
Homelessness Strategy 2013 - 2018

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 When we developed our last Homelessness Strategy in 2008, the Council had already put in place a prevention-focused service that had achieved significant reductions in homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation. We had already met our target to reduce our use of temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010, ahead of schedule.
- 1.2 During the past three years, the emphasis has been on preventing homelessness and reducing the Council's use of temporary accommodation, improving the quality of temporary accommodation and ensuring that people receive the advice and support they need to achieve independence. At the time the last Strategy was developed, whilst the Council and its partners were preparing to counter the impact of the weakening housing market, and its potential implications for the levels of homelessness, nobody could have envisaged the scale of the global recession or the sweeping benefit and housing reforms that were introduced by the coalition Government.
- 1.3 Since its Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, the Government has substantially reduced its investment in public services and affordable housing. It has also announced a whole raft of welfare reforms that are designed to reduce public expenditure on Housing Benefit and remove any disincentives for people of working age to look for work.
- 1.4 The introduction of the Affordable Rent Model¹, along with the increased use of Flexible Tenancies², is expected to result in a sustained reduction in the supply of secure/assured tenancies at social rents. Benefit reform has decreased access to the private rented sector for households on housing benefit, with only three in ten privately rented properties becoming available and single people aged 35 or under being restricted to shared room rates.
- 1.5 Building on the experience gained during the last 3 years, this new Homelessness Strategy will seek to mitigate the negative impacts that the welfare and housing reforms have on the residents of West Berkshire. It will continue to ensure that homelessness prevention remains at the top of everyone's agenda and that, through partnership working, the residents of West Berkshire continue to be provided with effective, high quality services that provide value for money, improve their life chances and enable them to secure and sustain suitable housing.
- 1.6 The overall purpose of this strategy is to set out how the Council and its partners intend to tackle homelessness within the borough up until 2017, by:
 - Preventing homelessness in the first place
 - Increasing the supply of suitable accommodation available for people who are or may become homeless

¹ Affordable Rent enables Registered Providers to charge rents of up to 80% of market rents on new homes and existing social homes that become empty

² Flexible tenancies enable Registered Providers to offer fixed terms tenancies lasting 2 years or more

- Ensuring that support is available to people whilst they are homeless and/or to those who might otherwise become homeless

1.7 This Strategy marks an opportunity to review how we tackle homelessness in West Berkshire. It is hoped that it will assist West Berkshire Council and its partners to reduce the causes of homelessness and provide a quality response to those affected by homelessness. It provides the necessary framework for effective partnership working and for the delivery of efficiently managed and co-ordinated advice, housing and support services for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless

2. Vision

2.1 The Council's vision is:

"Keeping West Berkshire a great place in which to live, learn, work and do business".

2.2 The purpose of the Council is to:

- Help you to help yourself
- Help you when you cannot help yourself
- Help you to help one another
- Promote and act in the interests of the community, people and business of West Berkshire.

2.3 Our guiding principles in developing our services to homeless people in West Berkshire are:

- To treat every homeless person with compassion and respect

To empower every person or family to make informed choices that enable them to secure accommodation that is suitable for their particular needs and to work in partnership to ensure that once housed, they have the support they need to sustain their home in the future

3. What is homelessness?

3.1 **Definition of Homelessness:**

By law, a 'homeless' household is defined as someone who does not have accommodation elsewhere which is available for his or her occupation and which that person has a legal right to occupy. A person is homeless if they cannot secure entry to such accommodation or if it is unreasonable or unsafe for them to do so. A person is also homeless if their accommodation is a moveable structure such as a boat or caravan and there is nowhere for it to be placed. A person is threatened with homelessness if they are likely to become homeless within 28 days.

- 3.2 Being homeless is about more than just not having somewhere to live. Not having a settled, secure and safe home can make it hard to stay in touch with friends and family. It can be difficult to travel to work or to find work. Moving around may, at best, mean having to register with a different doctor, and, at worse, having no access to health services. Children may have to change schools. Being homeless is a very stressful experience.
- 3.3 Many people can be threatened with homelessness at some point in their life. This can be because they are renting a property from a private landlord and they have been served with a notice asking them to leave. Alternatively, a relationship may break down which results in the family home having to be sold. There may not be enough money from the sale of the home to purchase two alternative properties. Sometimes the loss of a job can result in difficulties with paying the mortgage. In a few cases this can lead to repossession. Some people are actually roofless. They literally have no proper place to stay.
- 3.4 **West Berkshire Council's Statutory Duty**
Central Government requires councils to provide a proactive, planned and preventative approach to homelessness. The preventative approach should aim to work with those threatened with homelessness to either maintain existing housing or assist people in finding alternative housing options. Councils are required to help prevent homelessness whether the household is in 'priority need' or not. The preventative approach contrasts with the previous approach of being more reactive by responding to the crisis of actual homelessness, focusing on the person's rights and applying legal duties of the local authority.
- 3.5 The Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) recommends efforts to prevent homelessness at three key stages:
- Firstly – early intervention, for those who may be at risk of homelessness
 - Secondly – prevention, when homelessness is imminent
 - Thirdly – preventing recurring homelessness, for those who have been resettled
- 3.6 West Berkshire Council has the overall responsibility of achieving these aims within the district and has the duty to provide advice and assistance to people making homeless enquiries. **The Council does not have a duty to accommodate all households who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness**, but does have a duty to accommodate homeless households that are unintentionally homeless and defined as 'priority need' until more settled accommodation is found (see Appendix One).
- 3.7 In determining whether or not it owes a duty to a particular household, the Council has regard to five tests:
- Eligibility - A person is not eligible for housing assistance if he/she is not a British citizen and/or does not have full rights to live here because of immigration status or is not considered to be habitually resident in the UK
 - Homeless - A person is homeless if s/he has no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere that is available for his/her occupation and that s/he has a legal right to occupy; . has accommodation but cannot secure entry to it; has accommodation but is a moveable structure, for example, a caravan or houseboat; has accommodation but it would not be reasonable for her/him to

occupy it. A person is threatened with homelessness if s/he is likely to become homeless within the next 28 days

- Priority Need - A person is in priority need if she is pregnant or if dependent children live, or might reasonably be expected to live with her/him; s/he has become homeless or is threatened with homelessness as a result of a flood, fire or other disaster; s/he is aged 16 or 17 and is not a 'relevant child' or a child in need who would be covered by the Children Act 1989 (except a person who is in full time education and whose term time accommodation is not available during a vacation – 'a relevant student'); s/he is aged under 21 and was looked after, accommodated or fostered between the ages of 16 and 18 (except a 'relevant student'); s/he is aged 21 or over and is vulnerable as a result of having been looked after, accommodated or fostered between the ages of 16 and 18 (except 'a relevant student'); s/he is vulnerable due to 'old age, mental illness, handicap, physical disability or other special reason'; s/he is vulnerable as a result of having been a member of Her Majesty's regular Navy, Military or Armed Forces; s/he is vulnerable as a result of having served a custodial sentence, being committed for contempt of court or other offence or being remanded in custody; s/he is vulnerable as a result of ceasing to occupy accommodation because of violence or harassment from another person that are likely to be carried out. The duty generally extends to other members of the person's household
- Intentionality - A person is considered intentionally homeless if s/he deliberately did or did not do something which caused her/him to leave housing which s/he could otherwise have stayed in and it would have been reasonable to stay there
- Local Connection - A person has a local connection if s/he has lived in the area by choice for a certain time (usually for six of the last twelve months or three of the last five years; has a family connection in the area; works in the area; has a connection with the area for 'another special reason')

4. Strategic context

4.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 places a statutory obligation on all local authorities to undertake a review of homelessness in their area and, based on the findings of this review, to develop and publish a strategy to tackle and prevent homelessness.

4.2 This is West Berkshire's third Homelessness Strategy. It has been developed by the Council and its partners, all of whom are strongly committed to tackling the issue of homelessness and providing high-quality preventative services. Some key headlines include:

- 2816 approaches for advice and housing options in 2011/12
- 170 homelessness applications taken in 2011/12

- 63 homelessness applications accepted as being owed a full housing duty in 2011/12
- There are currently 3920 households on West Berkshire's Housing Register
- In 2011/12, there were 354 social housing lettings in West Berkshire
- Recognising the high levels of need, the Home and Communities Agency has invested more than £16.5 million in West Berkshire since 2007 to provide new housing, with a further £6.3 million allocated for the period 2011-2015
- Since April 2011, the Local Housing Allowance has been set at the 30th percentile of rents and has been 'capped'. This means that only 3 properties in every 10 will be let at rents that are at or below the amount that can be taken into account in the calculation of Housing Benefit
- 72 households have been affected by benefit caps introduced in May 2012, with 30 households losing up to £50, 18 losing up to £100, 15 losing up to £150 and 9 losing over £150 a week
- Analysis of West Berkshire's Housing Benefit data has revealed that 73 single claimants aged between 25 and 35 will see a reduction in their housing benefit entitlement when the Shared Accommodation Rate is applied to claimants under the age of 35.

4.3 A more detailed picture of housing needs can be found in West Berkshire's Homelessness Review 2012.

5. What we have achieved so far

5.1 West Berkshire's Homelessness Strategy 2008-2011 set out the District's five strategic objectives and 44 key actions. Good progress has been made towards delivering the action plan and the main achievements of the Homelessness Strategy 2008-2011 include:

- 1584 households prevented from becoming homeless between 2008 and 2011
- 417 households assisted into private rented accommodation through the Threshold Loan Scheme between 2008 and 2011
- Delivered 346 new units of affordable housing between 2008 and 2011
- Introduced an Empty Homes Strategy, including financial support for empty home owners who wish to bring properties back into use
- Incorporated mutual exchanges into Choice Based Lettings
- Established a bi-annual Landlords Forum
- Continued to support staff to achieve professional qualifications

- Transferred responsibility for the delivery and monitoring of Discretionary Housing Payments into the Housing Operations Team to ensure vulnerable homeless applicants are given priority for the available assistance
- Developed a supported lodgings scheme and emergency 'Krush Pad' for young people
- Prioritised home visits for all 16/17 year olds at home who are threatened with homelessness, where this is appropriate
- Continued to lead on the operation and development of the Young Persons Housing Panel
- Developed and implemented a Sanctuary Scheme ('Safer Spaces')
- Established an internal staff policy to support victims of domestic abuse
- Contributed to the management of ex-offenders through the West Berkshire Offender Management Panel, Offender Management Group, and the Multi Agency Public Protection Panel
- Continued to fund the rough sleeper accommodation provided by Two Saints and provide follow up housing advice and guidance to assist rough sleepers in accessing housing and support services
- Worked to identify applicants on the Common Housing Register (CHR) who are under-occupying and facilitate moves to free up family-sized accommodation
- Held an open afternoon for professionals to explain how the CHR and homelessness works

6. Links with other strategies and plans

6.1 The Council Strategy 2011-2016 contains strategic aims which focus on Housing and Homelessness. These include:

- **Explore** new opportunities and methods for delivery of affordable housing, including responding to the housing needs of rural communities;
- **Work with** owners of empty homes to bring them back into use;
- **Improve** access to private rented accommodation addressing issues of affordability and quality;
- **Continue** to work to prevent homelessness offering the widest possible range of options, advice and interventions.

6.2 In addition to this, the Local Strategic Partnership monitors the effectiveness of the Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2028. 'A Breath of Fresh Air' is the second Sustainable Community Strategy for West Berkshire, which presents a vision for the district spanning the next 18 years. The guiding principles that underpin the strategy are a community that are as follows:

- Greener
- Healthier
- Prosperous
- Safer
- Stronger

6.3 The Sustainable Community Strategy draws together the themes from a number of contributing strategies and partnership forums. More information can be found at: <http://www.westberkshirepartnership.org/index.aspx?articleid=15225>

6.4 The West Berkshire Council's District Profile and West Berkshire Council's Local Economic Assessment 2011 give full information on the area demography and economy which gives an overview of the issues that West Berkshire Council and its partners face in terms of priorities and services. For more information go to:

<http://www.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=8406>
<http://www.westberks.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=29621&p=0>

7. Our priorities and how are we going to achieve them

7.1 After reviewing housing need, assessing the likely impact of the Government's welfare reforms and consulting widely with stakeholders, we have developed a Homelessness Strategy that has 5 key priorities:

1. Continue to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies

We will work proactively to prevent homelessness by intervening early, championing the development of tenancy sustainment services, and providing high quality advice and support services.

We will continue with the successful multi-agency approach that we adopted for our previous strategy, and we will look for new and even more innovative ways to prevent homelessness and help tenants to sustain their tenancies and remain in their homes.

We are going to achieve this priority by:

- Continuing to offer Safer Spaces to victims of domestic abuse, where it is appropriate to do so
- Identifying the reasons for no fault evictions and develop a new approach to negotiating with private sector landlords to prevent homelessness
- Enabling people to sustain their tenancies by developing pre-tenancy training delivered through a multi-agency approach, for Care Leavers, people moving-on from short term supported accommodation, and those entering the private rented sector through Council schemes

- Looking at the feasibility of introducing accreditation for tenants to recognise responsible tenants and provide them with a competitive edge when seeking new accommodation
- Ensuring that commissioned housing related support services are accessible to, and meet the needs of, vulnerable households, including young people, households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness and victims of domestic abuse
- Working with young people in schools to intervene early by raising awareness of the realities of homelessness and signposting to relevant services that support and assist young people
- Working with Childrens Services and Connexions to develop a returning home or staying home 'virtual' team to provide early intervention to young people and families where breakdown appears to be a concern.
- Minimising evictions of vulnerable tenants by reviewing the Vulnerable Persons Protocol and implementing a revised scheme that meets current needs
- Working proactively with Registered Providers, sharing good practice and developing ways of reducing evictions from social tenancies through the Registered Providers Forum
- Continuing to work with Health Visitors, Social Workers and other professionals to educate them on housing options and homelessness to enable them to prevent homelessness by identifying early signs of problems and through early intervention
- Reviewing our service information to ensure that it is up-to-date and well publicised
- Consulting elected Members on the new powers under the Localism Act and any proposed changes to operations procedures

2. Mitigating the negative impacts of the welfare and housing reforms

We will do everything we can to mitigate the negative impacts that changes to welfare benefits will bring.

We will do this by identifying those households whose homes will be put at risk by the reforms and by working with them to prevent homelessness. To achieve this, we will work proactively with private landlords and rental agents to increase the supply of affordable private rented housing.

We are going to achieve this priority by:

- Working with partner agencies within West Berkshire to ensure that residents are able to access monetary advice and have support to negotiate with landlords to lower rents
- Working with the Revenues & Benefits to identify people negatively affected by the changes to welfare benefits, and with our partners to ensure households receive the help they need to find appropriate solutions

- Mitigating the impact of the changes to the single room rate by maximising the availability of good quality, well managed single rooms for rent for the under 35's

3. Make best use of the District's housing stock

We will maximise the supply of good quality, affordable housing, whether in the private or social sector, and make best use of the District's social housing stock. We will do this by removing barriers to the private rented sector, supporting the development of new affordable housing and by freeing up social rented family and adapted homes.

We are going to achieve this priority by:

- Continuing to work with developers and Registered Providers to maximise the delivery of new affordable housing in the district
- Continuing to support and work with the Rural Housing Enabler to identify local housing needs and deliver new rural exceptions schemes
- Working with private sector landlords and agents, to promote the benefits of working with West Berkshire Council, building relationships which act as an incentive and remove the barriers to procuring and accessing private sector accommodation
- Continuing to use the Rent Deposit Guarantee and Discretionary Housing Payment schemes to assist households access the private rented sector and support them to sustain their tenancy
- Working with colleagues in WBC Housing Benefit, Public Protection and Housing Strategy to provide advice and information to landlords
- Holding a bi-annual Landlord's Forum and developing a Landlord's Accreditation Scheme
- Continuing to work with Adult Social Care, through the Supported Living Development Programme, to bring about a co-ordinated approach for the procurement of accommodation for vulnerable people in need of supported housing
- Bringing empty homes back in to use through the Empty Homes Strategy and through effective promotion of the financial support that is available to owners of empty homes.
- Reviewing the supported housing provision for young people to make sure it meets identified needs, including the needs of young women aged under-16 who are pregnant
- Working with our Registered Providers, and through the review of the Allocations Policy, to tackle under-occupation, freeing up family-sized accommodation and developing a range of incentives and promotional materials to promote and develop this service
- Consulting with partners and the public to develop and implement a Tenancy Strategy in line with the Localism Act

4. Improving the life chances of homeless people.

Homelessness has a significant impact on the health, educational attainment, life chances and well-being of some of West Berkshire's most vulnerable residents.

We will work proactively with our partners to improve the life chances of homeless people by maximising opportunities for homeless people to engage in opportunities that improve their health, education and employment prospects.

We are going to achieve this priority by:

- Encouraging saving and enabling access to low cost finance by promoting the Community Savings & Loans (Berkshire Credit Union) scheme
- Working closely with the educational welfare service to minimise the disruption that may occur when families move to new accommodation
- Maintaining the number of people attaining and maintaining independent living through Housing Related Support Services
- Working with Real Lettings to facilitate procurement of good quality private rented accommodation suitable for people who are ready to move on from supported living into independent living
- Ensuring that vulnerable adults and children retain their support networks, by working with Children's and Adult Services, ensuring they are notified of housing decisions that affect vulnerable families
- Reviewing the data we collect so that have a clearer understanding of the health needs of households in temporary accommodation
- Ensuring that the health inequalities faced by homeless households are addressed through the forthcoming Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Ensuring staff have received training and are aware of safeguarding issues and referral mechanisms

5. Proactively work with partners to provide a co-ordinated approach to tackling and preventing homelessness

We know we cannot tackle homelessness on our own. The last three years have shown us how much more we can achieve by working together.

We will actively encourage a way of working that involves a joint approach to problem solving and supports the pooling of resources, the co-location of services and the sharing of information and good practice.

We are going to achieve this priority by:

- Continuing to support, and be active participants in, multi-agency forums, including but not exclusively: MARAC, MAPPA, Offender Management Group, West Berkshire Domestic Abuse Forum, child protection conferences, Youth Housing Panel, Mental Health Panel and safeguarding conferences

- Maintaining the Homelessness Forum for partners to exchange information and best practice, to ensure that services are co-ordinated, inclusive and have a multi-disciplinary approach to meeting need
- Through the Homelessness Forum, seeking opportunities to pool resources, co-locate and avoid duplication to make the best use of our resources; ensuring services are delivered in the most effective way that gives value for money
- Through the Homelessness Forum, adopting a co-ordinated approach to grant bidding, working collaboratively to identify and share information on funding opportunities to secure additional resources and promote innovation
- Through the Homelessness Forum, working together to address the impacts of national and local changes and their implications for service delivery
- Ensuring a multi-agency approach to delivering the priorities of this Strategy through the Homelessness Forum.

8. How we will implement and monitor this strategy

- 8.1 Tackling homelessness and the causes of homelessness is not the responsibility of any single agency. Whilst West Berkshire Council have a statutory role in responding to homelessness, and in providing strategic leadership on issues of homelessness, multi-agency working is an essential foundation if progress is to be made against the identified priorities.
- 8.2 Progress against the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan will be monitored on a quarterly basis by the West Berkshire Homelessness Forum, which brings together key agencies engaged in work to support households who are homeless or who are threatened with homelessness.
- 8.3 The Homelessness Forum will also undertake an annual review of the Homelessness Strategy, to consider the progress made during the year and to look forward to the priorities for the forthcoming year.
- 8.4 As well as monitoring the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy, the Homelessness Forum will identify and share good practice.
- 8.5 The Homelessness Strategy Delivery Plan has been produced in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders through a multi agency Homelessness Strategy Steering Group and public consultation. It will be a live document that will be reviewed and developed over the life of the Strategy, in response to emerging issues, concerns and policy changes.

Glossary

Affordable Rent	Tenancies let by Registered Providers on rent levels of up to 80% of open market rents
Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMA)	BRMA is an area, set by the Rent Officer, which comprises two or more distinct areas of residential accommodation adjoining at least one other area, within which a person could reasonably be expected to reside having regards to services and facilities. There are two BRMA in West Berkshire: Newbury/Thatcham and Reading
Choice Based Lettings (CBL)	A system to advertise available social housing that enables applicants to bid on properties that they wish to be considered for. Once the advert closes, a shortlist is run and the property is allocated to the applicant with the highest housing need
Common Housing Register (CHR)	A single waiting list for all social housing in West Berkshire, managed by the Council
Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)	A discretionary payment that is able to assist people in receipt of Housing Benefit (or Universal Credit in the future) with housing-related costs where they can demonstrate hardship
Homes & Communities Agency (HCA)	A national Government-established agency responsible for the delivery of new affordable housing and for the award of national grant subsidy towards the cost of developing new affordable housing. The HCA also have a regulatory role in respect of Registered Providers.
Housing Benefit	A means-tested welfare benefit that assists people on low incomes to cover all or part of their housing rental liability
Krashpad	Emergency overnight accommodation that can be offered pending a full assessment of the household's needs
Landlord Accreditation Scheme	A scheme to recognise and promote good landlords who provide their tenants with high quality, safe accommodation.
Landlord Forum	A meeting coordinated by the Council to share information and best practice, and develop stronger relationships, with private landlords
Local Housing Allowance (LHA)	LHA is a national scheme that came into effect on the 7 th April 2008. It sets the maximum rent levels that can be

paid by Housing Benefit for particular sized properties. The rent levels are set annually by the Rent Officer at the 30th percentile of open market rents, according to the Broad Rental Market Area

Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)	A partnership that brings together organisations from public, private and voluntary sector in a local authority area. The key objective of the LSP is to improve the quality of life in that area
Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA)	A statutory process through which the Responsible Authorities (Probation, Police and Prison Services) work together with Duty to Cooperate Agencies such as Mental Health/YOS/Housing/Social Care (children and adults) Job Centre Plus/Health to manage the Risk and help reduce the re-offending behaviour of Sexual and Violent Offenders in order to protect the public including the victims from serious harm
Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)	A victim-focused meeting where information is shared on the highest risk cases of domestic abuse between criminal justice, health, child protection, housing practitioners, IDVAs (Independent Domestic Violence Advocate) as well as other specialists from the statutory and voluntary sectors. A safety plan for each victim is then created
Offender Management Group	A strategic group that ensures appropriate provision is in place at a district level for the appropriate and effective management of offenders
Offender Management Panel	An operational meeting that oversees the management of persistent and prolific offenders
Real Lettings	A private sector leasing scheme that aims to secure good quality private rented accommodation for homeless households, managing it on behalf of private landlords whilst still offering them a return, and to increase accessibility to private rented accommodation
Registered Providers (RPs)	Housing providers who are registered with the Homes & Communities Agency
Rent Deposit Guarantee	A written guarantee, in which the Council underwrites a tenancy deposit for private rented accommodation, given in lieu of a cash deposit
Rural Housing Enabler (RHE)	The Rural Housing Enabler works with rural parishes to identify local housing needs, raise awareness of affordable housing and help enable the delivery of new rural affordable housing developments

Sanctuary Scheme	A scheme that provides professionally installed security measures to allow those experiencing domestic violence to remain in their own accommodation where it is safe for them to do so, where it is their choice and where the perpetrator no longer lives within the accommodation. The West Berkshire scheme is called 'Safer Spaces'.
Social Rent	Tenancies let by Registered Providers on rent levels set at 'target' rents (usually 40-50% of open market rents) set by the Homes & Communities Agency. These are traditionally the cheapest rents in the market
Supported Lodgings	A scheme that finds lodging placements for young people, within a family home, and with additional support
Threshold Loan Scheme (TLS)	A scheme offering eligible housing clients a written guarantee in lieu of a cash deposit and a rent in advance payment, to facilitate access to private rented accommodation

Appendices

Appendix One – Homelessness Flow-Chart