



East Herts Council Homelessness & Homeless Prevention Strategy

2008-2013

Draft 8/4/08

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Equality and Diversity in East Herts.

The Council is committed to equality of access to its services and has adopted a 'Diversity and Equality Policy'. This policy will be followed by officers when carrying out their duties. The policy statement reads as follows:

'East Herts Council is firmly committed to providing and promoting equality for all its employees and the wider community. The Council has adopted this policy to ensure equality influences the way we provide services and the employment of staff. To achieve this we will endeavour to create an environment in which there is respect for every individual and recognition that no member of the public, employee, potential employee, service user or Councillor will be discriminated against irrespective of their gender, race, ethnicity, colour, marital status, disability, age, sexuality, family responsibilities, religion, trade union involvement or political beliefs. Neither shall they be disadvantaged by conditions or requirements that cannot be shown to be justifiable for health and safety or legal reasons. This is not an exhaustive list and the Council recognises that there are other groups who may face unlawful discrimination. In respect of race equality the Council has adopted the McPherson's definition of a racist incident 'a racial incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'.

The Council follows the Codes of Practice of the Commission for Racial Equality and Equal Opportunity Commission, and it is committed to achieving the Equality Standard for local government.

We believe in the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity in all that we do. We recognise the rich diversity of East Hertfordshire's population as a strength and we aim to treat all people with dignity and respect whilst recognising the value of each individual and the positive contribution they make to the diverse community and workforce.'

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Foreword

By Councillor Bob Parker, Executive Member for Housing and Health

At East Herts we recognise how important it is that everyone has a decent settled home and the devastating impact the lack of a home can have on every part of a person's life.

This Homelessness and Prevention Strategy sets out what the Council needs and would like to do to tackle homelessness in East Herts over the next five years. There are significant financial costs in meeting the housing needs of households that are homeless or in housing crisis as well as the potential longer term social effects on peoples lives such their health or their children's education potential. Early intervention to prevent homelessness is key to reducing these costs and damaging effects and there needs to be a wide range of support and preventative services in place to achieve this.

A strategic approach to homelessness is therefore vital and must include not only the Council and the housing providers in East Herts but also health, social and other community services both statutory and voluntary. The results of the Council's and partner agencies work, since the publication of our first Homelessness Strategy in 2003, in reducing and preventing homelessness has been very successful. This document has been developed with the continuing support of those partners and we would like to thank them for their contribution to this strategy and look forward to working with them in fulfilling its objectives.

Executive Summary

The last Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008 started a period of rapid change for the way homelessness was viewed and dealt with in East Herts. This strategy sets out the achievement from that strategy and seeks to consolidate and expand on that work.

Issues for this strategy to address were identified through a review of statistical and performance data and through consultation with voluntary and statutory agencies and advocates.

The strategy has been developed to provide a framework, taking account of national, regional, sub-regional and local policies and priorities, of six strategic objectives. The strategy identifies why we have chosen the six objectives and details what is happening already to meet the objectives and what we need to do in the future. These six objectives provide a framework for the Action plan at Appendix 1.

- 1. Prevent Homelessness through early intervention and targeted Housing advice**
- 2. Develop and Improve Services to Young people**
- 3. Improve the type and use of temporary accommodation for homeless households**
- 4. Improve services to homeless households and households in housing need**
- 5. Develop and improve partnership working to maximise benefits to homeless households**
- 6. Increase the supply of appropriate, good quality affordable housing**

The remainder of the Strategy identifies the resources that we have to deliver the action plan and how we intend to monitor and review, with our partners, the activities identified in the Action Plan, to ensure we meet our strategic objectives.

1.0 Introduction

The overall purpose of the Homeless and Prevention Strategy (Strategy) is to ensure that as a Council we address homelessness strategically by ensuring suitable accommodation, support and advice is available and accessible to all client groups and to encourage a multi-agency approach to preventing homelessness.

The Council cannot tackle homelessness on its own and joint working is fundamental to the prevention of homelessness. It is recognised that the success of this Strategy depends on the skills, knowledge and expertise of a wide range of partner agencies from the public, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), voluntary and private sectors. This Strategy has been developed with the assistance of our partner agencies and the draft document was widely consulted on and suggestions have been included in the final document. The Council would like to thank everyone who gave their time and contributed to this Strategy.

1.2 From Crisis to prevention

A lot has been achieved since our first Homeless Strategy was published in July 2003 and a lot has changed both locally and nationally as far as homelessness is concerned. The Council and its partners have made significant progress on providing and improving services to those people that are homeless or potentially homeless. This Strategy builds on the themes of the original strategy but has a greater emphasis on the pro-active prevention of homelessness wherever possible.

Since April 2005 the Council's housing advice, homelessness and housing register services have been brought together and are now provided by a new Housing Options Service based at both our Bishop's Stortford and Hertford offices.

The Housing Options Service provides all of these services under one heading but with a focus on the prevention of homelessness. Where homelessness cannot be prevented then the Council's Homeless Officers work with homeless households to assess the Council's obligations taking into account the Government's homelessness legislation.

This strategy is set out in three main parts:

1. Strategic priorities: National, Regional and Local links. This part includes the strategic context within which East Herts provides its homelessness and housing advice services and shows how homelessness links to many other wider agendas.
2. Review of Homelessness in East Herts. The second part of the Strategy sets out a summary of data and information we and our partners hold on homelessness and housing need in East Herts.

3. Homelessness Strategic Objectives. The third and most important part details what we have done and what we intend to do, working with a range of partner agencies, to improve and develop the services we provide. These activities are grouped under six strategic objectives.
- **Prevent Homelessness through early intervention and targeted Housing advice**
 - **Develop and Improve Services to Young people**
 - **Improve the type and use of temporary accommodation for homeless households**
 - **Improve services to homeless households and households in housing need**
 - **Develop and improve partnership working to maximise benefits to homeless households**
 - **Increase the supply of appropriate, good quality affordable**

2. 0 Strategic Priorities

2.1 National Policy

In March 2002 the government published a report into tackling homelessness and formed a new Homelessness Directorate which formed part of the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The report 'More than a Roof' set out a new approach to homelessness, concentrating on contributing factors that lead to homelessness and prevention.

The report was followed by new legislation. The Homeless Act 2002, as well as expanding the priority groups for whom Local Authority's should provide assistance, brought in a requirement to review homelessness and homeless services and publish a Homeless Strategy.

The Government published a National Strategy for tackling and reducing homelessness in March 2005. The document was called 'Sustainable Communities; Settled Homes; Changing Lives' and it states that,

'Everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home at a price they can afford, in sustainable communities where they want to live and work'.

The Strategy sets out the governments plans which include the following priorities that every Local Authority should consider when developing their strategies:

- Prevention of homelessness
- Providing support for vulnerable people
- Tackling the wider causes and symptoms of homelessness
- Helping more people move away from rough sleeping
- Providing more settled homes

The Government's overall policy is to prevent homelessness and it introduced a number of targets and best value indicators to ensure this is achieved. They include:

- Target to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation by half by 2010
- Ending the use of Bed and Breakfast for families with children (except in emergencies and then for no more than 6 weeks)
- Reducing rough sleeping to two thirds below the level recorded in 1998
- Reducing the levels of repeat homelessness
- Reducing the levels of homelessness against main causes
- Monitoring the number of homeless preventions achieved by pro-active casework

2.2 Regional Policy

The East of England Regional Housing Strategy 2005-2010 identifies key priorities for the region on homelessness. The Regional Homelessness Advisory Panel (RHAP) is working with local authorities to ensure that the actions in the Strategy and associated plan are taken forward.

2.3 Sub-regional Policy

East Herts Council is in the London Commuter Belt Sub-Region which includes all the local authorities in Hertfordshire and also Uttlesford, Brentwood, Epping Forest and Harlow Councils in Essex. In 2005 a London Commuter belt Homeless Strategy Group was established to look at common issues and share best practice across the Sub-region. This group is a sub-group of the London Commuter Belt Chief Housing Officers who have responsibility for the London Commuter Belt Sub-Regional Housing Strategy. The London Commuter Belt Housing Strategy 2005-2008 priorities are:

- Maximise the delivery of affordable housing
- Achieve social Inclusion – creating a socially inclusive sustainable community
- Improving stock condition
- Meeting the needs of vulnerable groups
- Develop the intermediate housing market for example shared ownership

The current Sub-regional housing strategy is due for renewal in 2008-2009.

2.4 Local Policy and Priorities

This Homeless Strategy reflects the Councils Corporate vision:

To improve the quality of people's lives and preserve all that is best in East Herts.

The Council has developed six corporate priorities that it intends to achieve with its partners. The priority most relevant to this strategy is:

Promoting prosperity and well being: providing access and opportunities.

Priority: Enhance the quality of life, health and well being of individuals, families and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable.

The Council's Service Plans are the mechanism by which each service in the Council contributes to the Corporate Priorities.

2.5 Strategic Links with Other Documents

The nature of homelessness means that it is more than just about a roof over people's heads. Therefore, there are a number of strategies that this Strategy links with and these are detailed in Appendix 2.

3.0 Review of Homelessness in East Herts

3.1 Profile of the District

East Herts is the largest of the ten district Councils within Hertfordshire, representing approximately one third of the physical size of the county. The District remains a predominately rural area and includes five historic market towns with over 100 smaller villages and hamlets.

Of the 354 Districts in England, East Herts is ranked as the 7th most affluent/successful, although there are some areas within it that are less affluent. There is a predominance of employment in managerial, professional and technical occupations among the District's residents. Unemployment is low with a claimant count rate of 0.5%¹.

The District has seen a significant growth in its population over recent years. The increase between 1991 and 2007 has been 14.5%, which amounts to more than 16,000 people, the highest growth in Hertfordshire². It is estimated that in 2007 East Herts had a population of 133,600, constituting approximately 55,000 households³. The population is estimated to increase to 141,300 by 2021 with significant increases in the 60-79 and 80+ age groups⁴.

According to the 2001 Census the Black & Minority Ethnic population accounts for less than three percent of the population of East Herts and is made up of a mix of primarily Chinese and Indian. Since the Census the Council is aware that there has been an increase in the Polish and Portuguese communities in East Herts but there are currently no official population estimates.

¹ Claimant Count Rate, July 2007, NOMIS. This is the proportion of the working age population claiming job seekers allowance.

² Revised 2004 based sub-national population projections ONS

³ Revised 2004 based sub-national population projections ONS

⁴ Revised 2004 based sub-national population projections ONS

The Council's Council Tax Service had a total of 56,252 dwelling registered in East Herts at 1 April 2007. The Office for National Statistics records 86% of these properties as being owner occupied or privately rented compared to 81% for England. The social rented sector accounts for 14% of the housing stock compared to 18.4% for England. The Council does not own any stock having transferred ownership of its homes to Stort Valley, now South Anglia, and Riversmead Housing Associations in March 2002.

The attractiveness of East Herts as a place to live has led to high house prices with the District witnessing an 18% increase overall since 2005⁵. This has resulted in a growing number of households, who would not otherwise require subsidised affordable housing but, due to inflated house prices, are financially restricted from entering the private housing market.

Property Type	Average Price All Quarters 2005	Average Price First Quarter 2007	% Change
Flats & Maisonettes	170,225	187,700	10.3%
Detached	434,525	548,200	26.2%
Semi-detached	261,125	293,900	12.6%
Terraced	214,875	246,300	14.6%
All Properties	270,188	319,025	18.1%
County All properties	217,889	225,900	3.7%

Information from the Hertfordshire Observatory shows that in 2007 the ratio of the average house price in East Herts to the average income was 10:1 i.e. the average cost of a home was 10 times the average income. This was the third highest ratio in Hertfordshire.

The following table shows some comparison figures for renting a home in the private sector with a registered social landlord in January 2008⁶.

	Average Private rent per week	Average rent of Registered Social Landlord per week
1 bed Flat	£125.00	£65.00
3 bed house	£200.00	£95.00

3.2 Homelessness and Housing Need in East Herts

From 1 April 2005, the Council has operated an in house Housing Options Service that merged and re-configured the previous outsourced housing advice, housing register and homelessness services. The main objective is to provide a comprehensive options service for people in housing need.

This shift in emphasis for the Council from Homeless assessment to early intervention and prevention has led to a marked reduction in the number of homeless applications and an increase in the number of households for whom prevention casework has prevented homelessness.

⁵ Herts Observatory July 2007

⁶ Local Papers and Housing Options Service

3.2.1 Homelessness

The first contact with the Council, for the majority of households in housing need, is a Housing Options interview with the emphasis on preventing homelessness and saving, if appropriate, the current home. Where prevention of homelessness is not possible the emphasis is on providing the most effective and appropriate homeless service.

The levels of homelessness in East Herts have in the last two years, reduced compared to previous years. This reduction is the direct result of the implementation of the homeless prevention and housing options measures. The table below shows the number of approaches to the Council's Homeless Service and the number of households that, after investigation, have been accepted as homeless⁷.

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Homeless applications	254	215	117	106
Homeless Acceptances	142	120	56	64
Percentage of acceptances against applications	56%	56%	48%	60%

The following table gives a comparison of the three main reasons recorded for homelessness in 2007/08 and account for nearly 90% of the total homeless acceptances⁸.

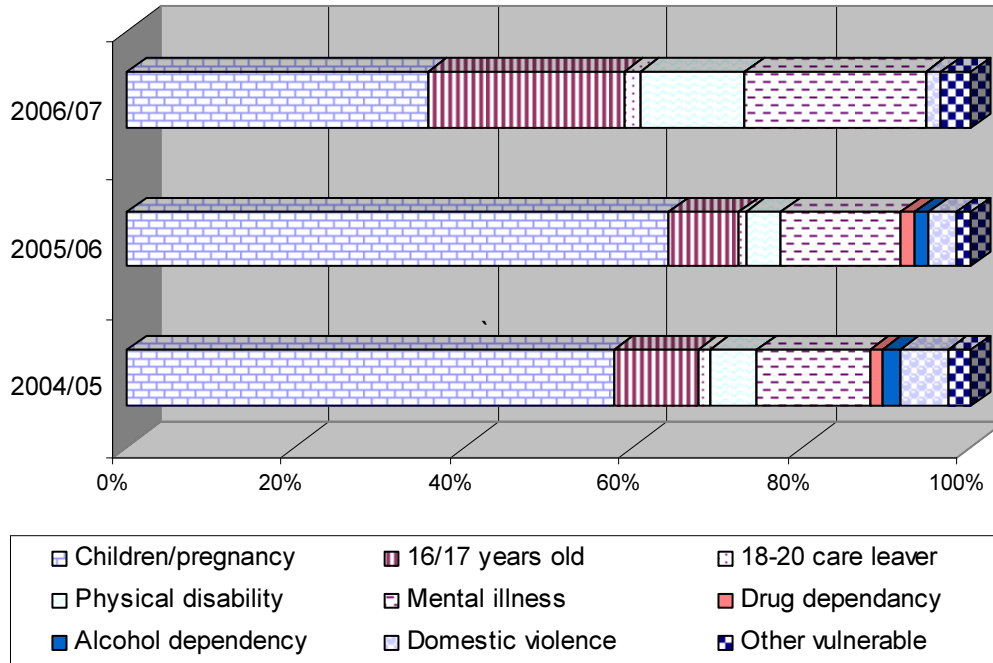
	East Herts
Parent, relatives, friends exclusions	47%
Relationship breakdown	15%
End of assured short-hold tenancy	27%

The graph below shows a comparison for the last three years of the reasons why households were considered to be in a priority need category when they were accepted a statutorily homeless.

⁷ Housing Options Service statistics

⁸ Housing Options Service statistics

Proportion of households accepted by priority need category 2004 - 2007



(NB 2007/08 data will be included when it is available)

3.2.2 Housing Advice

The Council's Housing Option approach is prevention focussed and that relies heavily on the residents of East Herts being able to access timely, high quality advice and assistance to help them resolve their housing problems well before their situation reaches crisis point. The provision of advice, by the Council, is from both our Hertford and Bishop's Stortford offices; when necessary a member of the Housing Options Team can visit people in their own homes. However East Herts has some very rural areas and this provides a challenge to ensuring advice is accessible across the district. In addition a number of our partner agencies provide advice across the district for example East Herts has a CAB in each of our five of our main towns

In 2006/07 the Council gave out over 895 pieces of housing advice primarily by phone or personal interview. In 2007/08 this has increased to over 1,000. Of these households the Council prevented homelessness for 168 households in 2006/07 and ??? (NB not yet available) households in 2007/08. In addition the Council funds a CAB Debt Advice worker who works from each of our offices for a total of 8 hours each week. This service now sees the majority of applicants with priority debt issues and in the four months from December 2007 to the end of March 2008 the Debt Advisor saw 66 households. The majority of the work involves liaising with creditors, making payment arrangements for priority debts and maximising income for clients.

3.2.3 Housing Register

As of 1 April 2008 there were 2,150 households on the Council's Housing Register of which three quarters were in a 'reasonable preference' category

for housing for example their current home exacerbated a medical condition or had inadequate facilities.

In 2006 the Council developed and launched a Common Housing Register (CHR) for the district with the majority of its partner housing associations working in the district. The Council and its partners believe that the development of a CHR has offered significant benefits to the Council, its partner housing associations and to applicants on the Housing Register.

In 2006 the Council agreed that a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme should be developed for East Herts. The government has set a target that all housing authorities should be operating a CBL scheme for allocating social housing by 2010. The government considers that CBL schemes can enhance mobility between areas and tenures and provide a balance between the needs of prospective tenants and choice and so may contribute to sustainable neighbourhoods. The Council joined a Consortia of five other Local Housing Authorities (Broxbourne, Epping Forest, Chelmsford, Uttlesford and Brentwood), and 25 registered social landlords and successfully bid for government funding to assist with the development and initial set-up of a CBL scheme. The CBL scheme went live in March 2008 and is a great success. The Council has developed the CBL scheme within its CHR framework so further enhancing choice and mobility for both new home seekers and existing tenants.

3.3.5 Rough Sleepers and Hidden Homeless

The Communities and Local Government office has issued guidance that says Local Authorities should use local intelligence from partner agencies about the extent of rough sleeping in it's area. Where this indicates that there are more than 10 rough sleepers in an area on any one night then they should carry out a full official count. The Council has monitored annually, since 2004, the number of rough sleepers with its partners in the East Herts Homeless Strategy Group. The group records, in a chosen week in November, all the clients that they see and whether they have slept rough and for which nights in that 7 day period. The maximum number of rough sleepers on one night has remained consistently at between 5 and 6. The majority of rough sleepers (75%) were aged under 25 and unlikely to be considered to be in priority need for re-housing under current homeless legislation. The government therefore considers rough sleeping to be a low priority for East Herts but we will continue to monitor numbers.

In addition the East Herts Homeless Strategy Group carried out a hidden homeless snap short survey in March 2007. The definition the Council used for hidden homeless (or sofa surfer), was:

‘a person who moves from place to place without having a fixed place to call home’.

A total of 25 survey forms were returned to the Council for analysis. The majority, 22 out of the 25 households, said that they were staying with friends or family. The largest group in the survey without a home was the 19-25 years age group, which had 11, or 44%, of the total households. Of these 11 households, six or 55% had been without a home of their own for over one

month. Of these six 2 had been without a home for up to one year and two for more than one year. In the main this age group tend to be fit and healthy and so do not fall into a priority need category and therefore there is no statutory housing duty. However the majority of young people in this age group are either currently unemployed or on low pay and as such do not have resources to enable them to secure accommodation in the private sector. They also have limited priority on the housing register.

When these applicants come to the Council for advice we can, in many circumstances, assist them with a financial grant to secure accommodation in the private sector. However their accommodation options are limited to rooms in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) due to the housing benefit rules for applicants under 25 years of age.

3.5 Equality and Diversity

The Housing service needs to be aware and try to meet the wide-ranging needs of everyone in East Herts. The Council has statutory equality duties with regards to race, disability and gender.

East Herts has a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) of less than 3% (Census 2001). The Homeless figures that we report to the government confirm that applications and acceptances are in line with the East Herts BME profile. The percentage and ethnic group of households on the housing register also reflect this profile as so does the nominations to social housing.

However since the Census in 2001 there is evidence of a growth in the East Herts population of migrants from Eastern European Countries. Hertford and Bishop's Stortford have a significant Polish Community since the expansion of the European Union to include A8* countries May 2004. There is also an established Portuguese population in Bishop's Stortford. Currently our housing recording systems do not identify these households separately on the housing register but groups them as European other. In addition there is very limited official government information on the number of migrants in the Country to base comparisons on.

The Councils Community Development Team has done work with different organisations, for example Church groups and community groups, which represent or support these communities to provide information about rights and the services that are available. The Councils' Community Development team along with, Braintree and Epping Council have developed a project called 'Building Capacity East', funded by the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA), to assist migrant workers across the three districts. The funding provides an Out-Reach Workers for each of the districts to give advice, and information on employment and housing etc and also assistance with the setting up of local support Networks. In addition the Council has available one day a week a Polish speaking officer who is based in our Bishop's Stortford offices.

An initial screening Equality Impact Assessment for the Housing Register and Allocations Policy is available upon request.

4.0 Strategic Objectives

There are a great many services that have been developed to prevent homelessness and recognition of the need to improve homeless services since the publication of our first Homeless Strategy in 2003. The Council has consulted and identified, with its partners, further developments it wants and needs to make. As the national, regional and local drivers change, which they are bound to over the five year life of this Strategy, the Council will continue to adapt and take opportunities as they arise.

In collaboration with our partners we have identified six strategic objectives that are relevant to all our partners and a range of actions under each which will contribute to the objectives. The Action Plan at Appendix 1 is a working document and will need to develop as further instances of best practice emerge or if external drivers, such as the national economy, change significantly.

4.1 Strategic Objective One

Prevent Homelessness through early intervention and targeted Housing advice

Housing advice can play a key role in improving people's lives and is a key part of preventing homelessness. In addition it has an important role to play in helping people to make informed and planned decisions about their housing options. There are a number of agencies providing housing advice services to the residents of East Herts. These include:

- East Herts Council
- Generalist advice services, e.g. CAB, YMCA
- Other Statutory organisations such as the Probation Service, Youth Justice Service, Leaving Care Team.

East Herts Council recognises that housing problems and homelessness are often not causes in themselves but symptoms of other problems in people's lives both personal and financial. The quality of advice offered must therefore be flexible and tailored to meet each household's needs. In order to do this a comprehensive range of housing options and access to specialist support services are available through our Options Officers.

4.1.1 What is happening already

Wherever possible the Housing Options Team work with a household to prevent homelessness by providing direct advice and support or where needed by liaising with appropriate external support agencies. The team gives advice on housing options, housing rights, applying for affordable housing, accessing the private rented sector, debt and welfare benefits advice and support and information on advocacy agencies that are available.

- **Citizens Advice Bureau Debt Advice Worker:** The Council fund a specialist money advice worker to work within the Housing Options Team for eight hours a week.
- **Herts and Essex Mediation service:** the Council has the facility to refer households to the Herts and Essex mediation service for friends and family exclusions.
- **Sanctuary Scheme:** Sanctuary Schemes are designed to enable a person or households that are the victims of domestic violence to stay in their own home where this is possible and desired rather than being forced to move and disrupting education, employment and family networks. The service is only provided where it is the clear choice of the victim and is implemented through a partnership with the Police and Victim Support. The Council fund the works to the home and includes strengthening doors and dedicated phone lines. This is available across tenures where the landlord of a property has given permission for the work to be carried out. In 07/08 the Council funded two sanctuary schemes each at an average cost of £850 each.
- **Homeless Prevention Fund:** The Councils Housing Options officers have access to a fund that they can use to prevent homeless. They have used this fund to pay for landlord renewal fees or to pay off small arrears thereby enabling a tenancy to be renewed or sustained.
- **Crash Pad and Mediation Service:** The Council has access to a crash pad mediation service for young people provided by the Herts Young Homeless Group (HYHG). The service provides emergency accommodation for young people with a host family whilst mediation is carried out to try and resolve the situation such that the young person can, if appropriate, return back home. In 2007/08 we referred five young people to the crash pad and mediation service. In the cases where the young person, following mediation, doesn't return home they often report a better relationship with their parent or carer so providing a much needed support network.
- **Home Visits:** In cases of homelessness the Housing Options Officers, where possible, carry out home visits, especially with family evictions, to ensure that both parties are clear about what homelessness actually means. In this way we can sometimes prevent homelessness. However if the breakdown cannot be reconciled we can negotiate and provide assistance for a planned move so preventing a crisis situation.
- **Floating Support:** the Council has access to floating support services to help vulnerable households access and sustain a home. The schemes provide support for those suffering domestic violence, learning disabilities, young people, drug and alcohol misuse and those living in temporary accommodation. Hertfordshire County Council Supporting People Team is currently re-configuring this service with the

aim of increasing the amount of support that is available across the County.

- **Housing Benefits Officer:** The Council has a Housing Benefits Officer working in the Housing Options Team two mornings a week.

4.1.2 What we want to do

We want to continue to develop a range of Housing Options that are homeless prevention focussed. To do this we will continue to monitor the causes of homelessness within East Herts, monitor the effectiveness of our current options and research best practice to develop new options that are appropriate. We consider debt advice to be crucial and we are keen to expand the service, in partnership with other agencies, for example by the provision of a Court Desk at Hertford County Court. Research from CLG has shown that the provision of a court desk can prevent up to 80% of mortgage re-possession so enabling households time to obtain debt advice and negotiate with their creditors. The Communities and Local Government have offered the Council a grant of up to £10,000 to provide a Court Desk facility at Hertford Court.

We want to improve communication with our residents about the services we and our partners provide, by marketing and the production of additional advice leaflets, to ensure everyone in East Herts can access timely, high quality advice and assistance to help them resolve housing problems well before their housing problems reach crisis point.

We want to ensure that there are robust and clear referral systems for all our partner agencies for the new generic floating support service being funded by the County Council Supporting People service. As the Council is the primary route into social housing we need to work with our RSL partners to ensure that the referral routes for people needing support to sustain their tenancies is clear and accessible and that the RSLs make use of it.

4.2 Strategic Objective Two

Develop and Improve Services to Young people

Preventing homelessness can have a huge influence on a young person's life chances. Good housing and support means that they are more likely to enter training, get a job, have a better standard of health and be able to take advantage of opportunities that they are offered.

In the Homeless Act 2002 the government strengthened the statutory duty for young people. All 16 and 17 year olds and care leavers aged between 18 and 20 have a priority need for housing if they become homeless through no fault of their own. For the 16 and 17 year old group our first priority is to try to get the young person back into the family home. If this is not possible or appropriate and the Council accept a homeless duty the young person can spend a considerable amount of time in one of the Council's hostels until we are able to rehouse them. In 2006/07 eleven 16 and 17 year olds presented as homeless of which eight were accepted for a rehousing duty. In 2006/07 10 young people left our hostels. Of these ten the Council had a duty to

rehouse eight and they stayed in the hostel for an average of 22 weeks before being found permanent accommodation.

The 18-25 year age group can also be hard to find housing solutions for. In the main this age group tend to be fit and healthy and unless they have a dependent child they do not fall into a priority need category and therefore there is no statutory housing duty on the Council. They also have limited priority on the housing register. As a result they tend to 'sofa surf' which restricts their opportunities for education and employment.

The YMCA in Bishop's Stortford provides accommodation for 18-30 year olds but there is a shortage of suitable supported accommodation for young people in the district especially in the Hertford and Ware area. There is no self referral direct access homeless hostel in the District; the nearest hostel is in St Albans.

4.2.1 What is happening already

In East Herts there is a limited amount of supported accommodation for people under 25 years of age. The YMCA has 27 units of self contained bed-sit accommodation which provides a medium level of support. In addition, due to the recognition that there was no supported accommodation for young people in Hertford or Ware the YMCA leased a property from a local landlord in Hertford. The property provides five units of shared facilities accommodation that the Housing Options Team can nominate to with a low level of off site support being provided. Other initiatives include:

- **Young Persons Joint Housing Protocol:** All ten local authorities in Hertfordshire, the County Council's Children's Schools and Families and Herts Young Homeless Group have developed and all signed up to a joint working protocol. The protocol is aimed at the 16 to 25 age group and explicitly defines the roles and responsibilities for each agency when a young person is either threatened with homelessness or is homeless. The protocol is currently being reviewed by Herts County Council.
- **Homeless Prevention and Support Services:** Herts Young Homeless Group and the Aldwyck Housing Group, funded by the Hertfordshire Supporting People Services, provide each Local Authority in Hertfordshire with an integrated Housing Advice Service which includes a Crash Pad and Mediation service for 16 to 25 year olds.
- **YMCA :** The Housing Options team currently funds the YMCA in Bishop's Stortford to provide at any one time two 6 month placements for homeless 16 and 17 year olds. The placements provide not only supported accommodation but intensive support in life skills such as budgeting, and encouragement and support to continue education or find training. At the end of six months, if the young person engages in the placement, they are offered accommodation at the YMCA. In addition the Council provide annually five units of general needs accommodation for young people who are coming to the end of their

successful stay at the YMCA. In 2007/2008 we funded four successful placements at a total annual cost of £18,000.

4.2.2 What we want to do

We want to continue to seek initiatives for the provision of suitable accommodation for this young vulnerable client group that supports them so that they have a greater chance of maximising their life skills and opportunities. We will do this by supporting the County Council's project to provide the revenue support for the provision of a new supported hostel for young people in East Herts, in the Hertford or Ware area and by supporting other agencies such as the County Council for the provision of supported lodgings and other initiatives.

4.3 Strategic Objective Three

Improve the type and use of temporary accommodation for homeless households

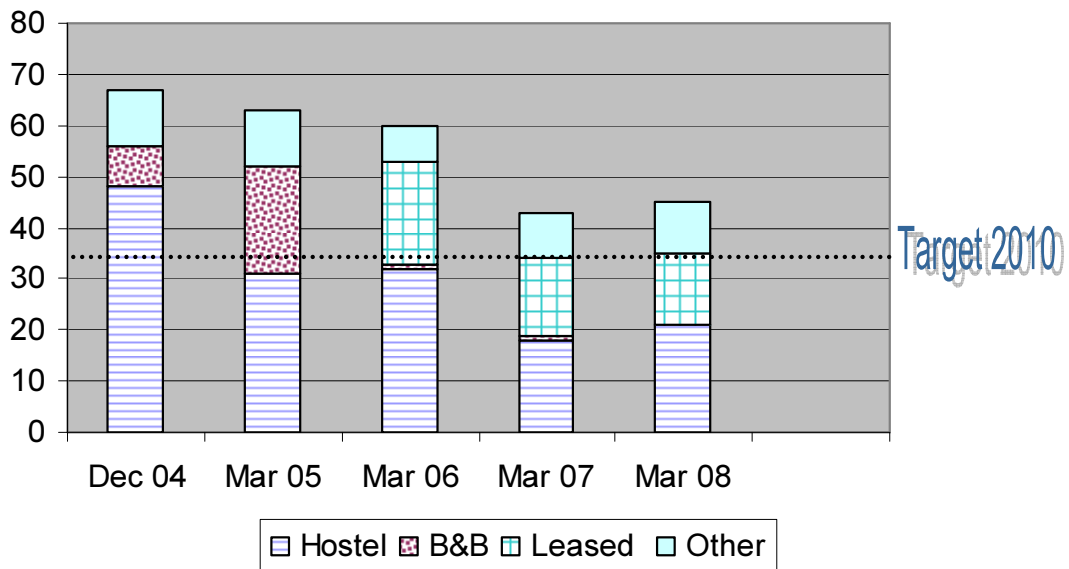
The Council uses temporary accommodation for homeless households whilst it investigates claims of homelessness. Temporary accommodation is also used where the Council has accepted a full rehousing duty towards a household but no suitable permanent accommodation has yet been secured.

The report Sustainable Communities Settled Homes, produced by the Government in 2005 set a target for all local authorities to half their number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010 from their baseline number at December 2004.

The Council uses several types of accommodation the main types being:

- Hostel accommodation: The Council currently has two homeless hostels with a total of 35 rooms. The hostels have shared bathing and common room facilities with basic cooking facilities in each room.
- Private Sector leased accommodation: the Council has an agreement with Paradigm Housing Association to provide up to twenty units of private sector leased accommodation. The accommodation includes self contained flats and houses that are leased from private landlords for up to three years.
- Domestic Violence Refuge: The Council has access to two refuges that are outside of their district, one in Broxbourne and the other in Harlow.
- Bed and Breakfast: The Council rarely uses bed and breakfast accommodation and then only in emergency situations if it has no other appropriate alternative for short periods of time.
- Springboard Housing Association: The housing association provides the Council with three units of temporary accommodation for clients who have mental health issues. The schemes provide both on site intensive support and also a floating support service.
- Crash pad: The HYHG and Aldwyck Young project this provides a pool of up to 20 host families providing temporary accommodation across Hertfordshire with currently two host families in East Herts.

Number of Households in Temporary Accommodation



4.3.1 What is happening already

The Council recognises that any time in temporary accommodation is stressful and that family networks, schooling and access to health care can be disrupted.

- In 2004/05 a household with children spent on average 20 weeks in one of our homeless hostels before they could be offered more secure housing. By 2007/08 we had reduced this to 14 weeks.
- The Council had 67 households in temporary accommodation at December 2004 and so has the challenging target of reducing that number to 33 by 2010. At the end of March 2008 we had 47 households in temporary accommodation.
- In 2004 we closed one of our homeless hostels, a 21 bed shared facilities hostel in Buntingford, and re-provided with 20 units of self contained private sector leased accommodation. This accommodation is managed by Paradigm Housing Association and enables us to specify the size and type and of temporary accommodation that we need.
- In 2005 the Council leased its two hostels to Paradigm Housing Association, with the council retaining 100% nomination rights to empty hostel rooms.
- The Council does not place households who have children or who are pregnant in Bed and Breakfast accommodation except via the out of

hours emergency service. In 2007/08 we placed a total of 13 households in B&B for an average of ten nights; six of the households were in B&B for only two nights.

4.3.2 What we want to do

We will continue to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation to ensure that we meet our target of 33 households by 2010 and that we reduce or sustain it. We also want to maintain our good record on the low use of bed and breakfast accommodation so that the Council can consider itself as an authority where B&B is not considered an option. We are currently reviewing our hostel accommodation provision and intend to decommission a further hostel and redevelop the final hostel to provide ten units of self contained accommodation that can be used flexibly.

We want to ensure that specialist accommodation, often only needed for a short period of time, is used effectively and we will work with the providers and the Hertfordshire Supporting People Team to provide move on accommodation to prevent bottle necks in provision.

4.4 Strategic Objective Four

Improve services to homeless households and households in housing need

Although homeless prevention is at the forefront of our approach some cases are unavoidable. When households become homeless we aim to try and make the move into temporary accommodation and onto settled accommodation as smooth and supported as possible. There are also households that are either homeless or in housing need but the Council does not have a statutory duty to them for example young single households or couples. With high house prices and high private sector rents these households often struggle to find suitable accommodation and are often effectively hidden homeless. The Housing Needs Survey (HNS) 2004 found that 6% of households in the District contained a 'concealed' or hidden household. The HNS Update 2005 showed that within this group 91% did not have an adequate income to be able to buy and 64% were unable to afford to rent privately (based on the smallest 1-bed flat).

The Council has tried to develop and improve services for households that are homeless whether we have a statutory duty or not.

4.4.1 What is happening already

- The Council has access to a floating support and resettlement service based at the hostels. The service ensures appropriate support and advice is available to people going into temporary accommodation and also provides short-term resettlement support to assist households moving into settled accommodation to ensure they sustain their home.

- Homeless questionnaire: In 2006 the Council launched a homeless questionnaire that every household that had a homeless decision was asked to complete. A total of 170 survey forms have been sent out and 47 survey forms returned which represented a 28% response rate. Overall 79% of households said that they agreed or strongly agreed that they were overall satisfied with the homeless service.
- Since April 2006 the Housing Options and Homeless Service has been available from both the Bishop's Stortford and Hertford Council offices.
- The Councils Rent Deposit scheme has proved to be an effective and popular Housing Option that allows households to access the private rented sector where they would not financially be able to do. The rent deposit has allowed people to choose where they want to live thereby maintaining family or schooling networks. In 2006/07 we assisted 41 households with finding accommodation in the private rented sector and in 2007/08, following a reduction in the grant available, 29 households. The deposit is in the form of a grant and so is recyclable to enable the Council to assist others. In 2007/08 we recovered over £11,000 of grant by either the tenancy coming to a natural end or from tenants repaying over the term of the tenancy.
- The Council launched Choice Based Lettings (CBL) in early March 2008 with homeless households having full access to the scheme. The Housing Register scheme is a point based system for measuring housing need. Prior to CBL, the Housing Options Team would have identified households on the Housing Register whose housing need was becoming acute and tried to find a suitable RSL vacancy to prevent homelessness. The Council has formulated the policy to allow the Senior Housing Options Manager to allocate time-limited homeless prevention points for those households whose housing need is approaching crisis point. This increases their chance of a successful bid.
- The Council have developed a joint protocol with MIND that enable the Housing Options Team to refer any household that they have contact with, that has or appears to have mental health issues, for advice and support.

4.4.2 What we want to do

The Council recognises the role of the private sector, particularly with homeless non-priority households and also in its ability to provide a choice of where to live for homeless households. The Council's Rent Deposit Scheme is very successful but we need to ensure that we are maximising the recycling of the grant money to maximise the number of households that can use the scheme and also monitor the number and reason why tenancies fail.

The Council will need to monitor the impact of CBL on homeless households and those in housing need. We need to ensure that the scheme is working with and not against the needs of homeless families and particularly those households whose housing situation is reaching crisis point

4.5 Strategic Objective Five

Develop and improve partnership working to maximise benefits to homeless households

Homelessness is complex; both the reasons for homelessness and the solutions. There are links to health, education, offending, income and relationships to name a few. Therefore any work to prevent homelessness or improve the services to homeless households will involve a partnership approach across a number of organisations.

4.5.1 What is happening already?

- The Housing Options and Strategy Teams play a key role in many partnership arrangements including:
 - Community Safety Groups including MAPPA (Multi-Agency Protection Panel)
 - Hertfordshire Supporting People Programme Development Group
 - East Herts Private Sector landlords Forum
 - London Commuter belt Housing Strategy, Heads of Housing and Homeless Strategy Groups
 - Hertfordshire Homeless Officer Group
 - Hertfordshire Mental Health Services
 - MAST (Multi Agency Support Team)

These groups are useful for ensuring best practice, bench marking our services and ensuring good networking to maximise the benefits of the work that we all do.

- In 2002 the Council set-up the East Herts Homeless Strategy Group in response to the Housing Act 2002 with the need to review homelessness in the District and to write the first Homeless Strategy. The group is made up of a number of key local partners involved in homelessness from advice and advocacy roles to the provision of accommodation. The current membership includes CAB, YMCA, Probation, Vale House Drug and Alcohol Services and Riversmead, South Anglia and Aldwyck Housing Associations. There is also a wider membership that is kept up to date with the group which includes, the PCT and Connexions. The group meets once a quarter and its remit includes:
 - Establishing knowledge about and a shared understanding of homelessness and the issues affecting homeless people
 - Development of an East Herts Homelessness Strategy
 - Agreeing Actions required by individual partners to ensure that the objectives of the strategy are met
 - Monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the East Herts Homeless Strategy.

4.5.2 What we want to do

The East Herts Homeless Strategy Group is a strong local group that has developed good networks and assisted the Council towards a better understanding of the differing needs of homeless clients. The stronger and more diverse this partnership is the more effective it will be. The intention is to expand the membership further by targeted invitation and by also publishing information about the meeting on the Council's website so that those who do not have the time to come to every meeting can also see what the group is doing.

With partnership working there are issues around data sharing and we intend to develop and agree with all our main partners a data sharing protocol specifically around homelessness and housing need.

We also need to encourage all our RSL partners to fully engage in the homelessness role as highlighted by the Housing Corporation in their own Homeless Strategy published in November 2006.

4.6 Strategic Objective Six

Increase the supply of appropriate, good quality affordable housing

Essential to tackling homelessness is the supply of accommodation. There is a shortage of affordable housing within the district and the Housing Service is therefore exploring options to increase the availability of and make better use of existing affordable housing for homeless households and those in housing need.

The private rented sector can also play a part in the prevention of homelessness and as a positive housing option for households in housing need. Increasing and sustaining access to the private sector can reduce the number of households who experience homelessness

4.6.1 What is happening already?

- Private Lease Agreements Converting Empties (PLACE) is a scheme targeted at helping the owners of long term empty homes return their properties to use, to support homeless prevention. East Herts is working partnership with Chelmsford, Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford Councils and Pathmeads and Swan Housing Associations. The scheme offers high level grant funding to repair properties and in return the relevant Council will lease the property for three years to a household in housing need.
- We will continue to provide grants for rent deposit to enable low income households to access the private sector.
- The Private Sector Environmental Health Team organise, every six months, a Private Sector Landlords Forum. The forum allows the Council to pass on important statutory information to private landlords but also acts as an informal mechanism for passing on information

about initiatives such as the Councils rent deposit scheme and listening to landlords.

- The Council has recently reviewed the threshold at which housing developers in East Herts have to provide affordable housing. In addition the amount of affordable housing the Council can ask for has increased from 30% to up to 40%. In 2006/07 and 2007/08 we achieved a total of 225 additional homes for rent through housing associations and 81 in 2007/08.
- We have good mechanisms for the monitoring of nomination agreements with our housing association partners to ensure we obtain the maximum number of social housing homes for applicants on our housing register.
- It is nationally recognised that a large percentage of current social tenants are under-occupying their homes. We have recently amended our Housing Register points framework, to include an award of points for existing social tenants, wishing to move to a smaller home, for each bedroom they 'give up'.
- Stansted Area Housing Partnership (SAHP) was developed as a partnership between Uttlesford, East Herts, Harlow and Braintree Councils following the granting of planning permission by Uttlesford to BAA to increase passenger throughput to 25 million. BAA Stansted put £2.2m towards the funding of affordable housing within a ten mile radius of the airport. A key feature of the SAHP is the development of inter local authority nomination agreement, giving the opportunity for residents of the four Councils to move across local authority boundaries.

4.6.2 What we want to do

Under occupation is seen by the Government as a large mis-use of social family homes. In December 2007 they published Good Practice Guidance on reducing overcrowding in social housing called Tackling Overcrowding in England: An action plan. The document states that Local Authorities need to develop mechanisms for identifying the extent and developing policies to reduce under occupation to utilise social housing more efficiently and reduce overcrowding. We will need to work with our RSL partners to identify under-occupation and consult and research best practice on the actions needed to reduce under-occupation.

In addition we need to promote our CHR and encourage all the RSLs who have stock in our district to join to promote choice and accessibility for all social tenants in East Herts that need to move.

We want to continue working with private landlords in the District and encourage them to engage with the Housing Options Team and provide accommodation for households on low incomes. We also want to continue to work with HMO landlords and recognise the valuable contribution they make in providing accommodation for young single households

5.0 Resources

Through consultation and the East Herts Homeless Strategy Group ideas have been generated for improving services for homeless people and the prevention of homelessness in East Herts. The resources needed, both financial and physical, need to be considered to meet these objectives jointly with our partners and to benefit from efficiencies by working in partnership and across local authority boundaries.

a) Housing Options Team – When the team was brought back in house the structure was re-organised to place an increased emphasis on the homeless prevention. The Housing Options Service currently employs a total of 11 full time and part time officers. A structure chart is at Appendix 5.

b) Grants to other organisations: The Housing Options Team provides some funding to other specialist organisations to provide assistance to households in housing need such as Women’s Aid and Shelter. In 2007/08 this was £13,000.

c) The Communities and Local Government Department has provided, since 2003 a homeless grant to fund homeless prevention projects. In the main this grant has been used to provide single homeless non-priority households with rent deposits and rent in advance to enable them to secure accommodation in the private Sector. The table below shows the amount of grant awarded and the number of preventions of homelessness we have achieved.

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Number of preventions	19	17	22
Value of Grant	£20,000	£25,000	£30,000

The Government have confirmed that the 2007/08 level of grant funding will continue to be made available to the Council for a further 3 years until 2011 for homeless prevention work.

d) Housing options fund and rent deposits: Since April 2006 the Council has provided the Housing Options team with two specific budgets for the prevention of homelessness and the provision of rent deposits.

	£	Number of households assisted
2006/07	£29,400	24
2007/08	£8,950	7

e) Temporary accommodation: the Council uses a range of general temporary accommodation including two hostels providing 33 units of shared facilities accommodation and 20 units of Private Sector Leased flats and houses. The total cost in 2007/08 was £??,??? (NB not yet available).

f) Affordable Housing: There are approximately 7,500 social housing homes in the district, which is 14% of the total housing stock. All the affordable housing is owned by housing associations and each year the Council is

offered, by them under legal nomination agreements, approximately 350 vacancies that it can offer, via CBL, to applicants on the housing register.

g) Other agencies providing advice: There are a range of agencies working in East Herts that provide general advice through to specialised housing and debt advice. The agencies include, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Shelter Hertfordshire and Herts Young Homeless Group.

6.0 Monitoring and taking the Strategy Forward

Each Strategic Objective within this strategy has its own timetabled action plan that sets outcomes, target dates, the lead organisations, partners and resources spanning the five years of the Strategy. Performance information is collected across a range of indicators to help monitor performance, identify trends and assess implementation of the strategy. This information is also used to benchmark our services against other local authorities. The London Commuter Belt Homeless Strategy Group has agreed a basket of indicators that we will benchmark ourselves against at least annually.

Progress against the action plan and performance information will be reported as follows:

- Quarterly to the East Herts Homeless Strategy Group
- Annually to the Council's Community Scrutiny Committee
- Annually to the LSP