

Cambridge City Council

Review of Homelessness in Cambridge 2015

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This review has been carried out to inform our strategy in relation to homelessness, which will form part of the council's Housing Strategy 2016-2019. It has been collated mainly through internal and external data, and informal consultation with partners on our Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group. More detailed data is shown in Appendix 1 or via the footnotes to this review.

2.0 BACKGROUND

A number of pressures are contributing towards the risk of homelessness. High demand for housing leading to high house prices and private rents; a shortage of social housing for rent; increasing household bills; cuts in welfare benefits and an increase in the number of people in work and claiming benefits; and cuts in funding for statutory and voluntary services offering support to vulnerable people are just some of the issues putting households at risk.

The council has a statutory duty to house families with children and vulnerable people who are homeless through no fault of their own, and to provide advice and assistance to those threatened with homelessness. This service is provided through our recently restructured Housing Advice service, along with management of the Home-Link choice based lettings system for social housing.

To achieve our objectives we work with a number of other partners in the provision a range of wider services, including hostel accommodation, debt and employment advice, advocacy etc.

3.0 HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

Over recent years the council's emphasis has been moving away from automatically accepting households as homeless, towards a more proactive approach to prevent homelessness. Although the numbers of homeless applications have increased in recent years, the number of acceptances has gone down, with more households being helped to avoid becoming homeless. See [Tables 1& 2](#) in Appendix 1.

3.1 Enabling people to remain in their existing homes

Provision of debt advice – particularly through Cambridge Citizens Advice Bureau - has been the single most frequently used intervention to enable people to remain in their existing home. The use of financial advice and dealing with rent, service charge and housing benefit issues, peaked during 2012/13, at a time when the economy

was depressed and many households were first being impacted by welfare reforms. The need for these types of intervention are expected to rise again as further welfare reform takes hold, particularly the cap on Local Housing Allowance rises and the introduction of Universal Credit. Providing financial support from the homelessness prevention fund has also been an important tool.

Although it is not always possible to measure their impact, we should not underestimate the role that other initiatives such as tackling fuel poverty, incentives for people to downsize, maintaining standards in the private rented sector, interventions to enable people to return home from hospital, etc can play in enabling people to remain in their own homes. These are dealt with elsewhere in the Housing Strategy.

3.2 Preventing homelessness through enabling moves to alternative accommodation

Increasing numbers of households assisted to move have moved into supported accommodation.

Prevention through provision of social housing has also increased, particularly as a result of new social homes being built, but use of social housing to discharge our homelessness duty has dropped. (See Appendix 1, [Table 3](#) below)

Use of the private rented sector has increased considerably as a homelessness prevention option – mainly for single people, although this is challenging due to high rents and low Local Housing Allowance rates.

Our home visiting service has enabled more liaison to help households threatened with homelessness to secure accommodation with family and/or friends.

We need to try to further increase the supply of rented homes available. We have looked into whether private investment could be levered in for developing our own private rented housing, but with high land values, the financial returns were not considered sufficient to be attractive to investors. Private sector investment in private rent is a growing area nationally, and we need to keep a watching brief on developments to see whether this might become more of a viable option in the future.

We also need to do more to bring long-term empty private sector homes back into use to increase the supply of housing.

4.0 STATUTORY HOMELESSNESS

Where homelessness cannot be prevented, the council has a statutory duty to house people who are accepted as eligible for housing, in priority need, unintentionally homeless, and have a local connection with the district.

4.1 Profile of households accepted as homeless

The main household types accepted as homeless in Cambridge are: lone parent/pregnant households, couples pregnant/with dependent children, and one person households. The proportion of lone parent and single person households accepted has risen over the last five years.

Most homelessness acceptances are for younger applicants with dependent children and/or who are pregnant. Other reasons include physical disability, mental illness/disability, and fleeing due to violence – including domestic violence.

Acceptance of applicants with children or who are pregnant has dropped over the last five years. Although numbers are small, the proportion accepted due to physical disability has increased; this needs to be monitored as it is not yet clear whether this trend will continue.

Around a quarter of homelessness acceptances involve non-UK nationals. Most of these households originate from Eastern Europe – particularly Poland. There is a mix of nationalities represented from outside of the European Economic Area.

(See [Tables 4 & 5](#) in Appendix 1)

4.2 Reasons for losing settled home

(See [Table 6](#) at Appendix 1)

The main reasons for loss of settled home involve family or friends no longer willing to accommodate, loss of rented accommodation – particularly assured shorthold tenancies – and domestic violence.

Loss of home due to parents no longer being able or willing to accommodate has been considerably reduced, in particular through a focus on home visits aimed at liaising with families. However, the number and proportion of losses of home due to other family and friends being unable or willing to accommodate have increased.

Termination of shorthold tenancies is on the increase, which reflects the national trend. Rises in rent levels fuelled by high demand, and failure of Local Housing Allowance rates to cover even the cheapest rents in the City are major contributory factors. We need some more detailed analysis of what is happening to inform how prevention might be improved in these circumstances.

Instances of loss of home due to a violent partner had been reducing, but are starting to increase again. This reflects national evidence which suggests a link between domestic abuse and economic pressure. There has been a strong emphasis on moving victims away from their homes, which for many will be the most appropriate solution. However, with the impact this can have on families we need to improve our understanding of whether more victims can be enabled to remain safely in their homes, and whether more can be done in responding to perpetrators.

4.3 Use of Temporary Accommodation

Government targets required us to reduce our number of temporary accommodation units to 70 by 2010 (from 140 in 2005). There are currently around 85 households in temporary accommodation at any one time, and since the national target was removed we have been increasing the number of units - working towards a target of 90 units by the end of 2014/15. This accommodation currently includes a mix of hostel bed-spaces, dispersed self-contained units, bedsits, and one sheltered housing unit. Most are council-owned, but 16 are secured through relationships with other providers. We also have temporary accommodation sharing arrangements with South Cambridgeshire and East Cambridgeshire District Councils.

The average stay in the council's own temporary accommodation is 5 months, with shortage of suitable permanent accommodation affecting ability to move people on more quickly.

4.4 Use of Emergency Accommodation

Use of Bed and Breakfast (B&B) is costly, and for many households it is less suitable than other forms of temporary accommodation. Its use had been increasing, peaking in August 2013 when there were 30 households in B&B. We have since increased our supply of alternative accommodation by 13 units, and reduced our use of B&B. Since November 2013 there have been no more than three households in B&B at any one time.

Through use of alternative forms of accommodation we have also reduced the length of stay in Bed and Breakfast. Since January 2014 we have had no households with children or pregnant in B&B for more than six weeks. (See [Table 7](#) in Appendix 2).

There will always be cases where Bed and Breakfast is needed – eg for short-term emergency housing or for particular individual circumstances, but we need to keep its use to a minimum going forward.

4.5 Access to the private rented sector

The council runs an Access scheme offering rent guarantees and rent deposits to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, to help them to access private rented accommodation.

Although our sub-regional social lettings agency, Town Hall Lettings is having some success in supporting single people, access for family-sized households is declining, and housing couples without children can also be difficult.

This situation is expected to worsen as private rents continue to increase considerably faster than Local Housing Allowance rates – which are already insufficient to cover even the lowest rents in Cambridge.

We need to assess how we can improve access to the private rented sector for couples and larger households – eg through Town Hall Lettings.

5.0 SINGLE HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING

5.1 Preventing single homelessness and rough sleeping,

The number of individuals recorded as sleeping rough has reduced over the last three years – from 391 in 2012 to 244 in 2014. (See [Table 8](#) in Appendix 2)

Around 40% of rough sleepers in Cambridge have no local connection with the City – a figure which has remained relatively stable over the past three years. The number of clients successfully diverted from Cambridge had been dropping, but an increased focus on reconnection through our sub-regional reconnections policy over the last couple of years means that more people are now being reconnected to where they came from. In 2013/14, 30% of these were diverted/ reconnected outside of the UK – mainly to Eastern Europe.

A snap-shot survey of homeless people and rough sleepers in Cambridge using Jimmy's Cambridge, Wintercomfort and Street Outreach (CRI) services was carried out in 2014. Although the sample was too small to draw any firm conclusions, issues highlighted included access to employment and healthcare, access to children, risk of homelessness amongst care and prison leavers, etc. There are plans to continue survey work and use the results to target further actions.¹

5.2 Supported housing for single homeless people

A review of the allocation system for supported housing for customers in the middle age ranges (25-60) in the City has led to more efficient processes, and a clear rationale behind allocations, which has contributed towards the reduction in number of rough sleepers. The average length of stay at Jimmy's Cambridge has fallen considerably since it was converted from a night-shelter to an assessment centre (from around 56 days in 2010 to 25-35 days from 2013 onwards).

Services providing accommodation report problems with move-on due to shortage of suitable and affordable settled accommodation. We need to improve formal monitoring of move-on rates from supported housing, and assess whether more can be done to improve them.

5.3 Youth homelessness

Whilst the majority of rough sleepers in the City are aged 25 and over, around one in ten people accessing Wintercomfort's services are aged 16-24, and one third of referrals to our single homelessness service are aged under 25. Preventing young

¹ Cambridge Rough Sleeping & Homelessness Survey 2014

people from becoming homeless at a young age may, in some cases, help them to avoid entering a longer term cycle of homelessness and rough sleeping.

Partners have highlighted the need to do more to improve access to hostel accommodation and supported housing for young people, ensuring that hostel places are allocated to those in greatest need.

They have also highlighted concerns about continuity of support, and expressed a desire to work with young people to help reduce their risk of becoming homeless or sleeping rough - particularly those not in employment, education or training (NEET), and/or those in Pupil Referral Units.

5.4 Mental Health and Alcohol/ substance misuse.

Partners have reported a recent significant increase in the number of people rough sleeping who have mental health problems. However, the extent to which this is due to an actual increase in mental health problems, and/ or to changes or reductions in the support available or being accessed, is not entirely clear. The County Council's Mental Health Prevention and Community Services (floating support) team now has a remit to provide more focused support to homeless people, and we need to work closely with them to monitor the impact of this service.

Concern has been expressed that there is no longer any specialist clinical support for homeless people in Cambridge, and we need to work with partners to look at whether this can be addressed.

Many of those with enduring mental health problems also have alcohol or substance misuse problems which need addressing. Cambridgeshire County Council is developing a dual diagnosis strategy in recognition that responsibility for care and treatment of those with enduring mental health issues combined with substance and/or alcohol misuse problems, needs to be clarified. We need to work with the county to assess the need to commission specialist dual diagnosis services for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

5.5 Single Homelessness Service

(See Appendix 1 [Tables 9a & 9b](#))

Our grant funded sub-regional single homelessness service was launched in October 2013. It aims to provide accommodation for people who are homeless, and either rough sleeping or at risk of doing so, and whom the council does not have a statutory duty to house. It targets those with low or no support needs for whom provision of accommodation is key to solving their problems.

In the first year, the service received 184 referrals, with numbers increasing during the year as the service developed.

Most of the referrals to date (78%) have come from Cambridge City Council. Referrals are also being received from The Springs (an adult foyer providing bed placements with meaningful activity for single people with low support needs) in relation to clients needing to move on into more permanent accommodation.

Key reasons for referral to the service included eviction by parents/relatives, relationship breakdown, and end of tenancy. At the time of referral, over half were staying with friends and relatives, and around a fifth were rough sleeping.

In its first year the service placed 72 clients, mainly into: the adult foyer; the private rented sector – through Town Hall Lettings (see below) or the council's Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme; accommodation secured through three registered provider partners; and lodgings through Hope Cambridge.

Demand for the service is high, and we need to improve access to all types of permanent housing, as well as to interim accommodation.

5.6 Town Hall Lettings

Town Hall Lettings was set up alongside the Single Homelessness service as a grant funded pilot sub-regional social lettings agency aimed at securing private rented sector housing for single people. It offers guaranteed rent to landlords at or below Local Housing Allowance levels. At February 2015 nine properties had been secured – mostly shared housing - with the capacity to house 20-30 people, although only two properties were in Cambridge. This tends to be less attractive to landlords in the City owing to high housing demand, as they can generally charge higher rents to the wider market.

Funding for this and the Single Homelessness Service currently runs until 2016. Both projects will need to be evaluated to assess their effectiveness and whether they should continue to be prioritised.

5.7 Skills and employment

Over recent years the emphasis has shifted from relying on hostel accommodation providing short term housing solutions for single people, towards a model of accommodation combined with re-ablement, so that more people can be supported to make changes and live more settled lives.

Part of this involves enabling people to develop skills and access employment, and meaningful activity has become an integral part of the supported housing system. This includes a Learning and Development service for single homeless people and rough sleepers is provided through Wintercomfort, and an employment service currently provided through CHS Group.

5.8 Tenancy sustainment

Many of the people engaged in street-based anti-social behaviour in Cambridge, such as street drinking and begging, are not homeless, but have tenancies. These sorts of behaviours can, however, increase the risk of homelessness. Partners are working on various initiatives to deal with this – including tackling begging and a ‘reduce the strength’ campaign with off-licences in the City. We need to ensure that these interventions are as effective as possible to minimise the risk of homeless.

Lack of appropriate support can also severely affect a person’s ability to sustain a tenancy. Partners report that some individuals are experiencing a lack of continuity of support, that in some cases support is duplicated, and that in others individuals are falling through the net as they are passed between services. We need to work with the county council to assess whether people can be better helped into independent living through more effective and seamless services.

Person-centred solutions known to be effective for more chronically excluded adults. We need to understand better the extent to which this approach is being put into practice amongst partners, and how we can support them in overcoming any barriers.

6.0 FUNDING OF HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

The council administers a homelessness prevention fund, made up of a combination of council funding and government grant. As well as providing housing advice, and financial support directly to households threatened with homelessness as a result of short term financial difficulties or debt, a number of external services are grant funded from this pot. These services include: hostel and accommodation provision; housing and street-based outreach support; housing and debt advice; emergency financial support; employment, training and skills development; support for those fleeing domestic violence; alcohol and substance misuse support; street-based crime reduction; etc

The government’s contribution through homelessness prevention grant currently runs until 2016, so future availability is currently uncertain.

We need to review how our prevention fund is being used, including the criteria for offering grants to external bodies, to ensure that available funding is used in the most cost-effective way going forward.

The county council also funds some services which were previously paid for through Supporting People grant. With this grant no longer ring-fenced, there are concerns that homelessness-related services could be at risk as demand from other areas increases and budgets are reduced. We need to work with the other districts in the county to ensure that the importance of homelessness prevention in achieving wider outcomes is adequately recognised.

7.0 HOUSING REGISTER AND SOCIAL HOUSING LETS

(See [Strategic Housing Key Statistics](#))

Our sub-regional housing register, Home-Link, was reviewed in 2012/13, in the light of new government guidance giving more freedom to decide locally who should be eligible for housing, and welfare reforms affecting those deemed to be 'under-occupying' social housing. All applicants were removed from the register and invited to reapply. An annual rolling review of all applications is now being carried out.

There is high demand for social housing. At December 2014, there were 2,342 Cambridge applicants on the register.²

Over half of applicants eligible for one bedroom homes (ie where eligibility is defined by the national 'bedroom standard'), and around one third are registered for 2 bedroom homes.³ However, turnover of smaller properties is higher – for example in the period January to December 2014, over 40% of all lets were of one bedroom homes, and a similar proportion were of two bedroom homes. Only one in five were 3 bedrooms, and 2% were 4 bedroom homes.⁴ This indicates a need for a range of sizes of homes to house people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Around one fifth are banded due to overcrowding – most of whom are lacking one bedroom.

The need to tackle homelessness has been helped by an increase in the number of new social homes delivered since 2012/13, contributing to an increase in the number of homes being let. 704 homes were let during 2013/14, compared with 510 during 2012/13, and lettings have remained at similar levels during 2014/15.⁵ There is significant further housing growth planned for the City, and we need to continue to maximise the delivery of social homes for rent. (See Chapter 3 of the Housing Strategy). An increase in the number of council homes bought under the Right to Buy since discount rules changes is likely to have an impact on the number of homes available to let in the longer term if we are unable to achieve one for one replacement.⁶

8.0 CONCLUSIONS

This review has highlighted a number of key themes which will need to inform our Strategy:

² Strategic Housing Key Statistics, Table HL1(a) & HL1(b).

³ Strategic Housing Key Statistics, Tables HL2(a) & HL2(b)

⁴ Strategic Housing Key Statistics, Tables HL6(a) & HL6(b)

⁵ Strategic Housing Key Statistics, Tables HL7(a) & HL7(b)).

⁶ Strategic Housing Key Statistics, Tables CH4(a) & CH 4(b)).

- The impact of high rents, high house prices and other costs, low Local Housing Allowance rates and welfare reforms putting increasing numbers of households at risk of homelessness.
- The importance of continuing to prioritise homelessness prevention work.
- Need to assess whether more can be done to prevent people from losing their homes due to termination of tenancy in the private rented sector.
- Need to understand whether more can be done to support victims of domestic abuse to remain at home.
- Need to increase access to housing for all household types – particularly into the private rented sector.
- Need to ensure sufficient appropriate emergency and temporary accommodation is available for all household types, and that people are able to move on into settled accommodation in a timely manner.
- A continuing need to focus on minimising use of bed and breakfast where other solutions are more appropriate.
- Importance of tackling single homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Need to focus more on preventing and dealing with youth homelessness – particularly amongst young, single people.
- Need to promote and assist in improvements to support provided to vulnerable people by other agencies, including those with mental health and/or substance misuse issues and other chronically excluded adults.
- Need to continue to develop approaches to supporting people into education and employment.
- Importance of reducing the risk of homelessness amongst those involved in street drinking and/or street-based anti-social behaviour.
- Need to review how available homelessness prevention funding is allocated – including provision of grants to other agencies - to ensure that required outcomes are achieved in the most cost-effective way.
- The ongoing importance of working closely with a wide range of partners to achieve our objectives.

Appendix 1: Data to inform Homelessness Review

(See also [Strategic Housing Key Statistics](#))

Table 1: Number of households presenting as homeless, and number accepted as homeless and in priority need.

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Homeless applications: Decisions made	150	168	144	169	189
Homeless applications: Accepted	126	137	112	124	127
Acceptances as a percentage of decisions made	84%	81%	78%	73%	66%

Table 2: Total number of cases where positive action was successful in preventing or relieving homelessness

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15 first three quarters
Assisted to remain in existing home	163	243	249	201	134
Assisted to move to other accommodation	60	101	119	203	183
Total prevented/ relieved	218	344	368	404	317

Source: P1E returns

Table 3: Number of social housing lets in preventing homelessness and discharging homelessness duty, as a percentage of all lets

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15 first three quarters
Number of social housing lets - prevention	10	22	28	48	45
Number of social housing lets - discharge of duty	not avail	80	63	71	57
Total number of social housing lets	559	332	510	704	495
Prevention cases - percentage of all lets	2%	7%	5%	7%	9%
Discharge of duty - percentage of all lets	not avail	25%	12%	10%	12%

Source: P1E returns

Table 4 Household types accepted as homeless –as a percentage of all households accepted

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15 first three quarters
Couple with dependent children/pregnant	41%	32%	35%	25%	22%
Lone parent/pregnant households	35%	45%	45%	48%	52%
One person household	13%	11%	15%	16%	13%
All other household groups	11%	12%	5%	11%	13%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total	137	112	124	127	112

Source: P1E returns

Table 5 Reasons for acceptance, as a proportion of all acceptances

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15 first three quarters
Households with children/pregnant	83%	84%	82%	79%	76%
Physical disability	2%	1%	1%	8%	4%
Mental illness or disability	11%	7%	9%	6%	10%
Fled due to violence	3%	0%	2%	2%	2%
Other	1%	8%	6%	5%	8%
Total number	138	112	126	128	114

Source: P1E returns.

Table 6 Reasons for loss of settled home

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15 1st three quarters
Parents no longer willing or able to accommodate	39	33	27	22	16
Other relatives or friends no longer willing or able to accommodate	13	12	24	28	14
Violent breakdown of relationship, involving partner	19	16	12	22	19
Termination of assured shorthold tenancy	30	25	18	20	28
Other loss of rented/ tied accommodation	10	4	12	10	8
Other	26	22	31	25	27
Total	137	112	124	127	112

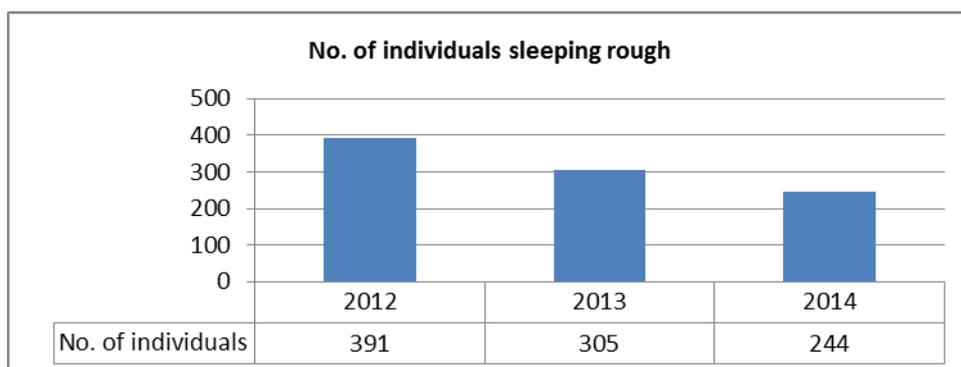
Source: P1E returns.

Table 7: Number of households with children or pregnant in B&B at the end of each quarter

	Q2 2012	Q3 2012	Q4 2012	Q1 2013	Q2 2013	Q3 2013	Q4 2013	Q1 2014	Q2 2014	Q3 2014	Q4 2014	
No of households	5	5	6	10	5	11	2	2	2	2	1	
Households there for more than 6 weeks	4	5	1	2	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	

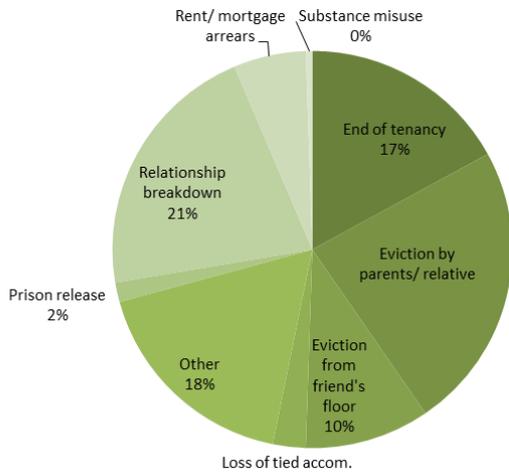
Source: P1E returns & internal data

Table 8: Number of individuals sleeping rough



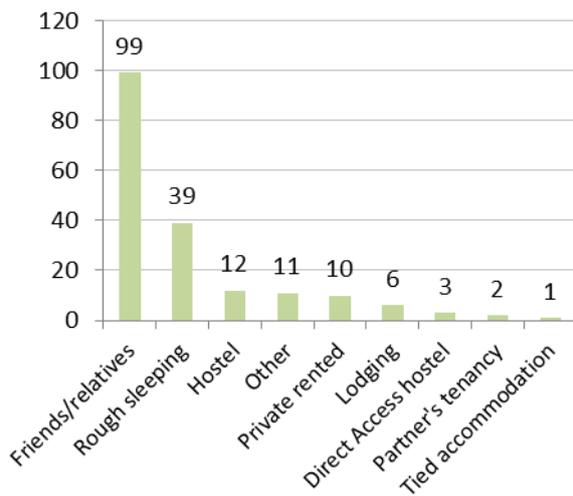
Source: Cambridge Street Outreach Team

Table 9(a) Reasons for referral to Single Homelessness Service



Source: Single Homelessness Service First Year Review 2014

Table 9(b) Where clients were living at time of referral to Single Homelessness Service



Source: Single Homelessness Service First Year Review 2014