

# **Cambridge City Council Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026 (extended to March 2028)**

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Targeted tracked update: 2026-2028 delivery plan and minor strategy extension only.

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## Foreword from Richard Johnson, Executive Councillor for Housing

Cambridge is a place of contrasts. For many it is a great place to live and work, offering significant opportunities. But with success come real issues of inequality and a chronic shortage of housing that people can afford. With high rents and house prices, and with around 1600 applicants on the council's housing register, homelessness and rough sleeping are big issues for the City.

People often see homelessness as mainly a problem for those seen sleeping on the streets. But there are many more Cambridge households experiencing housing stress such as those living in poor or overcrowded conditions; private tenants unsure whether their lease will be renewed; people living in hostels; people forced to leave their homes because of domestic abuse; the 'hidden homeless' sleeping on friends' sofas because they have nowhere else to go. The list goes on.

This new Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy outlines how we intend to work in partnership with others to help prevent as many people as possible from experiencing the misery of becoming homelessness.

Our council house building programme is part of the solution, as is work with developers to bring forward new affordable homes. But it is not just about building. It is also about ensuring that

the right support is available - to help people to remain in their homes or to find alternative accommodation where necessary. We are determined to continue to improve engagement with a whole range of partners, such as statutory services, private sector landlords and the voluntary sector. We also recognise the need to invest in more financial support to those who need a helping hand as part of our approach to homelessness prevention.

For many of those affected, risk of homelessness is tied up with a combination of other issues, such as poor mental and/or physical health, drug and alcohol problems or being in debt. A much more joined up approach is needed across a whole range of services, including mental & physical health services, social care and other housing providers. One example of this involves our commitment to a new cross-partner 'Streets to Home' service, to help move people rapidly off the streets and into accommodation, providing individually tailored support to help them to get back on their feet.

The Strategy has been developed during the Covid-19 pandemic which has affected all our lives. This has created additional risks and challenges which need to be overcome, but it has also opened up new and unexpected opportunities and ways of working, and we need to continue to build on these.

I am confident that the improvements proposed through this Strategy will increase our success in preventing homelessness and make a real difference to people's lives.

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The most visible form of homelessness involves people who are seen living on the streets, but the issue of homelessness is much broader than that, including, for example, people living in overcrowded or temporary accommodation or who are threatened with eviction. Anyone can become homeless, but issues such as unemployment, poor physical and mental health, alcohol and substance misuse, relationship breakdown, and combinations of all these, will increase the risk of losing a home and of being unable to quickly find another. As well as the impact on the individuals, there are also recognised costs to the economy.

This new Strategy confirms the council's commitment to preventing and relieving homelessness and rough sleeping, and how we will work with partners to meet our objectives and priorities.

It is an ambitious strategy, written at a time of uncertainty as to the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. There are already signs that the fall-out from the pandemic is putting more people at risk of homelessness and this may present challenges to achieving what we set out to achieve. But work with partners in responding to the crisis has also opened the door to exploring new and innovative solutions and different ways of working. Our proposed actions moving forward have been developed in this context.

### Vision, objectives and priorities

The objectives of the Strategy are to:

- Prevent people from becoming homeless
- Where homelessness cannot be avoided, help people to find suitable accommodation
- Minimise rough sleeping; and
- Ensure that housing outcomes for all residents reflect the Council's vision of 'One Cambridge, Fair for All'.

To achieve these objectives, the council will work with partners to realise the following priorities:

- Support those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes whenever possible or to find a new home without an intervening period of homelessness.
- Improve access to a range of permanent accommodation.
- Minimise the use of temporary and emergency accommodation.
- Improve access to, and the effectiveness of, support services.
- Prevent rough sleeping.
- Break the cycle of chronic and repeat street homelessness and rough sleeping. The chapter headings in the strategy reflect these priorities and an action plan for 2026 – 2028 is contained in Annex 6.

### National and local context

Our objectives and priorities are set within the council's broader strategic objectives, and in the context of other national and local strategies and plans. National examples include the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the National Rough Sleeping Strategy, and proposed private rented sector reforms. Issues which are contributing to housing stress and homelessness locally include:

- High demand, a shortage of homes and affordability issues locally across all tenures, particularly, although not exclusively, affecting those on low incomes.
- Issues such as poverty, inequalities in health and education, and being members of certain minority groups can increase housing pressures and the risk of homelessness.
- How welfare benefits aimed at covering housing costs are set and major reforms to the welfare system, which have been taking place over the last few years.
- Shortage of funding available for new affordable homes.

These local housing issues, and our plans to tackle them, are set out in our Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy. That document sets out the strategic direction for housing activity in Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District. It should be seen as the companion document to this homelessness strategy and read alongside.

## Priority 1: Support those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes where possible

Early intervention is essential to helping prevent homelessness. Although there may be many reasons for homelessness, loss of a privately rented home and family or friends no longer willing to accommodate are the two most common main reasons recorded locally. Other reasons include relationship breakdown, eviction from supported housing, the end of a social housing tenancy, and violence & harassment (including domestic violence). For many people there will be a number of reasons, and some will have multiple and complex needs. The Strategy highlights a number of services available to help people remain in their homes, including: financial and debt advice; work with landlords and letting agencies; work with family and friends with whom the person at risk is living; a tenancy sustainment service for council tenants; and partnership work to tackle anti-social behaviour, harassment and domestic abuse. Work in all of these areas needs to continue to be strengthened. To support those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes we will:

- Strengthen and better define (preferably backed with written agreements) how we work with health service and County Council partners to better support people with poor mental health or substance misuse problems to sustain a tenancy.
- Expand and better resource and publicise existing early intervention and financial support initiatives for people facing the loss of a private sector tenancy.
- Better support people to remain living with family or friends until a new home can be found.
- Encourage private landlords and letting agencies, social housing providers, owner-occupiers and tenants to contact the Council at an early stage when a home is at risk.
- Explore further tenancy rescue solutions for private tenants including the potential for targeted grants and loans.
- Review the financial advice services available, to identify any gaps, duplication or problems with accessing services.

- Review the effectiveness of financial advice and tenancy sustainment services for council tenants.
- Seek to set up a working group with other housing providers operating locally, to help agree common policies and approaches and help minimise the number of social housing evictions.
- Continue to work with partners on a 'whole housing approach' to dealing with domestic abuse.
- Improve how we capture reasons for homelessness.
- Improve understanding of what impact of Covid-19 might have on the risk of homelessness, so that we can plan and respond accordingly.

## Priority 2: Improve access to and range of permanent accommodation

With high demand and with housing of all tenures (but particularly social housing) in short supply, there is a need to expand the housing options available to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This includes looking beyond just social housing as the main tenure of choice and improving access to other tenures and housing types. The current approach includes increasing the supply of social housing through the council's new-build programme; financial advice and support, including our Housing Benefit top-up scheme (HB+) and grants & loans to help people to access the private rented sector; encouraging landlords to lease homes through the council's social lettings agency, Town Hall Lettings; and loans for bringing private long-term empty homes back into use. To help improve access to and the range of permanent accommodation available the council will:

- Explore how access to homes across a range of tenures might be improved, and how homes might be used more flexibly to meet a wider range of needs.
- Encourage take-up of private rented sector housing options, including out of town lets, through better promotion, additional incentives and improving support available.
- Improve engagement and partnership working with landlords, letting agencies and other private owners.
- Introduce additional incentives to improve the availability of private rented homes through Town Hall Lettings.
- Review the council's Housing Benefit Plus scheme with a view to making it a more attractive option
- Work with housing providers to explore how better use might be made of existing homes.
- Work with housing providers with a view to increasing access to housing for those with high levels of need, and better alignment of council and other providers' allocations policies.
- Investigate the feasibility of delivering more specialist forms of housing, and homes for people previously on middle incomes who may be at risk of homelessness, through the council's house-building programme.
- Investigate potential for conversion of commercial property to good quality accommodation through the council's housing development programme.
- Review the council's approach to Local Lettings Plans in the context of access to housing for those with high levels of need.
- Review the sub-regional Home-Link Lettings policy with partners to ensure it best serves local authorities' homelessness prevention objectives.

## Priority 3: Minimise use of temporary and emergency accommodation

The chronic shortage of permanent housing means there is a need for a supply of suitable temporary accommodation for those for whose cases are being investigated and those waiting for more permanent accommodation. Accommodation for use at short notice in an emergency is also important (issues around hostel accommodation for single homeless people and rough sleepers are dealt with under Priority 6). Demand for such accommodation and length of stay has been increasing and additional use of hotel rooms was necessary during the coronavirus lockdown. Long stays in temporary accommodation are far from ideal for the households concerned and are financially costly – particularly use of commercial hotels. There is a need to reduce overall reliance on temporary accommodation (through interventions such as those already referred to above) whilst at the same time ensuring sufficient is available to meet needs. To help minimise the use of temporary and emergency accommodation the council will:

- Systematically reduce demand for temporary and emergency accommodation by focusing relentlessly on preventing homelessness.
- Build on our understanding of the recent increase in the use of and length of stay in temporary accommodation to develop alternatives and keep information on demand under regular review.
- Improve our approach to monitoring of pathways through interim accommodation, and regularly review placement decisions to ensure consistency in decision making.

- Get a better understanding of the sizes and types of temporary and emergency accommodation needed.
- Continue to look for alternative ways of providing temporary and emergency accommodation, including for those for whom standard provision is unsuitable.
- Ensure we have the right internal processes in place to enable us to use our council housing stock to respond quickly to peaks and troughs in demand for temporary accommodation.
- Review the extent to which housing related debt should remain a barrier to being offered a home.

#### **Priority 4: Improve access to and effectiveness of support services**

Access to accommodation is only part of the solution in relation to homelessness, with significant numbers of people affected having additional support needs which put them more at risk of homelessness. Mental health support is the most common need, but many will have multiple needs. The council supports (in some cases financially) a range of other agencies. Examples include those providing financial advice; drug & alcohol services; support for prison leavers, domestic abuse services; etc. There is a strong commitment from most partners to work together in this area. However, issues such as lack of resources and gaps in services mean that people all too often fall through the cracks. Areas identified as particularly needing attention include mental health services and dealing with homelessness & anti-social behaviour linked to misuse of drugs and alcohol. There is a need to move more towards a 'whole systems' approach across services, agencies and the wider community. To help improve access to and effectiveness of support services the council will:

- Further improve working arrangements with mental health, substance misuse and social/social care services, including investigating the potential for some co-location of services and/or development of multi-disciplinary teams.
- Strengthen work with partners to provide a joined-up approach to preventing and tackling drug and alcohol related anti-social behaviour.
- Improve our understanding of the underlying reasons for homelessness, and use this understanding to help inform service design, planning and operation.
- Work to improve collaboration with statutory partners at a strategic level, including working with the County Council and other partners with a view to developing a fully integrated, multi-disciplinary homelessness service across a range of agencies.

#### **Priority 5: Prevent rough sleeping**

Homelessness is linked in the popular imagination with rough sleeping, but the majority of people presenting to the Council as homeless are not sleeping rough and, happily, are unlikely ever to face the prospect of having to do so. Rough sleeping is a special case of homelessness which needs to be understood on its own terms and tackled in a way that is informed by that understanding. A key consideration is that for many chronic and repeat rough sleepers, if not most, their homelessness is a symptom and not the primary problem. To complicate the issue further, some rough sleepers are known to have a permanent home or a hostel bed. Similarly, people street begging may not necessarily be without accommodation, and their presence on the street often causes the public to underestimate the scale of local provision and the open availability of local hostel spaces and support services. Chronic and repeat rough sleepers strongly tend toward having multiple and complex needs. Mental health and/or substance misuse issues are often the main ones, but there may also be a number of other contributory factors. Whether measured locally or nationally, the vast majority (usually above 80 percent) of rough sleepers are men. But while women are comparatively less likely to sleep rough, they often present with particular mental health and substance abuse problems and very often have particular needs, including a greater likelihood of being subjected to sexual and other forms of exploitation. Informed by research and experience, and the recent intensive training of housing advice staff in identifying and responding to domestic abuse, we feel we have a good understanding of the differing needs of male and female rough sleepers, but we plan to improve that understanding through consultation with female rough sleepers. There is a significant flow of rough sleepers onto the streets of Cambridge each year – often originating from outside the City - and targets for maximum numbers of rough sleepers are being missed. A significantly improved, more joined-up approach is needed in this area, with early intervention a critical part of this. To help prevent rough sleeping the council will:

- Improve our understanding of the nature and causes of rough sleeping in Cambridge.
- Work with partners to understand how prevention activities, as a whole, can help identify those at risk of rough sleeping, and help to intervene early to prevent the flow of new rough sleepers onto the streets.
- Gain a better understanding of where rough sleepers have come from, develop a more proactive approach to reconnecting rough sleepers to where

Executive summary they came from and review the offer available to those without a local connection.

- Aim to keep the number of rough sleepers below 10 for any one count, reducing to five through the lifetime of the strategy.
- Set demanding new targets for the number of individual rough sleepers seen in any year and the length of time they are on the streets before they are housed.
- Seek the views of female rough sleepers as to their experience of homelessness and local service provision and, informed by this, consider what we might additionally need to do to ensure that the particular needs of homeless women are met.
- Work with partners to explore how an emergency accommodation offer can be made available for anyone sleeping rough across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.
- Review the current approach to education around homelessness prevention amongst young people and step up our ongoing publicity campaign to better inform the public about homelessness and rough sleeping and the services we and partners provide.
- Review the current approach to street begging and anti-social behaviour.
- Ensure we assist every European Economic Area (EEA) national rough sleeper capable of achieving, and wishing to obtain, UK settled status to do so before the end of the 'grace period' in June 2021, and ensure that advice and practical support compliant with the law is available for those remaining rough sleepers without access to public funds.
- Promote and support effective implementation of the young people's assessment and care leaver protocols across all relevant partners.
- Review the prison leavers' protocol and identify how prison leavers' housing needs can be identified and addressed at an earlier stage.
- Work with South Cambridgeshire District Council to help prevent single homelessness within their district.

## Priority 6: Break the cycle of chronic and repeat street homelessness

Once people have started sleeping on the streets there is a high risk of remaining there and being caught in a 'revolving door' of insecure accommodation and street homelessness and rough sleeping. Although it does not suit everyone, hostel accommodation has an important part to play in supporting people off the streets and helping them to prepare for a move towards more permanent accommodation. The council considers there to be enough hostel accommodation to meet the City's needs, but that spaces are not becoming

Executive summary available often enough to meet demand because people are remaining in hostels for longer than may be necessary. Working with hostel providers, we will ensure that move-on planning with residents will begin early in their stay and that full advantage is taken of the various schemes we have introduced to make a private-rented move-on solution more affordable and more desirable. In support of this change of emphasis we will review our hostel allocation and resettlement panel (HARP) process in order to increase move-on capacity and ensure a fair balance between people in hostels and other housing register applicants. As well as working with other agencies, the council is keen to work with, and harness the interest shown by, the wider community in dealing with issues of homelessness and rough sleeping. This interest has been particularly evident during the Covid pandemic. To help break the cycle of chronic and repeat street homelessness & rough sleeping the council will:

- Work with providers to speed up move on from hostels, whilst at the same time reviewing how evictions and abandonments can be reduced.
- Work with providers to review the scope and effectiveness of hostel-based support, particularly in relation to move-on advice.
- Explore whether being excluded from moving on due to previous breaches of tenancy can be prevented.
- Work with sub-regional partner authorities to help ensure a proportionate provision of accommodation for rough sleepers in order to reduce drift into Cambridge.
- Work with the County Council to assess what balance between hostel and other accommodation might be appropriate going forwards.
- Promote and make private rented housing a more attractive option, to help make it available to a wider range of applicants.
- Review the effectiveness of the Housing First model of permanent provision and explore whether it should be extended to include private rented sector homes.
- Explore with social housing providers whether there are opportunities for short life or low demand social housing available, including to single sharers.

- Expand the provision of modular homes and explore other innovative ways of providing accommodation to prevent and relieve single homelessness.
- Continue to seek and make best use of funding opportunities to purchase new homes to accommodate rough sleepers.
- Work with the County Council in considering the need for commissioning longer term supported provision for those for whom mainstream housing with support may not be suitable.
- Work collaboratively on shifting emphasis from mainly a streets-based to a mainly home-based service model.

## **Funding the Strategy**

2026-2028 update: The delivery plan will align existing homelessness, rough sleeping, temporary accommodation, supported housing, health, care and partner resources wherever possible. A social investment proposition, including a Housing Pathways Fund model, will be developed and evaluated to support delivery of high-needs housing, Housing First and move-on accommodation where this is viable and proportionate.

The work of partners is fundamental to meeting the objectives and priorities in this Strategy. Each will, to a greater or lesser extent, have their own funding streams to draw upon. The main sources of funding for the council itself include council General Fund resources, housing benefit, and various government grants, including those requiring bids for specific projects. The council will continue to take every opportunity to maximise and make best use of resources available. The council will seek to develop a series of 'off the shelf' bids so that it is ready for external funding opportunities as they arise.

## **Implementing and Monitoring the Strategy**

2026-2028 update: Delivery of this strategy will be overseen by a multi-agency Homelessness Strategy Steering Group, supported by existing operational partnerships and reporting through council governance arrangements. Existing partnerships will be used wherever possible rather than creating new structures. See Annex 6 (Local Action Plan 2026 – 2028) for full details.

## Introduction & Purpose

The popular perception of homelessness is where someone has nowhere to live. This is most visible where homeless people are seen sleeping rough on the streets, and government has a national target of ending rough sleeping by 2027. But there are also other forms of homelessness, often hidden from wider public view. These include people living in some form of temporary accommodation or shelter; living in insecure housing – for example, where threatened with eviction or staying with family or friends (sometimes known as ‘sofa surfing’); or living in inadequate housing such as in severely overcrowded or poor conditions.

Almost anyone can find themselves facing homelessness, whether it be due to losing a job, relationship breakdown, fire or natural disaster. However, there are a number of factors which make it far more likely a person will lose accommodation. Long-term unemployment, poverty, poor physical or mental health, relationship breakdown, drug and/or alcohol problems and leaving institutional care are just a few examples. It is already evident that Covid-19 is increasing the risk of homelessness by exacerbating tensions in the home and increasing job insecurity. Rising unemployment will put more households at risk, particularly those already on low incomes with little or no savings behind them, and those living in insecure accommodation.

During 2018/19 and 2019/20, the council accepted over 1,600 applications from households who were homeless or at risk of homelessness and to whom the council owed a statutory homelessness duty. During each of those two years around 160 individuals were counted as sleeping rough on the streets.

Not only is homelessness and rough sleeping traumatic for those experiencing it, a government evidence review in 2012 identified some of the financial costs to the economy. These included provision of benefits and employment programmes, health and care services, costs to the criminal justice system, and grants to and expenditure by local authorities. Cambridge

City Council has, for many years, prioritised the prevention of homelessness and rough sleeping. We have a well-established homelessness and rough sleeping action plan, which has been developed and implemented and kept under regular review by a partnership of organisations operating locally.

This new Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy outlines our strategic direction and the actions we propose to take to help prevent and relieve homelessness and rough sleeping in Cambridge. It aims to communicate our vision and priorities to partners and the wider public and helps to support broader council ambitions set out in its other strategies and plans. It also meets the statutory requirement for each housing authority to have a strategy for preventing homelessness in their district.

## Vision, objectives & priorities

### Corporate objectives

As well as helping to support national policy, this Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy is also important in helping to achieve three of the council’s broader objectives:

- Supporting the economy.
- Promoting health and wellbeing; and
- Tackling poverty and inequality

### Housing Strategy vision and objectives

This Strategy also helps support the vision in our Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy: ‘Healthy, Safe, Affordable: Homes & Communities for All’. In particular, it will contribute to the council wanting Cambridge to be a place where:

- Everyone has access to a suitable home, and residents are able to live as healthily, safely, and independently as possible.
- The housing market functions effectively, providing homes which are affordable to people on all incomes.
- There is a wide and varied choice of good quality, sustainable homes of different sizes, types and tenures, including new provision of council homes, to meet the needs of a wide range of different households and age groups.
- We have strong relationships with residents, developers and partners that enable housing and services to be delivered effectively, and that support innovation where appropriate.

Other relevant council strategies and plans are listed at Annex 1 of this Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy.

## Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy objectives and priorities

Through this Strategy, the council will deal with homelessness and rough sleeping by working with partners to achieve the following objectives:

- Prevent people from becoming homeless.
- Where homelessness cannot be avoided, help people to find suitable accommodation.
- Minimise rough sleeping; and
- Ensure that housing outcomes for all residents reflect the Council's vision of 'One Cambridge, Fair for All'.

To help meet these objectives the Strategy is based around six key priorities:

- Support those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes where possible or to find a new home without an intervening period of homelessness.
- Improve access to a range of permanent accommodation.
- Minimise the use of temporary and emergency accommodation.
- Improve access to, and effectiveness of, support services.
- Prevent rough sleeping.
- Break the cycle of chronic and repeat street homelessness and rough sleeping.

## Local & national context

### Factors contributing towards homelessness

There are a number of factors which contribute towards homelessness and how we and our partners are able to respond to it.

### High demand and lack of affordability

As our Housing Strategy outlines, high employment levels and strong economic growth bring major opportunities for Cambridge, but also present significant challenges, including high housing costs and a shortage of accommodation which is affordable to local people. The issue is particularly acute for those on low incomes. Key problems include:

- High demand for and a shortage of social housing for rent. There are currently around 1,800 households on the council's Home-Link housing register. Although this includes some people with low priority for housing, we know that there are also people in housing need who are not registered. For example, those with very complex needs – including some rough sleepers - may not be sufficiently well engaged with services to register; others may decide not to if they feel they have no chance of being housed – e.g., if they have been evicted from previous accommodation or have a housing related debt.
- A mismatch between the profile of social housing applicants and the size and type of housing becoming available for letting.
- Shortage of private rented homes, leading to high rents. This is compounded by a Local Housing Allowance (the maximum amount which housing benefit, or the housing element of Universal Credit will cover for housing costs) which is intended only to meet the lower one-third of local private rents - for which there is great competition. Unaffordability for people on benefits remains the case even following the recent welcome increase in Local Housing Allowance rates (and we understand that these rates are now due to be frozen).
- Affordability of rents on new council and housing association homes. Most new affordable homes for rent are now only available at 'affordable rents' which can be charged at up to 80% of market rents and are higher than social rents. The council's policy has been to request that providers charge no higher than Local Housing Allowance rates to ensure that rents are as affordable as possible. However, even this is unaffordable to some, and under our existing policy (currently under review), the recent increase in Local Housing Allowance rates may have the perverse effect of social housing rents being increased, making them less affordable to those on low incomes.

### Poverty & Inequality

In 2017, Centre for Cities identified Cambridge as the most unequal City in the UK. <sup>1</sup>For example, 2018 income related indicators <sup>2</sup>show that average weekly earnings for the lowest 10% of earners were 3.5 times less than the average for all Cambridge employees; and council data shows that in 2017 around 14,000 of Cambridge residents lived in households claiming Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax support through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. <sup>3</sup>

The impact of Covid-19 on jobs and incomes is likely to lead to many more people in Cambridge experiencing economic hardship, including some of those who have previously been relatively well off. It will also exacerbate existing poverty; those who have no credit history or savings to fall back on are likely to be particularly hard hit. The Council's Anti-Poverty Strategy (currently under review) gives more information on the links between poverty and homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of protected characteristics, evidence from the Cabinet Office identifies that Black and minority ethnic (BAME) people are more likely than non-BAME people to experience housing issues in relation to quality of housing, cost of renting as a proportion of income and overcrowding.<sup>5</sup> LGBT research from Stonewall also found that around one in five trans people had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.<sup>6</sup>

Inequalities in health and educational attainment are also factors. A full Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out on the Strategy.

## National Policy

### The Homelessness Reduction Act

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017<sup>7</sup> introduced new legal duties aimed at preventing homelessness, and swiftly relieving homelessness where it cannot be prevented or has already happened.

Although the council has had a long history of actively helping to prevent and relieve homelessness, the Act has required a number of changes to be made to services and to ways in which the council works with other partners. This strategy aims to continue to build on those changes.

Pleasingly, the number of people seeking housing or homelessness advice and assistance has shown a marked increase since the Act came into force, indicating that people are identifying, and seeking a solution to, an impending housing difficulty earlier.

### National Rough Sleeping Strategy

The government's Rough Sleeping Strategy aims to halve rough sleeping nationally between 2018 and 2022, and to eliminate it by 2027.<sup>8</sup> It is intended to support every person who sleeps rough off the streets and into a home, and to prevent rough sleeping from happening in the first place. Several funding streams are in place to support delivery of the strategy.

Whilst the council fully supports this as an aspiration, with an ongoing flow of rough sleepers into Cambridge from elsewhere it is unlikely that we will be able to fully eliminate rough sleeping in Cambridge. A proposed local target is referred to elsewhere in this Strategy.

### Welfare Reforms

A programme of major changes to the welfare system has been taking place recent years, aiming to simplify the system, cut the overall welfare bill and encourage people into work. As a result, many people have had their benefits cut, including those in work. Research carried out for Crisis suggests a link between the national increase in homelessness over the last few years and the roll out of welfare reforms.

For example, single people under 35 only being entitled to the Local Housing Allowance shared room rate, the impact of benefit sanctions on vulnerable people, and loss of income and through introduction of Universal Credit all increase the risk of people on low incomes becoming homeless.

Locally this has been compounded by the size of the local Broad Rental Market area (BRMA) which does not reflect local private rents. The aforementioned increase in rates for 2020-21 in response to the Covid-19 epidemic should bring more homes within reach of benefit claimants. However, rates are still below lower quartile rents in the City, and more people are likely to be impacted by the overall benefit cap.

The council continues to work closely with partners to help manage the impacts of reforms.

### Delivery of new homes

The government aims to deliver 300,000 new homes per year, with their main priority in relation to affordable housing being to promote low-cost home ownership. However, with a severe shortage of housing and high house prices locally, for people on low to middle incomes buying a home is simply unachievable.

The council was successful in securing funding for 500 new council homes as devolution grant through the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. 10Building is well under way and discussions for a further delivery programme are taking place. However, only limited grant is available and there are restrictions on how receipts from Right to Buy sales can be spent in conjunction with other sources of funding. This impacts on the ability to develop as well as the rent levels which need to be charged to cover costs of development. The Covid-19 crisis may also affect future delivery plans – both for the council and for other developers.

### **Care Act 2014**

Our strategic and operational approach to homelessness is set within the context of the Care Act 2014, which requires public sector services to work in partnership to deliver preventative services which promote well-being in the community.

### **Private Rented Sector Reforms**

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, government had started on a series of reforms to support people in the private rented sector. Changes still to be progressed include 10 Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority.

National policy proposals to abolish no-fault evictions; further measures to deal with rogue landlords; and the introduction of an independent regulator for letting agents.

### **Other Local Policy**

#### **Health and Wellbeing Strategy**

Housing is well recognised as one of the key determinants of health and wellbeing.

Consultation has taken place on a draft Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2023. Relevant proposed areas of focus include preventing homelessness and improving pathways into housing for vulnerable people, improving access to mental health services, and embedding a 'Think Communities' approach into place-based working.

#### **Housing Related Support Review & Homelessness Transformation**

A county-wide review of housing related support services in 2018 identified a number of gaps in service provision and recommended some redesigning of services.

Further research was commissioned to consider the potential for 'homelessness transformation' across the two areas. Consultation on a housing related support commissioning strategy has taken place, with the main commissioning priorities over the next few years expected to be around services for homeless adults, rough sleepers, ex-offenders and young people at risk of homelessness. The aim is to move away from a predominantly hostel focussed approach to a wider mix of services.

## **Priority 1: Support those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes where possible**

### **Introduction**

Early intervention is essential to helping prevent homelessness.

During 2019/20 the council recorded over 200 cases where homelessness was successfully prevented, over 40% of which were outside of the statutory 56-day prevention period.

Our 2019 review of homelessness and rough sleeping in Cambridge has shown that the two most common causes of people becoming homeless in Cambridge are the loss of a privately rented home and family or friends being no longer willing to provide accommodation. Together these account for more than half of all homelessness presentations the council receives in a typical year. However, 2020 has not been a typical year and our most recent statistics show that relationship breakdown and family and friends being unwilling to accommodate on their own now account for the vast majority of homeless presentations.

Other prominent reasons for households and individuals presenting as homeless are eviction from supported housing, the end of a social housing tenancy, and violence (including domestic abuse) and harassment.

Early intervention is less easy to encourage when homelessness is predominantly caused by sudden personal crisis, but it is important nevertheless that we promote the message that homelessness is easier to resolve the earlier people seek advice.

Personal housing plans are also an important tool in enabling people at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes and sustain tenancies longer term.

### **Preventing loss of private rented tenancy**

According to the Census 2011, around 28% of households in Cambridge were living in the private rented sector. More recent estimates, although less reliable, suggest that this could have risen to around 35% and possibly more.

Where tenants have problems paying the rent, the council will signpost to services providing financial advice around issues such as entitlement to benefit, budgeting and dealing with debt. Discretionary Housing Payments may also be used to top up benefit payments for a period, but in coming years we intend to be bolder in our willingness to financially support people to remain in their existing home, recognising that this will often be more financially prudent in the long run for the council, relative to providing expensive temporary accommodation, and will, in most cases, be far better for households facing homelessness.

It is important to recognise that most landlords in Cambridge provide a good service and take a responsible approach when dealing with their tenants. Building on this understanding, we will continue to improve how we engage with landlords, letting agencies and tenants themselves to ensure that all parties are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and can obtain advice and support from agencies when they need it.

Within that context, the council will continue to take a proactive approach where tenants are threatened with eviction. The reasons why tenants will be required to leave will vary, but the council will negotiate with landlords to try to prevent eviction, or to delay it to give time for the tenant to find alternative accommodation. We will also continue to be active in dealing with quality and safety standards in privately rented homes.

Preventing unlawful eviction is also a priority. For example, a significant proportion of section 21 notices have been found to be invalid when they first come to the attention of the council's housing advice service. The council will continue to challenge invalid notices, working with landlords and tenants to try to resolve the situation; and will continue to develop private rented sector advice and support services.

Enforcement powers may be used, although only as a last resort.

### **Supporting people to remain with family or friends**

It has already been mentioned that being asked to leave by family or friends is a major cause of local homelessness. As shown in our homelessness review, in 2018/19, around 1 in 7 households were owed a statutory homelessness prevention or relief duty due to this cause and indications are that, following the pandemic, this proportion is now far greater.

Through its home visiting service, the council negotiates with the parties concerned, and provides and/or signposts to appropriate advice and support to help people to remain where they are for as long as possible. We will continue to develop this role, particularly in relation to mediation between the parties concerned, and the potential for offering incentives to allow people to remain where they are until we can help them find an alternative home. We recognise, however, that there will be situations where the relationship has deteriorated to such an extent that it is unreasonable to expect someone threatened with homelessness to remain where they are.

### **Preventing loss of social housing tenancy**

A comprehensive financial and debt advice service is available to council tenants who may have difficulty in paying their rent. In addition, a bespoke advice service for Universal Credit claimants has been introduced, in recognition of significantly higher arrears often occurring amongst that group than amongst other tenants

The council also runs a tenancy sustainment service aimed at council tenants whose tenancy may be at risk due to complex support needs such as mental health issues, local antisocial behaviour, or a previous history of homelessness. The scope and effectiveness of this service will be reviewed.

The council enjoys good working relationships with its housing associations partners, in particular those with a strong local base. We are, however, aware that we need to improve lines of communication with larger local stockholders with more centralised management and customer services. We will continue, and better promote, more effective early intervention in situations where households in housing association homes are at risk of losing their tenancy, working, in particular, through the existing 'Tenants at Risk' forum of providers and through the new housing providers' network we are proposing as part of this Strategy.

We have been working closely with registered providers in managing the impact of welfare reforms, to help prevent both council and housing association tenants from losing their homes due to issues such as changes in benefit entitlement or switching from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit.

### **Violence and harassment (including domestic abuse)**

The council works closely with partners in dealing with issues such as anti-social behaviour, harassment and domestic abuse. This includes working through both the Cambridge Community Safety Partnership and the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Partnership.

Having already achieved White Ribbon accreditation, we have made significant improvements in our approach more recently in dealing with domestic abuse. As a result, the council has now been awarded accreditation through the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA). We will continue to build on this to help prevent domestic abuse from happening and to ensure that we can respond appropriately when it does.

Cambridgeshire, as one of three project sites nationally, has adopted a government funded 'Whole Housing Approach' to domestic abuse. This aims to enable early identification and intervention, reduce homelessness related to domestic abuse, and enable survivors to remain where they are if they choose, or keep their tenancy status if they relocate.

### **Impact of Covid-19**

It is not yet clear what the full impact of Covid-19 pandemic will be on the economy and jobs, but there are already signs that rent and mortgage repossessions will increase. As mentioned, we will introduce mechanisms to support early intervention including prudent, but bold, financial intervention subject to rigorous cost-benefit analysis.

There are also already indications that there may be an increase in mental ill-health and that this may lead to an increased risk of homelessness – for example, through more evictions from supported housing, or through increased levels of domestic abuse.

We are already aware of issues around how reasons for homelessness are captured. For example, loss of a private rented sector tenancy may be recorded as a main reason for homelessness, but is likely to be driven by other factors such as loss of employment, mental health issues etc. The need to deal with the potential effects of the pandemic increase the importance of improving monitoring in this area. A better understanding of the wider reasons for a household becoming homeless or being threatened with homelessness is important to ensure we respond appropriately to individual cases, and to help with prioritising, developing and improving services. 11 Domestic abuse Whole Housing Approach

## Supporting those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes where possible

Moving forward the council will:

Continue to recognise the strong links between mental health, substance misuse and homelessness, and work with the County Council to ensure that service design supports tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.

Improve our approach to preventing private sector evictions and to preventing homelessness for people living with family or friends.

Improve engagement with private landlords, letting agencies, social housing providers and tenants; and promote the importance of those threatened with homelessness seeking help at an early stage

Explore further tenancy rescue solutions for private tenants including the potential for targeted grants and loans. Review the financial advice services available, to identify any gaps, duplication or problems with accessing services.

Review the effectiveness of financial advice and tenancy sustainment services for council tenants.

Seek to set up a working group with other housing providers operating locally, to help agree common policies and approaches and help minimise the number of social housing evictions.

Continue to work with partners on a 'whole housing approach' to dealing with domestic abuse.

Improve how we capture reasons for homelessness.

Improve understanding of what impact of Covid-19 might have on the risk of homelessness, so that we can plan and respond accordingly.

## Priority 2: Improve access to and range of permanent accommodation

### Introduction

This Strategy has already identified a shortage of supply and high housing costs in Cambridge, and that many people are unable to afford market rents. Access to good quality housing that is affordable is critical to both preventing and relieving homelessness.

For many years, the main route out of homelessness has been through an often-lengthy wait for a social housing tenancy. Our homelessness review identified that in 2018-19, provision of a social housing tenancy was the second most common successful intervention (second only to provision of supported accommodation - dealt with elsewhere in this Strategy). However, with demand outstripping supply, as well as measures to increase the numbers of social homes for rent it is also important to find other ways into more permanent housing.

One of the priorities in our Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy is around making better use of existing homes, which is particularly important in the context of tackling homelessness.

### Making private rented sector housing more attractive as an option

The shortage of social housing means that the private sector represents the only realistically available option for many people.

However, there is often resistance from applicants to taking up private rented sector offers, partly because they want the long-term security of a social tenancy but also because there are limited homes available within the City which are affordable, meaning people have to move further out into neighbouring districts.

The council is committed to doing more to make private rented housing more attractive both to potential tenants and to landlords, including better promotion and ensuring people moving into private rented homes receive the advice and support they need.

Our social lettings agency, Town Hall Lettings (THL), is aimed at encouraging landlords (private and Housing Association) to lease homes to the council to be let to those who need them. Any homes let through THL must meet agreed quality and safety standards.

Our Housing Benefit Plus (HB+) scheme offers financial assistance to those on benefits or a low income who, with a little assistance, can be helped to improve their financial situation. It provides a time-limited benefit top-up, in return for which households are expected to engage with financial and employment advice. The aim is that at the end of the top-up period they should be able to afford the full rent without the top-up.

While HB+ has proved successful in helping to both prevent and relieve homelessness, we believe that take up of the scheme could and should be greater. A recent review has identified that the offer should be made more flexible, offering a higher maximum level of supplement, a longer maximum duration of support, and stronger promotion of the scheme by housing advisors and in our homelessness prevention literature. We will also develop and promote targeted financial support to help people remain at home and review the range of financial support services available from all agencies, to understand where there might be gaps or duplication, and to identify reasons for any issues people might be experiencing in accessing services.

In addition to Housing Benefit Plus and Discretionary Housing Payments, our Access Scheme offers interest free loans and, in limited cases, grants, to help people meet the costs of entering the private rented sector. We will launch a pilot to help us decide whether it is more effective, and more financially prudent in the long run, to make the Access Scheme one where all assistance is in the form of a grant. We are also prepared to guarantee rents for a period or pay a lump sum covering several months advance rent to a landlord, where this will open up the sector to people who can afford the rent but are barred from entering it due to an unconventional employment or credit history. In summary, we are open to considering on a case-by-case basis any approach that might enable more people to gain and sustain a private sector tenancy, subject to two key considerations: will this prevent or relieve a household's homelessness; and do we have reasonable assurance that it will cost less, or certainly no more, than the cost of providing emergency and temporary accommodation.

Good, affordable privately rented accommodation is to be had a short distance out of the city, but some homeless households are resistant to an out-of-town offer, often for reasons that are understandable, but which might be overcome with a relatively small additional increment of support or assurance. In the early period of this strategy, we will explore the potential costs and efficacy of practical support measures such as subsidising for a limited period travel back into Cambridge for work, support or

medical services; support to find employment or training in the new location or innovations such as households retaining a time-limited local connection to Cambridge or gaining an enhanced banding on Home-Link.

### **Working with private landlords**

With high demand for rental properties there is a reluctance amongst some landlords to accept people on benefits on the basis that they may be at higher risk of not being able to pay the rent.

Town Hall Lettings offers a guarantee to landlords letting homes through the agency that rents will be paid. The council also offers loans to owners to bring long-term empty homes up to standard so that they can be let through THL. As mentioned, we are prepared to offer additional incentives, including advance rental loans paid directly to landlords, but we need to improve our approach to publicity in this area to try to encourage more landlords to participate.

Whilst we have good relationships with many private landlords and letting agents, there is still a need to improve communication, engagement, and partnership working.

### **Broadening the range of housing available**

The undoubted preference of people unable to buy a home of their own is to rent a home from a social landlord and the council is committed to making this option available whenever possible. The Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy gives more information how the council is increasing the supply of social housing, both through the council's own new build programme and through working with developers and other housing providers.

However, as well as a shortage of supply, there is also a mismatch between the size and type of stock available and the needs of people on the housing register. The council therefore needs to consider diversifying how its own new build homes are designed and used, as well as the use of existing homes.

For example, 80% of demand on the housing register is for one- and two-bedroom homes, with over half of applicants requiring one bedroom. However, studios and one-bedroom homes make up only 25% of the council's own housing stock, with 35% being two-bedroom homes. 12 12 Strategic Housing Key Facts

Because of this, the focus of the council's new build programme to date has been on smaller properties, although providing some larger homes also in recognition of lower turn-over of family homes and the need to create mixed communities.

Moving forward, we are exploring the need to provide more specialist forms of housing to help meet the specific needs of homeless people. For example, increasing provision of self-contained accommodation as a steppingstone to a full tenancy, or piloting provision of small blocks with some form of on-site supervision.

Alternative options for use of new and existing homes are being considered. One example is leasing homes to the council's Housing Company for use as Houses in Multiple Occupation. This could include existing council homes and/or market homes delivered as part of the council's development programme. There may also be the potential for leasing short-life and/or low demand homes from other housing association partners.

Potential conversion of surplus commercial property to good quality homes through our Housing Development Agency is another area to be explored; particularly in the context of the potential impact of Covid-19 on future demand for office space.

We are also keen to explore securing some private rented homes to be offered through the Home-Link choice-based lettings system to applicants who may be homeless or at risk of homelessness but not in priority need.

### **Improving access to social housing**

Some social housing providers have allocations policies which, in effect, can reduce the number of homes available for those with high levels of need. Building on the good relations we have with local providers we need to work with them to try to increase access to housing for those most in need and assess whether we can achieve better alignment between council and housing association allocation policies.

We also need to work with providers to establish whether better use can be made of existing homes, including potential for flexing tenures in some circumstances where that would better meet the needs of the council and of the provider.

This is likely to be more of a challenge in relation to some of the larger and less locally focused associations, with whom we need to improve lines of communication.

Bespoke Local Lettings Plans (LLPs) for particular developments, both council and housing association, can also have the effect of reducing the number of areas where those with high needs can be housed.

We need to review the council's own suite of Local Lettings Plans to understand the overall impact across the City and whether a change in approach is required. We have also identified in our Housing Strategy the need to develop a Local Lettings Plan framework to try to achieve greater consistency of approach between the council and other providers, and to ensure LLPs are not overly restrictive. T

here is also the need to review how we implement the policy in relation to applicants with outstanding debts being excluded from an offer of a social housing tenancy.

### **Improving access to housing for people on middle incomes**

One of the potential impacts of Covid-19 on the economy is that households previously on middle incomes could become more at risk of homelessness. We will consider how the council's own development programme might be able to help in providing private sector accommodation at sub-market levels, as well as at market rents to help cross-subsidise the wider new affordable housing programme.

### **Lettings policy**

The council is part of a sub-regional lettings policy which operates across six different neighbouring councils. Under the policy, homeless applicants to whom the councils owe the 'main' homelessness duty are awarded Band A (urgent need) priority.

Having a consistent policy which suits the needs of all partner authorities is inherently challenging, as needs in Cambridge are clearly different to those of some of the other districts. For example, as already highlighted the council is increasing the range of alternative housing options in addition to social housing; and rough sleeping is also a particular issue for the City.

The council will review the current policy and its impacts and consider whether being part of the current sub-regional approach is the best way of meeting local needs going forwards. Examples of issues to consider include: the priority given to statutorily homeless applicants on the register compared with the priority given to other groups including those at risk of becoming street homeless; how local connection criteria are applied; whether more priority should be available for multi- generational households or house-sharers; whether the offer to middle-income households should be improved; and whether those willing to take up a private rented sector offer should be awarded a higher priority banding.

## Improving access to and range of permanent accommodation

Moving forward the council will:

Explore how access to homes across a range of tenures might be improved, and how homes might be used more flexibly to meet a wider range of needs.

Encourage take-up of private rented sector housing options, including out of town lets, through better promotion, considering additional incentives and improving support available.

Improve engagement and partnership working with landlords, letting agencies and other private owners.

Consider whether additional incentives may be needed to improve the availability of private rented homes through Town Hall Lettings.

Review the council's Housing Benefit Plus scheme with a view to making it a more attractive option.

Work with housing providers to explore how better use might be made of existing homes

Work with housing providers with a view to increasing access to housing for those with high levels of need, and better alignment of council and other providers' allocations policies.

Investigate the feasibility of delivering more specialist forms of housing, and homes for people previously on middle incomes who may be at risk of homelessness, through the council's house-building programme.

Investigate potential for conversion of commercial property to good quality accommodation through the council's housing development programme.

Review the council's approach to Local Lettings Plans in the context of access to housing for those with high levels of need.

Review whether continuing to subscribe to the sub-regional Home-Link lettings policy can continue to meet Cambridge City's needs.

## Priority 3: Minimise use of temporary & emergency accommodation

### Introduction

However effective a homelessness service may be, there will always be situations where homelessness cannot be prevented and a household in need must be found an emergency or temporary home. The use of emergency accommodation – usually, in Cambridge, a local hotel – or the provision of a home intended to be occupied for a temporary period, is not necessarily a bad thing and, indeed, may be considered a necessary and commendable part of any authority's range of measures to help households in housing crisis. It is, however, undoubtably a bad thing if the emergency or temporary accommodation maintains a household in unsuitable accommodation for a lengthy period - especially if there are children in the household - and if the numbers in temporary accommodation are high relative to the supply of permanent homes.

As well as being a bad deal for homeless households, temporary and particularly emergency accommodation is a bad, high-cost deal for housing authorities.

Cambridge tries to minimise these problems by using its own council housing as temporary accommodation. At the time of writing our temporary stock numbers just over 100 units, the vast majority of which is owned by the council (our use of single homelessness and rough sleeping hostel accommodation is dealt with elsewhere in this strategy).

### Use of temporary and emergency accommodation

Following introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 56-day homelessness duty period, the numbers of people needing to be housed in temporary accommodation peaked in 2019/20, with families making up the largest proportional increase. The Covid-19 lockdown has since led to a fall in numbers, although this is expected to rise again following lifting of the temporary suspension of court proceedings. Rough estimates suggest that the council could see an increase in demand in the order of around 20% over pre-lock down numbers.

Length of stay has also increased, with some households waiting more than the statutory 56 days before being rehoused.

As mentioned, there are occasions when use of commercial hotels is unavoidable. This may sometimes mean people having to be located outside of Cambridge.

A special case of temporary accommodation has been our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, the council initially secured temporary use of a number of hotel rooms so that rough sleepers unable to isolate might be kept safe. We have more lately commissioned former student accommodation for this purpose. By December 2020, the council had housed over 200 people. At its peak there were 140 people under cover falling to around 60 by the end of the year. A commitment has been made to find a permanent home for everyone willing to work with us, and we have a target to have no further rough sleepers in Covid accommodation by April 2021.

### Reducing reliance on temporary accommodation

As has been mentioned several times in this strategy, a key future objective is to prevent households from becoming homeless, in turn reducing our need for, and reliance upon, temporary accommodation. Priorities dealt with elsewhere in the strategy, such as supporting people to remain in their homes, securing better access to permanent accommodation, and understanding how the current lettings policy may be impacting, are all important in trying to reduce reliance on temporary housing. In addition, the council needs to consider and/or enhance the use of other solutions, such as direct lets to homeless households outside of the Home-Link choice-based lettings system and reviewing the extent to which housing related debt should remain a barrier to being offered a home.

We also need to better monitor the speed of decision making on homelessness cases and how quickly we are able to bring an interim accommodation duty to an end. In addition, we need to keep decisions to place people in interim accommodation under regular review to ensure consistency of decision making.

It is also important to ensure that benefit claims are processed as swiftly as possible.

Although we need to reduce use of commercial hotels overall, we also need to explore opportunities for bringing in different types of commercial provision; in particular, for high need households for whom standard provision is unsuitable.

## Minimising use of temporary and emergency accommodation

Moving forward the council will...

Further develop our existing plan to reduce reliance on the use of temporary and emergency accommodation.

Continue work on identifying reasons for the recent increase in use of and length of stay in temporary accommodation, and keep information on demand under regular review.

Improve our approach to monitoring of pathways through interim accommodation, and regularly review placement decisions to ensure consistency in decision making.

Get a better understanding of the of the sizes and types of temporary and emergency accommodation needed.

Continue to look for alternative ways of providing temporary and emergency accommodation, including for those for whom standard provision is unsuitable.

Make use of council owned homes where appropriate.

Ensure that rough sleepers housed temporarily in hotels are moved into appropriate accommodation in a planned way so that they do not end up back on the streets.

Review the extent to which housing related debt should remain a barrier to being offered a home.

## Priority 4: Improve access to and effectiveness of support services

### Introduction

Whilst access to accommodation is essential for preventing and relieving homelessness, it is only part of the solution.

A significant proportion of households and individuals seeking housing advice and facing homelessness have a need for some form of additional support if their issues are to be addressed. Our Homelessness Review identified that of 1078 presentations in 2018-19, around two thirds were recorded as having support needs. Mental health support was the most common one recorded as a primary need, but many will have had multiple needs. Lack of appropriate support for such individuals or households increases their risk of being made homeless for the first time or becoming caught in a cycle of homelessness.

Public service cuts over recent years have taken their toll in terms of preventative services and are thought to be a key contributor to the numbers of people with high level and/or multiple support needs becoming homeless or sleeping rough.

### Improving joint working

Working closely with partners is key to helping people avoid homelessness, or at least the worst effects of homelessness. Under the Homelessness Reduction Act 'duty to refer', partnership working is now effectively a statutory requirement.

The council involves and supports – in some cases financially - a whole range of organisations in dealing with homelessness, including statutory agencies, contracted services, other housing providers and the voluntary sector. Single homeless and rough sleeper support, drug & alcohol services, supporting prison leavers, and services for those experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse are just a few examples. It is also important to ensure that people can access more generic services, such as those providing services such as: financial advice; access to education, training and volunteering/employment opportunities; and cultural & leisure activities.

The council has a long history of partnership working in relation to homelessness, with a strong commitment across most partners to work together. However, there is still significant need for improvement. All too often issues such as gaps in services, lack of resources, inadequate working protocols and absence of rapid referral routes can lead to people falling through the cracks. In some cases, duplication of services also needs addressing.

Mental health and substance misuse support is a particular area where working needs to become more joined up. Another area is in dealing with homelessness and anti-social behaviour linked to misuse of drugs and alcohol.

It is important that all partners, including the council as the housing authority, have clearly defined roles and a clear and agreed direction of travel in relation to preventing and tackling homelessness. Building on the improved understanding gained through our response to Covid-19, we need to review how non-commissioned voluntary services can be more effectively integrated with statutory and commissioned services.

Collaboration at a strategic level needs to be improved – particularly amongst statutory services – to ensure that those with a complex range of needs can receive the support they need. A list of key partners is at Annex 2.

### Homelessness Transformation

The homelessness Trailblazer service has taken joint working a step further forward over the last few years. Part of a multi-agency partnership across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, involving public, private and voluntary sector partners, it helps prevent people from becoming homeless by helping them to help themselves before they hit crisis point. Its main aim is to make homelessness the 'unacceptable outcome'.

However, more of a 'whole system' approach across services, agencies and the wider community will be needed if we are to achieve maximum effectiveness around homelessness prevention.

As a result of the recent county-wide Homelessness Transformation research (referred to previously in this Strategy) one of the recommendations the councils involved are exploring is the feasibility of having a fully integrated multi-disciplinary homelessness service across a range of agencies. Any proposals in this area would require full commitment to joint working from multiple partners, potentially including some co-location of services.

A key element of this from Cambridge City Council's point of view will be to ensure that the City's needs, as well as those of the wider Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area, can be appropriately met.

It will be important to engage not only partner agencies but also service users and the wider community in designing any new services.

## Improving access to and effectiveness of support services

Moving forward the council will...

Explore how working arrangements with mental health, substance misuse and social/ social care services can be improved, including investigating the potential for some co- location of services and/or development of multi-disciplinary teams.

Strengthen work with partners to provide a joined-up approach to preventing and tackling drug and alcohol related anti-social behaviour.

Improve monitoring of the underlying reasons for homelessness, to help inform service design, planning and operation.

Work to improve collaboration with statutory partners at a strategic level, including working with the County Council and other partners to explore the potential for a fully integrated, multi-disciplinary homelessness service across a range of agencies.

## Priority 5: Prevent rough sleeping

### Introduction

As previously highlighted, prior to additional temporary accommodation being provided in response to Covid-19, rough sleeping had become a growing and more publicly visible issue over recent years.

However, homelessness and rough sleeping, although often overlapping, are not necessarily the same thing. There are many people who are homeless who do not sleep rough, and some rough sleepers are known to have permanent homes, or at least a bed in a hostel or other temporary accommodation.

Similarly, street begging involves individuals who may or may not be sleeping rough, again some of whom are known to have access to accommodation.

The council has had a long-standing target of keeping rough sleeping numbers to fewer than 10 (as measured by street counts now carried out six times a year). However, 33 were identified in the autumn 2019 count and even in November 2020 when there remained more than 60 former rough sleepers in Covid emergency accommodation 16 people were found sleeping rough on the night of the count. 166 separate individuals were recorded as sleeping rough in Cambridge between April 2019 and March 2020, against a target of fewer than 135.

Our Homelessness Review identified that well over half of rough sleeping individuals identified in Cambridge over the period of a year appear to be new to the streets that year.

This is a complex area with no single solution. It is essential that we do all we can to promote early intervention to enable people to access accommodation and appropriate support and other services to reduce the risk of them moving onto the streets.

### Profile of rough sleepers

Rough sleepers and people at risk of rough sleeping tend to have multiple and complex needs, with a high proportion of rough sleepers in Cambridge having severe mental health problems and/or alcohol and substance misuse issues, including use of Class A substances. National research also shows that they tend to have higher rates of long-term physical health and mental health problems compared with the general population.

Other National research also identifies life experiences, threat of violence or abuse and lack of family and/or other support as just a few of the potential contributory factors.

Street homelessness disproportionately affects males, those who have experienced trauma, and those leaving institutional settings such as care and prison leavers. Although unlike some other areas there appear to be relatively few street homeless people in Cambridge who have been in the armed forces.

Around 1 in 5 Cambridge rough sleepers using Covid-19 hotel provision were identified as foreign nationals, many of whom were thought to have no recourse to public funds. However, our targeted work with those from the European Economic Area (EEA) has shown that it is possible to help those willing to work with us to find employment or otherwise gain pre-settled or settled status, allowing them to continue to live and work in the UK and access healthcare and any social security benefits they may be eligible to claim. We will build on the insights gained from this exercise so that we can assist any potentially eligible rough sleepers and will consider new eligibility rules following the ending of the transition period following Britain's departure from the European Union.

### Setting targets for rough sleeping

As previously stated, it is unlikely that we will be able to completely eliminate rough sleeping in Cambridge by 2027 in line with government aspirations. We propose a local target of fewer than 10 rough sleepers picked up in any one count by 2022, moving to fewer than five throughout the lifetime of this Strategy. We will also set a demanding target for the duration a person found rough sleeping remains on the street before being housed. This target will form part of the service specification for the proposed Streets to Home service.

### Early up-front prevention

To help young people to understand the implications and risks of leaving home without alternative accommodation being available, the council has formerly supported a programme of education within local schools, colleges and specialist young

persons' accommodation. We now think that a better approach is to target those likely to be at highest risk, and to better engage both young people and parents/carers at an early stage before the risk of homelessness arises.

We also need to improve how those at risk of rough sleeping are identified to help prevent the flow of new rough sleepers onto the streets.

### **Young people leaving care**

There is a strongly recognised link between rough sleeping and having been in local authority care. In Cambridge in 2016 just under 1 in 5 rough sleepers were found to have been in care at some point in their childhood. This broadly reflects earlier national research which estimated a figure of around 1 in 4.

It is essential that partners work effectively together to manage the transition between care and independence. There is a joint protocol between Cambridge City and Cambridgeshire County Councils for the assessment of 16 and 17 year olds, and we are also in the process of finalising a joint accommodation pathway protocol for care leavers.

For these protocols to be effective, they need strong and sustained commitment on all sides, and we need to ensure that they become fully embedded in the practice of all partners.

### **Prison leavers**

Homelessness prevention visits are made to people due to leave prison, but by the time the council is aware of someone being discharged it is often too late to provide effective homelessness prevention support. We will continue to work with the Police & Crime Commissioner and with prison and probation services to improve the approach to prison discharge, including considering extending the use of video links to carry out virtual housing assessments (introduced in response to Covid-19), and reviewing and revitalising the existing discharge protocol.

We also need to explore how links with each of the local prisons can be improved, and how individuals' housing needs can be identified and addressed at an earlier stage.

### **Access to accommodation**

There is no statutory requirement to provide temporary accommodation for single people not thought to be in priority need. This, combined with a shortage of suitable housing, means that people with no place to stay are at risk of moving onto the streets. The council's Single Homelessness Service assists single people not in priority need but at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping to quickly gain a secure home. So far, the scheme has assisted over 500 single people into private rented sector housing, but as highlighted elsewhere in this Strategy, lack of appropriate and affordable accommodation remains a challenge.

In terms of short-term accommodation, there is a need to explore, county-wide, how an emergency accommodation offer can be made available for anyone sleeping rough across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

### **Reducing the 'pull' of the streets**

As mentioned previously, some people who live on the streets already have access to accommodation. For many people it is difficult to understand why people would 'choose' to live on the streets as opposed to living in settled accommodation or taking up a hostel place.

National research has identified that as well as 'push' factors (such as eviction or abandonment - e.g., through poor housing conditions or threat of violence/abuse) other 'pull' factors are also influential. This may include a sense of community on the street, compared with boredom and isolation living alone. A recurring theme was the absence of both informal support (from family and friends) and formal ongoing support.

Local consultation has also identified that one of the benefits of living on the street is the ability to raise money through begging.

We need to improve public awareness of alternative ways of giving – including through Cambridge Street Aid, which funds individually tailored grants to help people to move off the streets.

We need to work with public health to try to tackle the root causes of begging, which are often related to drug and alcohol dependency issues. We also need to work with the police and other partners to explore how enforcement against begging and street-based anti-social behaviour can be improved in parallel with improved provision of accommodation and health and support services.

## Reconnections policy

Cambridge as a well-renowned city attracts people from across the region, the country, and indeed the world, some of whom sadly end up sleeping on the streets. This inward migration of rough sleepers is one reason why, prior to the Covid accommodation effort, numbers sleeping rough remain stubbornly above our target of ten.

The council has for many years had a policy of encouraging rough sleepers not connected to Cambridge to return to places where they may have family and friends able to support them. But individuals are free to choose where they live in an open society and there is an understandable and, probably, irreconcilable tension between making sure that we care for everyone who lands on our streets and seeming to encourage people to migrate to a city where services are good and local people are welcoming and generous.

One avenue we will wish to explore in the lifetime of this strategy is to work with our neighbouring local authorities, especially South Cambridgeshire District Council, to develop joint approaches to a shared rough sleeping problem which is sub-regional in origin but often manifests itself on the streets of Cambridge.

An ambition we will pursue under this strategy will be to gain a better understanding of where rough sleepers are coming from so that we can improve our approach for reconnection within the context of duties under the new Homelessness Reduction Act

## Preventing rough sleeping

### Moving forward the council will...

Improve our understanding of the nature and causes of rough sleeping in Cambridge.

Work with partners to understand how prevention activities as a whole can help identify those at risk of rough sleeping and help to intervene early to prevent the flow of new rough sleepers onto the streets.

Gain a better understanding of where rough sleepers have come from, develop a more proactive approach to reconnecting rough sleepers to where they came from, and review the offer available to those without a local connection.

Aim to keep the number of rough sleepers below 10 for any one count, reducing to five through the lifetime of the strategy; and agree additional targets around length of stay and time taken to make a housing offer.

Work with partners to explore how an emergency accommodation offer can be made available for anyone sleeping rough across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Review the current approach to education around homelessness prevention amongst young people.

Review the current approach to street begging and anti-social behaviour.

For people thought to have no recourse to public funds, ensure help is available for those who may wish to apply for pre-settled or settled status.

Promote and support effective implementation of the young people's assessment and care leaver protocols across all relevant partners.

Review the prison leavers' protocol and identify how prison leavers' housing needs can be identified and addressed at an earlier stage.

Work with South Cambridgeshire District Council to help prevent single homelessness within their district.

## Priority 6: Break the cycle of chronic and repeat street homelessness and rough sleeping

### Introduction

Once people have started sleeping on the streets there is a high risk of remaining there and we need to improve approach to stopping people getting caught in the 'revolving door' of street homelessness and rough sleeping.

Rough sleeping tends to last longer than other forms of homelessness and is much more likely to be cyclical. One London study in 2017-18 found that one-in-six people sleeping out in the capital in that year had returned to the street after a gap of at least a year. 19 This same pattern is familiar to us here in Cambridge.

Locally, although the majority of rough sleeping appears to involve those new to the streets in the last year, there are also significant numbers who have either returned to the streets or are 'entrenched' as rough sleepers.

There is also a surprising number of individuals who, having been found a home, remain deeply involved in the life of the streets, mixing intermittent rough sleeping with nights spent in their own home, often hosting associates from the streets - not always willingly.

It is often overlooked that for some rough sleepers the price paid for gaining a home is boredom and isolation, prompting disinterest in maintaining a home, the continuation of a street lifestyle and sometimes the abandonment of the accommodation. It is a strategic aim for us to better understand these factors, including the extent to which befriending schemes, skill sharing and peer support may help to anchor people in the home and neighbourhood. We will also want to analyse whether the alternative accommodation options we are developing - particularly our small, dispersed developments of compact modular homes and our experimental 'supported shared' homes where two friends live together – might better suit people with a street past than conventional one-bedroom flats which have hitherto been our best offer. Our innovative Housing First (HF) scheme which links two purpose-built HF flats to a third housing a 'good neighbour' is a further response to our current understanding of why people sometimes return to the street. Four flats over two schemes are anticipated to be completed in 2020-21 with a further five planned to be completed the following year.

### Improving hostel capacity

Although hostel accommodation does not suit everyone, it has an important part to play in supporting people off the streets and helping them to prepare for the move towards more permanent accommodation.

Around 345 beds are available in the city in hostels and dispersed 'move-on houses'. This is a significant number for a relatively small city, and we think adequate to meet the needs of the local rough sleeper population; although we need to better understand what an appropriate balance is locally between hostel and permanent housing provision.

However, there is an issue around the rate at which hostel places become available for new rough sleepers. Residents are expected to move on within two years, but a number stay for longer. Also, for some, two years may be too long to remain in an institutional setting.

While there are exceptions, the usual route into a mainstream homelessness hostel is through Jimmy's Assessment Centre. Slow rates of move-on from hostels affect the rate at which rough sleepers can move from Jimmy's, which in turn affects the rate at which people on the street can get a bed in Jimmy's.

More post-hostel accommodation and promoting and making private rented sector alternatives more attractive are needed if we are to move people through the hostels more quickly. We will also develop additional home-based support for people leaving hostels who feel they are still not ready to live independently.

We need to work with providers and other partners to help people move on more quickly. As well as advice and support to the services concerned, more challenging move-on target times are likely to be needed, as well as improvements in how progress through the system is monitored. There is also a need for better up-front information for residents and support workers on the range of accommodation and support options available to them.

Move-on discussions with individuals need to start as soon as possible after they have moved into a hostel and their position has stabilised. A 'Streets to Home approach' as proposed below could play a major part in this, to ensure that hostel discharges are well planned and accompanied by appropriate treatment and support.

South Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire District Councils currently have equal access, with Cambridge City, to hostel places in the City. With high levels of need just within Cambridge itself we need to consider the potential for reciprocal accommodation arrangements with other districts and support them to help increase hostel capacity with their own districts.

Although it is important to move people on, it is just as important to avoid unplanned move-on wherever possible, including through abandonment or eviction. Whether being excluded from moving to more permanent accommodation due to previous breaches of tenancy can be prevented also needs to be explored. We need to work with accommodation providers to review how incidents of eviction and abandonment can be reduced.

We need to work with the County Council to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of hostel accommodation compared with other housing options, to consider what balance of provision should be available moving forward.

### **Improving suitability of hostel accommodation**

We need to ensure that the supported housing available to individuals is suitable to for those presenting with complex needs. We will work with partners to review the scope and effectiveness of support provided in hostels, including in relation to move-on advice.

We also need to work with the County Council in considering the need for commissioning longer term supported provision for those for whom mainstream housing with support may not be suitable.

### **Access to housing**

As highlighted earlier, expanding access to homes that are affordable is an important part of the solution to preventing homelessness and keeping people off the streets.

We have already mentioned our Housing First model of accommodation for those with complex needs who are rough sleeping or have a history of repeat homelessness.

HF is not a panacea, but national and international research has identified it as being very effective for people for who have serially failed to maintain a hostel place or who refuse to go into a hostel. By some accounts it can also be a more cost-effective solution than hostel provision.

We plan to have 14 Housing First homes occupied by the end of 2020-21 with a target have a total of 24 HF homes of different types in this first phase of the project. At that point we will pause and review how successful HF has been - both for individuals and the wider community - and whether the programme should be expanded. We will also consider whether we can develop a private sector model of HF; our current project is based on social sector accommodation.

We are conscious that there is a tension between providing self-contained social accommodation through both HF and the HARP process, and negative perceptions of fairness among the wider number of applicants looking for a social home. Research on the views of hostel residents has identified that, understandably, most want social housing rather than a private rented tenancy, but we have been working, and will continue to work, to counter perceptions that a social tenancy is the only, and guaranteed, route out of homelessness or a hostel. The best antidote to this perception is for us to be able to demonstrate that a private rented option is a good and financially viable option and, as has been mentioned, we now have a wide range of schemes to make private renting easier, affordable and sustainable. We will continue to promote private renting to people needing to leave hostels and we will be reviewing our HARP process to see whether it might be expanded to include the offer of a guaranteed affordable private let rather than a social home.

The effect of our current approach to Home-Link applicant banding and moving towards more homes offered through Housing First is that around 20% of one- bedroom homes and 10% of all homes available through Home-Link are being let to single people with a street homeless background. Although it is important that housing is provided for this group, it does mean that others are having to wait much longer for a home, and it also presents challenges in achieving mixed and balanced communities to help meet our broader strategic housing objectives.

The position we want to achieve is that a social home will be available for people who have been street homeless, or who need to move on from a hostel, whenever there is an attested need for that this kind of tenure rather than a (perfectly understandable) preference for a social home.

We acknowledge a clear need for a flexible range of accommodation types for this group. Accordingly, the council has supported partners in the delivery of six modular units on Newmarket Road which are now occupied. In our market testing with

rough sleepers, fully self-contained but compact (around 25 metres square) modular homes scored very highly in terms of desirability and so we have also embarked on our own programme to provide up to 16 further modular homes on three council- owned sites across the city. These units have been donated by our development partner, Hill. This activity has taught us that it takes time to get modular homes through the planning process so we will look at whether an 'off the shelf' planning brief can be developed to help speed the process for any future developments.

We will investigate opportunities to work more collaboratively with other housing providers on projects to help prevent and tackle homelessness in addition to provision of social housing tenancies. This includes exploring whether there are opportunities for making use of any short-life and/or low demand social housing properties available – for example to single sharers or for general needs housing - through Town Hall Lettings.

We will also explore the potential for self-build and/or self-managed co-operative housing models for people who have been on the streets.

### **Streets to Home service**

A major focus up to now has been on providing services, such as day centre facilities, health services, education & skills development, welfare checks etc, to those living on the streets. There are also many informal voluntary and church-based services offering food, clothing and bedding to those living a street-based lifestyle. Rather than simply supporting people to remain on the streets, a major shift in approach is required if the cycle of street homelessness is to be tackled effectively.

The council is working with Cambridgeshire County Council and other partners to commission a comprehensive 'streets to home' service with the aim of helping people sleeping rough to rapidly get off the streets and into accommodation. Under a model which we are presently developing through consultation with service users and partner agencies we envisage there will be 'link worker' who will remain engaged with an individual throughout their journey from streets to home. This worker will not necessarily themselves provide services but will ensure that the individual is supported to get what he or she needs in what is inevitably a complex and sometimes challenging period of transition. Streets to home will view all rough sleepers as people with agency and ambitions for a better life. Accordingly, the starting point will be a thorough assessment of circumstances, need and the rough sleeper's own ambitions and goals, leading to an action plan agreed with, and shaped by, the rough sleeper themselves.

Once settled, new types of support services will be required which are tailored to individuals' needs, to help prevent people from returning to the streets.

To be successful this will depend on close collaboration with partners, including health and social care related support services, the voluntary sector, businesses and the wider community. We will also need to work closely with existing street-based services and with service users themselves to identify what role they can play in designing and facilitating this shift in approach.

### **Working with the wider community**

There has been considerable interest from the wider community in trying to deal with the problem of street homelessness and rough sleeping.

The community group It Takes a City (ITaC), along with other informal voluntary support services, have helped to enable a strong and collaborative approach to getting people off the streets in response to the coronavirus pandemic. We are strongly committed to building on this positive work, working with the community to help find more permanent housing solutions for rough sleepers and to help shape and implement new ways of working.

Among the things the experience of Covid has illuminated is that statutory and contracted services cannot do it all and that the value well-motivated, organised and properly integrated groups in the local community can add has the potential to be enormous. Accordingly, we intend to work with ITaC and other groups to support befriending, mentoring and skill-sharing initiatives.

It is also important to continue to increase public awareness of the issues involved and how they can help in keeping people off the streets.

## Breaking the cycle of chronic and repeat street homelessness and rough sleeping

Moving forward the council will:

Work with providers to help speed up move on from hostels, whilst at the same time reviewing how evictions and abandonments can be reduced.

Work with providers to review the scope and effectiveness of hostel-based support, particularly in relation to move-on advice.

Explore whether being excluded from moving on due to previous breaches of tenancy can be prevented.

Work with sub-regional authorities to help improve City access to existing hostel beds.

Work with the County Council to assess what balance between hostel and other accommodation might be appropriate going forwards.

Promote and make private rented housing a more attractive option, to help make it available to a wider range of applicants.

Review the effectiveness of the Housing First model of provision and explore whether it should be extended to include private rented sector homes.

Explore with social housing providers whether there are opportunities for short life or low demand social housing available, including to single sharers.

Expand the provision of modular homes, and explore other innovative ways of providing accommodation to prevent and relieve single homelessness.

Continue to seek and make best use of funding opportunities to purchase new homes to accommodate rough sleepers.

Work with the County Council in considering the need for commissioning longer term supported provision for those for whom mainstream housing with support may not be suitable.

Work collaboratively on shifting emphasis from a mainly streets-based towards more of a home-based service model.

## Funding the Strategy

As has already been highlighted throughout this Strategy, the work of partners is fundamental to meeting the proposed objectives and priorities; and each will, to a greater or lesser extent, have their own funding streams to draw upon.

For the council itself, the main sources of funding for dealing with homelessness and rough sleeping are a combination of its own resources together with government grant. The following is a list of what is currently available to support our work around homelessness and rough sleeping.

- Council General Fund resources
- Housing Benefit (for stays in bed & breakfast and Cornerhouse temporary accommodation)
- MHCLG flexible homelessness support grant
- MHCLG Homelessness Reduction Grant
- MHCLG Rough Sleeping Initiative Grant
- MHCLG Covid-19 rough sleepers contingency fund grant

Many of the government grants available for homelessness and rough sleeping require submission of bids for projects which meet the specific aims of that grant funding pot. The council will continue to work with partners to assess whether any funding which comes available can be used effectively to help meet the objectives in our Strategy, and to bid for funding where appropriate. The council will aim to write a series of 'off the shelf' bids which will enable it to act swiftly when bidding opportunities (which often have short timeframes for response) arise.

The full financial impacts of Covid-19 on local and national government spending, and funding available to other partners are not yet fully understood. This may of course pose risks to the extent to which some of our objectives can be met, at a time when a further increase in homelessness and rough sleeping is also highly likely. This makes it more important than ever that we take every opportunity to maximise and make best use of any resources available now and in the future.

## Implementing and Monitoring the Strategy

This Strategy will be accompanied by a detailed action plan, which will be outcome focused, with clear targets for delivery. (See Annex 6).

Delivery of this action plan will be overseen by a multi-agency Homelessness Strategy Steering Group, supported by existing operational partnerships and reporting through council governance arrangements. Existing partnerships will be used wherever possible rather than creating new structures.

## **Annexes**

