

Test Valley Borough Council's Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024 - 2027

Foreword by Cabinet member for Housing & Environmental Health, Councillor Nick Adams-King

- To be finalised in Mar 2024 after approval and before publication

Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 introduced a requirement for local housing authorities to undertake periodic reviews of homelessness in their areas, and publish strategies based on those reviews. The minimum review period is 5 years, however in Test Valley we have chosen to do a review every 3 years to ensure our Strategy and Delivery Plan are fit for purpose and relevant. This is the best way we can support our residents and prevent homelessness within the Borough.

The last strategy was adopted just as the Covid-19 pandemic broke, which immediately changed the priorities and the ability to deliver the action plan. However, partnership working strengthened throughout the pandemic, and the council fulfilled a new role and delivered services in a different way, reaching beyond its usual boundaries to support residents, keep them safe and prevent them from experiencing homelessness. The council supported over 100 single people with accommodation under the Government's Everyone In initiative. Not only did it provide emergency accommodation, but it also supported rough sleepers to move onto settled accommodation.

This strategy is an opportunity to build on the positive work over the lifetime of the previous strategy and allow us to revisit some of the actions that were unable to be delivered due to social distancing and periods of national lockdown.

Building on the Corporate Plan consultation which, during the summer of 2022, engaged over 2000 people and listened to their views, the council has, more recently, developed a comprehensive evidence base review of homelessness. The detailed results of this review can be viewed via the Council's website here: www.testvalley.gov.uk

This strategy sets out the key priorities for tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in Test Valley over the next 3 years. It has a deliberate focus on preventative measures, multi-agency working and supporting people in the local area with appropriate and effective services. The strategy is accompanied by a detailed delivery plan against which progress can be measured. It is ambitious and it will be delivered in partnership with other stakeholders.

Policy and Context

The Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will ensure the council delivers excellent homelessness services in Test Valley. This includes early prevention work before residents are threatened with homelessness, as well as quick and early intervention should anyone become threatened with homelessness, and practical support to help people secure a new home when needed.

The strategy has been produced against the backdrop of a complex network of both established and emerging national and local policy, and with regard to a range of legal duties and powers.

Whilst the national housing agenda has been summarised in the Evidence Based Review of Homelessness, there are 2 Acts of Parliament in addition to the Homelessness Act 2002, as referenced above, that are key to the council's role in providing homelessness services:

1. Part 7 Housing Act 1996, as amended, remains the primary legislation setting out how local housing authorities must respond to statutory homelessness and the rights of people entitled to statutory support.
2. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which came into force in April 2018 radically changed how local authorities must deliver services and raised the threshold of homelessness from 28 days to 56 days, placing an emphasis on prevention rather than crisis resolution. In addition, it introduced a new duty for public bodies to refer those at risk of experiencing homelessness to the local authority for intervention; this is known as Duty to Refer.

There are other Acts of Parliament that we must consider when delivering services, such as, Housing & Regeneration Act 2008 and the Localism Act 2011, however the acts referenced herein represent the most significant primary legislation affecting the way councils respond to homelessness in their areas.

The Housing Act 1996 and Homelessness Act 2002 set out criteria around Priority Need. Legislation sets out that councils have stronger duties to those categories of people who fall within a priority need category. This means that not all single people will be owed long term duties or even an offer of emergency accommodation when they find themselves without a home. This can be a cause of single people experiencing rough sleeping for the first time or returning to rough sleeping. In Test Valley we have a local commitment that no local person will have to sleep rough without first receiving an offer of accommodation, regardless of priority need. This goes above and beyond the requirements of the law. This local pledge allows Test Valley to keep its number of people experiencing rough sleeping low, and provides a quick intervention should it occur. During April 23 – September 2023 the council supported 23 single people who, without the local pledge, could have experienced rough sleeping in the borough.

This strategy aims to continue Test Valley's positive track record of investing in front line housing services and its positive approach to preventing and relieving homelessness effectively. The economic market is challenging, and the pressure on the public purse is forever tightening with funding streams and services having to reduce or close completely. Many more households could face homelessness across the borough over the next 3 years. This strategy sets out how we will intervene before it happens, how we will work with people to prevent them from becoming homeless, and what actions we will take if households experience a risk of homelessness or become homeless.

This strategy will directly contribute to the success of the council's Housing Strategy and in doing so, it will support the council to achieve the aims of the Corporate Plan, 'A Place for Everyone – Supporting Communities to Thrive'.

Defining Homelessness

The Housing Act 1996, as amended, defines homelessness as a person who has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere, which is available for their occupation, and which that person has a legal right to occupy. A person is also homeless if they have accommodation but cannot secure entry to it, or their accommodation is a moveable structure and there is nowhere it can lawfully be placed in order to provide accommodation.

A person is threatened with homelessness if they are likely to experience one of the above within 56 days. This includes a valid Section 21 notice.

Prior to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018, 'threatened with homelessness' occurred at just 28 days. Whilst the Act doubled the threshold in which local housing authorities have to carry out prevention work, 56 days is still a relatively short period of time. This time is extremely stressful for customers who worry for their families, and who need to quickly search for a new home that is affordable and close to their schools, places of work and their family and friends.

The definition of homelessness is more than just those without a home. It includes those without a home that is legally theirs, homes that are unsuitable, homes that can't be accessed, and it recognises that not all homes are traditional fixed structures.

A wide definition is good because it means local authorities will have to work with a wide range of customers in need, however the definition means that the council's duties extend across a larger customer group, adding further pressures to the service.

The evidence base review shows that demand to the housing options service has been increasing year on year, despite the positive work carried out in Test Valley to prevent and relieve homelessness. This means that there is more to be done to ensure our residents do not have to experience homelessness.

National and Local Challenges

Like many councils Test Valley is working hard to navigate many challenges both nationally and locally. Below are some of the key challenges currently being experienced:

Private Rented Sector – We know that the private rented tenure is one of the top 3 property tenures in Test Valley. Over 700 households with an active housing register application live in a privately rented home and one of the top causes of homelessness is the loss of private rented accommodation. Yet one of the top ways of resolving homelessness is to help people to secure a new home in the private rented sector.

Working with private landlords is very important to us, and the council has chosen to invest in staff to work with landlords and tenants to provide services to help sustain tenancies and to help customers access homes in the private rented sector. The development of Test Valley Lettings, the council's in-house estate agent, has been successful in achieving these goals.

The Renters Reform Bill received its second reading in October 2023. Whilst it is now on hold, the changes the Bill is proposing to introduce will have an impact on the private rented sector and our landlords.

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) – The gap between the Local Housing Allowance and market rent has been growing, making the affordability of a private home for those with a low income more and more challenging. Test Valley welcomes announcements in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement 2023 that LHA levels will be increased from April 2024, however this only aims to restore rates to the 30th percentile, making just 3 in 10 private homes affordable.

Slowdown in the delivery of affordable housing – Test Valley has enjoyed high levels of new affordable housing delivery over the past 5 years due to large-scale strategic developments providing a mix of affordable homes for rent and for low-cost home ownership. We temporarily enter a slightly more uncertain period where development in the local area is unlikely to deliver the same levels as previous years due to the lack of large strategic sites coming forward until the new Local Plan is further advanced. This will have a direct impact on the number of properties available to let through the housing register.

Homes for Ukraine – Test Valley is extremely proud of its residents to have hosted close to 300 Ukrainian nationals since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Many have been displaced from their homes but supported by local residents acting as hosts. In response to this the council formed a Refugee Support Team to work with guests and hosts to prevent homelessness and to ensure community integration. The Autumn Statement 2023 brought welcomed news that the Homes for Ukraine Scheme will continue for a third year, and the team will continue their work to minimise homelessness for this client group.

Uncertainty on funding streams – The housing options services is largely funded by annual grants and bidding opportunities from DLUHC. Each year the council receives an allocation of Homelessness Prevention Grant. This only a 12-month funding stream which makes planning and delivering services on a long term basis challenging. In addition, a large part of the service, working with single people with complex needs, is funded by both RSI (Rough Sleeper Initiative) and RSAP (Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme). Both funding streams run until the end of March 2025, and at the time of writing this strategy there is no update on further funding becoming available.

Future of Social Inclusion Services – Hampshire County Council support homelessness services by providing funding for social inclusion services. This fund is topped up to provide 42 x 1 bedspaces for single people who also require support. Due to increasing budget pressures Hampshire County Council have been forced into a position to review its funding of non-statutory services, and social inclusion services may be reduced or stopped altogether. If this funding reduces or ceases, the impact to single people in Test Valley would be quite significant. Test Valley will work with the county council and local partners to protect as many bedspaces as possible.

Cost of Living Crisis – As the country slowly moved out of the Covid-19 pandemic we found that the cost of everyday items such as fuel, utilities and food increased. This has led to a Cost of Living Crisis which has placed a financial pressure on all households in terms of purchasing the basic needs for their households. This has

led to additional pressures to pay rent, meet mortgage costs and continue with any debt commitments. In addition the increase in interest rates has had an impact on mortgage deals, and new fixed term mortgage rates are higher than the country has experienced over recent years. These factors have added additional financial pressures to households. Test Valley has provided additional support by making as much of the Household Support Fund available as possible to those who need it by a mix of allocations via the Housing Options team, and via open application schemes.

Dispersal accommodation – The Home Office is currently sourcing dispersal accommodation throughout the UK in an effort to move away from housing asylum seekers in hotels. Test Valley has had a contingency hotel in its areas which closed in December 2023, however the Home Office is looking to procure other types of accommodation to provide suitable housing for those waiting for their asylum applications to be determined. This adds competition for those looking for property available in the private rented sector, as landlords may be tempted to lease their properties to the Home Office, thereby reducing the availability of homes for local residents.

Strategic Ambition

The council adopted a new Corporate Plan in 2023, 'A Place for Everyone – Supporting Our Communities to Thrive'.

Within the Corporate Plan five strategic priorities were identified for our communities which are made up of:-

- Villages and rural communities
- Andover
- Romsey
- North Baddesley, Valley Park, Nursling and Rownhams and Chilworth.

The priorities identified are:

Sustainability – Delivering lasting benefits for our communities.

Connection – Building upon the identity, strengths and ambitions of our communities.

Environment – A greener borough for our communities.

Inclusion – Working together to create opportunities for our communities.

Prosperity – Economic growth that impacts positively on our communities.

The priorities set out in the Corporate Plan will run through this strategy.

High levels of homelessness could prevent the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan from being achieved. Communities will not be sustainable if its members experience homelessness, and people cannot connect if they are displaced from their community because of homelessness. The environment will be impacted if we have high levels of people experiencing rough sleeping, and economic growth will slow if residents are unable to sustain employment due to homelessness.

Inclusion and creating opportunities for our communities will be an important factor in the prevention of homelessness.

Those that do experience homelessness and may need emergency or temporary accommodation must still remain part of their community and not be disadvantaged due to their housing challenges.

This approach also reflects the Council's Values.

Our Priorities

1. Empower and support people to overcome their housing challenges, building on their strengths to secure the right accommodation at the right time and to provide help when needed.
2. Work together to maintain strong local partnership connections that contribute to the prevention and relief of homelessness in a holistic and timely way.
3. Provide good quality support services and information to communities to enable them to thrive and sustain accommodation.
4. Work in collaboration to ensure rough sleeping is prevented wherever possible or to ensure it is rare, brief and non-recurring.

Delivering the Strategy

A Delivery Action Plan supports this strategy, setting out a number of actions under each of the identified priorities to help tackle homelessness, and to ensure that there is a supply of accommodation and the right support services in the Borough.

Monitoring and delivery of the Strategy

The Test Valley partnership will be invited to form the basis of a Steering Group to review and monitor the delivery plan over the lifetime of the Strategy.

The Evidence Base Review of Homelessness and Key Findings

- The population in Test Valley is increasing, with nearly one third of the population over 65 years old.
- Home ownership remains the highest property tenure followed by rented accommodation in both the private and social sector.
- The ethnicity of residents in Test Valley is not as diverse as the rest of England. 93.1% of residents are White British.
- Over 60% of residents are economically active with weekly gross pay being higher in Test Valley compared to the average across Hampshire.
- The delivery of new affordable housing has temporarily reduced in the past 12 months compared with being above target for each of the previous 3 years.
- Repossessions by social landlords have reduced by 59% since 2018.

- Repossessions by private landlords have increased by 166% since 2018.
- Mortgage repossessions and claims have also decreased since 2018.
- The number of households on the housing register has increased by 11% since 2020 to 2353 households at the beginning of 2023.
- 1 bedroom needs account for nearly half of the housing register, followed by 2, then 3 and then 4 bed needs.
- Nearly one third of those on the housing register live in private rented accommodation and 20% live with family and friends.
- Overcrowding, unable to afford to rent or buy, asked to leave by family and friends are the top 3 reasons for customers joining the housing register.
- Over 700 housing register applications per year are started but not completed.
- An average of 550 properties have been let per year over the lifetime of the 2020-2023 strategy.
- Approaches to the housing options service has increased by 15% over the lifetime of the 2020-2023 strategy.
- Approaches from single person households made up 69% of total approaches in 2022/2023.
- The top reasons for homelessness in Test Valley are: friends/family unable to accommodate, domestic abuse, non-violent relationship breakdowns, end of private rented accommodation.
- Homelessness is relieved by relying on securing rented homes in the private and social sectors.
- Partner agencies view homelessness prevention as a shared responsibility.
- Partner agencies value and demand strong working relationships to tackle homelessness together.
- Providing the right support to customers to enable them to sustain their tenancies and not experience homelessness is valued by all.
- 70% of customers found it easy to make contact with the housing service, with 90% finding the service to be friendly and approachable.
- 40% of customers found levels of on-going contact and updates from the service were not enough and wanted more.
- 70% of customers found the information given was clear, and understood what housing options were available to them, however 30% did not.
- Those experiencing rough sleeping rated the services received from the team higher than those who were threatened with experiencing homelessness.