

Health and Wellbeing

There is growing evidence to support the view that access to quality housing has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of people. Addressing the problems associated with the wider determinants of health will have financial benefits to the health and social care sectors, through early identification and input, employment and education.

National research demonstrates that homelessness and rough sleeping impacts significantly upon a person's health and puts greater demands upon the health service, with 41% of homeless people attending Accident and Emergency Departments, 31% being admitted to hospital, 28% using an ambulance and 82% having visited a GP at least once within a 12 month period .

Making a difference to the health and wellbeing of the population is the responsibility of all agencies; we believe that by working together, placing prevention at the heart of our work across all the stages of life and a variety of settings, health outcomes will be greatly improved.

Increasingly the Housing Options team are supporting people with multiple and complex needs. Problems associated with alcohol, drugs or mental health issues are not uncommon and the resolution of the housing needs can often only be addressed with help from other agencies to support the individuals' with their health needs. A greater emphasis on support and partnership working is needed to ensure that any housing provision is sustained.

Delivery

Resources

The Council, like most organisations, have to ensure greater efficiency and targeting of available resources. It is essential that the Council and partners work together in order to achieve better outcomes for their residents whilst offering excellent value for money. The focus on prevention has been demonstrated to be cost effective with significantly fewer staff resources required over the long term, whilst also being better for those involved seeking early resolution. Opportunities to pool resources, review policies, remove duplication and explore alternative funding options to ensure the sustainability and suitability of services are all important considerations in ensuring that services remain viable and cater for the needs of our residents.

The homeless prevention grant is used in a number of ways to tackle homelessness and deliver prevention services. Some projects like money advice (Citizens Advice Bureau) and homeless education in schools (YMCA) are delivered by partners. Others are delivered by the housing options team, for example a tenant and landlord liaison officer provides support to tenants in sustaining a tenancy and builds relations with landlords to create opportunities for customers to use the private rented sector.

The impact of funding reductions on partner agencies is of critical importance given Stafford Borough Council's statutory duty to accommodate those who are unintentionally homeless in priority need, as this duty can only be fulfilled by effective joint working. With reductions in the level of Supporting People funding support levels have been decreased and temporary accommodation such as Eagle House can now only house those with lower needs. Some services have had to finish, for example, life skills training has been withdrawn at Lichfield House; supported accommodation for young people. The impact of this on sustaining tenancies in future is unknown. Accommodating 16 and 17 year olds in Stafford is no longer possible without a full care package in place. In all these cases the situation is being monitored to understand the impact.

All work to delivery this strategy by Stafford Borough Council will take account of the current Safeguarding arrangements that are in place.

Up to date details of the range of key housing support services is maintained on the Council's website www.staffordbc.gov.uk/housing and a wider range of services on Staffordshire County Council's Purple Pages website www.purplepages.org.uk

Governance

This Strategy will be delivered and monitored by the Council and its partners through the Stafford Borough Homelessness Forum. SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound) action plans will deliver the priorities in this strategy and will frame the work of the Health and Housing Team. Stafford Borough's Corporate Plan commits to supporting households that are homeless or threatened with homelessness; and this is monitored closely by Cabinet with reports provided quarterly.

Related Strategies

Tenancy Strategy

Housing Strategy

Corporate Enforcement Policy

Plan for Stafford Borough

Homelessness Strategy

Private Sector Assistance Policy

Empty Homes Strategy

Housing Health and Wellbeing Policy Statement

Home Energy Conservation Act Report / Affordable Warmth Strategy

Glossary

Affordable Housing

Social rented, affordable rented and intermediate housing provided to eligible households whose needs are not met by the market.

Social Rent

usually owned by local authorities or registered providers with target rents determined through the national rent regime.

Affordable Rent

homes let by local authorities or registered providers, at rents of no more than 80% of the local market rent, to households who are eligible for social rented housing.

Intermediate Affordable Housing

homes for sale and rent provided at a cost above social rent, but below market levels subject to the criteria in the Affordable Housing definition above. These can include shared equity (shared ownership and equity loans), other low cost homes for sale and intermediate rent, but not affordable rented housing.

Homeless Prevention

where a local authority takes positive action to provide housing assistance to someone who considers him or herself to be at risk of homelessness in the near future, and as a result the person is able to either remain in his or her existing accommodation or obtain alternative accommodation providing a solution for at least the next 6 months.

Gold Standard

The Gold Standard challenge is a local authority, sector led peer review scheme designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. The challenge follows a 10 step continuous improvement approach that starts with a pledge for local authorities aspiring to 'strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services' and culminates in an application for the Gold Standard Challenge.

The National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) is a new service set up specifically to develop and administer this framework for providing continuous improvement in front line housing services through the development and delivery of the Gold Standard Challenge. This is funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government and based on the Government report 'Making Every Contact Count'.

Examples of prevention methods to enable households to remain in their existing home

Mediation

Conciliation

Homeless prevention fund

Debt advice

Resolving Housing Benefit problems

Resolving rent arrears in the social or private rented sector

Sanctuary scheme for domestic violence

Crisis intervention - providing emergency support

Negotiation or legal advocacy in the private rented sector

Other assistance in the private or social rented sector

Examples of prevention methods to assist households to obtain alternative accommodation

Access to hostel or Houses of Multiple Occupation

Private sector landlord incentive

Private sector without landlord incentive

Accommodation with friends or relatives

Supported accommodation

Social Housing - management move of existing tenant

Social Housing - Part 6 offer/nomination

Social Housing - negotiation outside nomination

Low cost home ownership

CONTACT

05 15

Environmental and Health Stafford Borough Council

Civic Centre, Riverside, Stafford ST16 3AQ

TEL 01785 619 000

EMAIL ehtechsupport@staffordbc.gov.uk

www. staffordbc.gov.uk

If you need this information in
large print, Braille, other language
or in **audio format** please contact:

EMAIL info@staffordbc.gov.uk

TEL 01785 619 000

All information correct at time of going to print.