



East Herts Council Homelessness Review and Strategy

2013-18

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Foreword

By Councillor Linda Haysey, Executive Member for Health, Housing and Community Support.

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. Homelessness is a harmful and risky lifestyle and it is linked to wider social and health issues.

The development of our new Homelessness Strategy comes at a time of great change in housing, welfare and social policy.

Our Homelessness Strategy is part of a suite of integrated housing documents and its main objective is to meet housing needs and prevent homelessness. It is evidence based and has been developed in consultation with stakeholders. It sets out the causes of homelessness, wider housing needs, where we are now and considers the challenges and opportunities that will come forward in the next five years.

The strategy also outlines some significant achievements that we have been able to make since our last Homelessness Strategy was published.

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 Providers (RPs), voluntary and private sectors. This Strategy has been developed with the assistance of our partner agencies. The Council would like to thank everyone who gave their time and contributed to this Strategy.

Executive Summary – To be completed

1. Introduction

The overall purpose of the Homeless 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.

East Herts Council has a statutory duty to address the needs of homeless households. This includes the provision of advice, prevention of homelessness and provision of alternative accommodation.

The key outcomes for the Council are:

- Preventing homelessness, wherever possible
- Providing skilled help at the point of homelessness
- Providing an accessible, modern and effective Housing Options response
- Developing effective partnerships, to respond successfully to housing need and homelessness.

Being homeless is epitomised by the rough sleeper who is living on the streets, but this group of people forms a relatively small proportion of all homeless households. Many homeless households are “hidden” as they may have access to some form of shelter some of the time, but lack a stable, long term, settled home. For others, there are frequent moves from one temporary accommodation or shelter to another (e.g. emergency accommodation, refuges, friend’s homes, ‘sofa surfing’) – people with no settled home.

What have we achieved since the 2008-2013 Strategy?

The Council is pleased to report on a number of really important successes as a result of the previous Homelessness Strategy which was published in 2008. These include:

- A comprehensive review of the Allocations Policy to take advantage of the freedoms offered by the Localism Act. This has enabled us to re-think the priority awards that are made to homeless households and to ensure that the Council takes the opportunities presented by the Localism Act.
- Minimal use of B&B, and only in an absolute emergency. This is against the picture of rising homelessness both nationally and locally.
- Re-development of our temporary accommodation into 11 units of self-contained, high quality accommodation.
- Increased efficiencies from development of an online housing register application process.
- Significant numbers of homelessness preventions achieved by a small dedicated team.
- Introduction of effective and integrated triage, meaning that good housing advice is provided on drop-in at the council offices, followed by case working those that threatened are with homelessness at both our Hertford and Bishop’s Stortford offices.

- Extension of our debt and money advice service in partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Bringing Empty Homes back to use through Place Scheme Rent and Bond Deposit Scheme.
- In partnership with the County Council and Aldwyck Housing Association the development, in Hertford, of a 24 x 1 bed supported accommodation for young people from the ages of 16-25 including 4 mother and baby flats.
- Working in partnership with Herts Credit Savers to develop a more robust Rent Deposit Scheme to assist residents in housing need to access accommodation in the private sector.

2. National policy context

Since our last strategy, the national policy and financial context has changed dramatically. The environment in which we need to deliver homelessness prevention is now very challenging, partly as a result of the economic downturn post 2008 and partly as a result of government reforms to a range of key policies relating to welfare and housing.

a) Localism Act 2011

The Localism Act was given Royal Assent on 15 November 2011. The Localism Act lets councils decide:

- the types and lengths of tenancy that can be offered in social housing by introducing the fixed term tenancy which can be used instead of life time tenancies,
- how duties under the relevant Homelessness Act can be discharged, in particular the use of the private rented sector to discharge a Homelessness Duty where suitable,
- how to manage their housing registers by enabling councils to establish their own qualification criteria for who can be registered and therefore offered social housing.

b) Welfare Reform

The Government states that the aim of its welfare reform programme is to reduce the budget deficit, slow down growing benefit expenditure, increase fairness, increase work incentives and end benefit dependency. From April 2011 to date, the following changes have been introduced:

- Local Housing Allowance (LHA) calculated using 30th percentile of rents in the area. This means rents were previously calculated on the median (50th percentile) of rents in Broad Rental Market Area (BRMA). From April 2011 this changed to be calculated on 30th percentile of the BRMA. This will only be updated by CPI from April 2013.
- Removal of 5-bedroom LHA rate. This was effective from April 2011 on new claims and changes of address.
- Introduction of caps for 1 to 4 bedroom rates. The national weekly caps currently stand at
 - £250 one bedroom
 - £290 two bedroom

- £340 three bedroom
- £400 four bedroom
- Single people under 35 have, as from January 2012, only been able to claim LHA at shared accommodation rates. This was previously the rate allowed for under 25 year olds.
- From April 2013, property size restrictions for working-age people in social housing came into effect, bringing the same rules in that apply to private sector lettings. This requires under-occupiers of social housing properties to pay a charge for each bedroom in excess of their needs, taken as a reduction in benefit payable. This has affected over 700 households in social housing in East Herts.
- The introduction of the overall benefits cap, from July 2013 in East Herts, of £26,000 per annum for families.

Other significant changes that will come into force as a result of the reform to the welfare system include:

- Increase in non-dependant deduction charges (phased in between 2011 to 2014)
- Moving towards Universal Credit (2013 to 2017)

c) Supporting People

The Supporting People programme began on 1 April 2003, bringing together seven housing-related funding streams from across central government. The Supporting People provides funding for housing related-support services for vulnerable adults, including homeless people. Most hostels, supported housing projects and floating support services for homeless people receive funding from Supporting People.

From 2010 the government made it a wholly decentralised programme, administered through 152 top-tier authorities (Herts County Council for East Herts), who have complete discretion over where to direct their funds to best meet local needs.

d) Government Strategy

Tackling homelessness is a key priority outlined in the Government's Housing Strategy, 'Laying the Foundations, A Housing Strategy for England' (2011). The national strategy outlines the Government's commitment to homelessness prevention, meeting the needs of the vulnerable, managing the consequences of those made homeless and addressing rough sleeping.

In August 2012 CLG published "Making every contact count : A joint approach to tackling homelessness" with a view to ensuring wider responsibility for preventing homelessness. The document sets out 10 challenges for Local Authorities which are designed to ensure that homelessness prevention and support to vulnerable households is as effective as possible.

e) Public Health

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 contains various changes to the National Health Service, including the transfer of the majority of public health functions from Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) to local authorities. Public health is about helping people to stay healthy and avoiding ill health which improved housing can alleviate.

3. Local strategic links and policy context

Key documents have been taken into account in the development of this Strategy to ensure consistency across the Council and with our partners in other agencies. All the East Herts documents can be accessed from the Council's website at www.eastherts.gov.uk or by contacting the Strategic Housing Service on 01279 655261.

a) East Herts' Corporate Vision

This Homeless Strategy reflects the Council's 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.

b) Housing Strategy 2013-2016

The East Herts Housing Strategy has identified the following three strategic priorities:

- 1. Maximise the delivery of a range of new affordable homes, whilst ensuring the best use of existing housing.** There is a significant affordability problem in the District. This is a result of many factors but predominantly due to high prices in comparison to income levels. This in turn is placing greater pressure on the existing affordable housing in the District. There is simply not enough affordable housing to meet the increasing need of the District's residents.
- 2. Meeting the needs of a growing elderly population.** East Herts has an ageing population and it is projected that two thirds of the population growth anticipated in East Herts between 2006 and 2021 will be people aged over 65 years. This will have a significant impact on the provision of both housing and services, with accessibility and the suitability of houses being key factors
- 3. Meeting the needs of vulnerable people and stronger communities.** Strong communities require effective approaches in terms of policies to promote inclusiveness, assist the vulnerable, increase safety and the perception of safety, and in ensuring the built environment and public space meet people's needs and aspirations. The County Council has specific duties with regard to vulnerable adults and children. However as one of their key strategic partners, we seek to work with them to develop future priorities for all the people in our local communities whether that be by directly providing accommodation or services, enabling or 'donating' an asset.

The Homelessness Strategy will complement and be consistent with the East Herts Housing Strategy and although the Homelessness Strategy will operate as a stand-alone document, both policies share a number of key objectives.

c) Tenancy Strategy

The Localism Act required Councils to develop and publish a Tenancy Strategy by January 2013. The strategy is to guide Registered Providers of social housing in the relevant area in formulating policies relating to:

- (a) the kinds of tenancies they grant,
- (b) the circumstances in which they will grant a tenancy of a particular kind,
- (c) where they grant tenancies for a term, the lengths of the terms, and
- (d) the circumstances in which they will grant a further tenancy on the coming to an end of an existing tenancy.

Registered Providers are obliged to have 'due regard to' the strategy when developing their own tenancy policies. In East Herts, Registered Providers are currently looking at fixed / flexible tenancies lasting usually no more than 5 years.

d) East Herts Housing Register and Allocations policy

In May 2013 the Council implemented a new Allocations Policy which we believe provides a fairer and more transparent way of letting local social housing, which again is focused on mitigating the impact of welfare reform (particularly the bedroom subsidy) and promoting social inclusion.

4. Review of homelessness in East Herts

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.

a) Homelessness

Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Act 2002 place statutory duties on local housing authorities to provide assistance to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Authorities must consider all applications from people seeking accommodation or assistance in obtaining accommodation. A main homelessness duty (see below) is owed where the authority is satisfied that the applicant is eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and falls within a priority need group.

Where a main duty is owed, the authority must ensure that suitable accommodation is available for the applicant and his or her household until a settled home becomes available for them. Where households are found to be intentionally homeless or not in priority need, the authority must make an assessment of their housing needs and provide advice and assistance to help them find accommodation for themselves.

Where the applicant is found to be intentionally homeless but falls in a priority need category the authority must also ensure that accommodation is available for long enough to give the applicant a reasonable opportunity to find a home.

The table below shows the number of homelessness presentations and acceptances over the last 3 years for East Herts.

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Homeless applications	93	99	79
Homeless Acceptances	39	40	35
Percentage of acceptances against applications	42%	40%	44%

One of the ways that central government measures homelessness levels is looking at homeless acceptances per 1,000 head of population. The figure for Hertfordshire for 2012/13 was 2.40 acceptances per thousand population. Data for East Herts shows:

Year	Per 1000 head of pop _n
2011/12	0.71
2012/13	0.59

The main causes of homelessness locally, in order, are:

Cause of homelessness	Number during 2012/13	Percentage
Termination of assured shorthold tenancy	14	40%
Parents no longer willing or able to accommodate	5	14%
Non violent relationship breakdown	4	11%
Mortgage/rent arrears	3	9%
<i>Other reasons</i>	9	26%

As at the 31st March 2013, there were a total of 12 households in temporary accommodation. The breakdown of this as is follows:

Type of accommodation	Number
Bed & breakfast	0
Hostel inc women's refuge	7
Housing association stock	5
Private lease scheme	3
Other	12

b) Housing Advice

The Council's Housing Options 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 by booked appointments and also via a drop-in service provided on a Monday in Hertford and Friday in Bishop's Stortford. In addition a number of our partner agencies provide advice across the district for example East Herts has a CAB in Hertford, Bishop's Stortford and Buntingford.

In 2012/13 the Council prevented homelessness for 276 households via advice and assistance. This was done through various initiatives including maximising benefits income, liaising with landlords, providing accommodation through our Housing Register or the provision of small loans to access the private sector.

In addition the Council funds a CAB Debt Advice worker who works from each of our offices for a total of 16 hours each week. This service sees applicants with priority debt issues. The majority of the work involves liaising with creditors, making payment arrangements for priority debts and maximising income for clients.

c) Housing Register

The Council is part of HomeOption, which provides our housing register and choice based lettings service for 5 local authorities – Broxbourne, Chelmsford, Uttlesford, Brentwood and East Herts. There are currently over 3,400 households registered for accommodation in the East Herts area. This can be broken down by bedroom requirements, as follows:

Bedrooms required	Number of applicants
One	2,021
Two	1,015
Three	322
Four or more	80
Total	3,438

Each year the Council has a number of lets available through nomination arrangements with housing associations. The number of lets over the last three years are:

673 lets during 2012/13
 588 lets during 2011/12
 468 lets during 2010/11

d) Rough Sleepers

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 its 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 in one particular week in October. The last count was October 2012 and four rough sleepers were identified in one night in one week. They were all single people aged 35 or less and were not in priority need for re-housing under current homeless legislation. The Council recognises that there are not many housing options for this client group other

than the private sector and has therefore consistently targeted its Rent Deposit Scheme at non-priority homeless people to prevent rough sleeping.

5. Likely future levels of homelessness

It is likely that the current and future national welfare benefit changes will have an impact on lower income households. Welfare spending is planned to reduce and there are a number of concerns for the future that arise from this; some are being seen already, such as:

- Single room rate extension to the under 35s,
- Difficulty in accessing private rented sector accommodation because of high demand, including demand from people who might have been expecting to access the owner occupation market.

Other concerns are from the likely impact of Universal Credit – due to come in October 2013. For those who rent privately, there is a concern that they may not be able to effectively set aside the rent element from their benefit each month and pay landlords rent due on time. This could lead to increased court action and increased threat of homelessness.

There are a number of other issues that will impact on the workloads of those working locally to tackle homelessness:

- Home ownership being increasingly out of reach for future generations and this will lead to increased demand for social / affordable housing,
- Increasing demands on the rented sector,
- Interest rates are low now but any upward changes will severely impact on owner-occupiers and could impact on buy to let landlords - who may either sell or seek higher rent levels - which could put the properties out of reach for those in receipt of Local Housing Allowance (LHA).

There is a concern that there will be increasing numbers of households making approaches for housing advice, looking to access more affordable housing locally and ultimately an increase in numbers of people threatened with homelessness. The Council needs to respond to this challenge, and the Homelessness Strategy sets out our plans for doing this.

With an expensive private rented market in East Herts there are key concerns around affordability especially in light of welfare changes including the cap on total benefits. The introduction of the affordable rent model has also seen a reduction in the affordable housing grant available from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) with a greater emphasis on housing associations delivering sites using their own resources and borrowing money secured against income from the Affordable Rent model. These changes are likely to have implications for many of our residents. Raising public awareness and helping people to prepare for these changes will be essential in order to prevent homelessness occurring.

6. Homeless provision locally

There are a range of services in place to assist those who are threatened with homelessness. Some of these can be accessed directly by the clients, others are on a referral basis from one of the client facing agencies. The main sources of advice and assistance are:

a) East Herts Housing Options Service

This is the statutory service provided by the council, providing free housing advice, homelessness prevention casework and assessment and provision under the homelessness legislation. The service is primarily based at the council offices in Hertford and also Bishop's Stortford.

A drop-in service is provided Monday mornings in Hertford and Friday mornings in Bishop's Stortford. Other than this the Housing Options staff can be accessed by telephone or via an appointment service. These interviews are used to prevent homelessness, work with clients to discuss other housing options and, where necessary to take formal homelessness applications and make enquiries into homelessness.

b) Citizens Advice Bureau

The CAB has offices in Hertford, Bishop's Stortford and Buntingford in the district. They provide advice and assistance to clients.

c) Herts Young Homeless

This group works with young people aged 16 to 25 who are threatened with homelessness. Staff from the group provide the first point of access to advice services, and carry out needs assessments. The group also has the ability to refer to social services where necessary. The focus of the work is prevention of homelessness, but also to ensure the Council's duty towards young people who are homeless is properly carried out.

7. Strategic themes

Being homeless is a harmful and risky lifestyle. It is linked to wider social and health issues. Anyone can become homeless but we can identify some of those at risk based on past history in East Herts:

- young people leaving care,
- people suffering from domestic violence,
- those with a mental health or substance misuse problem,
- those from troubled families,
- people on low incomes and those who are in debt.

The aim of the homelessness review has been to produce a picture of homelessness demand in East Herts and also of the provision of services and actual accommodation for homeless households. By doing this, we are able to identify areas that need to be tackled by the Homelessness Strategy.

As the national and local policy changes, 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.

The key themes for the 2013-18 Homelessness Strategy for East Herts Council are:

1. Prevent Homelessness through early intervention and targeted Housing Advice, including mitigating the impact of welfare reform, so that the risk of homelessness is reduced.

Whilst we have, over recent years, significantly reduced statutory homelessness in East Herts through prevention initiatives, demand for services is expected to increase as a result of welfare benefit reform. It is important to continue to review and improve existing support available to people who are at risk of becoming homeless.

What is happening already?

Wherever possible the Housing Options Team works 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 funds a specialist money advice worker to work within the Housing Options Team for sixteen hours a week.
- **Homeless Prevention Fund:** The Council's Housing Options Officers have access to a fund that they can use to prevent homelessness. 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 to resolve the situation such that the young person can, if appropriate, return back home.
- **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.

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 want to improve communication with our residents about the services we and our partners provide, by marketing and the production of additional advice leaflets and online services, 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 are continually looking to improve local services and are interested in what the CLG sponsored “gold Standard” can contribute in doing this. The Gold Standard is a CLG sponsored programme, focusing on a 10 step continuous improvement approach that starts with the pledge for local authorities to “strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services” and culminates in an application for the Gold Standard Challenge. The standard itself is based around the report from the Ministerial Working Group on Homelessness – “Making Every Contact Count: A Joint Approach to the Prevention of Homelessness”. The Standard itself is set out in Appendix 1.

2. Increase the role of the private rented sector for those in housing need, with better sustained tenancies.

The Council recognises the increased demand for appropriate, affordable housing to meet local need, but also acknowledges homelessness in the future will be driven by the continuing changing economic climate and public expenditure changes. Welfare reforms in the private rented sector along with the requirement to meet the housing needs of other priority groups and the understanding that homelessness cannot be an assumed route into a social tenancy for life, means that the private rented sector must be developed as a solution for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

There are households that are either homeless or in housing need but the Council does not have a statutory duty to them or they have a low priority on the Council’s Housing Needs Register 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.

What is happening already?

- 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 so. The rent deposit has allowed people to choose where they want to live thereby maintaining family or schooling networks. In 2011/12 we assisted 41 households with finding accommodation in the private rented sector. The deposit is in the form of a grant and so is recyclable to enable the Council to assist others. In August 2103 the Council set up a partnership agreement with Herts Credit Savers to administer interest free loans for the Council’s Rent Deposit Scheme.

What we want to do

We want to be able to use the private rented market more effectively to help those in housing need to choose where they want to live in the district and meet their housing need quickly and effectively. The private rented market in East Herts is characterised by high rent levels and high demand. 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 is also concerned about the high level of homeless acceptances resulting from the loss of assured shorthold tenancies. If we are to use the private rented sector to meet housing need we need to ensure that the tenancies can be sustained and provide a long term solution to housing need.

3. Increase the supply of appropriate, good quality affordable housing including the provision of supported accommodation.

Essential to tackling homelessness is the supply of accommodation. The Council is working with partners to provide more supported accommodation in the district whether that be via dedicated accommodation or accommodation in the general social housing stock. We are also keen to work with the County Council and other partners regarding provision of support to ensure tenancies continue and are successfully renewed.

Preventing homelessness can have a huge influence on a vulnerable 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.

What is happening already?

- The Council's threshold at which housing developers in East Herts have to provide affordable housing has been set as up to 40%. The Council regularly achieves this target on eligible sites and in 2010/11 it achieved ??? new affordable homes and in 2011/2012 it achieved ??? .
- Houses in Multiple Occupation are sought after, particularly by young, single, mobile people or those on benefit under the age of 35, as they provide more affordable accommodation. The Environmental Health unit takes a proactive approach to identify such properties and bring them up to standard, in consultation with the landlords, as well as investigating complaints from tenants.
- YMCA: The YMCA in Bishop's Stortford provides supported accommodation for 18-30 year olds for up to two years. The Council provides annually five units of general needs accommodation for young people who are coming to the end of their successful stay at the YMCA.
- The Council is working in partnership with Aldwyck Housing Association to provide 24 x1 bed accommodation for young people between the ages of 16 and 25 in Hertford. The first residents will be moving into the scheme in September 2013.

What we want to do

We want to continue to work proactively with developers and RPs to develop appropriate and affordable general needs housing in East Herts. We also want to work with the County Council and other partners to support vulnerable client groups, whether that be through accommodation based services or floating support. We will be working with the County Council on their review of Mental Health Services provision across the County. East Herts has been identified as an area in the County with significantly less accommodation and services than other parts of the Country for residents with mental health issues.

4. Continue to develop and strengthen partnership working to maximise the 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.

What is happening already?

- The Housing Options Service plays a key role in many partnership arrangements including:
 - Community Safety Groups including MAPPA (Multi-Agency Protection Panel)
 - Hertfordshire Supporting People Programme Development Group
 - Herts Heads of Housing and Herts Strategy and Development Group
 - Hertfordshire Homeless Officer Group
 - Hertfordshire Mental Health Services
 - MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference)

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.

- Young Persons Joint Housing Protocol: All ten local authorities in Hertfordshire, the County Council and Herts Young Homeless 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 and the ten districts to ensure it is up to date and relevant. There will also be a need, for East Herts, to ensure that there is a relevant link to the new Young Person project in Hertford.
- Homeless Prevention and Support Services: The Council part-funds Herts Young Homeless the successful education project on homelessness for young people in schools across the borough.

What we want to do

We do work in partnership with colleagues in other departments and other agencies, but we recognise that there is scope to achieve more in this area. We will review the partnerships we have. We will work to develop joint protocols, where appropriate, to ensure partners are aware of the expectations and roles they and the Council have to play in preventing homelessness. Key to this will be making sure that every contact partners make with vulnerable people and families really counts.

We are also keen to ensure that partners are involved in the delivery and the monitoring of this Strategy and will establish a forum to enable effective review to take place.

A Delivery Plan for the Homeless Strategy will be developed around these four themes once consultation has been undertaken with our partners.

8. Resources

The Homelessness Strategy is based on the assumption that all actions and improvements will be delivered within the existing resources. The Council's in-house service consists of a team of 13 staff including a service manager. This team will have responsibility for developing, delivering and monitoring the Homelessness Strategy.

Partnership working will bring in additional physical resources. There are a range of agencies working in East Herts that provide general advice through to specialised housing and debt advice.

The Council receives an annual Homelessness Grant from Central Government to assist in implementing the Council's Homelessness Strategy and addressing homelessness issues. The amount available to the Housing Options Service for 2013/14 is £50,000. This funding is unlikely to continue after the next Government spending review in March 2015. This primarily funds the Council's Rent Deposit Scheme, through the provision of interest free loans, for households in housing need, to enable them to access private rented accommodation. The Council is working with Herts Credit Savers to ensure we maximise recovery of the loans to enable the scheme to be self-financing in future years.

For private rented tenancies the Council receives Discretionary Housing Benefit payments which can be used to support households affected by Local Housing Allowance changes. Where appropriate the Council will use Discretionary Housing Payments to help prevent vulnerable households in the private rented sector from becoming homeless.

9. Monitoring and taking the strategy forward

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

- Annually to the Council's Community Scrutiny Committee

10. Appendices

Appendix 1: Gold Standard: The 10 Local Challenges

1. To adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services
2. To actively work in partnership with the voluntary sector and other local authority partners to address support, education, employment and training needs
3. To offer a Housing Options and prevention service to all clients including written advice
4. To adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative
5. To have housing pathways agreed or in development with each housing partner and client group that include appropriate accommodation and support
6. To develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both client and landlord.
7. To actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme
8. To have a homelessness strategy which sets out a positive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually to be responsive to emerging needs
9. To not place any young person aged 16 or 17 into bed and breakfast
10. To not place any families in bed and breakfast unless in an emergency and for no longer than 6 weeks

Appendix 2

Glossary

Affordable Rent means rented housing let by a Registered Provider of social housing to households who are eligible for Social Rented housing at a rent of no more than 80% of the Local Market Rent, including service charges where applicable, and upon the approved Financial Terms at a fixed term tenancy for a period not less than that recommended by the social housing regulator currently the Tenant Services Authority (or its successor body) and with regard to any advice set out in the local Strategic Tenancy Policy adopted by the Council

Benefit Cap is a maximum allowance on the total amount of benefit a household is entitled to receive under the proposed new universal credit system to be introduced in April 2013 if they are not in receipt of certain exempt benefits such as Disability Living

Allowance. At the time of publication of this document the benefit cap for single persons is £350 per week and for a family £500 per week.

Social Rent means housing let at a periodical rent due at intervals of a month or less without any fine deposit or premium which is let at or below Target Rent and is let on the Registered Provider's standard form of letting as an Assured Tenancy and upon the approved Financial Terms

Conversion is when a property is let at different terms and conditions to those it previously had i.e.: changed from a social rented property to an affordable rented property.

Fixed term tenancies are a new type of tenancy introduced under the Localism Act 2012 available for registered providers to use from the date of inception of the Act that has a specified term of not less than 5 years or 2 years in exceptional circumstances. Fixed term tenancies can be used for Affordable Rent or Social Rent properties.

Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) includes any successor body or agent exercising statutory powers for the provision of financial assistance to registered providers for the provision of Affordable Housing

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is the maximum amount of Housing Benefit payable by number of bedrooms in a property in a Local Authority Area. It is updated annually and is calculated using the 30th percentile of market rent for each property size in that local authority area.

Mutual Exchange is a facility that enables a tenant to exchange their property and tenancy with another of their own Registered Provider's tenants or with a tenant of a different Registered Provider.

Registered providers is the term used for housing associations or other private sector developers, local Councils etc who have registered to provide social housing with the Homes & Communities Agency.

Universal Credit is a new approach to welfare to be introduced under the Government's welfare reforms in 2013. It will be an integrated benefit in place of income support, income-based job seekers allowance, income related employment and support allowance, housing benefit, child tax credit and working tax credit. Households in receipt of universal credit and not in receipt of specific exempt benefits will be subject to the benefit cap defined above.