

Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019 – 2024

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1. Introduction

Homelessness is a complex issue, arising from the causes and effects of different decisions taken within a wider system. To prevent homelessness we need to get to the root causes and not just the symptoms. The council cannot do this alone but with the support of a range of partners the homelessness service is already making a difference.

This strategy for preventing homelessness and rough sleeping builds on the recent review of homelessness and rough sleeping. It sets out the steps the council and its partners will take to prevent and relieve homelessness and rough sleeping. The strategy is underpinned by an action plan which will be updated each year.

The strategy has been developed in partnership with customers, partners and stakeholders, all of whom gave time, energy and ideas. The work has been supported by HQN, who undertook the review of homelessness services earlier this year. We welcome the commitment of our staff, partners and stakeholders to delivering this strategy and helping to eradicate the misery of homelessness for all of those living and working in the North Devon area.

2. Context

There is a statutory requirement for local authorities to carry out a homelessness review and publish a new homelessness and rough sleeping strategy at least every five years, more frequently if circumstances change. This was originally enshrined in the 2002 Act with additional requirements set out in subsequent legislation. There is also advice set out in the statutory Code of Guidance.

This strategy sets out how North Devon Council (NDC) will continue to meet the new duties which were introduced from April 2018, under the 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act.

NDC covers a largely rural area with Barnstaple as the main market town. The population is projected to increase over the period of this strategy. Around a quarter of the current population are over retirement age. 20% of the population have a disability or long-term limiting illness which affects their day to day activities. Two areas are in the most deprived 10% in England.

The housing market is characterised by low wages and high house prices and rents. There is a high proportion of second home ownership and a low proportion of social housing when compared to the national averages.

3. Summary of findings of homelessness review March 2019

NDC has a strong track record in preventing homelessness. Although the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) has brought its challenges, NDC was better prepared than many local authorities with prevention already embedded at the heart of the homelessness service.

Preventing homelessness is a high corporate priority. Despite the huge financial pressures on the council, additional resources have been found to fund the service, such as the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant for additional staffing and NDC capital funding to replace expensive temporary accommodation with high quality accommodation which will deliver savings. NDC also has a strong track record in attracting external funding for initiatives to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping.

NDC has also shown that it can move quickly to tackle issues that emerge. A good example would be the new Temporary Accommodation (TA) strategic approach which was agreed by a cross-party Member working group.

NDC has a strong track record on partnership working, particularly around preventing and tackling rough sleeping.

The number of people approaching the council who are at risk of becoming homeless has remained at broadly the same level for over five years. The advent of the HRA means however that more work has to be done with these households. Successful prevention means that the number of people for whom a main duty is accepted had not risen for a number of years, but last year saw a significant increase in new duties owed due to the requirement of the HRA. During the period October-December 2018:

- NDC received 442 new housing advice and homelessness requests for assistance
- 411 statutory homeless decisions were assessed and completed, compared to an average of 50 per quarter in the last year
- Homelessness duties to 229 households were accepted compared to an average of 22 households per quarter in the last year
- Homelessness was prevented or relieved for 188 households.

The reasons people became homeless in 2017/18 include:

- Would be unreasonable to remain in the property
- Asked to leave by family/friends
- Given Notice to Quit by landlord
- Fleeing violence and harassment
- Sleeping rough.

There were also a small number of cases evicted by social landlords and repossessed by the mortgagor.

Successful prevention outcomes include mediation or negotiation, resolving benefits and arrears issues, providing support and providing financial support (generally in the form of a loan). Where homelessness was prevented by securing alternative accommodation, around

half of these involved financial assistance. About half of households go into (or back into) the private rented sector, with 30% accessing social housing.

NDC's successful prevention and relief performance (under their new duties) compares well against national performance; intervening earlier and assisting more households into accommodation.

Numbers in TA are beginning to go up. In 2017/18 158 new households went into TA; in but for 2018/19 the forecast number is 183. The average number of nights spent reduced throughout 2017/18 but has begun to rise again in 2018/19, to 68 nights in quarter 3 (October-December 2018).

NDC has a significant population of rough sleepers, placing it within the top 50% of national authorities. The number of people sleeping rough has fluctuated over the last eight years, recorded as 12 in December 2018. Despite targets for prevention and relief of rough sleeping being met, the number of new 'at risk' of rough sleeping cases have been increasing over the past three years, with 125 people sleeping rough during 2017/18 and 123 in the first three quarters of 2018/19, an average of ten new cases per month. .

Key challenges for NDC are:

- Continuing to prevent homelessness in a high proportion of cases; to relieve homelessness through a move to alternative accommodation wherever possible; to aim for the lowest possible number of households to become homeless
- Maintaining services despite significant financial pressures and likely cuts in external funding
- Supporting people to move on from TA more quickly so that TA does not become silted up
- Expanding the data available to begin to move to a position where NDC can predict those more likely to be at risk of becoming homeless and to target interventions accordingly
- Ensure that new duties under the HRA continue to be embedded into its own approach and services and also that of partner organisations.

4. Key themes

Preventing homelessness is a key priority for the council and its partners. NDC will continue to work closely with a wide range of partners to ensure that homelessness prevention remains a priority and is considered when developing related strategies and policies.

NDC will work systemically to address the wider causes of homelessness, whilst recognising that the council cannot do this alone.

This strategy has been structured around the following key themes:

- Increasing the supply of affordable housing and making best use of existing stock
- Preventing homelessness and supporting homeless households
- Ensuring a cost-effective supply of good-quality Temporary Accommodation
- Reducing Rough sleeping in line with the Council's own homelessness and rough sleeping strategy and with government targets
- Addressing specific needs.

5. Increasing the supply of affordable housing and making best use of existing stock

We will:

- Continue to secure affordable housing through S106 in line with existing Council policy; 75% of this to be housing at social rent and the balance as intermediate forms of housing for sale or rent (eg, shared ownership, discounted sale)
- Continue to work with Registered Providers (RPs) to deliver new affordable housing at social rents
- Explore feasibility of establishing a Local Housing Company or similar model to enable increased delivery of affordable housing
- Continue to offer recoverable loans to those who would otherwise be unable to access the private rented sector
- Continue to work closely with the private sector housing team to drive up standards in the private sector, work with landlords to ensure good and fair management of rented properties and to tackle empty homes. Make full use of existing powers as appropriate
- Build on the work of the private sector access team to increase access to good quality privately rented accommodation for those at risk of becoming homeless, exploring additional services models as appropriate
- Introduce licensing scheme in line with current Environmental Health and Housing Service Plan
- Work with Help to Buy South West to ensure appropriate information is available to those who could be considering low cost home ownership options
- Continue to ensure that Devon Home Choice balances the needs of those who have become homeless against those who are at risk of becoming homeless and those with a high level of housing need
- Work with RPs to ensure most effective use of existing stock. In particular, RPs are committed to tackling under-occupation of larger family homes, and to reviewing their sheltered housing to ensure this continues to meet a high level of housing need.

6. Preventing homelessness and supporting homeless households

6.1 Universal prevention

We will:

- Provide early advice about housing options, rights and responsibilities; this will include self-service advice online
- Provide initial advice about benefits, money management and debt
- Provide information about the availability of housing and how to access different options
- Provide information about common causes of homelessness and what households should be doing to prevent themselves becoming homeless
- Continue to deliver a prevention approach which encourages customers to resolve issues for themselves wherever possible without creating barriers to the service or gate-keeping
- Continue to prevent homelessness for the majority of people approaching the service
- Improve our understanding of the characteristics of those who are at risk of becoming homeless so that we can ensure our service meets the needs of everyone in the community.

6.2 Targeted prevention

We will:

- Continue to employ a specialist officer to work with young people to provide tailored advice and support
- Provide tailored advice and support for older people on housing options including adaptations to existing property
- Continue to liaise with other agencies such as hospital, prison etc to identify those at risk of becoming homeless
- Work to predict those likely to be at risk of becoming homeless in future and make proactive contact before a crisis arises
- Continue to embed duty to refer. This has been implemented and will help to identify those at risk of becoming homeless. One RP has already signed a voluntary agreement in line with duty to refer and it is intended to roll this out to other RPs working in the area.

6.3 Crisis prevention and relief

We will:

- Ensure easy and quick access to advice and information online, by telephone and face to face for households who may be at risk of becoming homeless
- Continue to work proactively with households to avoid them becoming homeless, offering range of interventions matched to need. This may include financial support which will generally be offered as a loan
- Provide advice on benefits, budgeting and debt with option to refer on for more specialist advice as needed
- Continue to create a Personal Housing Plan for all those at risk of becoming homeless, setting out clearly what the applicant must do and what the council will do
- Support young people to remain at home where appropriate and undertake a planned move where required; undertake home visits where appropriate, offer mediation as necessary
- Continue to support cross-organisational fora, (eg. Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC)) to ensure a joined-up and holistic approach to those with identified needs
- Regularly review causes of homelessness and develop new approaches as required.

6.4 Supporting those who become homeless

We will:

- Where appropriate, provide suitable temporary accommodation for homeless households
- Comply with all duties under the legislation in a timely manner
- Support households to access alternative accommodation in the private rented sector or through Devon Home Choice.

6.5 Recovery and sustaining tenancy

We will:

- Provide support as required to establish the household in the new tenancy. Where this is a private sector tenancy the council is able to offer support. RPs will offer support to those who have accessed their homes
- Where a loan has been provided to enable the household to access the tenancy, contact will be maintained during the period that the loan is being repaid. This will

generally be sufficient time for the new tenancy to be well established. Where there is a pattern of recurring homelessness or other cause for concern, the council will maintain contact over a longer time period

- Increase resilience of households who have experienced homelessness by supporting them to create a community/social network which can provide support in the longer-term, e.g. through social prescribing.

7. Temporary accommodation

We will:

- Provide good quality temporary accommodation(TA) for those who have become homeless where no other solution is possible
- Implement the TA strategic approach, purchasing properties to be owned and managed by NDC for TA so as to ensure the most cost-effective provision
- Continue work to maintain the number of nights that people spend in TA to the minimum possible.

8. Preventing and addressing rough sleeping

We will:

- Continue to work closely with partners to provide a joined-up multi-agency approach to preventing and addressing rough sleeping, sharing knowledge and resources to deliver the best outcomes
- Provide full wrap-around support to those sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough, providing psychologically informed recovery services which help to achieve and maintain stable housing
- With partners, including Devon County Council (DCC), evaluate the benefits of a new commissioning approach for support services, particularly for those with complex needs. This could take the form of an Alliance, in line with DCC proposals
- With partners, evaluate options for rough sleepers to access appropriate health care, perhaps through a link General Practitioner (GP) model or similar
- Continue to support those who have slept rough into education, training or employment in order to maximise their chances of maintaining a life away from the streets
- Evaluate the Housing First pilot and consider whether this model could be adopted on a longer-term basis; as part of this evaluation we will also evaluate direct matching to support long-term rough sleepers into accommodation

- Explore ways of ensuring that the Safe Sleep scheme can continue beyond the identified funding period, and consider whether Safe Sleep should be available all year round
- Continue to maximise opportunities to lever in additional funding, especially for new approaches
- Implement the current rough sleeping action plan, which includes additional resource to support those with mental health issues.

9. Addressing specific needs

We will:

- Encourage the development of new homes to higher standards of mobility with in-built flexibility to enable older people and those with a disability to remain independent
- Continue to effectively administer Disabled Facilities Grants to enable adaptations that will allow someone to remain in their home for longer where this is appropriate
- Work with partners to find creative solutions for under 35s who are only eligible for the single room rate local housing allowance; this could include shared housing and lodgings schemes
- Implement the agreed Gypsy and Traveller strategy, which includes a need for further transit sites to be provided across Devon.

10. Partnership working

We will:

- Continue to work closely with a wide range of partners to ensure that preventing homelessness remains a high priority and that all partners are contributing to this work
- Collaborate with the One Northern Devon Partnership to bring together NDC's housing services with Devon Integrated Care System to improve the health and wellbeing of north Devon residents. Ensure that issues relating to mental health and homelessness continue to be debated and understood and that planning for mental health services takes into account the needs of homeless households
- Work with partners to maximise funding available for preventing and responding to homelessness through the widest possible range of opportunities
- Create opportunities for strategic discussion of homelessness patterns and trends with appropriate partners at least annually. This may be a separate event or may take place as part of another event or meeting, as appropriate

- Evaluate Devon-wide working groups to ensure that participation in these remains an effective use of time and resources. Consider whether Devon-wide groups offer opportunities to lever in funding and/or to lobby government on key policy areas.

11. Consultation

In carrying out the review of homelessness and developing this strategy, a range of different consultation activities were carried out. These included:

- Three workshops for all partners, one focused on the review, one on the strategy and one specifically on rough sleeping. Altogether over 30 people attended these, representing more than twenty different organisations. These included:
 - Devon County Council – a range of different services including Children’s Services, Adult care services, public health, community services and commissioning
 - Torridge Council
 - RPs including North Devon Homes
 - Representatives from police and probation
 - Representatives from health sector including those sitting on the Clinical Commissioning Group and GPs
 - Voluntary sector organisations including those working with rough sleepers.
- A workshop for Members
- Two workshops for staff, again focussing on the review and strategy respectively. All staff had the opportunity to attend these workshops
- Interviews with customers. Interviews took place at the Council offices in Barnstaple and at the Freedom Centre for rough sleepers.

In addition, the draft strategy has been widely circulated for feedback, including posting both the review document and the strategy on the Councils website, with a supporting questionnaire. Six responses were received, all of them supportive of the aims of the strategy.

This strategy sits within the context of, and supports:

- The Council’s emerging Corporate Plan
- The Local Plan for Northern Devon (covering NDC and Torridge but excluding Exmoor National Park)
- Environmental Health and Housing Service Plan.

12. Equalities Impact Assessment

An equalities impact assessment has been carried out and published alongside this strategy.

13. Action plan

This strategy will be underpinned by an annual action plan. The action plan for 2019/20 is included at appendix one.

Appendix one: action plan 2019/20

New actions for this strategy are detailed below. Actions included in other services action plans or strategies are not included.

Year one

- Continue to work closely with the private sector housing team to ensure their work supports homelessness prevention
- Work with RPs to ensure most effective use of existing stock. In Year one, this could focus on tackling under-occupation
- Review data gathered about the characteristics of those who are at risk of becoming homeless to ensure services meet the needs of everyone in the community
- Extend voluntary duty to refer to other RPs working in the area
- Explore potential funding options for social prescribing (led by GPs) to help increase resilience of households who have experienced homelessness by supporting them to create a community/social network
- With partners, including Devon County Council, evaluate the benefits of a new commissioning approach for support services
- With partners, evaluate options for rough sleepers to access appropriate health care, perhaps through a link GP model or similar
- Pilot new models of co-ordinated service delivery via the One Northern Devon Partnership. Ensure that issues relating to mental health and homelessness continue to be debated and understood and that planning for mental health services takes into account the needs of homeless households
- Evaluate Devon-wide working groups to ensure that participation in these remains an effective use of time and resources.

Specific to rough sleepers:

- Increase in Reach or floating support
- Appoint substance misuse worker
- Ensure additional specialist support from Police Community Support Officers
- Extend role of rough sleeper co-ordinator, ensure counts undertaken, co-ordinate outreach – all on track and/or ongoing
- Maintain database of rough sleepers, fortnightly hub meetings
- Ensure Severe Weather Emergency Protocol provision
- Maintain and develop partnership working including with the police, Devon and Cornwall rough sleeping partnership, prison discharge and drug-related deaths, and DCC
- Evaluate Housing First pilot, continue quarterly review meetings
- Provide £10,000 for landlord incentives to enable appropriate clients to access PRS either from supported accommodation or directly from the street
- Appoint Community Psychiatric Nurse to support clients with mental health needs and complex needs
- Support North Devon Home's bid for move-on for rough sleepers.

Year two

- Explore with landlords service models which would facilitate increased access to the private rented sector for those with a high level of housing need
- Work with RPs to ensure most effective use of existing stock. In Year two, this could focus on reviewing sheltered stock to ensure it continues to meet housing need
- Provide tailored advice and support for older people on housing options
- Work with partners to find creative solutions for under 35's who are only eligible for the single room rate local housing allowance
- Create opportunities for strategic discussion of homelessness patterns and trends with appropriate partners at least annually. This may be a separate event or may take place as part of another event or meeting, as appropriate.