

Housing Services

# Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy

2019 – 2024



## **Foreword from the Portfolio Holder for Housing**



Welcome to Gravesham Borough Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy, which sets out the Council's approach for tackling homelessness and rough sleeping in the district and how, over the lifetime of this strategy, we will achieve this working with key partners. With recent changes in legislation around homelessness and challenging times for local authorities and their partners, the introduction of a new strategic plan for the prevention of homelessness is essential. However, it is a sad indictment on our society that in the 21st century such a strategy is necessary.

This Strategy is the first strategy we have developed under the framework of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and is important as homelessness and poor housing conditions continue to blight lives, damage health, reduce opportunities and negatively impact on communities in profound ways. That is why preventing homelessness and rough sleeping is a priority for this Council and why the Council remains committed to preventing homelessness and rough sleeping, helping people find housing that meets their needs and providing the support needed to prevent them from going back into homelessness. This Strategy reinforces our commitment to preventing homelessness and rough sleeping rather than dealing with households at the point of crisis. This is particularly important during a time where resources available to the Council are more limited and yet we are seeing an increase in numbers requiring support to sustain their existing home, or secure new accommodation.

Grounded in a comprehensive evidence base, our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy has been developed working with our customers, our partners, and our stakeholders. I would like to extend my thanks on behalf of the Council to everyone who has been involved.

With their help, this Strategy has been developed at a time of change. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 represents a new statutory framework for local authorities. We want to get better at engaging and supporting customers, and the wider system of public services, so that together we can improve outcomes and improve the support available for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

I am very pleased to endorse and support this Strategy knowing that it will deliver improved outcomes for those who are facing homelessness in our district.

**Councillor Jenny Wallace**

**Cabinet Member for Housing**

## **Foreword by the Chief Executive**

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy 2019-2024 presents a roadmap for the way Gravesham Borough Council will deliver its Housing Needs services in the coming years. It will:

- Ensure compliance with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- Ensure the Council remains focused on continuous improvement in the way we respond to homelessness.
- Support reform across the wider system and improve the support available to local residents who find themselves in difficulty.

It will be delivered effectively, efficiently, and in keeping with the Council's core values and commitment to excellence in customer care.

The strategy represents the culmination of a significant body of work. It has been developed in partnership and through extensive consultation. It will directly contribute to Gravesham's current Corporate Plan 2015 – 2019 and that being developed for 2019 - 2023. The Strategy has been structured around 5 key priorities that feed into our overarching corporate aims and ambitions. In this context we will aim to:

- Intervene in a timely manner for those at risk of homelessness
- Strengthen our partnerships to support vulnerable groups ending the repeat cycle of homelessness
- Reduce Rough Sleeping
- Improve access to decent affordable accommodation in the private sector
- Improve the health and wellbeing of those threatened with homelessness or who are already homeless

The strategy enjoys the support of our wider services and has the full support of the Council's corporate leadership team. To be effective, we recognise that our services must come together to support our residents, and that we cannot achieve our aims as a Council on our own.

We will deliver in partnership across the voluntary and statutory sectors, and always in the interests of supporting our residents.

**David Hughes**

**Chief Executive**

## **1. Introduction**

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping occurs as a result of an often complex interaction between a person or family's individual circumstances and a number of social and structural factors often outside of their control.

Unless these factors are addressed, the ability of an individual or family to become resilient and improve their chance of a positive future is greatly reduced, and places them at risk of becoming trapped in a cycle of homelessness.

Tackling all of these issues at the point of crisis is complex and very expensive for not only local authorities but other services that may work with families such as health and social care, criminal justice or education. Therefore, the key is to prevent homelessness before it happens, with joined up working between services to minimise the impact of homelessness on households and enable them to move into sustainable accommodation and try to prevent homelessness from repeating itself. What is evident is that all experiences of homelessness are different and the Council and the partners it works with should respond to this by taking a flexible and individualised approach to tackling homelessness and the issues faced by each household.

However if the aim of this strategy is to deliver a more personalised individual approach to those who present as homeless, this has to be achieved within a context of challenging times. Homelessness in all forms has increased across the country over recent years following an extended period of austerity; there are fewer resources for services that work with those who are facing homelessness and this is set against a backdrop of a national housing crisis.

This strategy has therefore been developed in these challenging times, in line with the legal framework and critically sets out the key challenges faced by the authority, identified as a result of a comprehensive review of the homelessness situation in Gravesham and the priorities we have identified as a result of the challenges faced in the district. It also considers how we will work with other services to ensure that we deliver these tailored services for individuals and families throughout the life of this strategy.

## **2. Our Vision**

Through the lifetime of this strategy Gravesham wants to work towards the following vision

*“A Borough where services work closely together to eradicate all forms of homelessness or rough sleeping and all residents have a place to call home”*

## **3. Defining Homelessness**

Homelessness is defined within the Homelessness Code of Guidance as:

*“... somebody is statutorily homeless if they do not have accommodation that they have a legal right to occupy, which is accessible and physically available to them (and their household) and which it would be reasonable for them to continue to live in ... “*

For the purposes of the review and this strategy the term homelessness takes this definition in the guidance into consideration but will be used as a broad concept that includes a number of additional categories, ranging from those temporarily sheltered in homeless hostels, to hidden groups like 'sofa surfers', who are seeking temporary accommodation from friends and families following the loss of their own home, to those in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation.

For the purposes of the annual Rough Sleeper Estimate there is an additional definition of what constitutes Rough Sleeping

*“People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations, or “bashers”)”*

Throughout the review document and in this strategy homelessness will be used as generic term to incorporate all forms of homelessness including rough sleeping, but where information relates to specific groups this will be identified.

#### **4. Context within which the strategy has been developed**

Since 2002, the government made homelessness prevention a priority, by providing increased funding to tackle homelessness, setting challenging targets for the prevention of homelessness, and placing requirements on local councils to produce homelessness strategies. The 2002 Homelessness Act amended the 1996 Housing Act by extending the definition of priority need to include new groups of vulnerable people, whilst outlining the legal requirement placed on local authorities to undertake a review of homelessness in their area, and develop and publish a strategy which sets out how the authority will prevent homelessness, based on the findings of the review. This requirement was not amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act and the new Code of Guidance strengthens requirements for Local Authorities to work with partners in the development of their strategy. Chapter 2 of the newly revised Homelessness Code of Guidance sets out guidance on Housing Authorities' duties to carry out a homelessness review and publish a homelessness strategy.

These Strategies should be published periodically but at no longer intervals than 5 years. To fulfil these duties Gravesham Borough Council's Review of Homelessness in the district can be found at the following link

[Homelessness Prevention Strategy Review and Evidence](#)

This Strategy has been developed, consulted on and subsequently published based on the findings of this review and therefore meets these legal requirements.

Aside from the Homelessness Review, which is a legal requirement this Strategy is supported by the following key documents which are essential for its delivery and can be found at the following links:

Action Plan – This sets out the actions the Council will take to deliver against its priorities and will be updated annually

Equalities Impact Assessment – This ensures that this Strategy and the Council's actions do not unfairly discriminate against any particular groups of people and that all those that approach the Housing Needs Service are treated equitably and fairly and on the basis of need.

Risk Assessment – A full Risk Assessment of the Strategy and the risks associated with both its development and delivery has been completed.

Operationally the focus of services has remained on the prevention of homelessness since 2002, but the prevention of homelessness has always been regarded as best practice and the most cost effective way to approach homelessness but was not a duty placed on Councils. Until 2017 the prevention of homelessness was supported by initiatives in recent years such as the Government's No Second Night Out Agenda and the publication of Making Every Contact Count, which was billed as the Government's Homelessness Prevention Strategy which ensured previous priorities set by Government continued to be tackled and allowed authorities to continue to deliver effective homelessness services, prevent homelessness, reduce the use of Temporary Accommodation and end the worst manifestations of homelessness such as families living in Bed and Breakfast Accommodation and Rough Sleeping.

Homelessness has always been in the spotlight but more recently, it has remained on the political and media agenda with all of the major party manifestos making mention of homelessness in the June 2017 election, and the current Conservative Government has pledged to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it altogether by 2027. The Prime Minister has also established a high-level Rough Sleeping and Homelessness Reduction Taskforce supported by an expert Rough Sleeping Advisory Panel. This was in response to increasing levels of homelessness across the UK.

This has been alongside the Royal Assent of the New Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and its subsequent implementation in April 2018 which has made the prevention and relief of homelessness a duty for authorities. Government continues to supplement Local Authority resources, and has provided further additional funding to support the roll out of the new Act in the forms of the Flexible Homeless Support Grant (which replaces the Temporary Accommodation Management Fee) and through new burdens funding and, more recently, additional money announced for tackling Rough Sleeping targeted at specific areas and to deliver projects such as Housing First. However, in the current climate of Government budgets being reduced the future of this funding is uncertain despite the Government's commitment to tackling Homelessness.

## **The Homeless Reduction Act 2017**

The Homeless Reduction Bill was a Private members Bill taken through Parliament by Bob Blackman MP which resulted in the most significant changes to homelessness legislation for a number of years.

The Homelessness Reduction Bill received Royal Assent on 27 April 2017 and was enacted in April 2018. The new Homeless Reduction Act substantially amends Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 and modifies and extends the homelessness protection in a number of key ways:

### **Improved advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness**

A review of the 2002 Act demonstrated that the advice and information provided to single homeless people needed to be more effective. The new Act clearly sets out that everyone in a district should be able to access free information and advice on the prevention of homelessness and services providing advice and information must be designed to meet the needs of particular groups of people, for example care leavers or those experiencing domestic abuse.

### **Extension of the period “threatened with homelessness”**

Under the 1996 Housing Act an applicant was only ‘threatened with homelessness’ if they were likely to become homeless within 28 days. Under the new Act this period is extended to 56 days or if the applicant has been served with a valid Section 21 notice that expires in 56 days or less.

### **The introduction of new duties to prevent and relieve homelessness for all eligible people, regardless of priority need and intentionality**

Although the concept of prevention was introduced via an amendment to the Housing Act 1996 in 2002, most of the prevention and relief work completed by authorities sat outside the statutory framework. This often led to single homeless people only receiving advice and information to prevent or relieve their homelessness. The new Act will ensure that all people who are threatened with homelessness or who are homeless will be entitled to support from the authority regardless of priority need or intentionality. This will be achieved via a full assessment of the household’s needs and the development of a personalised housing plan.

Interim accommodation will still be provided to those who are homeless, eligible and have a priority need and for whom the authority have accepted a duty to relieve their homelessness.

Applicants who have a priority need, and whose homelessness cannot be prevented or relieved after the 56 days will be owed the main housing duty unless they have made themselves intentionally homeless or they have refused to co-operate.

To discharge the new duties the authority must be satisfied that any accommodation secured will be available for 6 months or more.



## **The introduction of assessments and personalised housing plans, setting out the actions housing authorities and individuals will take to secure accommodation**

The new act introduces a requirement for authorities to conduct a full assessment of all eligible household needs and consider the circumstances that led to the homelessness, the applicant's needs and whether the household needs support to secure and sustain accommodation.

A personal housing plan will then be developed which will set out steps the authority and the applicant must take to help the household to secure accommodation.

Where an applicant refuses to co-operate with their key steps in their personal housing plan, the authority can take action to discharge its duties.

## **Encouraging public bodies to work together to prevent and relieve homelessness through a duty to refer.**

The new Act introduces a new duty to refer an individual's case (with their consent) to a housing authority identified by the applicant. This element of the new Act was introduced in October 2018.

The Code of Guidance is a document that supports the legislation and this has been redrafted to reflect the new duties and the Government consulted on this at the end of 2017. The final version was published in March 2018 ahead of the implementation date of the new Act. The link to the revised Homelessness Code of Guidance can be found here:

[GOV.UK Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities)

## **The Rough Sleeping Strategy**

Most recently (August 2018) the Government has launched its Rough Sleeping Strategy which aims to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027. To support this Government has already announced funding for those areas with the highest numbers of Rough Sleepers and it has commenced work to address issues that may contribute to homelessness post 2020 when the funding ceases including the affordability of the private rented sector and funding options post 2020 when the current Local Housing Allowance freeze ends.

### **5. Summary of Review**

Gravesham Borough Council is one of 12 boroughs and districts within the county of Kent. The borough is predominantly urban to the north, whereas, to the south, the borough is more rural. It comprises the towns of Gravesend and Northfleet, together with the villages of Cobham, Higham, Luddesdown, Meopham, Shorne and Vigo.

Our last homelessness strategy focused on preventing homelessness. This approach has delivered excellent results, especially in preventing family homelessness. Between 2015 and 2017, 523 households were provided with support to help them maintain their current home or find alternative accommodation and prevent their homelessness.



This strategy will continue this focus on homeless prevention and seek to improve homeless prevention for singles and couples. This is aligned with the Homelessness Reduction Act which aims to ensure a greater focus on the prevention of homelessness and offers some increased protection for single homeless people and couples without dependent children. It also sets out how, over the lifetime of the Strategy, services will need to shift from being advisory in nature to being more individualised and supportive to those who are presenting as homeless, and sets out key actions as to how this will be achieved.

The review of homelessness was commenced in April 2018 and it is a detailed robust analysis of the challenges, trends, existing services and opportunities facing Gravesham. Consultation was pivotal in the development of the review.

The evidence presented in the review suggests that the UK has been through a time of unprecedented change with the uncertainty linked to the UK exiting the European Union continuing, and all sectors needing to adapt to these changes.

This is combined with significant changes to the welfare system and the legislative framework within which Local Authorities are operating their homelessness services.

The evidence suggests that the population of Gravesham is increasing, and is also set to age in the coming years, at the same time as the number of smaller households is increasing.

Gender breakdown in the borough is split equally and life expectancy for men in the borough is worse than the national average. However women's life expectancy in Gravesham is better than the national average. Those who are homeless have a significantly lower life expectancy than both males and females.

The ethnic make-up of the district is 78% white British which means 22% of the population come from a mix of other backgrounds.

Evidence suggests that deprivation in the borough has worsened. Welfare reform, including the bedroom subsidy and the changes to the benefits system could result in this number rising, and again could increase levels of homelessness within the borough.

Average earnings in the borough are lower than the national average, men being paid considerably more than women. Unemployment is around the national average, and a large proportion of residents are on low incomes. In parallel to this, due to its location, housing prices are at a premium making home ownership difficult for those on low incomes. This increases the demand on social housing (most affordable) and the private rented sector, (less affordable but more accessible) for young families and individuals looking to live independently. However access to the private rented sector is proving more difficult as London authorities utilise accommodation out of area and landlords who are increasingly refusing to accept those who are reliant on benefits to pay their rent or who have been homeless. This is coupled with around a quarter of private rented homes in the borough not achieving a decent standard.

The demand for council housing outstrips supply, however there is a now a greater demand for smaller property and larger properties are less in demand. This may be because of the under occupancy charge, and also that utility costs continues to rise. Families too are getting smaller, and fewer couples are having children meaning they would only require a one bed property.

Evidence suggests that homeownership, private renting and even affordable rents are unaffordable for some, leaving social rent the only affordable option placing an increased demand on council and housing association stock, which is decreasing due to right to buy. Additionally, in the 2015 post election summer budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a 1% decrease in social housing rents, year on year for four years.

However the Council is taking a proactive approach to the provision of affordable housing and is working to return empty homes back into use and also developing and regenerating further new council housing. Reforms to council housing finance have allowed the council more flexibility to do this.

Changes to benefits are likely to impact on the most vulnerable, as will loss of funding for services. Benefit eligibility criteria are making it harder for the most vulnerable to manage their finances. Also as universal credit is introduced and people will be expected to manage more money than they have ever had before, there is the probability of an increase in rent and mortgage arrears as people fail to pay, which could result in more evictions and homelessness.

Coupled with this, those who struggle to manage money and get one monthly lump sum payment of universal credit, may mean an increase in rent arrears and council tax arrears, as more and more tenants on benefits will be expected to contribute to their council tax bill. All of this could see an increase in evictions and debt, and an increased demand in households requiring emergency housing and support.

Nationally homelessness is on the increase. Therefore there needs to be a shift away from a housing advice role, to a continued emphasis on timely interventions and prevention methods to reduce the numbers of households reaching crisis point, and a more supportive and personalised service to those where they have got out of homelessness, to prevent them from repeating the cycle. This is supported by the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act which has placed duties on Councils to prevent and relieve homelessness.

Gravesham reflects national trends in that homelessness is on the increase; however there has been a decline in the number of accepted homeless cases and an increase in unsuccessful homeless applications, with preventions remaining fairly static. Gravesham also follows the national trend in that its main reason for loss of last settled home is the ending of assured shorthold tenancies in the private sector.

Demand for Temporary Accommodation has increased, however the current supply of Council accommodation into which the Council can fulfil its interim and full duties is limited and therefore there has been an increase in the use of nightly paid accommodation in Gravesham and a return to the use of Bed and Breakfast. However this has not been used

for families other than in emergency situations and where it has, the use has been limited. This has led to an increase in the cost of temporary accommodation to the Council.

The number of rough sleepers within Gravesham is relatively low, although it has risen over previous years.

In summary the key challenges identified via this review of homelessness for Gravesham over the lifetime of this strategy are:

- Homelessness in all forms is on the increase
- The availability of affordable private rented accommodation is limited and the council is using temporary accommodation to accommodate households
- The reduction in welfare benefits, particularly the freezing of local housing allowance rates, means that households on full and sometimes partial benefits are not able to find private rented accommodation in the borough that they can afford and, if they can, landlords are often unwilling to accept those who may rely on benefits to pay their rent or those households who have experienced homelessness
- The impact of pressure from the London housing market, which has resulted in rising property prices and rents, means that households on low incomes or benefits are unable to afford the rising cost of housing in Gravesham without the support of the council, and may have to consider moving away from Gravesham
- Demand for one-bedroom social housing has increased as benefit is now restricted to the room rate only for those who are under 35 in the private rented sector
- There are cohorts of single vulnerable adults rough sleeping who require both accommodation and support
- There are significant long term health and social impacts of homelessness that have wide costs for individuals, families and the public services in the borough
- The rising demand for housing has outstripped the supply of new social housing and we are not moving people out of temporary accommodation quickly enough
- There needs to be a shift in the way services work, with housing options being less of a focus and a move towards a more personalised individual service, with key partners involved to prevent homelessness at the earliest stages and prevent the repeat cycle of homelessness

The full review document can be found on our website.

As a result of identifying the challenges, to address these, the following have been identified as the key priorities for the district

- The provision of timely interventions for those at risk of homelessness
- Strengthening partnerships to support vulnerable groups ending the repeat cycle of homelessness
- To prevent Rough Sleeping
- To improve access to decent affordable accommodation in the private sector

- To improve the health and wellbeing of those threatened with homelessness or who are already homeless

A detailed action plan has been developed which supports this document and sets out actions as to how we will deliver against these priorities.

## **6. Resourcing the Strategy**

In common with other local authorities, the Council has been affected by austerity and year on year reductions in central government grant funding. These have required it to transform and constantly review opportunities to become more efficient.

In a 2-tier area, the Council is also vulnerable to funding decisions that are made by Kent County Council that can have knock-on consequences for district level resources.

Despite these pressures, the Council has continued to prioritise its frontline services and in particular has continued to invest in its Housing Services. Housing Services remain a priority for the Council and it is committed to ongoing work to improve the way we engage and support people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

## **7. Monitoring and Reviewing this Strategy**

Ultimate responsibility for driving through this strategy and ensuring it delivers key priorities rests with the Assistant Director (Housing), supported by a range of colleagues from other departments internally within the Council but also external agencies.

The strategy has been developed in partnership with others, including service users and stakeholders, and they will continue to be involved in the ongoing review and delivery against targets and outcomes.

In response to this ongoing review the Action Plan supporting this strategy will be updated annually as a minimum.