

Social Care, Health and Housing

# Homelessness Strategy

2010 - 2015



## Foreword

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## **Foreword**

### **Councillor Rita Drinkwater**



*(Insert Rita Drinkwater text)*

**Julie Ogley, Director of Social Care, Health and Housing**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

This is Central Bedfordshire Council's first Homelessness Strategy following local government review. This strategy will continue to build upon the significant achievements made by the previous districts to tackle homelessness, and will seek to enhance existing services and develop new initiatives. This strategy has been developed in consultation with partner agencies and service users.

This strategy has been developed in response to the findings of the Homelessness Review 2009, which provided a detailed analysis of homelessness in Central Bedfordshire.

The Homelessness Act requires every local authority to carry out a review of homelessness in their area every five years, to develop and publish a Homelessness Strategy based on this review and to consult with other local statutory and voluntary organisations. The purpose of the review is to develop an evidence base to inform the strategy for tackling and preventing homelessness for the next five years. The homelessness review is required to cover:

1. An analysis of the past, current and future levels of homelessness
2. An audit of the services aimed at preventing, accommodating and supporting people who are or may become homeless
3. A review of the resources available to spend on homelessness within the area

### **Key review findings**

Central Bedfordshire is an area of relatively high housing costs and housing need. The housing market has, in the years running up to the recession, been driven by in-migration from more expensive areas to the south – for example Greater London and Hertfordshire; and also by out-commuting of local residents to better paid employment than is available within Central Bedfordshire.

The recession has brought a decrease in house prices. However, house prices remain high relative to the local wage market, and alongside this, more local households are unemployed or depending on lower paid work than previously.

Although the area remains relatively affluent, there are pockets of multiple deprivation. Supporting People needs analysis shows unmet need for people who are socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion. We also know that there is significant unmet need for site-based accommodation amongst local Gypsies and Travellers.

This situation means a high volume of customers approaching local housing options and homelessness services for advice and help. A steady decline in the number of homeless applications and acceptances of full duty homelessness over the past 4 years, shows that services are effective in meeting this challenge, by preventing homelessness and drawing on all available housing options to help households address their housing needs. A decrease in the use of Temporary Accommodation also reflects this.

Pressure on money advice services, and an increase in the proportion of priority need homelessness which arises from mortgage repossession, show the effect of the recession on local people. Services are responding to this by increasing the availability of specialist money and homelessness advice to people facing financial crisis and possible repossession. This strategy will drive further service development around financial inclusion.

Recently, the private rented sector has grown and has become an important option for preventing homelessness and meeting housing need. Further service development – for example the launch of the Lets Rent service, will build on this in closer partnership with local landlords.

The available evidence shows that most people accepted as being in priority need homelessness are families with children. Service development around the Think Family agenda is therefore key to improving outcomes for families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Available information about households in contact with the service, and information produced by consultation on this homelessness strategy, suggests that there are particular types of local homelessness about which we do not know enough, and to which we need to develop our response.

Key areas to address are homelessness in young people, including non-priority need homelessness; and homelessness in people with complex needs, for example ex-offenders, people with mental health problems, people with drug or alcohol dependency, and people affected by a combination of different challenges.

The review process has also indicated that there may be further room for service development around homelessness which is caused by violence and harassment.

We also know that further service development is needed around equalities practice and around Safeguarding of Children and Vulnerable Adults.

A report into Homelessness and Health in Central Bedfordshire, produced in 2009 by a partnership of local agencies, including housing options and homelessness services, examined the local picture around the health impacts of homelessness, and made a series of recommendations for service development and partnership working, which are reflected in the following strategic priorities.

**Homelessness strategic priorities**

The review process has led to the identification of 10 strategic priorities for homelessness in Central Bedfordshire. These priorities are also informed by the Local Government Reorganisation agenda and by national policy.

**There are 6 specific priorities, which are:**

**Harmonise housing options services across Central Bedfordshire, following Local Government Reorganisation.**

Action around this is crucial to achieving a consistent response to residents across Central Bedfordshire, building on existing work between the legacy providers – Aragon Housing Association in the north of the area, and Central Bedfordshire Council housing service to the south.

**Respond effectively to the recession, focusing on financial inclusion.**

As outlined above, the service is responding to an increased demand from people facing financial crisis as a result of the recession. Service development around financial inclusion will maintain and strengthen the response to this, and has a preventative role in helping families to avert or manage periods of financial crisis in a way that supports their role as parents.

**Work with young people aged 16-24 to meet their needs more effectively.**

Young people who are homeless or in housing need are disadvantaged in their access to the private rented sector, due to rules around benefit eligibility. This element of the strategy focuses on developing options and pathways for young people to find settled accommodation, and also aims to address unmet need for support in developing the life-skills necessary to sustain an independent home.

**Embed the Think Family approach within all homelessness prevention activity and broader interventions to sustain families in permanent settled accommodation.**

This element of the strategy is preventative, aiming to increase the services available to support families, tackling the root causes which can make a family vulnerable to social exclusion, or to a financial or housing crisis; and aiming to improve outcomes for children by supporting stable family life.

**Strengthen safeguarding practice for vulnerable adults and children across all aspects of housing options and homelessness prevention.**

There is an on-going statutory obligation, under section 11 of the Children's Act 2004, which requires local authorities to ensure good practice in safeguarding children and young people, working in partnership with other

agencies such as Children's Services. The act also requires authorities to promote the wellbeing of children as a material consideration in service development and strategic decision making.

**Investigate the particular problems and pathway journeys that are experienced by people with complex needs, including mental health and substance abuse.**

This centres around developing a better understanding of this type of homelessness, and developing our response to it accordingly. It involves close partnership working with other agencies – such as health, and with social care colleagues; and builds on several existing projects which are in the homelessness strategy action plan.

In addition, there are a further four cross-cutting priorities, applicable across all aspects of the housing options and homelessness service, which are as follows:-

**Strengthen equalities practice across all aspects of the service.**

**Make best use of private sector accommodation in meeting all other homelessness strategic priorities.**

**Sharing awareness and working in partnership with the community and between partner agencies.**

**Tenancy sustainment.**

### **Implementing the strategy**

Tackling homelessness cannot be done in isolation and is dependent on effective joint working between the Local Authority and all organisations who are working to prevent and respond to homelessness.

The strategy will cover the period 2010 to 2015. Progress against its action plan will be monitored and reviewed by the Central Bedfordshire Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership, as well as through the local authorities internal performance management systems.



# 1 Introduction

Homelessness is a key issue for local authorities which can have an adverse impact at economic, social and personal levels.

This is Central Bedfordshire's first Homelessness Strategy as a Unitary Authority and covers the period April 2010 to 2014. The strategy is based on the findings of the Homelessness Review, which sets out to examine homelessness demand, housing supply in the area and existing homelessness services in order to map any gaps in service provision. It aims to ensure that the Council's future housing needs service for local people has a seamless and holistic approach according to needs, and prevents homelessness from occurring wherever possible.

The Homelessness Review also looked at the past achievements from the former Mid and South Bedfordshire Homelessness Strategies and brings together any remaining activities from these strategies that will support and enhance the key objectives for the prevention of homelessness within Central Bedfordshire.

The Homelessness Act requires local authorities to carry out a review of homelessness every five years, to develop and publish a homelessness strategy based on the review and on consultation with other organisations. The Homelessness Act 2002 requires homelessness strategies to include actions that:

1. Prevent homelessness;
2. Ensure there is sufficient accommodation available for people who are or may become homeless;
3. Ensure there is satisfactory support for people who are, or may become homeless, or need support to prevent them from becoming homeless again.

Partnership working is fundamental to this Homelessness Strategy. Many people will have multiple needs that extend beyond the basic need for a home. It is essential that services to meet the needs of homeless people are developed in partnership to prevent homelessness and offer sustainable housing solutions.

This strategy has been developed in partnership and its implementation will be led by the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership. It is based on findings following wide ranging consultation with customers, stakeholders, local community groups, health, fire and police services, council officers and members and other frontline staff who work with homeless people and those in housing need.

Key actions from the strategy will be monitored and reviewed by the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership and through Central Bedfordshire performance reporting framework.

## 1.1 The locality of Central Bedfordshire

Central Bedfordshire was formed on 01 April 2009, covering the areas of the former Mid and South Bedfordshire Councils, and taking on the functions within the new area of the former Bedfordshire County Council.

Central Bedfordshire covers approximately 716 square kilometres and is home to 255,000 people. It is predominantly rural with just over half of the population living in rural areas and the largest towns are Leighton Linlade, Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Biggleswade, Flitwick, Sandy and Ampthill. Around 6% of people living in Central Bedfordshire are from ethnic minority communities, the largest of which is "White Other" (2%).

There are approximately 105,400 dwellings in Central Bedfordshire of which 77% are privately owned with 14% socially rented.

By 2021, it is estimated that housing growth will increase the population to more than 282,000, with the largest growth in population being among the over 65's with a projected increase of almost 53% by 2021.

Overall, the health of people in Central Bedfordshire is generally similar to or significantly better than the England average. Over the last ten years, death rates from all causes, (including early deaths from heart disease, stroke and cancer) have reduced for men and women and are generally better than the England average. However, all age, all cause mortality (AAACM) rates in women are now very similar to the England average.

Average life expectancy in Central Bedfordshire is close to the East of England average (males 79.1 years and females 82.4 years).

Although Central Bedfordshire is a relatively affluent, and rural area, there are pockets of deprivation centered around the urban areas of Houghton Regis, Dunstable and Sandy, parts of Leighton Buzzard and of Flitwick. These tend to be areas of social housing, and of more marginal private ownership and renting in ex-local authority properties. They are characterised by low educational achievement and skills, and by higher exposure to crime and anti-social behaviour. (Sources are the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2009, and the Place Survey 2009).

## 1.2 National and local key drivers

The Government published a document called **Sustainable Communities – Settled Homes; changing lives** in March 2005, which sets key objectives such as homelessness prevention, supporting vulnerable people, tackling its wider causes and symptoms, helping people to move away from rough sleeping and providing more settled homes. The Government has also focused on youth homelessness as a particular concern, and has provided funding and support for local authorities to improve the supply of suitable accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds, increase access to mediation including family mediation, and have launched a national Supported Lodgings Development scheme for young people.

The former Housing Corporation (whose regulatory functions are now with the Tenant Services Authority) published their own strategy for Housing Associations called **Tackling Homelessness** in 2006, which aims to support and complement the prevention work of their local authority partners. The Strategy outlined the key role that Housing Associations have to play in tackling homelessness. The work with Housing Associations has since been complemented with the introduction of the Communities and Local Government (CLG) Homelessness Action Team, who work to build and sustain partnerships between local authorities and Housing Associations, whilst promoting good practice.

**“Independence and Opportunity” (2007)** outlines how the Supporting People programme helps to reduce homelessness by providing support to enable households to remain in their own homes, and offering invaluable support services to other vulnerable groups. The strategy emphasises the need for service users to remain central to the programme, whilst highlighting future changes and plans for delivery through the Local Area Agreements.

The Government also commissioned independent research to examine the role of social housing and how best to meet future housing need. The Hills Report entitled **Ends and Means: The Future of Social Housing** was published in 2007, and cites the need to include employment advice alongside housing advice in order to increase choice and opportunities for those in housing need.

Whilst each local authority is responsible for tackling homelessness within its own area it is important to recognise the benefits of sub-regional working. Central Bedfordshire is working in partnership with Sub-regional groups including the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Groups.

At a local level, we recognise the need to provide an efficient and focused housing needs service that delivers positive outcomes for homeless people.

The main objectives of the Housing Needs Service are;

- To increase the supply of affordable accommodation
- Early intervention to prevent homelessness
- Shift the focus on how we are best able to meet housing need, to promote choice
- Avoid the use of temporary accommodation where possible
- Provide support for vulnerable people
- Tackle the wider causes such as debt and unemployment
- Address the health needs of homeless people
- Focus on youth homelessness
- Strengthen partnerships with others and make best use of resources

### 1.3 Alignment with other Central Bedfordshire Strategies

This Homelessness Strategy is closely aligned with Central Bedfordshire strategies and successful implementation and delivery is reliant on the outcomes from other housing related strategies. This strategy will influence some of the priorities of other emerging strategies, such as:

- Sustainable Communities Strategy (**under development – adopted June 2010**)
- Supporting People Strategy (**evolving into a Central Bedfordshire Preventative Strategy**)
- Housing Strategy
- Asset Management Strategy
- Private Sector Renewal Policy – incorporating Empty Homes, Grants Programme, policy on Houses in Multiple Occupation and Fuel Poverty
- Tenant Participation Strategy

Supporting People strategy is the framework within which the council has made funding and commissioning decisions around the provision of housing related support services since 2003. These services are key to the response to homelessness, and will be discussed in detail further in this document.

Under the Supporting People programme, the council has developed its understanding of needs around housing related support, and there has been some service development to better align service provision with identified needs.

The emerging Preventative Strategy for Central Bedfordshire will in the future drive decision making around this type of service provision, taking a holistic

view of all services which have a role in promoting the independence and welfare of vulnerable people, and as a result preventing crisis situations from arising.

There are also a number of other related council strategies that will contribute to and support the success of the Homelessness Strategy; These will include:

- Safeguarding Adults Strategy
- Children and Young People Plan
- Child Poverty Strategy
- Older People Strategy
- Learning Disability Strategy
- Mental Health Strategy
- Community Safety Strategy
- Domestic Violence Strategy
- Think Family Strategy
- Safeguarding Adults Strategy

For more information about strategic housing issues, please see the Council's main Housing Strategy.

## **2 The Housing Need and Economic Context**

### **2.1 Housing affordability and the housing market**

Central Bedfordshire is an area of relatively highly priced housing to buy and rent privately. Between 2000 and 2008, house prices in the former Mid Bedfordshire rose by 111%, and in the former South Bedfordshire by 94%.

The 2009 Bedfordshire and Luton Strategic Housing Market Assessment identifies a need for 6400 further social rented homes to be built in Central Bedfordshire by 2021 in order to meet need from people unable to access owner occupation or intermediate tenures such as shared ownership.

Although house prices have fallen in response to the recession, they remain out of reach for many people on relatively low incomes. Meanwhile, decline in local manufacturing industries and job losses means an increasing number of households unemployed or in low-paid employment, and so unable to afford home ownership.

Data collected by the council's Economic Growth and Regeneration service show that between January 2007 and August 2009, there was a 138% increase in the number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants in Central Bedfordshire. This compares to a national increase over the same period of 68%. Vauxhall remains a major provider of relatively well-paid manufacturing

jobs in the sub-region, and job losses here have the potential to pitch large numbers of people into unemployment and housing need. (Nomis, December 2009).

Local unemployment disproportionately affects people aged 18-24. This group account for 12.8% of the working age population, and 27.1% of JSA claimants.

It is widely accepted that timely, expert money advice is important in helping people in difficulty to avoid a crisis situation which may place them at risk of homelessness.

Housing need services in Central Bedfordshire have responded to this changed economic climate by employing a dedicated Homelessness Prevention and Mortgage Rescue Officer. This officer will target specific households to prevent homelessness and work with other agencies to prevent mortgage repossessions. This will compliment the general work of the service on financial inclusion and generic money advice.

Much of the money advice available to residents of Central Bedfordshire is provided in partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), supported by grant funding from the council. In addition, Aragon Housing Association run an in-house service, for their own tenants, and for homeless people referred from Aragon's housing advice service. Aragon report that there are normally around 35 people on their waiting list for this service. Citizens Advice Bureaux in Central Bedfordshire report receiving 514 new debt advice enquiries between April and August 2009. However this does not include new enquiries to Dunstable CAB, or clients who presented with a different type of enquiry but went on to receive debt advice.

## **2.2 Migration**

Previous housing need studies have shown that Central Bedfordshire attracts migrants from areas to the south, such as Greater London and Hertfordshire, where house prices are more expensive. It is also a destination for people moving out of Luton. This has been an important driver of the local housing market, although it is unclear what the effect of the recession has been on this pattern of migration.

Figures on international migration published in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment suggest that this is not a significant source of housing need in Central Bedfordshire. Migration statistics published by the Office for National Statistics show that between 2001 and 2006, there was a net gain of 3200 international migrants in Mid Bedfordshire, and a net gain of 600 international migrants in South Bedfordshire.

## 2.3 Housing waiting list demand

Local housing need translates into a total of 2781 households currently registered on the Choice Based Lettings housing waiting list for Central Bedfordshire. Of these, 1347 are waiting for one bedroom accommodation, 999 for two bedroom accommodation and 435 for accommodation of 3 or more bedrooms. Although the higher volume of demand is for smaller accommodation, in practice it is a bigger challenge to meet needs for family sized accommodation. This is because smaller properties become available to re-let more often, and because homelessness legislation places a greater statutory obligation on councils to house families with children than other household types.

It is important to note that housing waiting lists do not reflect total and true need and demand for social housing. Housing need studies such as the 2009 Strategic Housing Market Assessment do attempt to do this, taking into account wider factors than are reflected in waiting lists.

The following table shows the main council and Housing Association stock in Central Bedfordshire from which these needs can be met, and the frequency with which properties of different sizes have become available for letting between April 2006 and March 2009. (NB These figures include sheltered housing stock and stock designated as particularly suitable for older people).

	Number of properties	Average yearly lettings
Bedsit and 1 bed	3330	129
2 bed	3110	211
3 bed	4611	166
4 bed +	212	8

## 2.4 Choice based lettings

A sub-regional Choice Based Lettings scheme for the allocation of social housing has been operational in Central Bedfordshire since June 2009. This is delivered in partnership with other providers in the sub-region. An accessible and effective Choice Based Lettings system is a crucial part of the response to households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Choice Based Lettings describes a scheme where all available council and housing association properties are advertised to housing applicants who can then place a bid for any property they are interested in. Priority is given to households in the greatest housing need.

The CBL scheme, Bedfordshire Home Finder, is supported by a Sub Regional Allocations Policy and at present this Policy is undergoing a review in order to provide a fair and flexible system of allocation, through choice.

Choice Based Lettings encourages families to take up a tenancy in the area they want, and the type of property that best suits them. By doing so, it has been evidenced that tenancies tend to be longer as a result, and families are more inclined to become involved in a positive way with their neighbours and wider community. Choice Based Lettings also means that families and individuals have choice about their local schools or health centre's, and can plan to move close to family and friend networks which is especially important for vulnerable people.

Of course it is important to note that the ability of Choice Based Lettings schemes to meet applicants' aspirations for where and in what type of property they live depends on the location and type of the social housing stock which comes up for letting.

In addition to the Choice Based Lettings Scheme the Council is also developing a Local Lettings Policy to further maximise use of its housing stock and respond to local needs. The Policy will introduce local lettings variations for particular schemes or types of housing, giving preference to specific groups of applicants. The Policy will aim to meet the following objectives;

- Ensure that property types meet waiting list demands
- Explore alternative use of properties to meet housing needs and widen choice
- Tackle low demand and stimulate demand for unpopular properties
- Ensure that properties are let rapidly but appropriately
- Ensure that communities are sustainable
- Ensure that letting decisions support key corporate themes such as supporting and caring for an ageing population and creating safer communities
- Ensure that letting decisions support strategic housing objectives
- Maintain a strong element of housing provision according to need, but also recognise social and community need, in order to contribute to sustaining local neighbourhoods and estates

Full consultation will be carried out prior to the implementation of a local lettings variation and specific measures of success will be identified and monitored to ensure that it meets one or more of the Policy objectives.

The following table shows the number of people who have successfully obtained a property under the Choice Based Lettings system between June and December 2009. Allocations in bands 1 and 2 are to applicants with an emergency or urgent need for accommodation – including people who are homeless. Allocations in band 3 are to people who are in housing need. Allocations in band 4 are to people who are classified within the system as being 'adequately housed' - people who want to move, and may have a perceived need, but are not considered to have a need to move within local allocations policy.



Bedsizes	Total	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4
Bedsit	5	0	0	3	2
One bed	158	0	21	95	41
Two bed	138	2	18	100	18
Three bed	60	3	16	39	2
Four bed	6	0	0	5	1

The fact that a high proportion of allocations have been to people in band 3, and that there have been allocations into band 4, suggests that the system is working well in meeting a range of housing needs.

However, other information emerging from the Choice Based Lettings IT systems indicates a high level of unsuccessful bidding, which represents a lot of wasted time and disappointment for applicants, and there are also concerns that some applicants in housing need seem not to be bidding, and a need to understand why this is.

## **2.5 Equalities monitoring of new allocations**

Monitoring of new allocations by ethnicity shows that the proportion of new council tenants between April 2006 and March 2009 who were from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) background was broadly similar to the proportion of BME residents of Central Bedfordshire in the 2001 census.

Information on new allocations to disabled people is currently unavailable, although CBL reporting systems are being developed to deliver this.

Monitoring by age is not carried out systematically and this is an area for development. There is no monitoring by sexuality, and this also needs to be addressed.

Central Bedfordshire will continue to monitor any changes in Policy that may impact negatively on marginalized and vulnerable households and will work with partners Sub Regionally to ensure a fair and flexible system of allocation.

## **2.6 New affordable development**

An important part of the council's response to housing need is working with Housing Association partners to bring about the development of new affordable housing. The council uses the findings of housing need studies to develop planning policies around the amount and type of new development which should be affordable, and negotiates with developers as to how these plans will be reflected in new housing developments.

Between April 2005 and March 2009, 365 new social rented homes were built across Central Bedfordshire, as well as 333 new homes of intermediate tenure, such as shared ownership.

The Council is currently performing within its 2009-2010 target (National Indicator 155) to build 150-200 units of new affordable accommodation, despite the current economic downturn and its impact on the housing market. This is due to effective internal working within departments and a close relationship with our partner Housing Associations. A further 200 units of affordable accommodation is anticipated in 2010-2011. It is not possible at this stage to predict development beyond 2011 as it is dependent on yet unannounced funding from Central Government.

## **2.7 Meeting housing needs within the private rented sector**

In recent years, the private rented sector has grown locally as described in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2009. This seems to be linked to the growth of buy-to-let mortgages which took place in the years before the credit crunch, and has continued through the credit crunch as home owners wanting to move have chosen to rent out their properties as an alternative to selling.

It has traditionally been difficult for people on low incomes to access good quality private rented housing due to a reluctance on the part of landlords to accept benefit applicants. However, as the sector has grown, more landlords have begun to accept tenants on Local Housing Allowance. At the same time, homelessness prevention services have worked with private landlords to keep people in Assured Shorthold Tenancies for longer, and promote Local Housing Allowance to landlords as a secure source of rental income.

This means that the private sector is catering to more housing need than in the past, and playing a greater role in homelessness prevention, allied to tenancy deposit schemes which help people in financial difficulties to overcome the difficulty of meeting the requirement for a large deposit at the start of tenancy.

The Lets Rent initiative being launched Central Bedfordshire on 17 March 2010 is intended to create further opportunities to meet housing need in the sector. Tenants going into the private rented sector under Lets Rent will receive a deposit guarantee from the council, and floating tenancy support to prevent tenancy failure.

The Housing Options Team who run the service, work closely with colleagues in Housing Benefits to ensure that all paperwork and documents are in place where applicable to avoid delays in payment before the tenancy commences. The team is also on hand throughout the tenancy to provide help and advice to either party and to resolve any difficulties that may arise.

The quality of accommodation under Lets Rent will be assured through an Accreditation undertaken by the Council's Private Sector Housing team. Officers will work with landlords to ensure that properties meet standards to become accredited as good quality accommodation.

The Council will be hosting a further Landlords' Forum in May 2010, at which the Lets Rent scheme will form the focus of the Forum.

Increasing use of the private rented sector has some knock-on implications around affordability. There is a need for ongoing work with landlords, and with Job Centre Plus, to tackle the 'poverty trap' effect of rents which are higher than those in the social rented sector.

## **2.8 Young people**

People who are aged 24 and under, without children, and on low incomes, have restricted access to the private rented sector due to rules about Local Housing Allowance eligibility. This group have not benefited from increased access to the private rented sector and there is a lack of alternative housing options for young people in housing need – for example, Central Bedfordshire has no crash-pad or foyer accommodation for young people, and only limited supported hostel accommodation, discussed in more detail below.

Young people aged 16/17 are also a group that are affected by homelessness and although they are defined as a "priority need" group, recent case law changes mean this group are actually defined as being the responsibility of Children's Services and many now fall under the criteria of the Childrens Act 1989. There is now a protocol in place with Children, Families and Learning for jointly assessing the housing and support needs of this group.

## **2.9 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Need**

A study of Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs across Bedfordshire and Luton was carried out in 2006. It found that there was significant unmet housing need within the local Gypsy and Traveller community, and that there was a general preference amongst Gypsies and Travellers to live on sites if possible rather than in 'bricks and mortar' accommodation.

The study concluded that in order to meet the needs of local people, 74 new pitches should be provided on sites across Bedfordshire and Luton between 2006 and 2011. The study recommended that 20 of these pitches should be in the former Mid Bedfordshire, and 34-40 should be in the former South Bedfordshire.

## **2.10 Need for housing related support services**

Meeting housing need and responding to homeless demand means understanding and meeting needs for housing related support services. Existing services are currently funded from Supporting People grant – an amount paid to Central Bedfordshire by the Government, based on needs in the area. The council uses this money to deliver support services – either directly as a provider, or by funding other providers to deliver a service.

A study is currently underway researching where there is unmet need for these types of services. However, we know from previous research that there is significant unmet need for services which support people who are socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion. These are the type of services which are particularly important in meeting need from people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

At present, floating support in Central Bedfordshire is provided by Bromford Support, a relatively new service which has been introduced as a result of Supporting People service development. They are able to provide support to up to 133 households at a time, across different types and levels of need. A new service which will provide support specifically to Gypsies and Travellers is in the pipeline.

There are three Supporting People funded services providing supported hostel accommodation to homeless single people. These are Signpost which provides accommodation and support to homeless young people; Mayday Trust and Bedford Housing Link, which provide accommodation and support to single homeless people across age groups.

Data on the numbers of people trying to access these services show the pressure they are under in meeting the level of local need. The three services have 86 units of accommodation and support. In 2008-09, they received 404 referrals of people seeking accommodation. At September 2009, the services had 36 people on their waiting lists to take up accommodation. At the same time, they were accommodating 14 people who were ready to move out but unable to because they were waiting for suitable move-on accommodation.

All the services referred to in the above paragraph take referrals from housing advisors. There is no direct-access hostel in Central Bedfordshire, to which single homeless people can refer themselves in an emergency.

Responding to this type of homelessness is perceived as a challenge by frontline workers. Housing options advisors must have reason to believe that a homeless person is likely to be in priority need (within the meaning of homelessness legislation) before they can arrange temporary accommodation and take a homeless application from the person. Alternative options and pathways need to be available in order to be able to offer meaningful help to a person who is not in priority need.

This difficulty is more acute where the person in housing need is aged under 25, due to lack of access to private rent described above.

Young people who are aged 16-17, or who are vulnerable due to leaving care, are catered to by homeless legislation – they fall into priority need, and are the subject of protocols with Children, Families and Learning as described above.

However, new services and pathways are needed for those young people who do not fall into priority need homelessness, do not otherwise have high priority for a quick allocation of social housing, and are not able to access a private rented tenancy due to their age.

## **2.11 Disability and housing need**

Disabled people with need for aids and adaptations present their need mostly as requests for grant-funded aids and adaptations. There is high spending on this across Central Bedfordshire, for council and Housing Association tenants, and home owners. However, waiting times for help can be long, in part because the available funding does not match demand. A comprehensive review of these services is currently underway, with the explicit aim of increasing the number and timeliness of adaptations as far as possible within available resources.

However, the response to this challenge must involve incorporating higher mobility standards into newly built housing wherever possible.

The Sub Regional Partnership for Choice Based Lettings is working towards introducing an Accessible Housing Register, thus trying to assist in matching the specific housing needs of customers who require aids and adaptations to properties that already have such adaptations contained within them.

## **3 The Council's Approach to housing options and homelessness**

### **3.1 Housing options and homelessness services**

Central Bedfordshire homelessness and housing need services are provided directly by the council in the south of the area, and by Aragon Housing Association in the north of the area, reflecting the arrangements in place under the legacy district councils.

The two services have been working closely together since April 2009 through a series of harmonisation meetings, examining and synchronising their work practices in order to draw together a seamless service across the whole Central Bedfordshire area.

Housing options and homelessness prevention are a key element of the way services are provided. Traditionally, homelessness services have responded to cases of apparent priority need homelessness by taking a homeless application, placing the household in temporary accommodation, and allocating a council or Housing Association tenancy to the household once a full homeless duty was confirmed.

Where a full homeless duty is confirmed, this means the council has investigated the household's circumstances, and concluded that they are homeless, that they are in priority need, that their homelessness is not intentional, and that there is no reason to do with immigration status which would make them ineligible for help under the homelessness legislation.

What places someone in 'priority need' is legally defined, and may not match up to the need which the homeless person considers themselves to be in. (Definitions of priority need can be found at Appendix 2).

Since 2008 the focus has been on homelessness prevention, early intervention to avoid crises and expanding housing choice for customers. Under a homelessness prevention and housing options approach, a housing options officer will work with a homeless family to find a way of preventing the homelessness by helping the household to remain in their present home; or to find alternative accommodation, taking into account all the alternative housing options which might be available, which they can move to in a planned way. Often there are other issues not housing related that may affect a household and by tackling the root cause of these issues, it can mean a household being provided with a sustainable housing option that will have benefits and positive outcomes in terms of health, educational attainment and tackling worklessness.

Taking this approach achieves other benefits. By taking into account the full range of housing options available to the household, it makes better use of the limited social housing stock available for letting. Secondly, by either preventing homelessness altogether, or helping the household to move in a planned way – which for many households will still be into a social tenancy, it helps households to avoid the trauma and uncertainty of actually being homeless and spending time in temporary accommodation.

The same approach of exploring all housing options and providing information and help in accessing them is applied to people who are not homeless, or not in priority need.

The council is coming closer to developing an 'Enhanced Housing Options' service, which aims to work with the household on the root causes of their housing need, by for example by looking at support issues, or training and skills.

### **3.2 Referral to and from other agencies**

Central Bedfordshire Council already has a number of protocols in place with external agencies to capture and protect vulnerable people who may become homeless for reasons other than housing itself. Protocols and referral mechanisms are already in place for Care Leavers, Mental Health and Hospital Discharges, and draft documents are currently under consultation for 16/17 year olds and Drug/Alcohol. The council is currently writing a draft protocol for ex offenders, due out for consultation in December 2009.

## 4 The Homelessness Review

### 4.1 Purpose of the review

Under the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities are required to carry out a review of homelessness in the area in order to publish a new homelessness strategy. The review should seek the views of both service users and stakeholders so that the council can identify and map any gaps in the existing service, and to listen to suggestions as to how the service could improve its customer focus and support to the community.

### 4.2 Reviewing existing homelessness strategies

The homelessness review, carried out in 2009, was particularly important as it needed to combine information and intelligence about homelessness across the former Mid Bedfordshire and South Bedfordshire districts. There were two existing homelessness strategies for these former council areas, so it was necessary to examine and bring together all the past achievements and ensure that any remaining priorities were carried over to the new Central Bedfordshire strategy.

### 4.3 Achievements from the last homelessness strategies

Significant progress has already been made by the council in relation to the reduction of homelessness, expansion of housing options and offering choice. The table below demonstrates some of these achievements.

- Launch of Choice Based Lettings scheme
- Independent housing adviser for money advice
- New Housing Options literature and leaflets to crystal-mark standard
- New procedures implemented to identify vulnerability and risk with all homeless applicants
- Court duty desk manned by housing officer
- Six monthly articles on homelessness in Horizon
- Website advice reviewed and updated every six months
- Domestic violence training given to all housing staff
- Domestic violence information line set up
- Two domestic violence refuges currently under construction
- BME monitoring in place for Gypsy and Travellers
- Home visits for family exclusion cases
- Rent deposit/rent in advance scheme
- Dedicated post to tackle Mortgage Rescue, worklessness and financial inclusion



- Launch of Teenage parent pilot project
- Bromford floating support available across all tenancy types
- Provision of hostel in Leighton Buzzard
- Mental Health and Housing Forum established
- Review of Transfer Incentive Scheme with increased funding and support
- Additional funding for money advice to young people and tenants
- Launch of Credit Union
- Satisfaction surveys for homeless service users

#### 4.4 Homelessness strategy health check

As part of the work of the review, service managers used the Communities and Local Government’s Strategy Health check document as a tool in identifying areas of concern and improvement. The following table shows the council’s perceived strengths and weaknesses; all areas of perceived weakness have been incorporated into the new homelessness strategy.

Areas of Strength	Areas of Weakness
Member and corporate commitment to tackling homelessness	Need further protocols with agencies to reduce homelessness in areas relating to health, offenders, drug and alcohol
Sub-regional working including a homelessness forum	Having named contacts with other agencies for a seamless referral approach
Good consultation with service users and stakeholders for the new strategy	Homelessness prevention training and awareness to frontline staff in other agencies
Meeting the Government’s 2010 TA reduction target	Improved ethnic monitoring
Strong prevention and options work	Improved working with Housing Association partners
Good levels of mediation offered, including home visits	Tackling wider causes of homelessness such as worklessness
Care Leavers protocol in place	Performance monitoring
16/17 year old protocol drafted with Children’s Services	Pathways and options for homeless young people.
Action to improve liaison with Housing Benefits department	
Rent deposit and rent in advance scheme	
Provision of floating tenancy support	
Domestic violence awareness and action	
Robust procedures and processes for administering a homelessness service	

## **4.5 Homelessness demand**

In order to establish the past, present and projected future of homelessness demand, the review looked at statistics from a variety of internal and external sources. The raw data from these sources can be found at Appendix 1. Homelessness demand is explained in greater detail in the next chapter.

# **5 Homelessness Demand**

## **5.1 Homeless acceptances and applications**

Data on approaches to the service from customers in housing need shows a high volume of work coming into the service. In 2009, 1550 households presented to the council's service in housing need and 814 presented to the service run by Aragon Housing Association.

However, data on the number of homeless applications taken, and the number of households accepted as being in priority need homelessness, show the success the service has had in responding to this challenge, with a 70% reduction in acceptances between 2005 and 2009.

## **5.2 Homelessness prevention**

The timing of this change co-incides with the introduction of the housing options and homelessness prevention approach adopted in 2007. During 2008 and 2009, there were 330 homelessness preventions, including some early successes on mortgage rescue. More detail on the preventions achieved is published in Appendix 1, and shows strong performance on this across both housing options service providers in Central Bedfordshire.

This approach has allowed a marked reduction in the use of temporary accommodation across Central Bedfordshire. In June 2008 there were 71 families in temporary accommodation. This had reduced to 31 families in March 2009.

The prevention and options approach is also demonstrated in the proportion of new lettings which are to statutory homeless households. The Homelessness Review carried out by South Bedfordshire District Council in 2003 showed that 60% of allocations during 2002-03 were to homeless households. In 2008-09, this had reduced to 25% of allocations to Central Bedfordshire Council tenancies.

### 5.3 Profile of homeless households by reason for homelessness

Data from statutory homelessness returns to the Government provides detailed information about the profile of those households who have been accepted as being in priority need homelessness between 2005 and 2009. Analysis of the reasons for homelessness in these households shows the volume of homelessness decreasing across all recorded reasons over the period. During the period, the most common reasons for homelessness were the loss of accommodation with family and friends (including non-violent relationship breakdowns), followed by the end of an assured-shorthold tenancy, violence and harassment (including violent relationship breakdown), and mortgage arrears.

The only reason for homelessness which has increased proportionately during this period is mortgage arrears, which is to be expected in the context of the recession. In 2005, this type of homelessness accounted for 5% of all priority need cases. In 2009, the proportion had increased to 11% of all priority need cases.

These 10 cases of homelessness due to mortgage arrears in 2009 are only one part of the effect of the recession on homelessness. For instance, we know that in 2008-09, 43 households were evicted from council and Aragon Housing Association tenancies in Central Bedfordshire due to rent arrears. These evictions are not reflected in homeless acceptance figures for the same time period, either because the household was not in priority need, or was in priority need but found to be intentionally homeless.

We would expect to see further increases in local unemployment reflected in increased demand on the service. The cold winter may also increase demand, as fuel poverty leaves people struggling to meet household expenses.

There has been a slight increase in the proportion of people becoming homeless due to harassment or violence, which raises questions about the role of community safety in preventing this type of homelessness, particularly given service developments around domestic violence and broader community safety issues during this time. More in-depth research would help to understand the nature of this problem and identify the correct response to it.

There has been service development in recent years around provision for people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, due to domestic violence. The 'Sanctuary' scheme exists to prevent homelessness, where appropriate, by installing security measures and panic buttons in the victims home so that they can safely remain in their existing home.

Two hostels catering to people fleeing domestic violence are currently in the pipeline. One, in the south of the area, will complete in March 2010, and the

other, in the north, is scheduled to complete later in 2010. These refuges will provide a dedicated resource for survivors of domestic violence and will be run in partnership with Supporting People and Stonham.

## **5.4 Profile of homeless households by type of priority need**

Data is also available on the reasons for priority need in these homeless households. It shows that the great majority of priority need homeless households are single parent households, followed by couples with children. This reflects that children or a pregnant woman in the household automatically places the household in priority need.

The number of homeless households with children, whilst far lower than in previous years, nonetheless highlights the importance of the Think Family Agenda in the way that the service responds to homeless families. Preventing homelessness in a family, or responding to their homelessness in a way which recognises the wider needs of the children for stability and support, has an important role to play in preventing long-term detriment to the family's prospects.

Analysis of priority need shows that after families with children, the next largest group (10% of all acceptances in 2009), are people who have mental ill health or a mental disability, followed by people with a physical disability, people with 'other special need', and people who are vulnerable because they are fleeing violence.

The number of people having a priority need because they are care leavers is low – just 8 people in 5 years, reflecting that alternative housing pathways are in place for this group. At present Central Bedfordshire is working in with Children's Services to set up a protocol for all care leavers so that a supported housing pathway is created for them to meet each individual's housing need and ensure ongoing support for that care leaver, so as to minimize the risk of tenancy breakdown or individuals living a chaotic life.

## **5.5 Ex-offenders and people with drug or alcohol dependency**

Numbers accepted as having a priority need because of alcohol or drug dependency, or because of having been in custody, are particularly low and have been throughout the period 2005-09 – just seven people from these categories in 5 years. This could indicate that alternative housing pathways are in place for this group, although Supporting People analysis indicates that there is unmet need for housing and support in these groups. It could be that

people who are homeless in these circumstances are being picked up and identified as having another type of priority need. However, the possibility that services are under-responding to these groups should be considered. There is a lack of reportable data about contact with the service and resulting outcomes for people who approach services in this situation and are not found to be in priority need as a result of their problems.

## **5.6 Ethnicity of priority need homeless households**

Data collected on the ethnicity of priority need homeless households suggests that the proportion of households found to be in priority need who are recorded as BME is proportionate to the percentage of BME households in the population according to the 2001 census. This does not mean that there is not ongoing work to be done in ensuring that the service meets needs across ethnic groups. For example, we have no data about the number of Gypsy and Traveller households applying as homeless because the statutory returns do not ask for them to be recorded as an ethnic group.

We do know that there is significant unmet accommodation need amongst local Gypsies and Travellers. Responding to homeless demand from Gypsies and Travellers means developing better monitoring so that we know more about homeless demand from this group; developing our ability to respond to customers from this group with culturally appropriate housing advice; the provision of floating support to Gypsies and Travellers, which would include helping people housed into 'bricks and mortar' accommodation to settle in; and working with colleagues across housing and planning to develop more sites and improve living conditions on existing sites.

## **5.7 Disability**

We do not have reportable data about the volume of homeless demand which comes from people needing housing adapted for a disability, and this needs to be addressed in monitoring systems. However, analysis of acceptances by reason for priority need shows that there is homeless demand from disabled people.

## **5.8 Sexuality**

We do not collect information about the sexuality of customers approaching the service in housing need and cannot evidence our response to people who are homeless in situations where the sexuality is a factor in their situation. B Proud, a Third Sector organization representing and advocating for the views of LGBT people, were consulted in developing the Homelessness Strategy, and suggested areas for service development around responding to homelessness in this group.

## **5.9 Non-priority need homelessness**

Conducting the homelessness review has revealed a general difficulty in obtaining reportable information about non-priority need homelessness. . Collecting more reportable information about these households would make it easier to evidence our response to this type of housing need, and would support anecdotal intelligence about the need for further service development.

## **5.10 Young people**

Homelessness in young people (those aged 24 and under) is an area where frontline services perceive unmet need. This links back to earlier discussion, under 'Housing needs', about the difficulties for this group in accessing the private rented sector, and the lack of alternative pathways and options – including support - for this group.

Statutory returns show that in 2009, there were 37 cases of priority need homelessness where the household was headed by someone aged 24 or under. However, this ignores non-priority need homelessness in this age group. Analysis of people approaching the council service for housing advice in this age group shows that a further 459 young people came to the council for housing advice in 2009, amongst which will be people who were homeless but not in priority need. The information referenced earlier on young people accessing the Signpost service provides further evidence of unmet homeless need in this group.

## **5.11 Repeat homelessness**

Available data on repeat homelessness from statutory returns shows just 10 cases of this in 5 years. However, this represents only a narrowly defined group of households falling into priority need homelessness twice within 3 years. Households who are repeatedly homeless without being in priority need, or who fall into priority need repeatedly over a longer timescale, are ignored in this data. There is a need to establish recording which allows a fuller understanding of this issue locally.

However, anecdotally, we are aware that there are a significant number of vulnerable families living on our estates who may be vulnerable to repeat homelessness, and so work around 'Think Family', and wider service development around floating tenancy support, are in place as part of the response to this type of homelessness.

## **5.12 Rough sleeping**

Rough sleeping is perceived not to be a significant problem locally and Central Bedfordshire is not defined as a rough sleeping zone by the CLG. However, a “hot spot” count of rough sleepers with partners in 2009 showed evidence of an issue with rough sleepers, with a total of 9 rough sleepers identified and a further 4-5 known to have slept rough in Sandy in the previous 12 months. Another hot spot count is planned for 2010 and Central Bedfordshire is working in partnership with the Salvation Army to provide a dedicated winter hostel for 2010.

## **5.13 Safeguarding vulnerable adults and children**

Central Bedfordshire Council has statutory responsibilities to safeguard vulnerable adults and children from harm and abuse, by ensuring the safety of vulnerable adults and children in their contact with the service, and with services provided to them on the council’s behalf. There is also an obligation to train employees to recognize the things that they might come to be aware of in their contact with customers which could indicate that someone is being abused; and to ensure that staff know what to do if they have cause for concern about the welfare of a vulnerable adult or child they come into contact with.

Further, the housing service has a statutory obligation to make promotion of the welfare of children a material consideration in strategic decision making. Developing and improving practice around these areas of work is therefore an ongoing strategic priority for homelessness and housing options services.

## **5.14 Homelessness and health**

A study of the health impacts of local homelessness was carried out in 2009 by a partnership of local agencies, including the council and Aragon’s housing options and homelessness services. The study was informed by work with focus groups of single homeless people and homeless families.

A multi-agency conference was held in January 2010, hosted by NHS Bedfordshire, to further explore the issues raised in the study.

The focus groups with homeless families raised issues around the impact on the health and wellbeing of parents and children of the stress and uncertainty of homelessness, disruption to their ability to access primary care services (although the study found that generally local GP services are more responsive to homeless families than they have been in the past), and health and hygiene issues associated with shared temporary accommodation. The council’s homeless hostel at Bedford Court is in the process of refurbishment and will consist entirely of self-contained accommodation by the end of 2010, with the final phase of this work to begin in March 2010.

The health issues raised by families in these focus groups echo the findings of various academic studies into health outcomes for homeless parents and children.

The study drew attention to the fact that the area's rurality makes any rough-sleeping low-visibility and difficult to quantify. Despite this, there is some rough sleeping, as discussed above, which is associated with particular impact on mental and physical health.

The lack of a direct access hostel in Central Bedfordshire, of hostels catering to over 30's and to medium and high level support needs, was identified as a contributing factor to rough sleeping locally.

Focus group participants reported a fear of accessing hostel services based in Bedford and Luton.

The role of health professionals in assessing priority need and vulnerability was identified as crucial in ensuring that priority need in homeless people was correctly identified, and in ensuring that considerations of intentionality took mental ill health and disability properly into account.

Various recommendations were made in the study, which are reflected in the Homelessness Strategy priorities and action plan. These are as follows:-

- Complete work on a notification system between health and housing for homeless families with children moving in and out of temporary accommodation.
- Joint protocols and working practices agreed between housing and health, housing and education, and housing and social care services, for the support of families who have been placed into temporary accommodation during this period and whilst they are settling into permanent accommodation.
- Jointly explore how homeless families with school age children are identified and supported.
- Provide mother and baby homeless units in Central Bedfordshire.
- Engage the benefits agency in local homelessness forums.
- Explore the development of an independent Housing Advice Centre in Central Bedfordshire.
- Partnership work between health professionals and Medical Officer's employed by housing services to assess medical priority, priority need and related issues.
- Setting up focus groups with rough sleepers, and multi-agency partnership work to better understand local rough-sleeping and related housing and health needs.
- Co-ordinated health support to minimize eviction from hostels.
- Hospital discharge protocols.
- Consider joint commissioning of additional drug and alcohol treatment services in Central Bedfordshire, depending on the outcome of needs analysis around this issue.





## **6 Partnership Working**

### **6.1 Relevance and importance of other agencies**

Central Bedfordshire cannot resolve the challenges of homelessness alone and must work in partnership to deliver services for homeless people. Partnership working within the council is well developed and we are increasingly aligning our strategies with those of partner organisations to address the needs of homeless people.

Through our Healthier Communities and Older People Partnership Board, the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership comprises a broad range of public sector agencies, Housing Associations, private sector housing landlords and other voluntary and community groups who jointly develop strategies and policies for preventing homelessness as well as commissioning Supporting People services, to safeguard vulnerable people and ensure that their needs are met.

### **6.2 Total Place pilot scheme**

Central Bedfordshire Council is a Total Place Pilot and we are working with local partners on Integrated Offender Management and Access to Benefits, both of which have a significant impact on the management of homelessness demand and sustainment of tenancy, to provide better services.

### **6.3 Working with Housing Associations**

Housing Associations are key partners in delivering new affordable housing and other strategic housing aims, and are represented on the Strategic Housing Delivery Partnership with common aims and objectives with the Council. We are working together to review our approach to homelessness to meet the Government's targets on prevention, overcrowding and worklessness.

## 7 Stakeholder and Service User Consultation

### 7.1 Consultation on Homelessness Services

In order to create an effective new Homelessness Strategy, Central Bedfordshire Council has spent the last year consulting with stakeholders and service users about current homelessness demand and how best to meet it. The Council held a series of three initial consultation events; a Stakeholder day, an Overview and Scrutiny meeting for Members, and hired a specialist independent agency named Understanding Us to work with service users – people who had experienced homelessness and had been assisted by the Council.

The following table shows some of the common suggestions for improvement, from both stakeholders and services alike.

- effective inter-agency working
- greater education and awareness about homelessness for service users and providers alike
- better consultation with service users
- provision of floating support services and drop-in outreach sessions
- training on mental health
- increasing methods of access to the Council's homelessness service
- introduction of a housing forum
- developing a range of quality standards
- provision of crash-pads for emergency homeless use
- consulting with diverse client groups
- providing advice in a variety of formats and languages
- staff training on equalities
- tailoring the service to the individual's need

The stakeholder's Question and Answer session raised some interesting enquiries about how the new strategy would support vulnerable client groups like those leaving the armed forces, young people and provision of care for rough sleepers. There were also questions about the type and flexibility of support that could be offered to those in housing need. Issues about tenancy sustainment in the private sector were aired by a landlord, and the new Lets Rent scheme was examined in closer detail including the processes that had been drawn up to reduce tenancy failure through behaviour issues or rent arrears.

## 8 Housing Outcomes and Homelessness Strategy priorities

### 8.1 Housing Service objectives

Central Bedfordshire Council has a set of ambitious but achievable housing objectives for the next five years. The objectives have been created to maximise housing supply and reduce homelessness demand, and they also feed into the delivery of the wider corporate objectives of the council.

On the next page is a table demonstrating how each housing objective fits in with the corporate structure.

#### Corporate objectives

Supporting and caring for an ageing population	Educating, protecting and providing opportunities for children and young people	Managing growth effectively	Creating safer communities	Promoting healthier lifestyles
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#### High level housing service priorities

Needs are met from the supply of decent affordable housing	Housing assets are protected and improved for the benefit of future generations	Accommodation is safe and healthy; accessible and affordably warm
Home and Estates are well managed, instilling neighborhood pride and a thriving community spirit	Homelessness is prevented and crisis situations are avoided and uncommon	Vulnerable people are living independently in suitable accommodation

## Housing options and homelessness service objectives

Work with partners to increase the number of units in supported housing and move-on accommodation, in particular for young people
Implement the choice based lettings approach within our wider housing options environment
Promote equality through making available a range of services that reflect and respect the diversity of individuals and their communities
Assess and interpret housing need to develop a strategic perspective which supports the Council's enabling approach to deliver new affordable homes
Expand and enhance the current range of housing options to support a comprehensive Lets Rent scheme for private landlords
Develop a Service Improvement Strategy through a combination of peer review and external inspection
Maximise the potential of the government's Mortgage Rescue Scheme to prevent homelessness as part of an over-arching Council approach to promote financial inclusion
Determine a long term coherent approach for the provision of housing options and homelessness services across Central Bedfordshire
Implement the Council's Homelessness Strategy
Deliver two domestic violence refuges in Central Bedfordshire
Support the development of the Council's Older Persons Strategy
Financial inclusion, money management and preventing people from losing their homes, whether through eviction or repossession
Devise and implement a rolling programme of monthly CBL awareness sessions to frontline workers, community groups and council staff
Improve the level of customer care and customer satisfaction ratings within the housing needs service



Corporate Objectives



Housing Objectives



Housing Needs Objectives

## 8.2 Strategic priorities for homelessness

Consideration of homelessness demand, the wider housing need and economic context, and of outcomes from the Homelessness Strategy consultation have led to the development of 6 specific strategic priorities for homelessness, and 4 cross-cutting priorities. 'Health' does not feature as a priority in its own right, but recommendations from the homelessness and health study referred to in the Homelessness Review at section 5.14 are reflected across the various priorities outlined below.

### 1. Harmonise housing options services across Central Bedfordshire, following Local Government Re-organisation.

The creation of Central Bedfordshire Council on 1 April 2009 was a single milestone in the process of change management that began in the spring of 2008, and will take possibly two more years to complete. The harmonization of former District council responsibilities for housing is progressing well, in terms of a coherent and consistent customer experience.

However, the needs service, encompassing homelessness; options and advice; lettings and temporary accommodation, is managed differently in each of the former District areas. The service is, in structural terms, split, one service being directly managed by the council, the other being managed through contractual arrangements by our partner, Aragon Housing Association.

The council is undertaking a wide ranging review, between April and June 2010, to determine its arrangements for its strategic housing approach.

The specific aims of this review are to-:

- promote choice,
- improve quality, and
- maximise housing opportunity, especially for vulnerable people.

In this context, the priority in terms of the Homelessness Strategy, is to develop a model of service for Housing Needs that is fit for purpose for the future, in terms of the overall strategic housing approach.

Specific actions for this strategy in respect of service harmonisation include-:

- Agreeing a Service Level Agreement between Central Bedfordshire Council and Aragon Housing Association.
- Develop a robust understanding of accountability between the two organisations in respect of implementing the homelessness strategy.
- Aligning work across the two services to achieve consistent operational service delivery, including service culture, consistency of good quality advice, a consistent range of options available across the district, consistency in levels of staff training and expertise across different circumstances and areas of legislation, and consistency in the content and tone of communications such as letters to applicants.

## **2. Respond effectively to the recession, focusing on financial inclusion.**

The focus of our work around this strategic priority is maintaining our existing focus on the increased provision of expert money advice and homelessness prevention case-working to households at risk of financial crisis.

The council is working in partnership to alleviate the impact of recession on homelessness, financial poverty and its indirect effects of increased cases of domestic violence and crime. Clearly the impact of recession has many negative outcomes for individuals and communities, but by early intervention and targeted homelessness prevention, quality housing advice coupled with good debt and money advice can limit the effects of recession and promote financial inclusion.

Central Bedfordshire has successfully accessed funds from the government for Mortgage Rescue and Recession Impact Funding. £16 000 of extra-resource was provided by the Government and this money was shared with the Citizens Advice Bureaux, Salvation Army and Luton Rights to support them with the increase in demand for money and debt advice. Part of the funding is being used to raise public awareness of the services available to households and promote better financial inclusion.

A dedicated Homelessness Prevention and Mortgage Rescue Officer is working across Central Bedfordshire with partner agencies, court desks and financial institutions to identify households at high risk of repossession and to target households to prevent mortgage arrears escalating. To date, two households have completed a full mortgage rescue.

There is a dedicated protocol and Service Level Agreement with the Citizens Advice Bureaux in Central Bedfordshire to provide dedicated and comprehensive debt and money advice services. Much work has been carried out to strengthen the relationship with the Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Salvation Army.

The housing options service continues to provide advice to households to ensure that they are aware of their rights in mortgage or rent arrears cases and to signpost to specialist services. The service also carries out affordability assessments for all clients for all clients in financial difficulties with rent or mortgage arrears.

The Housing and Health Study 2009 recommended engaging the benefits agency in local homelessness forums, and we will take this recommendation forward in the strategy action plan.

### **3. Work with young people aged 16-24 to meet their needs more effectively.**

Available information suggests that the main causes of homelessness amongst young people are parental eviction and teenage pregnancy. There are also associated issues around domestic violence, substance misuse, intergenerational worklessness, crime and disorder.

There are clearly negative outcomes around health and educational attainment for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and more work to be done to create housing pathways which meet needs in this group.

Needs in this group are for accommodation but also for support – tenancy sustainment is perceived as a problem for young people, as they may lack the life-skills to sustain independent living in their own tenancy, particularly if they have left home without receiving financial or practical support from their family to establish their own home.

Present homelessness legislation states that any 16 or 17 year old made homeless has an automatic priority need for housing assistance. However, recent case law (R (on the application of G)(FC)(Appellant) v London Borough of Southwark (Respondents 2009) has contradicted this by stating that the majority of 16 and 17 year olds made homeless should be considered as 'children' under s20 of the Children Act 1989, and that responsibility for them in a situation where they do not have a home with their family now lies with Children's Services, with input from Housing Services. As a consequence, a protocol has been developed with Children, Families and Learning and Youth Support Services in Central Bedfordshire to provide a comprehensive service to maximize the best outcomes for young people in this situation.

A dedicated action plan is being developed for implementation of the protocol. Development of Crash Pads and Supported Lodgings are planned, and await confirmation of funding from Children, Families and Learning.

Other homeless young people are not subject to the same legal and funding arrangements. There is a lack of supported hostel accommodation for young people in Central Bedfordshire. Signposts and Mayday Trust provide some supported accommodation in the south but are not able to meet all local needs. In the north, Bedford Housing Link provides a limited amount of accommodation for people with low to medium support needs. However, most young people requiring hostel accommodation who present to Aragon's housing need service in the north are referred to hostels in Bedford.

An significant element of youth homelessness involves young people who are 'sofa-surfers' – people staying with various friends and relatives but lacking a stable home.

Existing floating support services in Central Bedfordshire – support services which are separate from the customer's housing arrangements and delivered to wherever they happen to live – are provided by Bromford Support. They do not have sufficient capacity at present to meet the needs of this group.

There is a specialist Priority and Prolific Offender floating support service based at Luton Probation Service, for Central Bedfordshire clients. However, this is currently funded from a one-off Vigilance Programme grant, and requires further funding to continue its work beyond the life of the existing grant.

Providing more accommodation and support for this group in the future requires a comprehensive commissioning plan to include all young-people client groups, including those with specific requirements and vulnerabilities, and those who are homeless but not in priority need. Good practice for single people should include supported accommodation in a pathway model with access to suitable move-on accommodation with an element of support.

Immediate actions for improving our response to homelessness within this group include improving the way we use data to understand homelessness in this group, and using the Lets Rent scheme to provide extra capacity for



young people, by procuring bed-sit or shared housing in the private rented sector, for which the young people will be eligible for Local Housing Allowance, and providing support.

The council is also looking at making more of its own housing stock available to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, allied to floating support to sustain the tenancies and promote community safety and neighbourhood sustainability.

#### **4. Embed the Think Family approach within all homelessness prevention activity and broader interventions to sustain families in permanent settled accommodation.**

Central Bedfordshire has adopted the Think Family approach, and the housing options and homelessness service will use this approach to support the whole family, intervening early where necessary to avoid escalation of problems and improve outcomes for children, young adults and the family as a whole. As a unitary council with a whole systems approach, we will work with other services to improve outcomes by adopting a holistic approach with the following principles:

- No wrong door – contact with any services offers an open door into a system of joined-up support.
- Look at the whole family, taking into account family circumstances.
- Provide tailored and family centred packages of support to families at risk.
- Promote the use of family mediation and extend the scope of the Family Intervention Project.

Housing Renewal Challenge Funding has been secured to fund two Family Intervention Project officers who will be based in the housing service in Central Bedfordshire. They will work across tenures with families who present a housing management challenge and/or are at risk of homelessness due to problems with anti-social behaviour.

There is a separate Family Intervention project, hosted by Children, Families and Learning, which will work with families on anti-poverty issues. Joint working via the council's Family Intervention Group should ensure that the different Family Intervention Projects complement and support each other.

#### **5. Strengthen Safeguarding Practice for vulnerable adults and children across all aspects of housing options and homelessness prevention.**

Safeguarding requires strategic leadership from the Council and its partners and is a main responsibility of the Council. Put simply, safeguarding is everyone's business and the approach being taken is across the whole

Council, to strengthen policy, practice and to achieve better outcomes for people who are at risk of harm or abuse.

In terms of our Homelessness Strategy, the initial imperative is to establish through a review process whether safeguarding concerns are being properly identified, whether appropriate action is being taken to properly investigate all concerns, and to develop further protocols and procedures to support correct practice.

Risk areas include temporary accommodation, for families and also vulnerable adults. Initial work has been undertaken to risk assess our temporary accommodation from a safeguarding perspective, but meeting this responsibility means ongoing review of activity to ensure that existing procedures are being followed, and are updated to follow good practice developments.

We will co-operate with the development of the notification system between health and housing for families moving in and out of Temporary Accommodation as part of this strand of work.

The Housing Needs Service touches on the lives of people who are vulnerable or in crisis and for this reason needs to treat safeguarding practice and systems as an ongoing strategic concern.

Statutory responsibilities to children go further than safeguarding, and require council services to make the promotion of children's welfare a material consideration and service development and strategic decision making. We will review housing options and homelessness services across Central Bedfordshire in order to identify potential to better serve this requirement to promote welfare, in partnership with Children's Services.

This means responding to families who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, in a way which is sensitive to the health and emotional impact on the parents, and works with partner agencies to help parents feel supported.

It also means making sure that housing options and homelessness service practice is supportive of the health and educational needs of children in these families, and links in with relevant partner agencies to achieve this.

In taking this forward, we will implement the Housing and Health study 2009 recommendations to develop multi-agency protocols and working practices for families placed in temporary accommodation, between housing and health, housing and education, and housing and social care services.

**6. Investigate the particular problems and pathway journeys that are experienced by people with complex needs, including mental health and substance abuse.**

The effects of homelessness, when combined with substance misuse, or mental health problems, or both (dual diagnosis), can impact acutely not just on the individuals and families concerned but also on the wider community.

Evidence from research into health and homelessness shows that the experience of homelessness - in particular rough-sleeping – is likely to exacerbate pre-existing mental health or substance misuse issues, and that these problems also cause poorer physical health.

Work on this area involves better intelligence on the nature and scale of this problem in Central Bedfordshire. This means better information on those presenting to housing options and homelessness services in these type of circumstances. It should also be informed by information held by other agencies about housing need in people with mental ill health and drug / alcohol problems. Those with chaotic lifestyles will not necessarily be presenting to housing advice services.

Needs analysis of housing needs and homelessness from people with drug and alcohol problems will be made available through the developing Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Supporting People needs analysis. The Homelessness and Health 2009 Study recommended joint commissioning of additional drug and alcohol treatment services in Central Bedfordshire, possibly including residential treatment, pending the outcome of these needs assessments and depending on available funding.

This will inform the development of actions around this strategic priority.

In the meantime, the following positive practice features in the strategy action plan-:

- A mental health and housing forum has been set up. Early activity initiated by the forum has been cross- service training, attended by housing needs and housing estates staff.
- The mental health and housing forum will start meeting monthly, to look at improving joint working practices, integrating best practice and managing complex and chaotic clients. This will include taking forward the recommendation to use co-ordinated health support to minimise eviction from hostels.
- A Bedfordshire-wide hospital discharge form is in place for all mental health section patients.
- A Bedfordshire-wide hospital discharge form has been developed, to include a housing needs assessment prior to all discharges from hospital.
- The housing and health study 2009, discussed in section 5.14 of the homelessness review, recommended focus groups with rough sleepers and multi-agency working to better understand

and respond to this problem. We will explore taking this recommendation further.

Further work will be driven by developing Health Equality Strategy for Central Bedfordshire.

### **7. Strengthen equalities practice across all aspects of the service.**

Actions under this strategic priority include better capture of data on equalities. This data will be used to inform service developments which ensure that vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups can engage with the service, that all client groups are adequately represented and included in the shaping of policies, and that the service provided meets all language, cultural, disability, and other specific needs of the customer.

The strategy aims to tackle the barriers faced by marginalised groups in accessing services, for example Black and Minority Ethnic Groups (including Gypsies and Travellers); lesbian, gay and transgender people; young people; older vulnerable people; people with disabilities; groups marginalized due to substance misuse and those affected by physical or mental health issues. The strategy also aims to capture the housing needs of people living in rural communities who may face issues of overcrowding, rough sleeping, lack of accessibility to support and advice services, and isolation.

Inter-generational poverty, which places those affected as an inherent disadvantage in the housing market, is also recognised as an equalities issue. Good quality housing options services are one of the tools which local authorities should use to address this type of inequality.

Some actions around equalities which are in place within the service. All housing needs staff have had specific, specialised training around around safeguarding vulnerable children and adults and responding to domestic violence, with links made to BME survivors groups.

There has been specific mental health training and awareness, and there is a dedicated training plan to roll out continuous training that meets the needs of communities and enables officers to create an environment where marginalized groups will feel at ease in accessing services.

Specific actions to be implemented under this strategic priority are:-

- Ongoing focus on training. For example, all officers will undergo specific training to ensure compliance with the law and regular equality training to recognize the different needs of communities and apply the law in a fair and consistent manner so as not to promote discrimination.
- The formation of a People's Panel to shape policy, which will include policy around housing and services which meet the needs of disabled people and carers.

- A disability audit of all reception points to ensure adequate access to the building and staff.
- The development of an Accessible Housing Register which will better match adapted properties with people requiring the adaptations.
- Work to ensure that men presenting with domestic violence, and men with dependent children, are treated equitably with women, who are more likely to present in these circumstances.
- Work to ensure that services are fully responsive to lesbian, gay and transgender people, taking into account the particular housing issues related to sexual orientation or gender reassignment that people might experience – for example hate crime or relationship breakdown, and the particular difficulties that people may experience in accessing help and advice in these situations. Targeted analysis and further consultation is required in order to develop these plans further.
- On race and religion, it is vital that data collection is improved and that further training needs are identified, to allow staff to recognise and respond to lesser-known cultural needs.
- Work to develop our ability to give housing options and homelessness advice to Gypsies and Travellers, which takes cultural factors into account.
- Consideration of closer joint working between health professionals and housing in consideration of priority for housing, priority need and intentionality, where physical and mental ill health and disability are relevant factors.

**8. Within all the above priorities, it is imperative that the council makes best use of private sector accommodation.**

We have developed the Lets Rent initiative in partnership with local private sector landlords. We will continue working closely with them to make the launch in March 2010 a success, and to further develop the role of the Landlord Forum as an arena for feedback and consultation, and a forum at which the council and landlords can develop strategy around the private sector in partnership.

Separate monthly meetings will be held with all landlords who are Lets Rent partners.

**9. Sharing awareness and working in partnership with the community and between partner agencies.**

The Council recognises that much more needs to be done to engage local groups and to promote the importance of homelessness prevention within the community, and to work in partnership with them to tackle homelessness and housing need. This aim cuts across all the strategic priorities. The Homelessness Strategy Action Plan contains a number of actions to progress this including;

- Outreach support service for people with mental health needs
- Floating support service for Gypsies and Travellers
- Promotion and publicity of Lets Rent deposit scheme
- Develop a fit for purpose Tenant Compact
- Dedicated officer to promote Mortgage Rescue Scheme
- Money advice training for all tenant liaison officers
- Monthly CBL awareness sessions for frontline agencies and voluntary groups
- Set up a panel of service users for consultation on policy and procedure
- Creation of a specialist people's panel dealing with homelessness and housing issues.
- Developing work with the Landlord Forum, particularly around Local Housing Allowance administration and the new Lets Rent scheme.
- Creation of a local homelessness stakeholder forum.

**10. Tenancy sustainment**

The need to prevent homelessness by sustaining tenancies cuts across all strategic priorities. Particular actions around tenancy sustainment to be included in the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan are:

- Further improvements to the Choice Based Lettings scheme
- Home Improvement Agency model with NHS partners
- Increasing number and turnaround time for major adaptations
- Training on money advice for tenant liaison officers
- Continue funding independent housing and money adviser
- Outreach support service for people with mental health needs
- Floating support service for Gypsies and Travellers

## 9 Implementing the Strategy

### 9.1 Strategy action plan

The Homelessness Strategy Action Plan incorporates any remaining priorities from the existing Homelessness Strategies, and identifies new priorities for the next five years. The full Plan can be found at Appendix XX.

Central Bedfordshire Council produces a monthly **Performance Information and Business Intelligence** report, currently under review for further improvements to the style and format. The Council also collates a housing baseline profiling report that provides detailed data on homelessness activity and prevention and housing supply status.

The Council will use its performance monitoring to examine how closely homelessness and housing need is being met and to ensure that resources are used efficiently and productively, and in the right areas. More details of this can be found in the Strategy's accompanying Action Plan.

### 9.2 Dedicated resources

The Housing Options team has been refocused by the introduction of specialist officer roles for specific areas of prevention such as youth homelessness, mortgage rescue and the Lets Rent scheme.

### 9.3 Customer feedback and satisfaction

The Housing Needs service has already begun to record and monitor customer satisfaction levels through their mini satisfaction survey at the main reception desk. The Council's set of service standards have also been included in all the service's new literature and advice leaflets. Within the next five years, the Housing Needs service will continue to expand its customer satisfaction monitoring by;

- implementing an annual postal survey to all homeless and housing register applicants
- delivering a set of specific customer service training sessions to all staff
- setting up a panel of service users to consult and review policy and procedural changes
- conducting an annual review of Members Enquiries and complaints
- ensuring that customer care is a standard item for discussion at all team and staff one to one meetings.