

Thurrock Council

Homelessness Prevention and

Rough Sleeping Strategy

2020-2025

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Foreword

The Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25 demonstrates Thurrock Council's response to date to key changes to homelessness legislation, such as the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, and sets out the strategic direction and key priorities for the next five years.

Whilst homelessness can be defined as the lack of a safe, secure and suitable home, we recognise that it is not a challenge which will, or even should, be addressed in Thurrock solely by the Housing service of the council. Homelessness must be ended, but this goal cannot be achieved by one team in isolation.

The approach for the development of this strategy has seen the Housing service engage with other teams across the council, with individuals, agencies and organisations from other sectors who support homeless households, and with those who have lived experience of homelessness themselves. Through this activity, we have been able to better understand what the main concerns, issues and barriers are which those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness face daily.

The insight and expertise provided through this engagement was invaluable, and has led to the identification of four key strategic priorities – partnership and collaboration, health and wellbeing, provision and accessibility, and customer excellence.



The strong message from the engagement activity was that collaboration, partnership and communication are all central to ensuring that high quality and timely support is provided to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

This strategy recognises the importance of partnership and collaboration as a main principle, and as a priority the council will drive forward to create a Homelessness Partnership Board which will be central to the ongoing monitoring of this strategy and the ownership of its action plan.

I look forward to work continuing between the teams within the council, with partners across the public, private and third sectors, and with those approaching our teams for assistance, to achieve the shared goal of preventing and tackling homelessness in Thurrock together.

Cllr Barry Johnson
Portfolio Holder for Housing

Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 placed a duty on every local authority to carry out a review of homelessness within their area. Following this review, local authorities were required to formulate and publish a Homelessness Strategy based on its findings.

Each Homelessness Strategy must set out plans for the prevention of homelessness, including securing that sufficient accommodation and support are, or will be, available for people who become homeless or who are at risk of becoming so.

The 2002 Act also includes requirements for local authorities to publish refreshed Homelessness Strategies, based on the result of further analysis, within five years of the publication of their last document. Local authorities are able to undertake such reviews and publish refreshed strategies more frequently if circumstances change.

Thurrock Council last refreshed its Homelessness Strategy in November 2015. Since this time, there have been a number of developments in case law and legislation, most notably relating to the enactment of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which significantly reformed England's homelessness legislation and was widely welcomed by homelessness charities and support organisations.

In August 2018 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published its Rough Sleeping Strategy where the government stated a commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. Within this document it was also outlined that local authorities would be required to update their existing homelessness strategies by winter 2019.

Work to refresh Thurrock Council's Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy began in winter 2018 and has encompassed a number of key stages, including evidence and data gathering, peer reviews from leading sector experts, engagement with key partners and stakeholders, and the development of an action plan to ensure progress towards addressing the key priorities outlined in this document throughout the life of this strategy.

The council's Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy represents an ambitious approach rooted by the fundamental principle that homelessness is not simply a housing issue, but is instead a complex social challenge requiring true collaboration to tackle effectively.

Corporate context

The Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy is underpinned by Thurrock Council's vision and corporate priorities, which were adopted in January 2018. The council's vision is for Thurrock to be **an ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.**

Sitting alongside the vision are the three corporate priorities of People, Place and Prosperity.

People – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay.

This means:

- high quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
- build on our partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
- communities are empowered to make choices and be safer and stronger together

There are key links to this priority, particularly with regards to the effective use of partnerships to not only improve health and wellbeing of homeless people but to improve services and outcomes for all households. Those who approach the council for assistance with homelessness should receive a service from supportive and knowledgeable officers and partners which encourage and empower people to make their own choices to best meet their needs.

Place – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future.

This means:

- roads, houses and public spaces that connect people and places
- clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in
- fewer public buildings with better services

The physical environment plays an important part in the lives of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Safe, suitable and secure accommodation, or the lack of it, has a substantial impact on physical health, mental health and general wellbeing. This strategy aims to tackle the challenges surrounding the physical environment, through the provision of new accommodation and work with partners to ensure that existing accommodation is of good quality.

Prosperity – a borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations.

This means:

- attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
- vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
- commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services

In the years since the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 there has been an upward trend in the number of households referred to Financial Inclusion Officers and foodbanks, particularly those who are homeless, at risk of homelessness and affected by in-work poverty. Through this strategy and the partnerships which will be developed, households will have greater access to employment and educational opportunities to enable and empower people to achieve their aspirations.

Legislative framework

This section provides a summary of the key legislative elements that define the powers, duties and obligations of local authorities and other public authorities towards those who are homeless or are threatened with homelessness.

Housing Act 1996 Part 7

The main legislative provisions surrounding homelessness are contained in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996. This Act provides the basis for action to prevent homelessness and provide assistance to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The Housing Act 1996 includes:

- principle criteria that guide and define the duties a local authority will owe to a homeless applicant
- the requirement for a local authority to make inquiries to see if any duty is owed to an applicant that the authority has reason to believe may be homeless or threatened with homelessness
- when and how an applicant should be notified of any decision
- main accommodation duties and how they can be discharged
- how a decision can be challenged

Whilst this the Housing Act 1996 is the primary piece of legislation, since its implementation it has been amended on a number of occasions, most notably due to the Homelessness Act 2002, the Localism Act 2011, and most recently the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Homelessness Act 2002

The Homelessness Act 2002 introduced the requirement for local authorities to adopt more strategic approaches to tackling homelessness. The Act included obligations for local authorities to undertake regular reviews of current and future forecasted levels of homelessness within the local authority area, and outlined the requirement for the cyclical development and refresh process of homelessness strategies.

Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002

Section 189 within Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 outlines a number of examples of applicants which would have a priority need for accommodation, such as pregnant women, a person with dependent children, or a person who is vulnerable due to old age, physical disability or mental illness. This Order added further examples of applicants which would have a priority need for accommodation, such as homeless 16 and 17 year-olds, care leavers under the age of 21, and people who are vulnerable as a result of time spent in care, the armed forces, prison or custody, and those who are vulnerable due to fleeing domestic violence.

Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003

Under this Order it is outlined that bed and breakfast accommodation, defined as accommodation that is not self-contained or requires the sharing of certain amenities with another household, is not to be regarded as suitable for families with children or containing a pregnant woman. If bed and breakfast accommodation is the only accommodation which is available then exceptions can be made, however any such placement must not exceed a maximum length of 6 weeks.

Localism Act 2011

The Localism Act 2011 amended Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 by providing local authorities the power to end a main housing duty by arranging an offer of suitable accommodation in the private rental sector. This was introduced as a way of reducing the time that households spent in temporary accommodation as local authorities would have access to a greater range of housing options for applicants, both inside and outside of the local authority area.

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 introduced a number of reforms to homelessness legislation in England. Through this Act, greater duties were placed on local authorities to intervene at far earlier stages to better prevent homelessness within their area.

Further to this, the Act requires local authorities to provide advice and assistance to all households which are homeless or at risk of homelessness, rather than just those households or applicants with an identified priority need for accommodation.

The Homelessness Reduction Act introduced:

- the requirement to provide enhanced advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness
- new duties to prevent and relieve homelessness for all those who are eligible for assistance, regardless of intentionality or priority need
- an extension of the period of time where households are considered to be 'threatened with homelessness' by local authorities from 28 to 56 days, allowing the local authority to work with households much earlier to prevent homelessness
- new personalised housing plans and assessments which outline the actions and reasonable steps which both the applicant and the local authority will take to prevent or relieve homelessness
- a new 'duty to refer' for specified public authorities, such as prisons and hospitals, to refer service users (with their consent) who they believe to be homeless or at risk of homelessness to local authority homelessness services.

National context

Homelessness

Research by Crisis suggests that local authorities across the country have seen a 42% rise in homeless households since the low point in 2009.

Across England in 2018-19, 286,000 households approached local authorities and were assessed in order to establish if a prevention or relief duty was owed. Of these households, it was confirmed that 263,000 were owed a duty for assistance.

At the end of March 2019, the most common reasons for the loss of accommodation as reported in MHCLG statistics were:

- family or friends no longer willing or able to accommodate (24.6%)
- the end of an assured shorthold tenancy (21.8%), of which:
 - 48% were evicted as the landlord wished to sell or re-let the property
 - 26% were evicted due to rent arrears
- violent breakdown of relationship with partner (8.6%)
- non-violent breakdown of relationship with partner (7.9%)

Other reasons for loss of accommodation includes, but is not limited to, the loss of social rented tenancies, eviction from supported housing, the loss of accommodation due to fire, flood and emergency, mortgage repossession, property disrepair and the loss of accommodation due to leaving HM forces.

The use of temporary accommodation across England has increased over the past eight years. At the end of 2010-11 there were 48,240 households living in temporary accommodation. By the end of 2018-19 the number of households living in temporary accommodation had increased by 75.6% to 84,740.

The factors contributing to homelessness nationally includes:

- diminishing financial support for private renters on low incomes – research by Crisis and the Chartered Institute of Housing has shown that underinvestment in local housing allowance rates means that 92% of areas in Great Britain and 97% of areas in England were deemed to be unaffordable for single people, couples or small families in 2018/19 – local housing allowance rates control the maximum level of Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit which can be claimed
- high demand for housing and limited supply leading to increases in both purchase prices and rental costs, leading to greater shortfalls between local housing allowances and private sector rents
- high demand for social and affordable housing, with extremely limited supply and relatively low levels of new development
- increased financial and budgeting pressures as a result of welfare reforms, such as the introduction of Universal Credit and benefit caps
- the reduction of funding of statutory and voluntary services which support the most vulnerable residents

Rough sleeping

In its Rough Sleeping Strategy, the government has committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. In order to achieve these aims, it expects central and local government to work in partnership with businesses, communities, faith and voluntary groups and the general public to work together in new ways, tackling the issues of homelessness and rough sleeping directly.

Local authorities are required to undertake an annual exercise which provides a snapshot of people sleeping rough within their administrative boundaries on a single night and can be carried out as a physical count or an evidence-based estimate. There are challenges associated with accurately reporting the number of people who have experienced rough sleeping, and the number of people identified as sleeping rough on any given night can be affected by the weather, the availability of alternatives to rough sleeping such as night shelters, the size of the local authority area and the time of year.

Official statistics published by MHCLG indicate that in 2018 the number of individuals estimated to have been sleeping rough in England on a single night was 4,677. Whilst this represents a slight decrease of 2% when compared to the previous year (4,751), it is a marked increase of 167% against the number of individuals estimated to have been sleeping rough on a single night in England in 2010 (1,768).

The number of individuals experiencing rough sleeping is not distributed evenly across the country, with London accounting for 27% of the overall number of people sleeping rough in England (1,283). Although the number of people sleeping rough across the country as a whole reduced by 2% compared to 2017 with 40% of local authorities reporting a reduction in rough sleepers within their administrative boundaries, London as a whole experienced an increase in people rough sleeping by 13% in the same period.

84% of those experiencing rough sleeping are men, and 14% were women, however a trend has been identified which indicates that the number of women sleeping rough is increasing. It is difficult to gather detailed information about women who are sleeping rough and their support needs as evidence indicates that they are more likely to move at night, make themselves less visible or actively conceal their gender in order to ensure personal safety, as women who experience rough sleeping also experience increased vulnerability compared to men.

In terms of other demographic indicators of those who experience rough sleeping, 80% of people sleeping rough were over the age of 25, with 6% between the ages of 18 and 25. 64% of rough sleepers were UK nationals, with EU nationals from outside the UK and non-EU nationals accounting for 22% and 3% of the total respectively. In London, the number of non-UK EU nationals sleeping rough increased by 87%, whereas the number of UK nationals non-EU nationals both reduced.

Those who experience rough sleeping are likely to require support regarding drug misuse, alcohol misuse or mental health needs. 2018-19 CHAIN data from London indicated that 50% of those seen rough sleeping required mental health support, 42% required support for alcohol misuse and 41% required support for drug misuse. Only 1 in 5 of people seen sleeping rough did not require support as previously outlined.

People sleeping rough also face significant challenges with access to primary care for their physical health, which is negatively affected due to poor living conditions, poor diet, difficulties with maintaining personal hygiene, exposure to sustained high levels of stress and the misuse of drugs and alcohol. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) indicates that April and December are the months with the highest number of estimated deaths of homeless people, which suggests that

weather may also have an impact upon physical health, however the ONS has identified that further analysis would be required before establishing causation rather than simply correlation.

As outlined, the impacts of rough sleeping on the health of an individual is serious, and those who experience multiple or extended periods of sleeping rough are more likely to die younger compared to the general population, and are more likely to die as a result suicide, injury or drug/alcohol poisoning.

The average life expectancy of those who experience rough sleeping is markedly lower than the general population. For men, the average age of death for someone experiencing rough sleeping was 44, and for women was 41. In the general population, the average age of death for men was 76, and for women was 81.

Statistics published by the ONS estimate that 726 people died in 2018 across England and Wales whilst sleeping rough or using emergency accommodation, representing an estimated increase in deaths of 51% since 2013 and an increase of 21% compared to 2017.

52% of those who die whilst sleeping rough die due to alcohol or drugs, compared to 2% in the general population – deaths due to drug-related poisoning have been estimated to have increased by 55% from 190 deaths in 2017 to 294 deaths in 2018. A number of deaths due to other health conditions may have been preventable with access to care which was both timely and effective.

Changes in legislation and policy

There have been a number of notable events and developments since Thurrock Council last refreshed its Homelessness Strategy in 2015 which have affected the housing landscape. Some changes have led to new opportunities for local authorities to better meet the needs of their residents, whereas others have negatively impacted upon residents and have, in part, contributed to the increase in households approaching the council for assistance. These include:

- the implementation of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 and the roll-out of Universal Credit for new claimants
- the freeze of local housing allowance (LHA) rates running from April 2016 to March 2020
- the introduction of the Housing and Planning Act 2016
- the government's housing white paper, "Fixing our broken housing market", published in February 2017
- the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in April 2018
- the removal of the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap in October 2018, lifting restrictions placed on local authority borrowing for building, refurbishing and regenerating properties

There is also potential for further changes in the near future in housing policy and legislation, following the government's response to a number of consultations including:

- "a new deal for social housing" – the government's social housing green paper published in August 2018
- a review of the rules which govern the ways that that Local Authorities are able to use the money raised through Right to Buy sales, published in August 2018
- "a new deal for renting" – proposals to remove Section 21 'no-fault' private sector evictions and strengthen the Section 8 eviction process, published in July 2019

Local context

Since the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018 Thurrock Council has experienced an increase in the number of households which are homeless or at risk of homelessness that have approaching the Housing Solutions service for assistance.

Period	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
April to October	822	888	1,254
April to March	1,395	1,605	2,150 (forecast)

In 2018-19, the first year of the Homelessness Reduction Act, the number of households approaching the service increased by 15% compared to the year before. In the months between April and October 2019, the service has seen a 41% increase in approaches compared to the same period in 2018-19, and a 53% increase in approaches compared to April to November 2017.

As reported in data published by MHCLG, approximately 23% of households that approached the council in 2018-19 that were owed the prevention or relief duty were homeless or at risk of homelessness as a result of the termination, or risk of termination, of a tenancy in the private rental sector. Exclusion by family and friends accounts for the reason for homelessness cited by around 35% of households.

The Homelessness Reduction Act places greater emphasis on the council assisting homeless applicants to prevent or relieve their homelessness. In some instances this is not possible, however the council may still have a duty to secure accommodation if the applicant is eligible for assistance, is homeless or at risk of homelessness, has a priority need and is not intentionally homeless. In 2018/19, 58% of households owed this duty were comprised of a lone female parent with a dependent child or children, 15% were couples with a dependent child or children, and 3% were a lone male parent with a dependent child or children.

78% of applicants owed the rehousing duty had an identified priority need as a result of dependent children or pregnancy within the household. 7.6% of households had an identified priority due to physical disability, and finally mental health illnesses accounted for 6.6% of the households.

There have been significant changes in the housing market in Thurrock during the lifetime of the current Homelessness Strategy. These have led to increased challenges surrounding affordability in the borough for both residents attempting to find secure accommodation and for the council to fulfil its rehousing duty.

Firstly, between February 2014 and February 2019 the average house price increased by 50%, from £199,666 to £298,694. Whilst the average house price in Thurrock remains lower than in the neighbouring South Essex boroughs of Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford and Southend, the percentage increase experienced in Thurrock between 2014 and 2019 is greater.

There have been increases in property purchase prices across all sizes and types in the above period, as illustrated in the below table.

Property type	Feb 2014 value	Feb 2019 value	% increase	£ increase
1 bed flat	£97,725	£149,643	53.1%	£51,918
2 bed flat	£129,129	£197,865	53.2%	£68,736
2 bed house	£178,653	£279,051	56.2%	£100,398
3 bed house	£205,486	£316,043	53.8%	£110,557
4 bed house	£291,783	£438,840	50.4%	£147,057

Analysis of household income data indicates that 59.8% of Thurrock households have a gross income of £40,000 or less. Further analysis of property purchase affordability indicates that a household income of £35,000-£40,000 is required for a first time buyer to purchase a flat or maisonette in Thurrock.

This means that approximately 52.9% of Thurrock households would not meet the affordability requirements to purchase the smallest types of property available on the housing market. For terraced houses, semi-detached houses and detached houses, the percentage of first time buyers in Thurrock that would not be able to afford to purchase these types of properties are 76.6%, 84.2% and 92.4% respectively.

The average weekly cost to rent in Thurrock has also increased over the past five years. The table below illustrates both the lower quartile (LQ) and average weekly costs of renting by property size in both 2014 and 2019.

Property type	2014		2019		Increase %		Increase £	
	LQ	Average	LQ	Average	LQ	Average	LQ	Average
1 bed	£129	£139	£166	£172	29%	24%	£37	£33
2 bed	£162	£174	£207	£219	28%	26%	£45	£45
3 bed	£196	£218	£265	£276	35%	27%	£69	£58
4 bed	£277	£296	£336	£357	21%	21%	£59	£61

This data indicates that to rent an average one bed property for 52 weeks in 2019, a household would be paying £8,944, compared to £7,228 for 52 weeks in 2014. This represents an increase in housing costs of £1,716. The annual increase to rent a two, three or four bedroom property for 52 weeks between 2014 and 2019 is £2,340, £3,016 or £3,172 respectively.

The most recent earnings by place of residence dataset published by the Office for National Statistics gives the below mean gross salary for Thurrock. A calculator has been used to show the net income based on deductions for income tax and national insurance for the 2019-2020 financial year.

Salary	Gross	Net (2019/20)
Thurrock Mean Salary	£28,257	£22,751

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the maximum Housing Cost to Income Ratio (HCIR) in order for accommodation to be considered to be affordable would be 1:3. This means that if a household is spending more than a third of its net income on accommodation costs, that accommodation would not be deemed to be affordable.

The below table illustrates the average housing cost affordability for households with one or two full-time earners in comparison with lower quartile and average rents.

Rent	Average weekly affordability (1x FT salary)	Average weekly affordability (2x FT salary)	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed
Lower quartile	£146	£292	£166	£207	£265	£336
Average rent			£172	£219	£276	£357

This table indicates that for a household with a single full-time average income, weekly rents in the private sector are not affordable across all property sizes. A household with two full-time average incomes may find the private rental sector more affordable for properties with one or two bedrooms, however would experience less affordability with three or four bedroom properties.

There are also noticeable shortfalls between the maximum Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate and weekly rents in the private sector. The table below displays the current weekly LHA rates for one, two, three and four bedroom properties as well as the weekly shortfalls between the LHA rates and average rental costs.

	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed
LHA rate	£136	£171.08	£199.80	£266.65
Lower quartile shortfall	£30	£35.92	£65.20	£69.35
Average rent shortfall	£36	£47.92	£76.20	£90.35

As demonstrated in the above table, the current LHA rates are not sufficient for average rental values in Thurrock. A claimant in an average one bedroom private rental property would have an annual shortfall of £1,872 between the cost of renting and the amount of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit housing element.

Action to date

In response to the legislative changes introduced through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the challenge to end rough sleeping as set out in the government's Rough Sleeping Strategy, Thurrock Council has already started to take action by making changes and improvements to the way that services are delivered. These changes include the following.

Rough Sleeper Initiative

Thurrock Council has been successful in securing funding through the government's Rough Sleeper Initiative Fund, and using this to recruit both a Rough Sleeper Coordinator and a Rough Sleeper Outreach Worker.

These new roles will enable greater engagement with individuals who are sleeping rough, allowing for detailed work to take place to recognise and best support the needs of rough sleepers in the borough.

Rapid Rehousing Pathway and Private Rented Sector Access

Thurrock Council has also been successful in securing funding through the Rapid Rehousing Pathway and Private Rented Sector Access funds. Two new roles have been created and these officers work to assist and help find accommodation for single people with no priority need.

Working alongside single non-priority applicants, these officers are able to identify previous or existing challenges which applicants may have with securing and sustaining accommodation, including identifying the risk of rough sleeping.

When working to secure accommodation, these officers have access to funding to offer as rent deposits or to bridge the shortfall between local housing allowance rates and private rental sector costs – both of which can be substantial barriers to individuals aiming to rent in the private sector in Thurrock.

Peer Reviews

The homelessness service commissioned the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) and Shelter to conduct reviews of the service focusing on key areas which impact upon the customer experience. The main aim of these reviews was to seek an external view on how Thurrock is performing against the new legislative functions introduced by Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and how well the service is working with residents and partners in making the correct decisions and providing the right advice in line with the law on homelessness.

Shelter undertook a file review in March 2019, and 'mystery shopping' exercise in June-July 2019. The NPSS review was carried out in July 2019.

The reviews by both organisations identified areas of good performance and have demonstrated that the service is performing at a reasonable level, whilst also recommending areas where service delivery can continue to be improved in order to better assist those approaching the council's homelessness service, ensuring that positive outcomes can be achieved.

A detailed set of these recommendations have been produced which has been used to set the foundation of a Customer Excellence Programme for the homelessness service.

Customer Excellence Programme

The Customer Excellence Programme began following the NPSS and Shelter peer reviews in 2019. A detailed project plan has been established and addresses themes such as strategic priorities, investment, corporate commitment, joint working, corporate facilities, customer experience (including assessments, ongoing support, temporary accommodation and customer feedback), staff development and operational delivery. The project is due for review and evaluation in March 2020.

Brook House Hostel

The council is working to increase the amount of council-owned temporary accommodation located in the borough, and has taken significant steps to date which includes the purchase of Brook House which is now operating as a ten-unit temporary accommodation hostel.

Feedback to date from households currently placed in Brook House has been positive with regards to the support and advice from officers and the quality of accommodation.

Housing First Programme

Thurrock Council has been operating a Housing First programme for a number of years. This programme provides intensive support to people who are long term or recurrently homeless and have high ongoing support needs.

The project has so far successfully supported 7 individuals who were homeless or threatened with homelessness. They had faced persistent barriers to accessing housing, some of which were caused by a variety of health conditions and addictions resulting in complex needs.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol Review

A review of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol has recently been undertaken to ensure that vulnerable people are protected during the winter when weather threatens their safety, health and wellbeing

Review of Case Management System

The case management system used to record homelessness as well as the letters generated by the system have been reviewed and refined. Through this process, the usage of the system has been improved and enhanced to ensure that officers are recording information as accurately as possible, leading to the best outcomes for customers.

Staff Training Programme

An ongoing training programme has been developed for officers in the homelessness service and covers areas including:

- Homelessness Reduction Act, including personalised housing plans
- partnership working
- welfare and benefits knowledge
- tenancy and tenure training
- legislation and case law reviews
- systems training
- customer care and experience training

Strategic priorities

As set out in the Homelessness Code of Guidance published by MHCLG, the council must consult public or local authorities, voluntary organisations and other people considered appropriate before adopting or modifying a homelessness strategy.

Engagement activity undertaken throughout the development phase of the delivery of the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy included face-to-face sessions with council staff, partner agencies and individuals currently using the council's homelessness services, statistical analysis, and presentations to other key council services, committees and boards.

Close work has and will continue to take place with a range of partners and service providers, such as the membership of the council's Homelessness and Mental Health Forum, NELFT, St Mungo's, Open Door, SERICC, Mind, and Changing Pathways, and newer organisations such as the Friends of Essex and London Homeless.

A number of key themes emerged through the engagement period, and these key themes serve as a thread through each individual action in the strategy's action plan.



Partnership and collaboration

The first theme that has been identified focuses on true partnership and collaboration, not only between council services but also with public bodies such as NHS Trusts, Police and neighbouring local authorities, as well as homelessness charities, registered providers and other organisations that support those who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.

This approach is necessary, as homelessness can be both a cause and result of factors beyond the boundaries and knowledge of the Housing service. There are examples of local authorities establishing homelessness partnership boards that bring experience and expertise together to address these key issues and make a joint commitment to tackling all forms of homelessness, including rough sleeping.

A major factor currently experienced in Thurrock is the number of households being placed in the borough by other local authorities, either within temporary accommodation or as a final placement. This impacts upon the availability of accommodation for the council to secure as accommodation for its own residents, but also has an impact on the resources of the partners listed above.

These partners may also be aware of households or individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, but have not approached the Housing Solutions team for assistance. There may be a range of reasons for this, however increased relationships between organisations may help to encourage those who are often most vulnerable to seek assistance with the right support.

Lastly, new community groups, voluntary organisations and charities are set up which work with those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, however the council's homelessness service may not always be made aware. By establishing a cross-sector network, it will ensure that all partners can be kept informed of new developments across organisational boundaries.

Together we will:

- **establish a Homelessness Partnership Board for Thurrock, bringing together partners from the public, private and community, voluntary and faith sectors as well as those with lived experience to tackle homeless in the borough**
- **commit to work closely with London authorities to reduce the impact of out-of-borough placements of homeless households in Thurrock**
- **work with stakeholders and the community, voluntary and faith sector to address the support, education, training and employment needs of vulnerable people**
- **share knowledge between partners to improve the identification of individuals experiencing rough sleeping in Thurrock in order to provide appropriate and timely support**

Health and wellbeing

The second theme focuses on the health and wellbeing of those who approach the council's homelessness service for assistance. The uncertainty that loss of secure accommodation brings and its effect on daily life has a substantial impact on general wellbeing, however there are often a number of other physical or mental health needs for which an applicant may require support.

The impact of sexual and domestic abuse on individuals and their families is profound, significantly affecting both physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Those affected will often be deprived of safe, secure and suitable accommodation and will require highly specialised support as a result of the abuse which has been experienced.

The existing joint protocol for survivors of sexual and domestic violence has set a strong foundation by ensuring that partners commit to following good practice in order to provide support in a consistent, safe and effective way. Further work can be undertaken to review the joint protocol to reflect the current practice, including identifying and engaging with other agencies and organisations which work with those affected by sexual and domestic abuse. This activity will also take into consideration any applicable recommendations made in the council's 2019 Sexual Violence and Abuse joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA).

There is growing understanding of mental ill-health relating to its role as both a contributory factor to, and a consequence of, homelessness. Closer liaison with partners will be established, in particular with those offering support for mental health and wellbeing, so that defined referral pathways between can be developed, redesigned or republished, helping households to access timely and suitable support. Recommendations made in the council's 2018 Mental Health JSNA will also be explored, as will opportunities to allow improved access to all health services, especially for those who are rough sleeping or have no fixed address.

The council's Veteran's Charter recognises that those who have served in the armed forces in particular may experience issues which impact upon their health and wellbeing. As previously outlined, housing is also a well-established determinant of health, so through proactive identification of veterans which approach the council's homelessness service, specialised advice and information can be provided to best support former members of the armed forces to secure safe and suitable accommodation.

Together we will:

- **redefine and simplify pathways for vulnerable households to access health and wellbeing services across the borough, especially in relation to mental health**
- **increase awareness of the physical impact of homelessness and work with partners to improve access to primary care services for those experiencing rough sleeping**
- **explore opportunities to deliver improved services to armed forces veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness**
- **review and revise the existing joint protocol for supporting those at risk of homelessness as a result of fleeing domestic and sexual abuse**

Provision and accessibility

The third theme explores the provision and accessibility of accommodation for those who approach the council for assistance. There are great pressures on finding and securing affordable accommodation in Thurrock, not only in the private rental sector but within social housing as well. Demand far outstrips supply for the council's own stock, although there are a number of ongoing new build schemes, and there is a disproportionately small amount of housing association properties within the borough as an alternative.

Affordability is a key factor in securing accommodation. Through the development of a partnership approach, it may be possible to improve financial inclusion or increase access to employment opportunities, thereby increasing the number of affordable options available to applicants.

Additional challenges in this area include competition to secure stock within Thurrock with other local authorities with greater financial resources. Work is ongoing to develop a local offer to engage with local landlords and reputable lettings agents in order to build positive and beneficial relationships for the supply of properties.

It may also be possible to explore new options for emergency, temporary and permanent accommodation. Thurrock has experienced recent success in increasing provision of accommodation in the borough – the Brooke House hostel was brought into use as more in-borough temporary accommodation in October 2019 and options have been explored with a number of partners in the voluntary, community and faith sector which has led to a winter night shelter provision being established in the borough.

Further engagement with stakeholders and other partners, such as housing associations, is also due to take place, with the aspiration that a range of housing options, including more affordable housing, will become available for households in Thurrock.

Together we will:

- **explore options to increase council-owned temporary accommodation available within the borough**
- **review the Winter Night Shelter to assess its impact in order to guide future provision**
- **develop new social housing in the borough to be let at levels within Local Housing Allowance rates**
- **engage with landlords in the private rented sector to secure safe, suitable and affordable accommodation for homeless households**

Customer excellence

Finally, an important factor in the delivery of the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping strategy, as well as the day-to-day service provision, are the homelessness teams themselves. Officers serve as a vital link between partners, other professionals, housing providers and the households approaching the council for assistance.

It is recognised that intense levels of support are required for some applicants, including rough sleepers, and a detailed understanding of complex legislation and guidance is required in order to make correct decisions within defined timeframes.

A key part of the Customer Excellence Programme, and therefore the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy, is ensuring that staff receive ongoing training and development which enables the best outcomes to be achieved.

Officers will need to build new connections as well as reinforce existing relationships between the service and its partners in order to make best use of the knowledge and expertise available. Further areas for development are outlined in the Housing Solutions Customer Excellence Programme report

Together we will:

- **ensure that training regarding homelessness legislation and best practice is available for council staff and partners involved in supporting homeless households in Thurrock**
- **consider ways in which the council could develop support and accommodation options for people with complex needs**
- **engage with those with lived experience of homelessness to support future service and policy development and design**
- **build a directory of specialist knowledge and skills, embedding officers these skills directly into the homelessness service where possible, to provide timely and appropriate support to homeless households in need**

Monitoring and review

Alongside the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy sits an action plan. Throughout all elements of partner engagement and consultation, it has been a shared aspiration that the action plan is a document which is owned jointly by partners to ensure that the best outcomes for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are achieved by using the skills, knowledge and expertise of each organisation.

The action plan will be regularly monitored and updated to make sure that progress is made and that key actions are delivered within defined timeframes. A group will be responsible for this activity, formed as part of a new Homelessness Partnership Board which will be established during the lifetime of this strategy.

Between the publication of this strategy and 2025 it is anticipated that a number of new actions will be added to the action plan as a reaction to changes in external factors (such as legislation) or proactively if an opportunity to do so arises. These additions will be managed appropriately and will ensure that the key themes continue to be reflected throughout the action plan.

To ensure that there is appropriate oversight of the action plan, an annual update will be provided to Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.