

# **Huntingdonshire District Council**

## **HOMELESSNESS & ROUGH SLEEPING - REVIEW & STRATEGY**

**December 2021**



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## 1. Introduction

The Council is required to review homelessness within the district and update its Homelessness Strategy every five years. The previous review and strategy took place in 2017 just prior to the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which came into effect in April 2018. The Act implemented the most significant changes to the homelessness legislation in 40 years, by amending certain parts of Homelessness Act 2002, and this review and revised strategy is timely given that we are three years into a transformed way of working. It also allows us to reflect on more recent changes within the national policy context, the impact of the pandemic as well as reflecting on emerging local issues and pressures.

The legal framework that we must consider when preparing this strategy is contained within the Homelessness Act 2002, as amended. The Act requires all Councils to formulate a Homelessness Strategy and in preparing this they must carry out a review of homelessness in their area. The strategy must then:

- address the causes of homelessness in the area;
- introduce initiatives to prevent homelessness wherever possible;
- provide sufficient temporary accommodation for those households that are or may become homeless; and
- ensure that appropriate support is available for people who have previously experienced homelessness in order to prevent it happening again.

The Council recognises the devastating effect that homelessness can have on households and that good quality housing providing a stable and secure home environment contributes to the health and wellbeing of our residents. It was one of key themes highlighted within the Council's 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement (AGS). This identified the link between housing affordability leading to homelessness and constraining growth.

Each theme within the AGS is wide ranging and will be delivered only if a strategic and collaborative approach is taken. The fact that homelessness and the associated area of affordable housing delivery is registered as a key risk places this on the highest possible footing in terms of the priorities that the Council must tackle.

The Council has included within its strategic priorities, contained within the Corporate Plan 2018-22, objectives and key actions that support the work that will flow from this strategy to help address homelessness:

## Corporate Plan 2018-22:

Vision:	People – Support people to improve their health and well-being.	
Objective:	Meeting the housing & support needs of our population	Develop stronger and more resilient communities to enable people to help themselves
Key Action:	<p>Continue to develop and support early homelessness prevention initiatives in line with the new duties contained within the Homelessness Reduction Act, to help residents remain in their current homes or find alternative housing</p> <p>Ensure that the principles of earlier interventions aimed at preventing homelessness are embedded within public sector organisations and other stakeholder partners</p>	<p>Working with communities to build resilience.</p> <p>Supporting community development and enabling the voluntary and community sector to develop</p>

## 2. Our Strategic Priorities.

This five-year strategy covers the period 2021-26 and from the review of homelessness in the area we have highlighted 4 broad priorities that will be the focus of our efforts over the life of this strategy.

There are a range of objectives linked to each of these priorities and we will develop annual action plans around these objectives to help us, working with our partners and the wider community, achieve those objectives. By developing an annual action plan this will allow us to respond to the evidence base as this develops throughout the lifetime of the strategy as well as any emerging national and local policies.

### Priority 1: Preventing homelessness.

Given the challenges we face around increasing homelessness it is critical that we continue to put homeless prevention at the heart of everything we do. In particular this principle will form the basis of how we respond to the economic hardships faced by our residents impacted by the pandemic. Being flexible and agile, adapting to local needs as we emerge through the recovery stages of the pandemic will be key in meeting future issues that may lead to homelessness if not tackled.

We will find new ways of both understanding and addressing the factors that can lead to homelessness - such as the ending of private sector tenancies, family/relationship breakdown and discharge from institutions. We will also

develop a greater understanding of the impact of wider social issues such as poverty and disadvantage, unemployment, poor health and wellbeing and lack of access to affordable, decent homes. We believe this will greatly increase the chances of positive outcomes for people at risk of becoming homeless.

### **Key Objectives**

- Develop further preventative actions based on the evidence of what has previously been successful in preventing homelessness both at a local and national level.
- Understanding and tackling the economic impacts of the pandemic that may otherwise lead to homelessness.
- Embed the early intervention principles and systems that were seen to be successful through the Homelessness Trailblazer pilot.
- Develop greater understanding of the ‘triggers’ that are causing tenancies to end, especially in the private rented sector; and why relationships and/or families are breaking down – to allow new opportunities for prevention to be identified and implemented.
- Monitor and act on the impact of the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act within the Council’s Housing Advice & Options service and with partner agencies.
- Review and analyse the information that we gather in relation to homelessness and we will adapt future services and interventions in response to what we learn.
- Continue to effectively communicate with people about how to avoid the risk of homelessness, ensuring that advice and appropriate support is readily available.

### **Priority 2: Providing appropriate temporary accommodation and aiming to reduce its overall use by securing accommodation for people who are homeless.**

#### **Key Objectives**

- To link this strategy with the targets to increase affordable housing supply including an increase in the supply of move on accommodation for all supported housing pathways.
- Reduce the use of bed and breakfast and nightly paid temporary accommodation, instead providing appropriate temporary accommodation options in partnership with Registered Provider partners.
- Provide support to households placed in temporary accommodation to help them address issues that may be barriers to moving into settled housing.
- Develop a greater understanding of what may encourage private landlords to increase the supply of affordable rented accommodation and how we may assist with making this a realistic housing solution.

### **Priority 3: Establishing effective partnerships, working arrangements and support to those who are threatened with homelessness, to improve their resilience and reduce the risk homelessness occurring.**

The previous homelessness strategy emphasised partnership working to co-ordinate activity and focus combined energies on preventing homelessness and improving services for homeless people. With this new strategy we wish to develop this approach further. Over the life of this strategy, we will forge new relationships with our partners and ensure that our collective efforts to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping are effectively aligned.

#### **Key Objectives**

- Continue to establish appropriate pathways for customers between agencies which reinforce the early identification of factors that may be likely to lead to a risk of homelessness.
- Align efforts and resources with partners to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Build on and improve existing processes to ensure an effective 'duty to refer' from all relevant public sector bodies as set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act.
- Work with Cambridgeshire County Council to embed the 'Think Communities' approach across the district.
- Ensure that the Council's workforce have the appropriate skills to apply 'Making every contact counts' principles when assisting customers
- Challenge and resolve barriers to effective service delivery as part of business as usual.

### **Priority 4: Supporting rough sleepers to address their housing and other needs.**

Although the intelligence-based estimates show relatively low numbers of rough sleepers in the district our priority remains to prevent all forms of rough sleeping. We recognise that these figures represent just the 'tip of the iceberg', for example with many more people having to 'sofa surfing' and at risk of rough sleeping.

#### **Key Objectives**

- Support and evaluate the pilot Street Outreach service, in particular to better understand the causes of local rough sleeping as well as the pattern and locations of rough sleepers.
- Support rough sleepers who are ready for independent living to move into longer-term accommodation and to sustain their tenancy.
- Evaluate and adapt housing pathways, and develop new ones where they do not exist, to ensure they meet the needs of those living with complex needs as well as new/emergent client groups.

- Build on existing work with partner organisations to develop appropriate supported housing solutions, such as a 'Housing First' model, for homeless people with the highest level of need.

### **3. National Policy Context**

#### **Homelessness Reduction Act**

The Homeless Reduction Act was introduced in April 2018, making some of the most significant change in terms of how local authorities should work towards preventing homeless in their area. The Act's main thrust is to refocus local authorities' efforts to prevent homeless and to do this in co-operation with other local partners. The Act has amended Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 and its measures include:

- An extension of the period during which an authority should treat someone as threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days.
- A new duty to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness irrespective of priority need.
- A new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants irrespective of priority need.
- A new duty on public services to notify a local authority if they come into contact with someone they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
- Clarification of the action an authority should take when someone applies for assistance having been served with a section 21 notice of intention to seek possession from an assured shorthold tenancy.

#### **Rough Sleeping Strategy**

The Government launched its Rough Sleeping Strategy in August 2018. It is based around three core pillars:

- Prevention - providing timely support before someone becomes homeless;
- Intervention – helping people who are already in crisis get swift, targeted support to get them off the streets;
- Recovery - supporting people to find a new home quickly and rebuild their lives via a new rapid rehousing approach.

The principles of this strategy are very much in line with those introduced through the Homelessness Reduction Act and the Government's commitment is to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027.

The Government has introduced several funding bid rounds since the launch of its strategy to help local authorities devise innovative solutions to help deliver on the three core pillars explained above.

The Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy highlights that those who sleep rough are more likely to have experience of institutions such as prisons, the care system or the armed forces. Local authorities should be mindful of the impact of these types of institutional backgrounds that may lead to rough sleeping and put in place assistance and timely interventions. This should include putting in place effective pathways for those prior to leaving these types of institutions to minimise the chances of homelessness and rough sleeping.

## **Welfare reform policy**

In 2015 the Government announced a package of welfare reforms which would have an impact on household incomes in general, with some having a direct impact on the ability of households to meet their housing costs. These included:

- Lowering the household benefit cap threshold from £26,000 for a family and £18,200 for a single person, to £23,000 in London (£15,410 for a single person) and £20,000 (£13,400 for a single person) elsewhere in the UK.
- A four-year benefits freeze.
- Limiting support through Child Tax Credits/Universal Credit
- Replacing Support for Mortgage Interest with Loans for Mortgage Interest
- Reducing social housing rent levels by 1% in each year for four years from 2016-17

The National Audit Office's report 'Homelessness' in 2017 examined the impact of certain welfare reforms. It found that a substantial amount of variation in levels of homelessness between different local authorities is associated both with the broad character of different areas and with the proportion of households in an area receiving housing benefit to help pay their rent. The risk of homelessness is greatest for households in areas of high economic activity on the margins of being able to pay market rents for their homes.

The impact of welfare reforms that change the balance between welfare benefits received and the affordability of local housing is therefore likely to have a wider impact on homelessness.

## **Troubled Families Programme**

This programme has been running from 2015 to 2020, being run and delivered by all 150 upper tier Local Authorities and their partners. Although this programme is not specifically aimed as homeless prevention it aims to address many of the issues that are the main risk factors associated with homelessness, for example worklessness and problem debt, poor school attendance and attainment, mental and physical health problems, crime and anti-social behaviour, domestic violence and abuse and children who are deemed as in need of help.

The programme is driving service transformation in local authorities, changing structures and processes, strengthening partnership working and promoting 'whole-family' working. These are the same objectives that local housing

authorities are aiming to achieve in order to deliver effective homelessness prevention. Innovative local authorities are therefore building on the foundations of the Troubled Families Programme in order to help achieve transformation in the delivery of homelessness prevention services.

### **Domestic Abuse Act 2021**

The new Act received Royal Assent in April 2021 and it is expected that most of the provisions will come into force during 2021/22. The Act will improve the effectiveness of the justice system in providing protection for victims of domestic abuse and bringing perpetrators to justice. It will also strengthen the support from statutory agencies for victims of abuse.

In terms of homelessness the Act will amend the legislation to that all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have 'priority need' for homelessness assistance. This may previously have been a barrier for some receiving assistance from local housing authorities at a time when they most needed it and so this amendment to the legislation is welcomed.

## **4. Local context – policies, projects and transformative programmes.**

The Council has a clear commitment to address and resolve the housing difficulties faced by our communities, and in particular those that lead to homelessness. There are a number of local policies, projects and transformative programmes that will shape how public services as a whole respond to homelessness. These are summarised below:

### **The Grand Challenges**

The Cambridgeshire Public Services Board (the Chief Executives' group representing the public sector agencies across the area) defined a vision for Cambridgeshire. This vision is split into four Grand Challenges that each public sector service should aim to contribute to and there are clear links as to how successful homelessness prevention may contribute to these challenges. The Grand Challenges are:

- Giving people a good start in life
- Ensuring that people have good work
- Creating a place where people want to live
- Ensuring that people are healthy throughout their lives

### **Huntingdonshire District Council Housing Strategy 2020 -2025**

The Council updated its Housing Strategy in 2020 and states the ambitions of the Council to address the housing needs of the area. This highlights the link between the economic growth and the associated housing pressures that this can

create, in terms of providing a range of affordable tenures for a growing workforce.

This links back to the National Audit Office's report on homelessness referred to above, that the risk of homelessness is greatest for households in areas of high economic activity on the margins of being able to pay market rents for their homes. Similarly though, the risk of homelessness is also great in times of an economic downturn and this is why the economic effects of the pandemic are most likely to have an impact on homelessness in the immediate future. These issues are covered later in the strategy.

Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping form one of the main priorities of the Housing Strategy and this document is a sub-strategy to that document that covers this in more detail.

### **Housing Advice & Options preventative services**

The Council invested in a restructured and increased homelessness prevention service at the time of the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act. Initially the immediate response was for Council to ensure it fulfilled the new duties contained within the Act but recognised that the change in the law was only the beginning. A significant cultural shift was needed to change ways of working; to accelerate the better use of data, use new methods and improve collaboration between different institutions and services early on.

Establishing these new ways of working has been the focus of this team and continues to be so. The following transformative programmes link directly to this different way of working and so must be considered in the whole to ensure that efforts and resources are aligned with partners to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

### **Homelessness Trailblazer Programme**

The Council together with partners from Cambridgeshire and Peterborough successfully bid for funding through the Government's Trailblazer scheme in September 2016. This was in preparation for the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, identifying distinct areas of work that could contribute to homelessness prevention through earlier interventions. The funding was available for 2 years, going live in the second half of 2017.

The Trailblazer team has led on reviewing pathways between partners that contribute to the homelessness prevention agenda and establishing new pathways where they previously did not exist. Through these pathways they received 1365 referrals from other agencies and achieved 482 successful homelessness preventions across the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area. Although the funding from Government lapsed the partnership committed to continue with the Trailblazer programme through to December 2020. This allowed the completion of certain priority areas of work as well as an evaluation

of the programme and how it links into the wider homelessness transformation agenda (see below).

### **Housing related support commissioning and the potential for wider homelessness system transformation**

In counties with two tier local government, the County Council has historically received the funding for and commissioned housing related support services.

These services help people to live independently or move on to independent living, supporting a wide range of client groups such as: older people or frail elderly people with mental health problems; homeless people; women at risk of domestic violence; people with substance misuse problems; offenders; young people and teenage parents; people with physical or sensory disabilities; and people with learning disabilities.

A key part of these services is to support the individuals or families to be able to sustain their accommodation, or help set up their home for the first time, so that they are able to live independently successfully. They play an important part in both preventing homelessness across all the client groups listed above as well as helping households move through a homelessness crisis back into settled accommodation.

Cambridgeshire County Council is currently reviewing the services it commissions, specifically looking at those that support homeless households. To support this the County Council has consulted with the District and City Councils on the steps it intends to take to re-commission certain services as well as investigating whether there are opportunities at the same time to re-design services. This work is being supported by a commissioned piece of research to ensure that the Housing Related Support review and service redesign work is underpinned by the best possible understanding of the needs of our vulnerable homeless population.

The research reported in April 2020 informing the drafting of the County Council's Housing Related Support Strategy and the possible opportunities to redesign or reconfigure models of delivery, taking account of relevant recommendations and any identified good practice. The County Council has delayed its re-commissioning of those housing related services supporting adults until 2022 and the local housing authorities continue to be consulted and involved with this process as it is progressing.

### **Think Communities Approach**

The Think Communities Approach is being developed with partners from across the public sector in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This approach focuses on developing an innovative set of principles and ways of working that the public sector across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will implement to ensure our citizens are at the heart of our decision making.

8 workstreams have been identified as part of this approach with many of these intrinsically linked to the delivery of 'joined up' services that will help facilitate homelessness prevention within our communities. Examples of how these principles will be linked to transforming homelessness prevention services include:

**Strategic Coherence & System Facilitation** – that will provide the system with the strategic leadership to ensure Think Communities is delivered, and to ensure the public sector works as a single system, with communities at the heart of place-based delivery.

**Communications** - developing new communication platforms that engage our communities and workforce, making it easier to find the right information, and that enable new behaviours that help residents and staff identify and access alternative services.

**Workforce Reform** - transforming and engaging our workforce to deliver Think Communities outcomes. This will be achieved by:

- Developing new skills and core behaviours
- 'Unlearning' traditional ways of working
- Listening to and understanding our communities
- Enabling our staff to work in a 'less permission, more innovation' environment
- Blurring organisational boundaries where appropriate, lawful and safe to do so.

As the Think Communities approach is developed and refined this will help inform any transformative opportunities for the delivery of homelessness prevention activities across the range of public sector organisations.

The following two projects commenced prior to the pandemic and although our response to Covid-19 has meant that these initiatives did not receive the same focus, the principles within them formed much of the basis for how the Council and its partners worked together during the response stages of the pandemic. They have strong synergies with the 'Think Communities' approach and we will ensure that the commonalities between these are brought together to avoid duplication and to maximise efficiency and scale in terms of transforming multi agency prevention working.

## **Project Pathways**

Prior to the pandemic the Council initiated a project examining how we structure and deliver services to our most vulnerable customers, preventing a revolving door of presentations. This took into scope all frontline customer contact and the interplay between Citizens Advice, Job Centre Plus, CGL (substance misuse services) and Everyone Health (health & well-being services) who all offer services at the same location in Huntingdon.

We recognised that despite ever greater collaboration between our teams, the risk is that services remain silo based. This project aims to create a seamless service for customers. Evidence showed that to meet growing demand the most cost-effective response is to tackle the issues that generate the demand and so working in partnership with others to proactively predict and solve problems, building self-reliance and social capital on the way, we aim to deliver services to customers that better resolve the range of difficulties they face.

A particular strand of this project will include workforce development and reform, with the aim of achieving the same outcomes as highlighted under the Think Communities approach above.

### **Huntingdon North Initiative**

The Oxmoor is within Huntingdon North ward making up the majority of its residential areas. It is characterised by social housing built between 1965 and 1975 as ‘London Overspill’ to accommodate the additional housing needs of the capital. Individuals with their families moved to the area with their employers and as a result enjoyed a life as one big community.

More recently things have changed and Huntingdon North Ward is now one of the most deprived wards in Cambridgeshire. This deprivation assessment takes account of factors such as income, employment, education, health, crime and access to housing.

The Council held two ‘Developing Oxmoor’ events in 2019 involving a wide range of partners and stakeholders to identify the local issues. The priorities identified at those events all linked to the Grand Challenges that have been set by the Cambridgeshire Public Service Board and operational boards were established under each of these headings to deliver against the identified priorities for the ward.

Although the pandemic has meant that the focus shifted to responding to Covid-19 the learning from this initiative, the priorities for the local community, together with the wider public sector services and networks that have been established will continue to be developed as we move through the recovery stage of responding to the pandemic.

### **Delivery of affordable housing**

The Council’s Local Plan to 2036 was adopted in May 2019 and it sets out the approach to securing sustainable development in the district to meet identified needs. This includes ensuring that housing development in Huntingdonshire contributes to the delivery of affordable housing. As is looked at in later sections of this strategy, affordable rented housing is one of the main ways in which homelessness can be prevented and relieved and so making sure that sufficient numbers of affordable homes in order to meet identified needs, is essential.

## **The Council's Lettings Policy**

This policy determines who will be considered for the social rented housing that becomes available in the district and how these households should be prioritised. The policy ensures that those households that legislation states must be prioritised, including those that are owed certain homelessness duties, are offered sufficient priority. This helps with the prevention of homelessness as well as assisting those households placed in temporary accommodation to move into a settled home so as to minimise the impact of becoming homeless.

The Lettings Policy was amended to take account of the changes introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act and has been reviewed again in 2020/21 to ensure that it continues amongst other things to contribute to the prevention of homelessness and relieve homelessness where prevention is not possible. The policy will go live in the summer of 2021 as all Home-Link partner authorities take the revised policy through their local adoption processes.

## **Health & Well-Being Strategy**

Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council have consulted on a joint Health and Well-Being Strategy that aims to address many of the important factors which affect residents' health and social, economic and environmental well-being. The upper tier local authorities recognise that the lower tier authorities, including Huntingdonshire, provide many services which are key to health and wellbeing, and so are engaged in the development of this strategy.

Many of the factors affecting health and well-being are recognised as contributory factors leading to homelessness or are experienced as a consequence of someone suffering homelessness. The Health & Well-Being Board's draft strategy includes an objective directly relating to the prevention of homelessness and improving pathways into housing for vulnerable people and the Council will be actively involved in the contributing to the workstreams that develop from this.

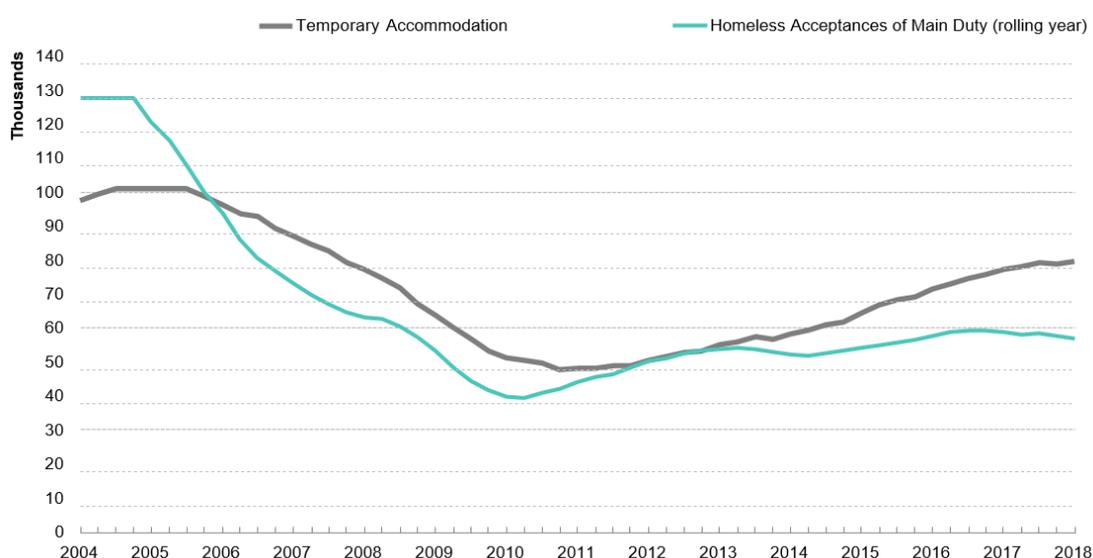
## **5. Homelessness in Context - The National Picture**

The introduction of new duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) from April 2018 has led to changes in how homelessness is recorded by local authorities and reported nationally. This has led to some issues with comparing trend data across the years. It is therefore best to consider what happened before the introduction of the HRA and what has changed post-April 2018.

Prior to April 2018 local authorities recorded the number of households that they owed a duty to secure accommodation because of their homelessness. Over the last 9 years prior to the introduction of the HRA the general trend had been an increase in homelessness, measured by the number of households that local authorities in England accepted as 'statutorily' homeless.

The financial year 2010/11 saw a 10% increase in homelessness acceptances by local authorities over the previous year, representing the first financial year increase since 2003/4. Homelessness acceptances continued to rise over the next three years but fell by 3% between 2012/13 and 2013/14. The 2014/15 financial year recorded a further increase, with acceptances 36% higher than in 2009/10. Acceptances increased again in 2015/16 and 2016/17 but fell by 4% in 2017/18 compared to the previous year.

### Households accepted by local authorities as owed a homelessness main duty, and the number of households in temporary accommodation, quarterly 2004 to 2018, England



Source: MHCLG Housing Statistical Release December 2018

### Impact on numbers of households placed into temporary accommodation

As homelessness rates increased local authorities were required to find temporary accommodation and ultimately settled housing solutions for those households in need. The ability to find permanent housing solutions is challenging and influenced by the affordability of the housing options available in local housing markets. Many households approach local authorities for housing assistance when faced with homelessness because they are unable to find an affordable solution themselves. This often means that the local authority is not able to resolve their homelessness by helping to source a private rented tenancy, particularly for those households on lower incomes. In these circumstances social rented housing is likely to be the only realistic affordable solution to resolve a homelessness situation.

The availability of social, or affordable rented properties in appropriate numbers therefore affects the ability of local authorities to move households from temporary accommodation into settled homes. During a period where lower numbers of new affordable homes were been delivered, at a time of rising

demand, the impact was increasing numbers of households being accommodated in temporary accommodation awaiting moves into settled homes.

The chart above illustrates the link between the growth in the number of households in temporary accommodation from 2013, above the rate of homelessness growth, because of the inability of local authorities to provide sufficient number of affordable settled housing solutions to move these households through temporary accommodation.

### **Causes of homelessness**

The most significant factor contributing to the increase in homelessness since 2010/11 has been the growth in the number of households being evicted from private sector tenancies through no fault of their own. This growth correlates to the financial crash of 2009 and the resulting austerity measures, in particular the introduction of the welfare reform programme and changes to the Housing Benefit system. The indication is that this has led to housing affordability becoming an increasingly significant issue, as more households facing the end of a private tenancy are unable to find an alternative that they are able to afford through their own income or with the assistance offered through the Housing Benefit system. This affordability issue has led to some households having only one option, to approach local housing authorities for help with housing.

This trend continued, leading to it becoming the single largest cause of homelessness in 2014. There was a downturn in the number of households accepted as homeless caused by loss of a private sector tenancy in 2017/18, although it still accounted for 1 in 4 of all homelessness acceptances by local authorities. By the end of 2017/18 evictions of households by family or friends becoming the highest cause of homelessness nationally, being slightly above evictions from private sector tenancies.

### **The National Picture – Post April 2018**

Following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018 households are now initially assessed as being owed either a prevention or a relief duty. In general terms the prevention duty applies where someone is threatened with homelessness within 56 days. If their homelessness is not prevented and they become homeless they are then owed a relief duty for a further 56 days. If their homelessness is not relieved within this timescale and other conditions are met, then the person may be owed a main housing duty (similar to the old legislation prior to the introduction of the HRA).

In 2019-20, 288,470 households were owed the new prevention or relief duties, which is four times the number of households owed the 'main duty' in 2017-18 prior to implementation of the HRA. Whilst these types of duties are not directly comparable, there has clearly been a significant increase in the number of households receiving a statutory homelessness service through the change in legislation.

There has been no notable change in the number of households who are owed a prevention duty at first assessment from 2018-19 to 2019-20. However, there has been an 18,170 household or 14.9% increase in households owed the relief duty and 71.0% of this increase is attributed to single adult households, which indicates that the overall increase in those who are recorded as homeless and owed a relief duty, is driven by more single adults coming forward for and receiving help.

Households with children are more likely to be owed a prevention duty at initial assessment (63,650 households) than a relief duty (33,530 households), which suggests that more families are receiving help earlier. Single adult households are the largest group of households owed a prevention or relief duty, representing 60.1% of all households who had a duty accepted. Single adult households are more likely to access support when they are already homeless than when they are threatened with homelessness, 99,910 or 57.6% of single adults are initially accepted under the relief duty. Of the households that were owed a duty in 2019-20, those that were owed a prevention duty were more likely (58.5%) to have an accommodation secured outcome than households owed an initial relief duty (40.0%).

Accommodation secured under the prevention duty is more likely to be in self-contained private rented sector accommodation at 36.3%, or in a social rented sector registered provider tenancy at 21.7%. This reflects households with children being more likely to receive help under the prevention duty, and being more likely to be in private rented sector accommodation on approach. Accommodation secured at relief is more likely to be a social rented supported housing or hostel offer at 26.6%, which reflects the higher proportion of single adults being assisted under relief duties.

## **Rough Sleeping**

Local authorities are required to carry out street counts or evidence-based estimates of the number of people sleeping rough in their local areas. These are single night snapshots of the number of people sleeping rough that allow authorities to understand the extent and impact of rough sleeping so that they are able to provide or commission appropriate services to assist rough sleepers off the streets.

The most recent published figures coincided with a national lockdown throughout November 2020 and the tier restrictions in October. This is likely to have impacted people's risk of rough sleeping and should be noted when comparing this year's annual snapshot figures with previous years. The ongoing 'Everyone In' scheme helped to protect thousands of vulnerable people during the pandemic, including those sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough. By November 2020, the scheme had supported around 33,000 people with nearly 10,000 in emergency accommodation at that time and over 23,000 already moved on into longer-term accommodation since the pandemic began.

As a result the number of people estimated to be rough sleeping had fallen with 2,688 people estimated to be sleeping rough on a single night in autumn 2020.

This was down by 1,578 people or 37 % from last year and down 43 % from the peak in 2017. Nearly half (44 %) of all people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn 2020 were in London and the South East.

The national statistics break down instances of rough sleeping by region and certain regions have seen significant decreases with the East of England recording the second largest reduction of 42% from 2019 to 2020.

Although rough sleeping is not solely problem faced by men, of the 2,688 people found sleeping rough in the autumn 2020, 85% of these were male.

## **6. The Local Picture – a review of homelessness and rough sleeping in Huntingdonshire**

### **Pre-Homelessness Reduction Act**

The trend in homelessness in the district has been similar to national trends, showing an increase in the number of statutory acceptances by the Council up until the introduction of the HRA in April 2018. The number of households accepted as homelessness increased from 169 in 2010/11 to 254 in 2017/18, a 50% increase, although the number of homelessness acceptances plateaued and remained constant between 2015 and 2018.

The welfare reform programme and continued increases in the cost of privately renting in the district has meant that more households see social/affordable rented housing as their only realistic option. This has undoubtedly contributed to the number of households approaching the Council for assistance when faced with homelessness.

The lack of properties available within Local Housing Allowance rates in the private rented sector meant that opportunities to help households into this sector as a successful homelessness prevention reduced, resulting in fewer successful preventions from 2010 to 2014.

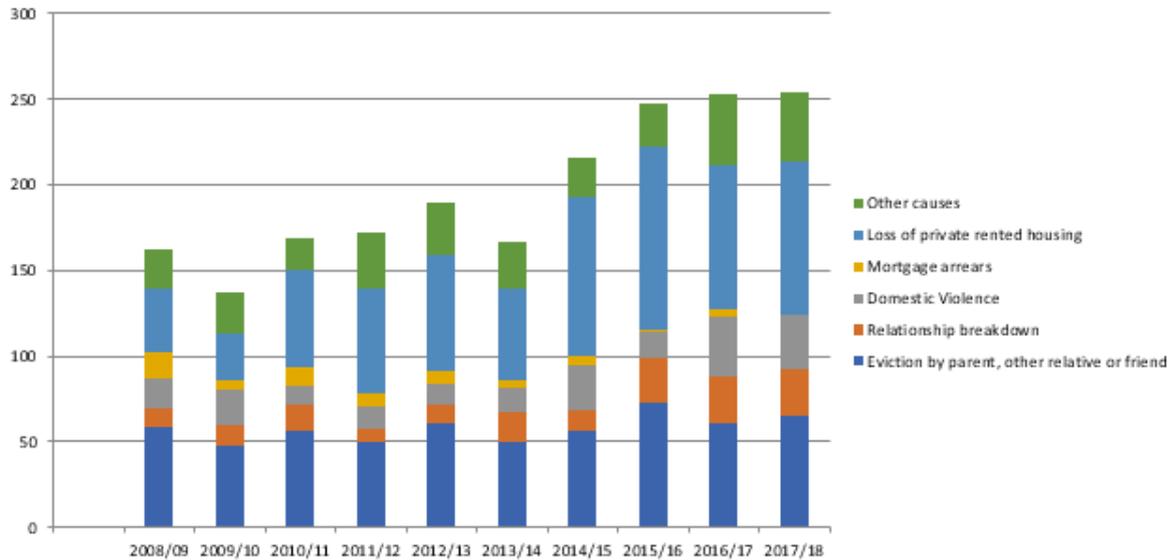
However, refocusing prevention efforts in areas where earlier interventions have been able to have an impact has led to an increase in overall preventions since 2014. This undoubtedly contributed to keeping statutory homelessness acceptances constant from 2015 to 2018 and it is likely that acceptances would have been at a higher level without these successes.

### **Local main causes of homelessness**

The causes of homelessness within the district are consistent with the national picture: eviction by parents, other relatives and friends and relationship breakdown (violent and non-violent) continues to be significant causes but as at the national level the end of private sector tenancies has grown considerably and since 2010/11 has been the single largest cause of homelessness in the district.

Although national trends saw a downturn in the number of households becoming homeless from the private sector in 2017/18 this was not experienced locally (although the previous year had seen a slight downturn). It remained the largest cause of homelessness accounting for a third of all homelessness acceptances.

### Households accepted as statutorily homeless (main duty) by reason for loss of last home - for Huntingdonshire between 2009/10 - 2017/18



Source: MHCLG Statutory Homelessness Live Tables

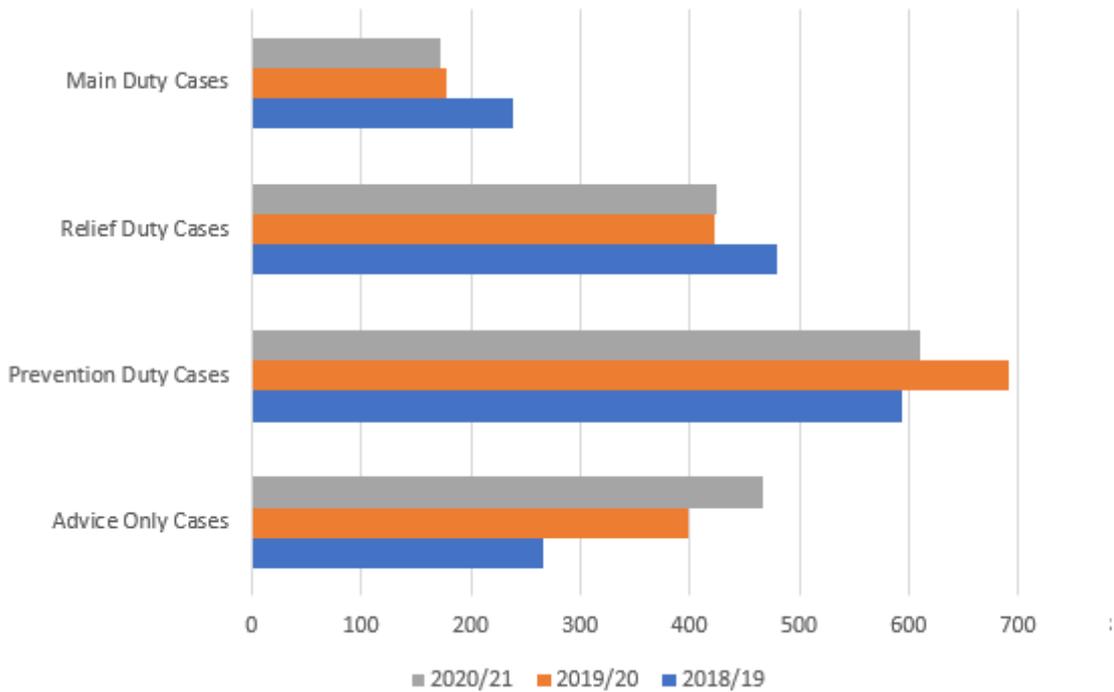
### Post Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA)

2018/19 saw the first year of recording homelessness under the terms of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA). It is important to remember that some households that did not have their homelessness prevented at the initial stage will have been considered under later duties (leading to some double counting). The breakdown of the differing stages of assistance are shown in the chart below. The data from 2020/21 is include but this has yet to be verified by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. It is also important to remember that 2020/21 data will be affected by the pandemic which will be reviewed in a later chapter.

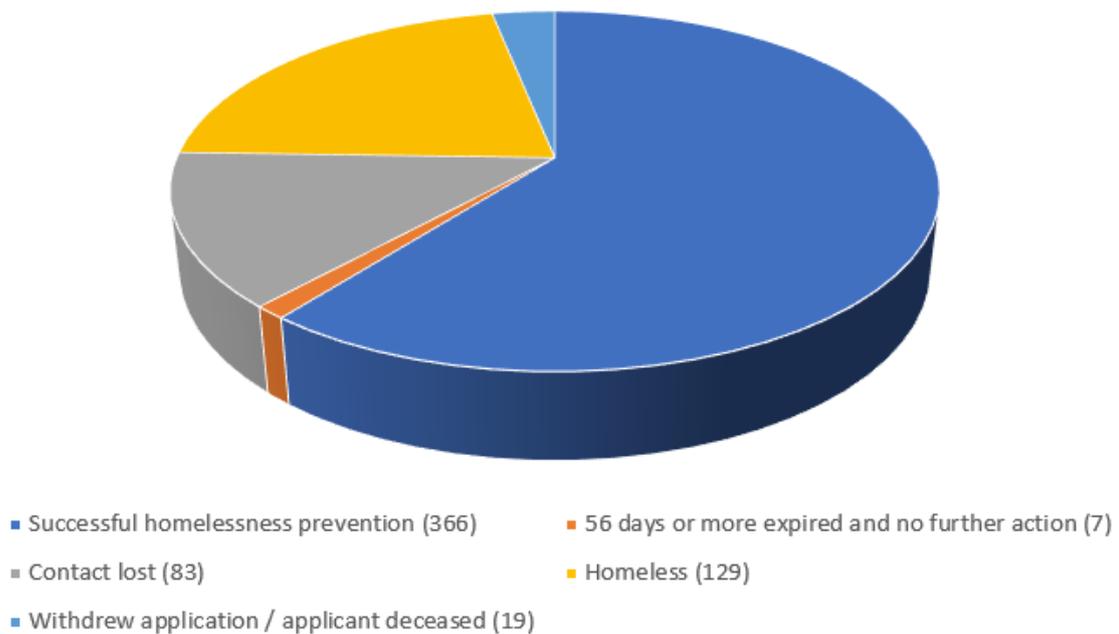
Considering 2018/19 to 2019/20 we can see that:

- There was a 50% increase in advice only cases (ones that did not trigger a prevention or relief duty) and a 17% increase in prevention duty cases as the focus on earlier interventions improved.
- There was a 12% reduction in relief duty cases and 26% reduction in cases reaching the main housing duty stage as issues were resolved at the earlier prevention stage.

### Number of Homeless Applications Opened At the Various HRA Duty Stages, Huntingdonshire 2018/19 to 2020/21



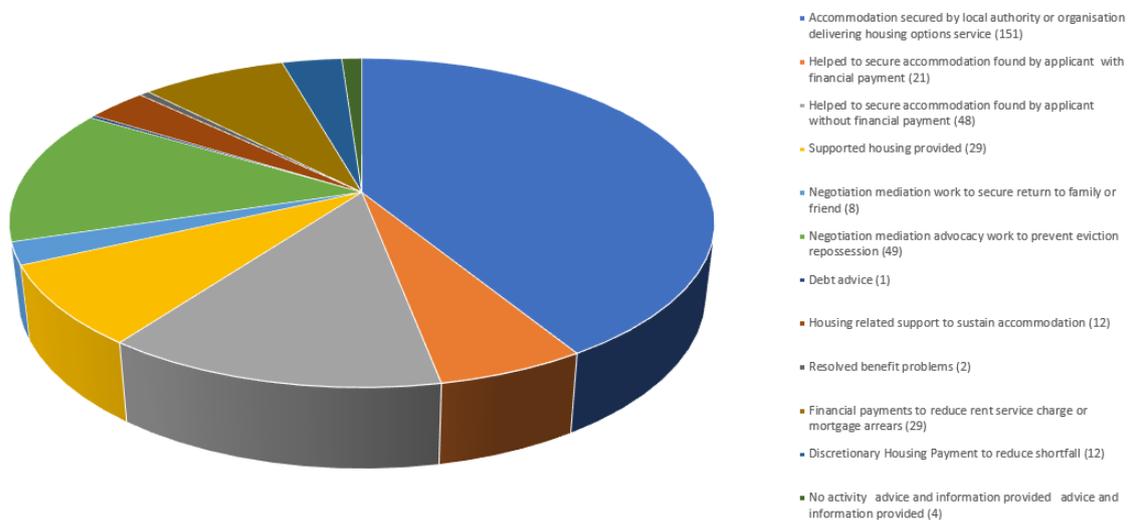
### Outcomes At The Prevention Duty Stage, Huntingdonshire 2019/20



The chart above shows the outcomes that were achieved from preventatively working with households prior to their actual homelessness (the Prevention Duty stage). Almost two out of every three instances of homelessness at this stage resulted in a positive outcome, by either securing the household’s current home or helping to find alternative accommodation.

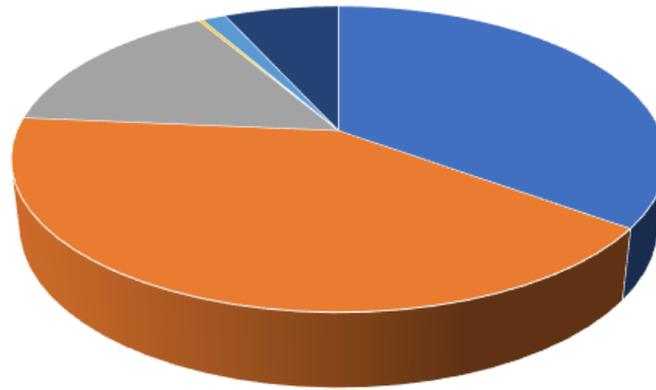
The 'prevention toolkit' offers a range of options that may be used to try and prevent a household losing their existing home or where this is not possible, find an alternative home before homelessness actually occurs. The options investigated at this stage will be informed by the particular cause of homelessness and what actions and solutions may help prevent this. In 2019/20, 1 in 4 successful outcomes were achieved by resolving financial issues and arrears that were threatening homelessness. These actions included negotiating with landlords; resolving benefit problems; helping access Discretionary Housing Payments or homeless prevention payments. Over 40% of cases were resolved by helping households into alternative accommodation through the Home-Link scheme, ensuring that they were appropriately prioritised when under a threat of homelessness (see chart below).

### Actions to achieve successful homelessness preventions, Huntingdonshire 2019/20



For those households where prevention work was unsuccessful the Council would then go on to see what assistance could be offered to help relieve their homelessness (the Relief Duty stage) – see the following chart.

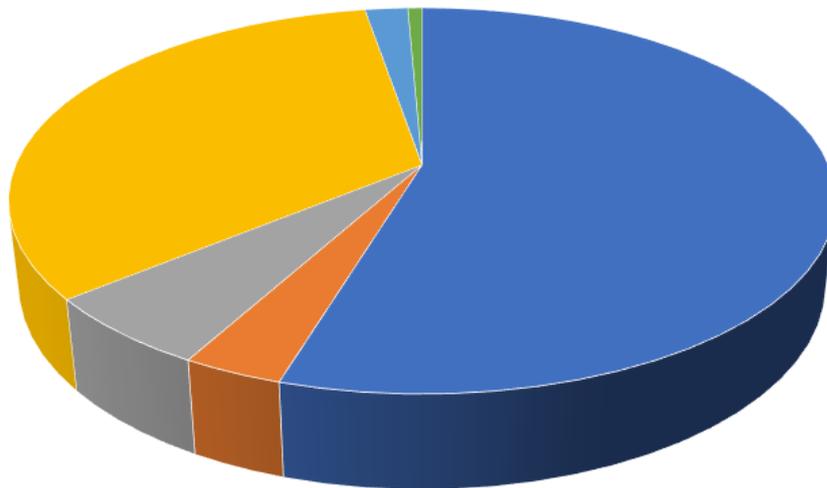
## Outcomes At The Relief Duty Stage, Huntingdonshire 2019/20



- Successful homelessness relief (150)
- Contact lost (65)
- Local connection referral accepted by other LA (6)
- Withdrew application / applicant deceased (29)
- 56 days elapsed & still homeless (177)
- Intentionally homeless from accommodation provided (1)
- No longer eligible

In situations where households reached the crisis point of homelessness, triggering a relief duty, the Council managed to help to successfully resolve their homelessness in one-third of cases. This stage of assistance lasts for a period of 56 days after actual homelessness.

## Actions to achieve successful homelessness relief, Huntingdonshire 2019/20

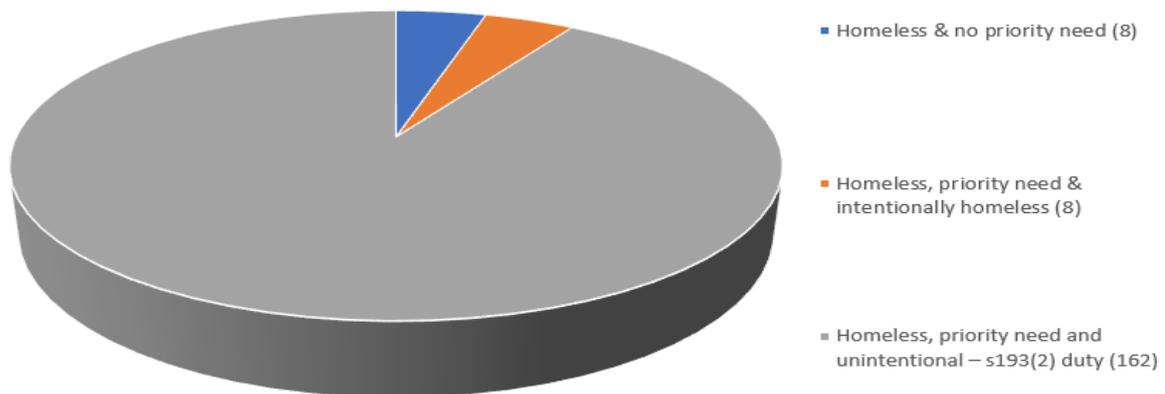


- Accommodation secured by local authority or organisation delivering housing options service (82)
- Helped to secure accommodation found by applicant with financial payment (5)
- Helped to secure accommodation found by applicant without financial payment (9)
- Supported housing provided (50)
- Negotiation mediation work to secure return to family or friend (3)
- Other activity through which accommodation secured (1)

The chart above shows the actions that were successful in relieving homelessness, with 88% of successes being as a result of helping the household access social rented housing through Home-Link scheme or sourcing appropriate supported accommodation.

Where this is not successfully resolved the Council must consider whether it owes the household the main housing duty. If the Council does not owe a main housing duty it can continue to assist the household at the relief stage in order to try and achieve a positive outcome.

### Outcomes At The Main Duty Stage, Huntingdonshire 2019/20



The Council accepted over 90% of households as ‘statutorily’ homeless at the main duty stage – see chart above. By reaching this stage it means that their homelessness was not successfully prevented by earlier interventions, the 56 day relief period did not give further opportunity to come up with solutions and so, subject to final assessment, the main homelessness duty is owed to those households. The solution for households that are accepted at the main duty stage is not limited to, but most likely to be, an offer of social rented housing through the Council’s housing register.

### Temporary Accommodation

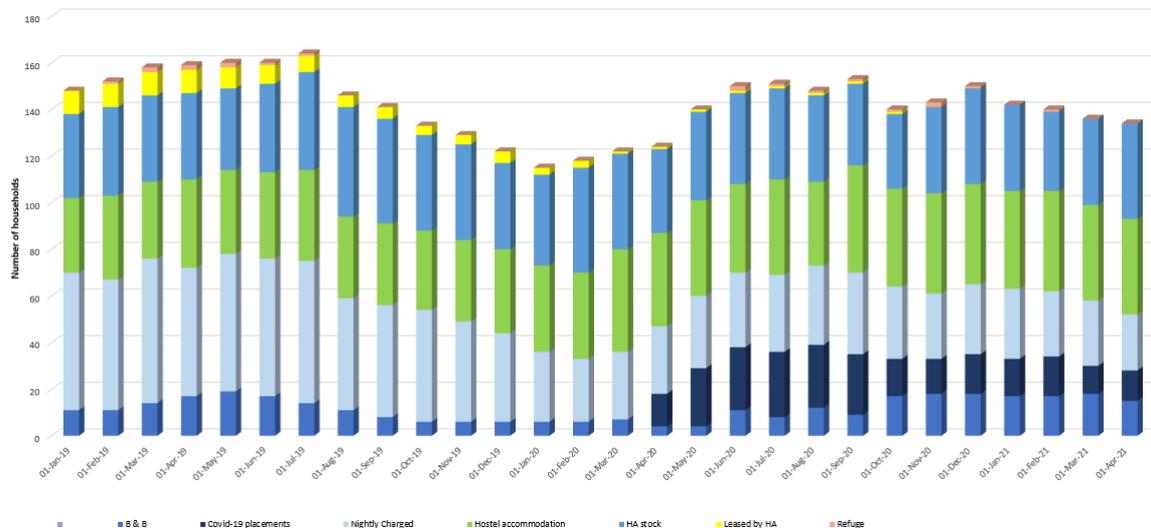
The HRA did not amend the Council’s duty to provide temporary accommodation to certain households that become homeless. Under the new legislative framework Councils must consider whether to provide temporary accommodation at the relief duty stage when homelessness actually occurs. As with the national picture, we have seen an increasing number of households placed in temporary accommodation, whilst relief activities are carried out.

There is a significant cost to the Council associated with the provision of temporary accommodation placing an increased emphasis on achieving positive outcomes at the prevention stage, so that households do not have the need to be placed into temporary accommodation. It is similarly important that there is a steady supply of suitable properties through the housing register as this allows households to quickly move into settled homes, resolving their homelessness and limiting their time in temporary accommodation.

The number of new build affordable rented homes completed in 2019/20 contributed to a reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation in the latter stages of 2019. We then saw an increase in the

overall number of households accommodated in the summer of 2020 as the pandemic took affect and the Council accommodated up to 30 rough sleepers under the Government's Everyone In initiative. This resulted in a peak of 153 households in temporary accommodation in September 2020 but this number has reduced over the following months as these rough sleepers have been assisted into alternative housing – see chart below.

### Number of households in temporary accommodation, Huntingdonshire January 2019 onwards (including rough sleepers accommodated under Everyone In)



The Council, in partnership with a partner housing association, has delivered an additional scheme providing a further 22 units of accommodation to be used as short term lets. The scheme opened in May 2021 and will further contribute to our reduced use of bed & breakfast and nightly paid accommodation.

### Rough Sleeping

The Council is required to carry out either an annual count or an intelligence based estimate of the number of people sleeping rough in the district on an average night. As in previous years the Cambridgeshire local authorities agreed to complete this on the same night in November 2020 so as to avoid the potential for double counting of rough sleepers who may move between districts.

Given the large geographic area of the district we completed an intelligence based estimate collating information from a wide range of partners from the public sector, voluntary organisations and faith groups that work with or come into contact with rough sleepers. This information and the processes used were then independently verified.

From the intelligence gathered it is estimated that there were 8 people sleeping rough on the chosen night. These were people that had been made offers of emergency accommodation under the Everyone In initiative and refused the offer.

This figure was surprising given that at the same time the Council was already accommodating 15 rough sleepers that we had been working with over the preceding weeks. The main cause of homelessness for rough sleepers at that time was due to family or friends being unable or unwilling to continue to offer accommodation during the pandemic.

The Council was successful in securing funding from Government in 2019 through the Rough Sleeper Initiative which has allowed us to pilot a homeless street outreach service. This is a service covering the combined areas of Huntingdonshire, South & East Cambridgeshire Councils and was launched in December 2019. It provides rough sleepers with a level of support to help them address a wide range of issues, such as accessing health services, but with the ultimate aim of trying to assist rough sleepers off the streets. The services will be continued in 2021/22 following a successful further bid to the Government's Rough Sleeper Initiative funding stream.

### **The Cost of Homelessness**

Homelessness has a huge impact on the households affected in both social and economic terms. Homelessness also has a huge financial impact on local authorities particularly in relation to the provision of temporary accommodation, with many authorities having to make significant provision within their budgets to meet these costs.

Further investment in enhanced ways of working preventatively, achieving higher rates of success and limiting the number of households that require help with temporary accommodation, will help reduce this cost to the Council as well as minimising the devastating effect of homelessness on those households affected.

The range of measures in place to try to prevent and relieve homelessness, together with the links that we will continue to make as highlighted earlier in this strategy, show a commitment to combat homelessness wherever possible. The annual action plans associated with this strategy will also focus on the financial impact of homelessness and how this may be addressed.

## **7. The Covid-19 Pandemic And Homelessness.**

The Government introduced the 'Everyone In' initiative at the end of March 2020 asking that local housing authorities ensure that during the pandemic rough sleepers or those who are at risk of rough sleeping are accommodated and supported. This initiative has continued throughout the various stages of lockdown with rough sleepers seen as one of the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic.

The Council has provided emergency accommodation for 108 individuals under Everyone In during the 12 months up until the end of March 2021. A number of people have also been offered emergency accommodation but not taken up the offer but have continued to be offered support to try and resolve their homelessness. A small number of rough sleepers have refused all offers of help

but the Council has attempted to maintain contact in the hope that they reach a point where they are ready to accept offers of help.

Of the rough sleepers accommodated under Everyone In:

- 41 have been helped to move on positively from emergency accommodation
- 13 chose to leave and make their own arrangements
- 18 were evicted because of anti-social behaviour, drug use or criminal activity
- 12 are still in emergency accommodation

The remainder have since been assessed as having a priority need under the homelessness legislation and accommodated, and in some cases have moved into settled accommodation.

The Council is committed to continue working with those rough sleepers currently accommodated under Everyone In to find appropriate housing solutions so that they do not have to return to the streets.

In terms of the possible wider impact of the pandemic on homelessness, the likely economic hardships that households may experience have been partially mitigated by the Government's initiatives over the last year. Specifically relating to measures that support households who may otherwise face problems such as rent or mortgage arrears, and possible eviction or repossession, these have included:

- The Job Retention Scheme – where employers were supported to continue to employ staff, claiming a proportion of their usual monthly wage costs. The scheme will be phased out between 1 July and 30 September 2021. The unknown at this stage is what impact the phasing out of the scheme may have on unemployment, a key risk factor leading to possible homelessness.
- Extended notice periods for certain types of private sector tenancies – notice periods in most cases were initially increased from 2 to 3 months in the early stages of the pandemic. They were extended further to 6 month notice periods and from June 2021 have now reduced to 4 month periods. By introducing extended notice periods this gives tenants the opportunity to address and resolve the reason that have led to the landlord giving notice or find alternative housing in advance of any possession proceedings.
- The suspension of housing possession claims – a bar on possession action being taken in the Courts between April and 20 September 2020.
- A range of initiatives to support tenants that may be faced with possession action:

- A pre-action protocol for possession claims – that landlords seeking possession must follow.
  - The Housing Possession Mediation service – available free of charge to landlords and tenants in advance of Court action.
  - The Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space) – available as a measure to delay possession action to address wider debt issues in certain circumstances.
- A mortgage payment holiday option for landlords and owner occupiers.
  - Increases in the support through Local Housing Allowances – meaning that the payments to those eligible for Housing Benefit were closer to market rates with tenants therefore less likely to fall into significant arrears because of previous shortfalls in these amounts.

The Government introduced these measures to help households retain their homes, particularly those who are renting. The English Housing Survey's most recent Household Resilience Study (produced by MHCLG) highlights that in November – December 2020, 9% of private renters were currently in arrears, up from 3% in 2019-20. 1% were more than 2 months in arrears with the main reasons cited for such difficulties were being furloughed on reduced pay or working fewer hours/less over time.

On a positive note, the study found that mortgage arrears have returned to pre-pandemic levels, following a significant increase in June – July 2020.

The full economic impact of the pandemic and how this may lead to future homelessness is not yet fully apparent. The most recent economic downturn prior to 2020 was the financial crisis of 2009 and we mention earlier in this document the consequences that this had on increasing homelessness. The impact then was delayed until 2010 and we then saw year on year increases in homelessness through until 2013/14.

As mentioned above, the Government's steps to help mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic may assist with reducing the effect on homelessness but the success of these measures in the medium to longer term remains uncertain. It is likely that this latest downturn will lead to a growth in demand from our residents for housing and homelessness assistance and a key part of our ability to address these risks will be how we continue to develop targeted early and upstream interventions with those most at risk.

We will learn from the early interventions that we have made, for example the welfare calls we made to residents during the early stages of the pandemic, to try and identify circumstances that may lead to future homelessness. By taking earlier action we will aim to prevent future crises and homelessness developing.

As an example of this we have begun work with the main stock holding housing associations in the area to work together with tenants that may be most at risk of possession action because of increasing arrears. Early interventions and help for social and private sector tenants in these situations to prevent possession action

progressing will be one of our main priorities as we emerge out of lockdown and the Government mitigations measures begin to be withdrawn.