

# **Homelessness Strategy 2014 - 2019**

## Foreword

Good quality housing is at the heart of a sustainable community and is pivotal to the health and well-being of families and in particular influences the life chances of children. As such, the impact on both individuals and families can be far reaching and long-lasting. The council therefore, has a key role to play in preventing homelessness and alleviating the negative consequences of homelessness wherever possible.

Very often it is all too easy to stereotype those families that become homeless as not contributing to our communities; however the high demand for housing across Maidstone allied with the fast moving housing market can often result in families being displaced from their accommodation through no fault of their own. There are also those households who are particularly vulnerable to changes in the housing market and those families whose income presents real challenges when trying to secure sustainable housing.

This Homelessness Strategy sets out the challenges facing the council in delivering our statutory responsibilities to protect homeless households from the negative impact of homelessness, and sets out our priorities for tackling the complex drivers of homelessness and the actions we intend to take over the next five years to meet those challenges in an informed and innovative way.

I am confident that the actions set out here will provide far-reaching and positive contributions to the lives of those residents of Maidstone who find themselves homeless or threatened with homelessness in a challenging housing landscape.



**Councillor Marion Ring**  
**Cabinet Member for Environment and Housing**

# 1. Introduction

Dealing with local homelessness remains a strategic priority for Maidstone Borough Council.

Homelessness takes many forms, including sleeping rough, hidden homelessness such as “sofa surfing” and living in unsuitable or temporary accommodation. It can have negative knock-on effects on a person’s health and wellbeing and their ability to access education and employment. Homelessness can affect social cohesion within local neighbourhoods and economic prosperity.

Homelessness can bring significant costs to local housing authorities and their partners, at a time of diminishing public resources. National policies introduced since the last strategy, such as welfare reform, will bring their own set of challenges for the Council.

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires all local housing authorities to have a Homelessness Strategy and undertake a homelessness review of the borough every five years. The strategy is required to provide an overall plan of the local authority’s activities to prevent homelessness and to ensure sufficient provision of accommodation and support for households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Since the previous strategy was published in 2008, the Council has made significant progress in tackling local homelessness. Specific achievements include:

- Finding homes for 3,054 households from the Council’s housing register
- Enabling the delivery of 1,715 new affordable homes within the borough
- Revising the Council’s bond scheme to enable more households to access the private rented sector
- The introduction of the Maidstone Homefinder scheme to enable the Council to discharge its homelessness duty into the private rented sector
- Revising the Council’s Allocation Scheme to prioritise local residents and those contributing to the local community

This strategy sets out how the Council will deal with homelessness within the borough over the next five years. The Action Plan for the strategy will be regularly monitored by Maidstone Borough Council and its partners and progress reported to Members.

# 2. The National Context

The wider economic climate, reduced house building, higher levels of unemployment and the introduction of welfare reforms have created a challenging environment for homelessness prevention.

In particular, the changes to benefits (see Figure 1), whilst necessary to reduce households’ reliance on the state, may also impact those households’ ability to fund their housing costs.

## Figure 1 – Summary of Key Welfare Reform Changes

### Local Housing Allowance (LHA)

In April 2011, LHA was reduced from the 50th percentile of market rents to the 30th percentile and an overall cap to LHA of £400 a week was introduced. Since April 2013, increases in LHA have been linked to CPI rather than RPI, which disconnects LHA from likely rent increases. The level of LHA available to people under-35 has also been restricted to the single room rate, making it difficult for them to access self-contained housing. The Government has also talked about possible future restrictions to housing benefit for those under-25.

**Council Tax Support**

In April 2013, Council Tax Benefit was replaced by locally determined Council Tax Support schemes with a 10% reduction in government funding. Under the new scheme, local authorities can decide the level of Council Tax Support provided to working age claimants. This has resulted in some households seeing a reduction in the level of financial support they receive towards their council tax bill and having to make an additional contribution themselves.

**Spare Room Subsidy**

Since April 2013, working age social housing tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit with one spare room have had their benefit cut by 14% and those with two or more bedrooms have seen a reduction of 25%. A shortage of one and two bedroom properties locally has meant that many households who want to move can't and are having to meet the rent shortfall themselves.

**Benefit Cap**

An overall benefit cap was introduced in July 2013, limiting total working age benefits to average (median) net earnings for a working household, currently £26,000 a year. Couples and households with children receive £500 per week for a household and single people £350. This puts particular pressure on larger families, who have much higher housing costs.

**Disability Benefits**

From April 2013, Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit started to be replaced by Personal Independent Payments (PIP) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) respectively. Existing claimants will be assessed before being transferred to the new benefits and may find that their current benefit entitlements are either reduced or cut completely, putting additional pressure on their finances.

**Universal Credit**

The proposed introduction of Universal Credit in 2017 will see all working age benefits (excluding Disability Living Allowance or Carer's Allowance) rolled into one single monthly payment, paid directly to the tenant. This means that many tenants who currently have their Housing Benefit paid directly to their landlord will be responsible for paying their rent to their landlord themselves, which may be difficult for some more vulnerable households to manage.

The Government has committed significant amounts of funding to tackling homelessness, including additional Discretionary Housing Payment funds to help support households cope with the effects of welfare reform.

Despite this, nationally, homelessness is rising, as is use of bed and breakfast as temporary accommodation, leading to significant increased costs for local councils. "Termination of assured shorthold tenancy" has become the main reason for homelessness across the country, followed by "parents no longer willing to accommodate".

## 3. Review of homelessness in Maidstone

A comprehensive review of homelessness within the borough was carried out in autumn 2013. The review considered the current and likely future levels of homelessness in the borough, the activities carried out in the borough for the prevention and relief of homelessness, and the resources available in the borough for these activities. The review consisted of analysis of local data over the previous 5 years and consultation with key stakeholders, including social and private landlords and homeless households. A copy of the review can be found on the Council's website: [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk)

### 3.1. Key findings

The review found that:

- The number of homelessness decisions made by the Council has increased significantly since April 2010. During 2010/11 80 decisions were made rising to 162 in the first two quarters of 2013/14.
- The number of cases accepted as homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need has also increased since 2010, with 27 homelessness applications accepted during 2010/11 compared with 92 during the first six months of 2013/14.
- The typical profile of someone who was accepted as having a full housing duty towards them is:
  - A female lone parent (47% of applicants);
  - Aged between 16-44 (82% of applicants) and;
  - With one child (46% of applicants)
- "Parents no longer willing to accommodate" remains the main reason for homelessness, followed by "termination of assured shorthold tenancy"
- Homelessness preventions have decreased, although this is most likely to be as a result of changes to how homelessness decisions are recorded by local authorities
- Landlord possession claims have increased steadily since 2006, although the number of orders actually granted are much lower and have only seen a gradual increase
- Mortgage repossessions orders granted have decreased since 2009/10 although they remain at higher than pre-2007 levels
- Levels of rough sleeping have decreased since 2010 compared to increases in neighbouring local authorities. In 2010 there were 27 known rough sleepers and this had reduced to 14 in November 2013.
- The number of homeless people accessing housing-related support from the Kent Supporting People Programme has decreased by around 35% since 2010
- 37 families were affected by the benefit cap and 240 young people were affected by the extension of the shared room rate to under-35s

### 3.2. Key issues

The review identified the following key issues for consideration within the strategy:

- The increasing importance of the private rented sector in reducing homelessness and the barriers to providing a sustainable affordable housing solution;
- The increasing number of landlord possessions in the private rented sector contrasted with the reduced ability for prospective tenants to access private rented accommodation;
- The relationship between the Allocation Scheme and encouraging homeless applicants into employment, voluntary work or training;
- The reduction in referrals to Kent County Council's Supporting People programme (for example to provide housing-related Floating Support) for homelessness services despite the increasing levels of homelessness in Maidstone, and;
- The increase in mortgage possession orders granted but not yet enforced which may result in a future spike in homelessness as the property market recovers.

## 4. Priorities and Objectives

The key priorities of the Council are:

- Maidstone has a growing economy
- Maidstone is a great place to live
- Maidstone delivers excellent customer service

The Council believes the best way to prevent homelessness is to ensure everyone has the best prospect to develop themselves to make the most of their opportunities. Key to this principle is ensuring that Maidstone's citizens make the most of early year's development, education and training in order to be able to compete in the working environment. The Housing Service works in a collegiate way with other services in the Council, e.g. economic development and community development, and voluntary groups to provide a wide range of services.

To support this approach the Council's Allocation Scheme provides for a greater ratio of social housing vacancies to be advertised to applicants in Band A (community contribution). Applicants in Band A will either be in work, undertaking a voluntary activity or be in education or training; and can be persons owed the full housing duty under the homelessness legislation.

Other homeless applicants fall within Band D and their housing circumstances are more likely to be resolved sooner by accessing the private rented sector. Assistance can be provided through the Maidstone Homefinder scheme.

The priorities of the Homelessness Strategy are:

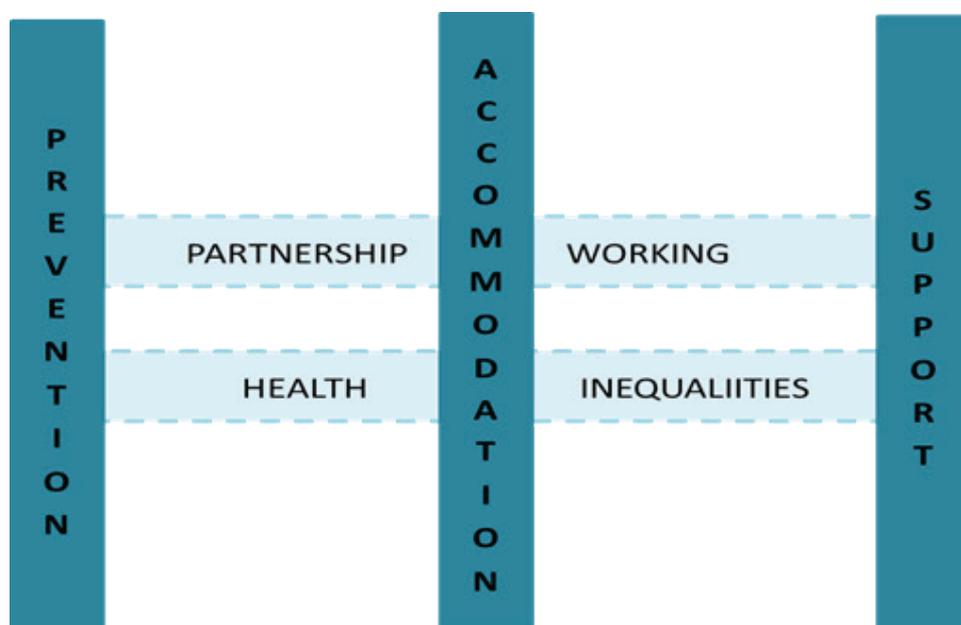
**Priority 1:** The prevention of homelessness

**Priority 2:** The provision of accommodation for homeless and at risk households

**Priority 3:** The support for vulnerable households

Cutting across these priorities are two key issues: health inequalities and partnership working. These are set out in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Priorities and cross-cutting issues**



The objectives of this strategy are to:

1. Prevent homelessness amongst local residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
2. Secure sufficient levels of appropriate accommodation within Maidstone to house homeless households
3. Ensure vulnerable households have access to appropriate support to enable them to live independently
4. Reduce health inequalities amongst homeless households
5. Strengthen partnership working at a local, county and national level across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

## 5. Priority One: Prevention

Prevention of homelessness is a key national and local priority.

Enabling households to access employment and training opportunities can help to prevent homelessness and boost skills and confidence amongst vulnerable households.

Support for the private sector is growing in importance, as termination of private sector tenancies as a reason for homelessness is increasing. Mediation between landlords and tenants to resolve disputes can help to prevent homelessness. Changes to benefits, including the way in which housing benefit is paid, are a concern for landlords and tenants in both the private and social sectors.

Homelessness amongst young people, particularly those aged 16-17, remains a concern for the Council. Mediation between young people and their families can help to prevent homelessness as can providing temporary "crash pad" accommodation for young people to live in whilst they fully consider their housing options

Investment in preventative services can help to realise greater long-term savings for the Council by reducing future homelessness presentations and reducing the need for temporary accommodation, including costly Bed and Breakfast.

### **We will:**

- **Ensure homeless households have access to volunteering, training and employment opportunities**
- **Continue to support private sector landlords and tenants to maintain their tenancies**
- **Support affected households to manage changes to the benefit system**
- **Provide crash pad accommodation for potentially homeless young people**
- **Reduce unnecessary customer interactions and use technology to provide housing options advice**
- **Provide housing advice and guidance to households facing repossession**

### 5.1. Access to employment

Non-working households are more likely to suffer from homelessness than working households. A lack of a permanent address can also prevent households from gaining employment, creating benefit-dependency.

Volunteering and training for those who have never worked or have been out of work for a long time can help to build skills and confidence and prepare people for the world of work.

Helping households to become economically active can help to improve their housing options and boost the local economy. Households who are making a contribution to the local community are placed in Band A on the housing register giving them the best opportunity to secure a social home.

## 5.2. Private sector support

Landlord possession claims are rising and “termination of Assured Shorthold Tenancy” is now the second highest reason for homelessness within the borough.

In partnership with Golding Homes, the Council offers pre-tenancy training to households on the housing register, to help tenants to maintain their tenancies both in the public and private sectors (see Case Study 1).

As part of its Maidstone Homefinder bond scheme, the Council also provides additional support to private sector tenants and landlords, undertaking tenancy sustainment visits with tenants to identify and address any concerns before they lead to the landlord serving notice. This has proved successful in helping to prevent evictions within the private rented sector.

The Council will also be piloting a mediation service between tenants and landlords with Maidstone Mediation Service to help avoid the breakdown of private sector tenancies.

### Case Study 1 – Pre-tenancy Training

In partnership with Golding Homes, the Council offers pre-tenancy training to people on the Council’s Housing Register. Through the course, prospective tenants learn about their rights and responsibilities as a tenant, how to look after their home properly and what they can expect from their landlord. This is particularly helpful to people who have never rented a property before or have had a bad experience in the private rented sector.

Helping people to understand how to be a “good tenant” can be vital to tenancy sustainment and can prevent disputes between landlords and tenants occurring.

There is real concern amongst private sector landlords surrounding the introduction of Universal Credit. This has led to some local landlords withdrawing from the housing benefit market, particularly as they are able to secure working tenants not in receipt of benefits from the buoyant “professional tenant” market.

The concern centres on two main issues: the payment of housing benefit direct to tenants as one monthly payment and the loss of local benefit teams as a result of the centralisation of benefits within the Department for Work and Pensions. Landlords are worried that tenants will not manage their finances and could end up failing to pay their rent, leading to arrears. The centralisation of benefits could mean that were there any delays in paying benefit or changes that need to be applied it will be harder and take longer to get these resolved than if these were being managed through a local team.

## 5.3. Welfare reform

The Government’s welfare reforms aim to reduce the cost to the state of benefits and to incentivise people to get back into work. However it has implications for people in terms of accessing and maintaining their housing.

The introduction of the spare room subsidy, the reduction of LHA to under-35s and the benefit cap have all led to some households in Maidstone having a shortfall between their housing costs and their housing benefits, leaving them to have to make up the difference themselves.

The Government provided local councils with additional funding for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to help people affected by welfare reform. So far locally, relatively few claims have been made for DHP by those affected, suggesting that they have been able to meet any additional housing costs. However, households may not be able to continue to subsidise their additional housing costs over the long-term, meaning that the impacts of the reforms could still be felt in the next 6-12 months.

Other reforms such as reduction in Council Tax Support and the changes to disability benefits will see household finances squeezed further and many recipients will receive reduced levels of benefit or possibly none at all. The uprating of benefits in line with CPI instead of RPI may also mean that benefits increases will not rise in real terms.

The proposed introduction of Universal Credit in 2017 will see 6 individual benefits (including Housing Benefit) rolled into one single monthly payment, paid in arrears direct to the tenant. This will see many households facing direct payment of their housing costs for the first time. Some people may struggle to manage their personal finances properly and could fall into rent arrears.

With the introduction of welfare reforms putting an increased strain on benefit-dependent households' already tight finances, the ability to budget properly is of particular importance. Special accounts which pay rental costs direct to landlords from a person's bank account could help to ensure that they do not fall into rent arrears.

The Council is already working with Golding Homes to pilot direct payments to tenants to get them prepared for direct payment, budgeting over a longer period and paying their rent themselves. Private sector tenants are harder to reach, but would equally benefit from similar help to prepare for managing their money on a monthly basis.

#### 5.4. Young people

For young people aged 16-17 or former care leavers aged 18-21 who become homeless, the first requirement is for Adult Social Care to work with that young person to determine whether they should be treated as a "looked after" child in accordance with the Children's Act. Where remaining in their existing home is not possible or appropriate, the Council and Kent County Council's Adult Social Care will work together to support that young person to make an informed choice about their care status and subsequent housing options.

Over the last 5 years, just over 40% of those accepted by the Council as being owed a housing duty were under 25. "Parents no longer willing to accommodate" remains the main reason for homelessness amongst households accepted by the Council as being homeless and in priority need, although this reduced substantially from 60% in 2009/10 to 22.2% in 2011/11 and rose slightly to 23.2% during 2012/13.

Expectations amongst young people in particular around their housing options if they present to the Council as homeless are often unrealistically high. Education about the realities of homelessness, particularly for those aged under 18, would be beneficial, especially with the potential for further cuts in housing benefit to the under-25s being considered by senior members of the current government.

Homelessness amongst young people can often be resolved through family mediation and conciliation. The Council already works with Maidstone Mediation Service to help young people and their families to resolve conflicts and enable the young person to successfully return to the family home.

"Crash pad" accommodation can also help greatly to facilitate family reconciliation and has been used to great effect in other parts of the county, particularly in Dartford. Crash pads provide temporary respite for young people where they can have time and space away from their family whilst working to resolve their differences. Supported accommodation specifically catering for young people already exists within the borough and could also be used to provide temporary crash pads.

## 5.5. Housing options and advice

The Council provides housing options information and advice to local residents, ranging from general information about local housing to advice for those threatened with homelessness. Information about employment and training schemes are also discussed, with applicants being signposted to relevant agencies or staff within the Council. Residents mainly access the housing options team by visiting the Maidstone Gateway or telephoning the team directly.

These types of one-on-one communication are resource intensive and have high transaction costs. In many cases, individual tailored advice is not required, meaning one-to-one contact is unnecessary. Greater use of web and smartphone technologies to provide housing options advice to local residents will help to reduce costs and enable housing advisors to concentrate their time and effort on those households with complex needs. The Council will shortly be introducing an online Housing Advice service, which enables customers to enter their details and receive tailored housing advice without needing to see a housing advisor. If the customer is subsequently unable to resolve their issue, they can then see a housing advisor for further advice.

## 5.6. Mortgage repossessions

Mortgage repossessions within the borough spiked in 2009 and have since declined, however they remain higher than before the financial downturn. So far, relatively few homeless acceptances have been as a result of mortgage repossession, but there is a concern that this low level of activity is linked to the reduction in house prices and that more repossessions will occur as the housing market starts to pick up.

The Bank of England base rate remains at a historic low of 0.5%. An increase in base rate and related increase in mortgage rates could see households unable to pay their mortgage. The withdrawal of the Government's Mortgage Rescue Scheme in April 2014 may also leave households struggling to meet their housing costs.

# 6. Priority Two: Accommodation

Not all homelessness can be prevented. Where prevention of homelessness is not possible, the Council will assist local residents to move into accommodation which is suitable for their needs. For the majority, this is likely to be in the private rented sector, as the level of subsidised housing available in the borough is not enough to meet demand.

The Council transferred its housing stock to Maidstone Housing Trust, now Golding Homes, in 2004 and therefore does not own or provide subsidised housing directly. However, it retains a key enabling role, working with Registered Providers, developers and the Homes and Communities Agency to secure the delivery of new affordable homes within the borough.

Use of temporary accommodation is increasing both locally and nationally. Availability of suitable temporary accommodation within the borough is limited. Lack of move-on accommodation is resulting in households having to remain in temporary accommodation for longer, which can impact on people's health and wellbeing, particularly children. Temporary accommodation is also very costly for the Council.

**We will:**

- **Increase the number of temporary accommodation units within the borough and reduce length of stay**
- **Enable the delivery of new affordable housing, particularly 1 and 2 bedroomed homes**
- **Make best use of the private rented sector to house homeless households**
- **Secure shared housing for under-35s**

### 6.1. Temporary accommodation

Increasing levels of homelessness have put increase pressure on the Council to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households. The number of households being placed into bed and breakfast accommodation has risen substantially over the last two years.

Levels of suitable temporary accommodation within the borough are limited and not sufficient to meet demand, with some households having to be placed in more expensive hotel accommodation or outside of the borough.

The Council will explore options for increasing the levels of suitable temporary accommodation within the borough, including direct provision.

A lack of move-on accommodation within the borough, particularly 1 and 2 bedroom homes, has meant that households are staying for longer in temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast, with knock-on effects for their health and wellbeing. Enabling the delivery of more affordable homes within the borough will help to ease this pressure and reduce people's length of stay in temporary accommodation.

### 6.2. Subsidised housing

Demand for subsidised housing (previously known as social housing) within Maidstone remains high and there are currently around 1,300 people on Maidstone's housing register. The number of households who have been housed from the register has steadily increased since 2010/11, although not all of these have been housed within the social sector.

There are around 8,500 subsidised homes within Maidstone, however fewer than 10% become available for re-let every year. There is also a particular shortage of smaller sized properties (1 or 2 bedrooms), making it difficult to meet the growing demand for these properties from within the existing subsidised housing stock. New supply is also restricted by overall growth in the housing market. Since the economic downturn, house-building across all tenures has not kept up with previous levels of provision. Over the last five years, supply of new affordable housing within the borough has been greater than in neighbouring authorities, although still less than historic levels. 180 new affordable homes were built in the borough in 2013/14.

Access to subsidised housing within Maidstone is determined by the Council's Allocation Scheme. Following extensive consultation with applicants and stakeholders the new policy was introduced in 2013, and requires applicants to have both a housing need and a local connection to qualify for subsidised housing.

The introduction of these criteria halved the number of households on the register. Applicants found the old points based system complex and not very transparent, and as a result a new banding scheme has been introduced, with applicants being placed into one of four priority bands depending on their household's circumstances. Those applicants who are homeless are placed in priority Band D unless they have additional housing needs and/or are making a contribution to the local community.

Properties are advertised for applicants in a band (or number of bands) to enable applicants may place bids accordingly to meet the council's quota for the number of properties to be let to each band. Bids are assessed by the date that the applicant entered the housing register, and the eligible applicant who has waited on the housing register the longest is nominated to the property.

### **6.3. Private rented sector**

The private rented sector forms an increasingly important part of Maidstone's local housing market. High local house prices and deposit requirements have kept many working households who would otherwise have bought a home from getting onto the property ladder. The prevalence of working households renting in the private sector has pushed up rental prices and limited choice for low income households within the sector.

Low levels of subsidised housing within the borough means that access to those homes needs to be rationalised effectively to ensure best use of stock. The majority of households presenting to the Council as homeless or potentially homeless will therefore only be able to secure a home within the private rented sector. This applies equally to households as defined by the relevant legislation as non-priority and households accepted by the Council as homeless, eligible and in priority need.

The Council provides assistance for non-priority households who do not have the money for a deposit to secure private sector properties through its Maidstone Homefinder bond scheme, providing a minimum bond of £1,250, which can be called upon should the landlord suffer financial loss such as rent arrears or damage to property.

The Council has also recently joined the HomeHunt web-portal, which enables households to bid for private sector properties that accept benefit recipient or low income households. A bond can be offered if the household does not have funds to raise a deposit regardless of their location.

Using new powers contained within the Localism Act 2011, the Council can end its statutory homelessness duty towards a household with an offer of a 12-month tenancy in the private rented sector, provided the property is suitable for that household's needs.

Private landlords can be reluctant to rent their properties to homeless households. The buoyancy of the professional end of the private rental market has meant that landlords can achieve higher rents with less risk and no longer necessarily need to rent to benefit recipient households. To incentivise landlords to house homeless households, the Council has introduced an incentive scheme, which provides landlords with an upfront fee if they provide a property which can be used by the Council to end their homelessness duty for a period of 3 years. So far the scheme has had some success and there are encouraging signs that local landlords are willing to engage with the scheme.

### **6.4. Single households**

The homelessness review identified a lack of accommodation for single people, both in the social and private rented sectors.

In particular, the changes to Local Housing Allowance which has restricted people under-35 to a shared room rate, have greatly limited the housing options for young single people. There is currently a lack of shared accommodation available within the borough for these people to live in. Greater opportunities for this type of housing exist within the private rented sector and landlords need to be made aware of the benefits providing such accommodation can bring, such as good financial returns.

Registered Providers of subsidised housing could also consider whether there is scope to convert some of their existing larger housing stock into shared accommodation for young people.

## 7. Priority Three: Support for vulnerable households

Many homeless households are often vulnerable and have complex needs that require additional support. Providing such support can help households to sustain their tenancies and avoid becoming homeless again.

Support services are not provided by the Council but by partner agencies, so there need to be strong links and referral processes between organisations to ensure that vulnerable households receive the support they require.

### We will:

- **Ensure people with mental health needs have access to suitable housing and support**
- **Continue to support people fleeing domestic abuse**
- **Review provision for rough sleepers**
- **Support ex-offenders to make appropriate housing choices**
- **Ensure vulnerable homeless households are referred to the Supporting People Programme if appropriate**

### 7.1. Mental health

There is a recognised link between homelessness and mental health issues, with an estimated 70% of people accessing homelessness services nationally having a mental health problem.

Appropriate housing and housing-related support is often not considered by health agencies, which tend to be focused on clinical needs. Establishing agreed referral processes between housing and mental health services will ensure that housing options are considered as an important part of a person's mental health recovery pathway.

Supported accommodation for those with a mental health issue is over-subscribed within the borough. The Council is working with Kent County Council and local Registered Providers to increase the level of provision within the borough and improve the quality of existing provision. In particular, it is encouraging and assisting with the reconfiguration of supported housing for mental health clients, from shared facilities to self-contained accommodation. During the last few years a number of new self-contained schemes have been brought forward within the borough (see Case Study 2) and the Council will continue to support the delivery of new schemes in the future.

#### Case Study 2 – Pippin Court

The Council worked in partnership with Kent County Council, MCCH, the Homes and Communities Agency and Hyde Housing to bring forward a new scheme of 12 self-contained flats at Pippin Court, for people with mental health problems. The scheme was made possible by a combination of HCA funding and direct investment from Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council.

The new homes have enabled clients to experience better living standards than that normally found in shared accommodation and helped them to adjust better to independent living.

Where access to supported housing is not possible, the Council will help households to secure a private sector tenancy, ensuring that a high-level of housing-support is put in place to help them to sustain their tenancies through the council's Maidstone Homefinders scheme.

## 7.2. Domestic abuse

The Housing Team works closely with partners within the Community Safety Unit and the voluntary sector to raise awareness about domestic abuse and tackle it head on.

Violent breakdown of relationships as a reason for homelessness in the borough has increased since 2010. Victims of domestic abuse can access housing advice and support from the multi-agency One Stop Shop, run by North Kent Women's Aid, which is based in the Maidstone Gateway.

Best practice suggests that specialist accommodation provides a secure and supportive environment. In addition the emergency accommodation in Maidstone is mainly clustered around the town centre, which poses its own risks should the perpetrator of the abuse attempt to find the applicant. For these reasons the council will always look to place those fleeing domestic abuse into specialist supported accommodation such as refuges.

The Council will provide assistance to people fleeing domestic abuse from outside of the borough, who are unable to stay in their local area because of concerns for their personal safety.

## 7.3. Rough sleepers

Rough sleeping is the most visible manifestation of homelessness.

Rough sleeping in Maidstone has decreased since 2010. This compares favourably with neighbouring authorities who have seen rough sleeping increase over the same time period. The number of rough sleepers in the borough remains relatively high at around 14, although it is considered likely that they are attracted to the borough by the number of homelessness services that are available.

Rough sleepers tend to suffer from a range of complex issues, including poor physical and mental health, drug and alcohol misuse issues, lack of family and personal support, financial exclusion and poor mental health. They require a range of co-ordinated assistance including housing, health and general support.

Maidstone Churches has piloted a winter shelter for rough sleepers over the winter months of 2013/14. As well as providing overnight support, the shelter signposts rough sleepers to other agencies and services, including those of the Council, to help them access appropriate accommodation and other additional support.

Maidstone town centre has suffered from time to time from street begging which can be mistaken as rough sleeping. During 2013 a task force was set up involving housing, community development and the community safety unit and the voluntary sector that tackled the issue with direct intervention. Only half of those engaged during this time were found to be homeless, and the work demonstrated that positive outcomes were achievable through continuous engagement.

Following this initiative the Council approached Porchlight to second a member of staff to work within the Housing & Community Services division to improve outreach work around homelessness and substance misuse. An agreement was entered into to deliver a service over 12 months and to provide an opportunity for shared learning between the agencies.

## 7.4. Ex-offenders

Housing plays a key role in reducing rates of reoffending and helping ex-offenders to reintegrate back into society.

Ex-offenders need to apply for housing within the borough where they are able to establish a local connection, normally the area where they lived before going into prison. Offenders (from outside the area) serving within Maidstone prisons are not able to gain a local connection by virtue of serving their sentence within the borough and therefore are not eligible to join the Council's housing register.

Ex-offenders can often find themselves homeless upon release from prison and in need of emergency accommodation. The Council will work with the Prison Service, the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Companies to support ex-offenders to access suitable accommodation within the borough and make appropriate housing choices.

## 7.5. Vulnerable households

Kent Supporting People provides housing-related support to vulnerable people with Kent, including homeless hostels, refuges, support accommodation and Floating Support services for people in the private rented sector.

The programme's main clients remain single homeless people with support needs, mainly male, although this has decreased over the last three years. Homeless families with support needs have doubled over the same period, although still in relatively low numbers.

The number of homeless clients accessing housing-related support has decreased in Maidstone by around 35% since 2010, despite an increase in the number of homeless persons in the borough and no decrease in service provision from the programme. This would suggest that the programme is not getting the level of referrals from the Council and other agencies that it previously did. There has been much publicity at a national level around the removal of the ring-fence around Supporting People funding and some assumptions may have been made at a local level that the service capacity has been reduced. However this is not the case.

# 8. Cross-cutting issues

## 8.1. Health inequalities

Households who are homeless tend to experience greater health inequalities than the rest of the population.

Living in temporary accommodation can negatively impact a person's health and wellbeing, particularly mental health. People in temporary accommodation often suffer with stress-related health conditions such as depression and children are more likely to suffer illness and experience difficulties at school whilst staying in unsettled accommodation. People in temporary accommodation can also often lose contact with primary healthcare services. This is a particular problem for families, as children can miss out on key immunisations, impacting their future health.

Rough sleepers also tend to suffer substantial health problems. They have high rates of diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis, pneumonia, hypothermia, and have poorer mental health and greater prevalence of smoking, alcohol and substance misuse. The average life expectancy of a rough sleeper is just 47, thirty years below the general population. The lack of a permanent address makes registering with a GP and accessing primary health care services difficult. Where rough sleepers are treated in hospital, they are often discharged without a home to return to, making ongoing provision of healthcare difficult.

## 8.2. Partnership working

Partnership working underpins the prevention of homelessness within the Borough. The Council already works closely with a range of partners including Registered Providers, Kent Supporting People, Kent County Council, Probation Service, Maidstone Community Safety Partnership and voluntary and community services including Maidstone Mediation Service, CAB, Maidstone Churches and Maidstone Christian Care. Strengthening existing relationships and developing similarly strong partnerships with other relevant local, County-wide and national organisations will help to ensure the strategy is delivered.

Reductions in public funding are likely to continue throughout the lifetime of this strategy. The Council and its partners will need to ensure that they can continue to deliver effective homelessness services in this challenging financial environment. Opportunities to pool resources and jointly take advantage of any local, regional or national funding opportunities will help all organisations to maintain services, achieve value for money and potentially provide additional services that would otherwise not have been delivered.

## 9. Implementation

The Strategy will be implemented by the Council and its partners through the detailed action plan set out in Appendix A below.

The action plan will be regularly monitored by the Council and refreshed annually to reflect progress and ensure that it remains current.

## APPENDIX A - Action Plan

### Objective 1: Prevent homelessness amongst local residents who are homeless or a risk of homelessness

Action		Outcomes	Lead	Timescale
1.1	Ensure homeless and at risk households have access to training, volunteering and work opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Homeless households contribute towards the local community</li> <li>More homeless households become economically active</li> </ul>	MBC VCS Jobcentre plus	April 2017
1.2	Undertake a review of how to make best use of the private rented sector to assist in tackling homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase housing options for benefit recipient households</li> <li>Reduce housing register</li> </ul>	MBC Private landlords	October 2014
1.3	Engage with private sector landlords and tenants to raise awareness of, and prepare for, Universal Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Landlords and tenants are aware of Universal Credit and how it will affect them</li> </ul>	MBC Private landlords	April 2017
1.4	Pilot a tenancy mediation service for private sector landlords and tenants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer private sector evictions</li> </ul>	MBC Maidstone Mediation Private landlords	September 2015
1.5	Explore options with Kent Savers for budgeting accounts for tenants affected by Universal Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer rent arrears amongst private sector tenants</li> <li>Fewer private sector evictions</li> </ul>	MBC Kent Savers Private landlords Registered Providers	April 2018
1.6	Provide low income households with finance and budget management advice and guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer rent arrears amongst private sector tenants</li> <li>Fewer private sector evictions</li> </ul>	MBC Registered Providers CAB	April 2018
1.7	Increase provision of temporary crash pads for young people within the borough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced homeless amongst young people</li> </ul>	MBC Supported housing providers	December 2014
1.8	Educate young people within the borough about the realities of homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer young people presenting as homeless</li> </ul>	MBC Schools Housing support providers	December 2014

1.9	Pilot a Home Advice scheme to reduce unnecessary customer demand and interaction with the housing options service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Routine queries diverted to alternative channels</li> <li>Transaction costs for housing options reduced</li> <li>Housing options staff able to provide more time to those with most complex needs</li> </ul>	MBC	September 2015
1.10	Monitor mortgage repossession claims and offer assistance and advice to affected households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Households at risk of being repossessed receive help and advice at an early stage</li> <li>Mortgage repossessions do not become a major reason for homelessness</li> </ul>	MBC Court Service	On-going

**Objective 2: Secure sufficient levels of appropriate accommodation within Maidstone to house homeless households**

Action	Outcomes	Lead	Timescale	
2.1	Pilot direct provision of emergency accommodation within the borough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce use of bed and breakfast accommodation</li> <li>Reduce costs to the authority</li> </ul>	MBC	December 2014
2.2	Maximise new affordable housing delivery, particularly 1 and 2 bedroom homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More social homes available within the borough</li> <li>Those most in need able to secure a social home</li> </ul>	MBC Registered Providers	On-going
2.3	Review the impact of the Allocation Scheme to ensure social housing is being allocated effectively and revise as necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social housing allocated to those most in need</li> <li>Homelessness preventions are not adversely affected by the Allocation Scheme</li> </ul>	MBC Registered Providers	April 2015
2.4	Increase participation in the HomeHunt scheme amongst private landlords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase access to the private rented sector for homeless or at risk households</li> <li>Increase housing options for non-priority households</li> </ul>	MBC NLA Private landlords	October 2015
2.5	Expand the Homefinder incentive scheme to more landlords within Maidstone and neighbouring boroughs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase discharge of homelessness duty into the private rented sector</li> </ul>	MBC Private landlords	October 2015
2.6	Secure sufficient provision of shared accommodation for use by under-35s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase housing options for under-35s</li> <li>Reduce DHP spend</li> </ul>	MBC HCA Private landlords Registered Providers	March 2018

**Objective 3: Ensure vulnerable households have access appropriate support to enable them to live independently**

Action		Outcomes	Lead	Timescale
3.1	Ensure people with mental health needs have sufficient access to appropriate housing and support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quicker, simpler referrals between housing and health services</li> <li>• More self-contained accommodation within the borough</li> <li>• People with mental health needs can access appropriate accommodation</li> <li>• Fewer vulnerable households are evicted</li> </ul>	MBC KCC Supporting People Support Providers KMPT Registered Providers	April 2015
3.2	Continued participation in the multi-agency One Stop Shop service for victims of domestic abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer people fleeing domestic abuse at point of crisis</li> <li>• Increased resilience for individuals suffering domestic abuse</li> <li>• Increased homelessness prevention for victims of domestic abuse</li> </ul>	MBC One Stop Shop	On-going
3.3	Raise awareness of housing, health and support services for rough sleepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rough sleepers are signposted and connected to housing, primary health care, mental health and substance misuse services</li> </ul>	MBC GPs Support Providers	June 2015
3.4	Review the success of the winter shelter in enabling rough sleepers to access alternative accommodation and support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer rough sleepers in Maidstone</li> <li>• Rough sleepers supported to access services and accommodation</li> </ul>	MBC Maidstone Churches	September 2014
3.5	Work with Kent probation to ensure that ex-offenders are appropriately supported to access suitable housing and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in re-offending rates amongst ex-offenders</li> </ul>	MBC Kent Probation Kent Prison Service Kent Supporting People	March 2015
3.6	Ensure that homeless households in Maidstone are appropriately referred to Kent Supporting People services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More homeless households receive housing-related support</li> <li>• More vulnerable households are able to live independently</li> <li>• Fewer vulnerable households are evicted</li> </ul>	MBC Supporting People VCS	April 2015

**Objective 4: Reduce health inequalities amongst homeless households**

Action		Outcomes	Lead	Timescale
4.1	Improve access to GPs and primary care services for homeless households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase no. of households in temporary accommodation accessing primary health care services</li> <li>Increase no. of rough sleepers accessing primary health care services</li> </ul>	MBC GPs	June 2015
4.2	Develop a homeless hospital discharge protocol for rough sleepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Homeless people have accommodation upon discharge so increasing opportunities for continuation of care and reduction of readmission</li> </ul>	MBC Hospitals	June 2015

**Objective 5: Strengthen partnership working at a local, county and national level**

Action		Outcomes	Lead	Timescale
5.1	Be an active member of local, county and national networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share and learn from best practice</li> <li>Promote innovation in Maidstone</li> </ul>	MBC	On-going
5.2	Explore opportunities to pool resources and take advantage of local, regional or national funding opportunities as they arise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced costs and better value for money in service delivery</li> <li>New services are developed at minimal cost to the Council</li> </ul>	MBC KHOG JPPB Registered Providers	On-going