

Waverley Borough Council

Homelessness Strategy

2013 – 2018

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Foreword

The publication of Waverley's third Homelessness Strategy comes at a very exciting and challenging time for housing in Waverley.

Due to the significant changes in how social housing is financed (changes that Waverley played its part in bringing about), for the first time in many years the Council is able to invest significant amounts of money in improving its existing Council housing and in developing new homes.

Despite the economic challenges over recent years Waverley's innovative and dedicated approach in preventing homelessness has led to the Council having the lowest number of homeless households in temporary accommodation in the South East.

However, with homelessness in Surrey and the UK steadily rising and the challenges of the impact of welfare reform, the next few years are likely to bring further challenges to the Council as it seeks to continue to help households faced with the threat of homelessness in Waverley.

Whilst Waverley residents enjoy the benefits of its beautiful location and facilities, Waverley's attractiveness means property prices to rent or buy are beyond the reach of many. This creates demand for more affordable housing for which the demand far outstrips the supply, even taking into account the recent reduction in the numbers on the housing register to focus eligibility on housing need rather than housing want. The lack of supply means households either have to find accommodation in less expensive areas outside of Waverley or have to live in far from ideal circumstances in the homes of friends or relatives. Such situations inevitably trigger tensions in homes that in some cases can lead to homelessness. This can particularly be exacerbated for households with additional needs due to their vulnerability.

This strategy outlines both the successes in tackling homelessness over the last few years as well as the challenges ahead and proposed actions to meet these challenges.

The Council is indebted to the many people and organisations that have assisted in producing this strategy and would like to thank them for contributing to its content and their commitment to achieving its aims.

I am pleased to commend this strategy and hope it will help the Council and its partners build on the good work that has already taken place.

Keith Webster
Portfolio Holder for Housing

1. Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires that Local Authorities publish a Homelessness Strategy every 5 years. Waverley's last Strategy was published in July 2008. The Strategy should be the result of consultation and partnership working with Waverley's statutory and voluntary partners. It should include a review of the current levels of homelessness in Waverley and the services and accommodation available to meet the needs of those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

It should also take into account Government priorities in terms of tackling homelessness as well as link in with the Council's own strategies and the strategies of its partner agencies. The strategy should then outline what the Council and its partners will do to help tackle homelessness in the Borough.

This strategy is divided into 2 main sections with an appendix giving background context and statistical information:

Section 1 – Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

The strategy highlights the progress made in tackling homelessness since the last strategy. It then outlines the principles behind the strategy, the risks, challenges and opportunities ahead and the priority areas for the action plan (Section 2).

Section 2 – Action Plan

The action plan outlines the steps the Council and its partners will take over the next 5 years to meet the challenge of preventing homelessness. As the strategy will be reviewed annually the Action plan mainly focuses on actions for the first year.

Appendix – Waverley's Homelessness Review

The review sets out the background context, including statistical information, case studies and details of the services in and around Waverley for homeless people.

Whilst the Council has taken the lead in co-ordinating and producing the strategy, thanks are also due to service users and representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies for their invaluable contribution to the strategy through the consultation process and through day to day partnership working to address homelessness.

Section One

Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

a) Progress since the last Strategy

The Council and its partners have made considerable progress in tackling homelessness by adopting a proactive, preventative approach, known as a housing options approach. This means that resources are targeted at preventative housing advice and measures such as mediation, negotiation and housing support, to help people remain in suitable accommodation.

Where prevention is not appropriate or achievable, the Council has worked very hard at helping people access alternative housing options such as accommodation in the private sector or supported accommodation.

This new approach has meant that the number of households formally applying as statutorily homeless to the Council and being accepted as homeless has dropped considerably. This in turn has meant the Council easily met the previous Government's 2010 target of reducing the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation by 50%. Currently Waverley has the lowest number of homeless households in temporary accommodation in the South East, at a time when across Surrey and the UK, numbers of homeless applications and households placed in temporary accommodation has been steadily rising, along with the number of rough sleepers. The decline in numbers in temporary accommodation is shown in the table below:

Homeless households in temporary accommodation as at 31 March

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
107	80	53	28	17	5	7	2	2	1

This excellent performance has been the result of taking innovative approaches to managing homelessness such as developing homeless prevention units with the Council's housing association partners, remodelling the housing options service to create increased frontline housing advice capacity, developing positive partnerships with private landlords, statutory agencies and voluntary organisations and making use of new technology such as the online housing options wizard.

This approach has delivered financial benefits to Waverley in that the Council has been able to end its reliance on expensive privately leased properties as temporary accommodation. It has also been able to review its own stock of temporary accommodation provision so that some properties have been either sold to generate income for decent homes work or redeveloped to provide more affordable housing.

Waverley's homelessness budget for the last few years is outlined in the following table:

04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13
£507,640	£419,220	£382,460	£333,910	£245,920	£195,580	£191,050	£244,130	£210,690

In addition to the costs to Waverley as a result of fulfilling its duties to assist homeless households, homelessness has a significant social cost to the families concerned and to the public purse generally. The social costs to those who are homeless include disruption to education, employment and support networks as well as negative impacts on health and well being.

Research carried out at Heriot-Watt university in 2007 showed that preventing homelessness saves money when compared to the cost of helping someone who is already homeless. The cost to the public purse of providing temporary accommodation and re-housing afterwards was estimated as being £5,300 a year per household. However more recently others, including Shelter and the Government estimate it as being much higher – between £24,000 - £30,000 per person.

Even based on the conservative estimate of £5,300 per household, the homeless preventions carried out by the Council and its partners in Waverley in the year 2012-13 (564 successful preventions) amounted to a saving to the public purse of £2,989,200.

Purely relaying statistics and the costs does not fully capture the reality of homeless prevention work. That is why in the homelessness review in the appendix, anonymous case studies/pen pictures are included to show the positive impact that the hard work of Waverley's and other agencies staff has had on some of the most vulnerable people in the community. It should be noted that sometimes, despite officers' best efforts, interventions can fail due to chaotic behaviour, mental health difficulties, drug/alcohol issues. Sometimes it takes a number of interventions from the housing options officers and other agencies before customers fully engage and co-operate with the help that is on offer.

Despite the excellent work, the Council and its partners have by no means eliminated homelessness in Waverley. The numbers of people approaching the Council for help in regard to their housing and the threat of homelessness is in fact increasing as shown by the following table:

New Housing Advice inquiries dealt with by Housing Options team

04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13
476	658	634	682	734	884	774	879	881

The uncertainty in regard to the economic recovery and the additional challenge of welfare benefit reforms are likely to place greater pressure on Waverley's resources and its ability to maintain its excellent performance in preventing homelessness.

Additionally the Government has set local authorities the challenge to further improve services for homeless people. These are particularly around the needs of homeless households for whom Councils do not normally have a statutory duty to house, such as single homeless people and rough sleepers.

b) **Principles behind Waverley's Homelessness Strategy**

Proactive – One of the reasons the Council has been successful in tackling homelessness over the last few years is through taking a proactive and innovative approach. It has done this by anticipating trends and changes and embracing alternative options as demonstrated by the recent use of homeless prevention units, launching the online housing options wizard and the employment of a welfare benefits officer to help Council tenants deal with challenges from welfare reform.

Partnership Approach – Waverley's strategy aims to build upon the partnership working that has already contributed to the effectiveness of the current service. The Council works with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies in its work to prevent homelessness such as Citizens Advice Waverley, Social Services, Housing Associations, supported housing providers, private sector lettings agents and landlords, Surrey Supporting People, Three Counties Money Advice, Police, other Councils and Health Services.

Personal responsibility - not incentivising homelessness — Before embracing a housing options, preventative approach to homelessness, the way Councils dealt with homelessness was frequently perceived to incentivise homelessness. Some applicants saw being accepted as homeless as the first step to becoming a Council tenant. To address this issue Waverley's Allocation Scheme was changed in 2007 to give equal housing register priority to those with a local connection to Waverley whether they are homeless, living with friends or relatives, or in private rented accommodation. This in turn means that those who are under threat of homelessness are incentivised to help themselves find alternative accommodation, often in the private sector, and not see homelessness as a means to a Council tenancy. Waverley's strategy aims to maintain this approach.

Continuous improvement – Despite Waverley's success to date there are a number of challenges ahead including a national rise in homelessness numbers, a challenging economic outlook and the implementation of welfare reform. Waverley's strategy aims to build on the success and in keeping with the Government's 'Gold Standard' challenge for homelessness services (see below), 'strive for continuous improvement and deliver the best possible housing options services to all clients'.

c) **Challenges, Risks and Opportunities**

Following the consultation and review of services, certain challenges, risks and opportunities were identified – these include:

- i) The challenge of helping customers through the changes of welfare reform and improving the help offered to single homeless households
- ii) The risk of the uncertain economy, the fact that homelessness numbers nationally and in Surrey are on an upward trend and the resulting impact of this on emergency hostel vacancies and private rented accommodation availability for those reliant on benefits.
- iii) The opportunities the Council has in developing new affordable housing and building on its excellent innovation and partnership approach

d) Priorities for Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

Following analysis of these factors five priorities have been identified to inform the action plan for Waverley's Homelessness Strategy: Prevention, Accommodation, Improvement, Support and Partnership Working. Although the Strategy covers a five year period, the intention is to review it annually so the majority of the actions relate to the first year.

- i) Homeless Prevention** Given the success of adopting a preventative approach to tackling homelessness, it is recommended that Waverley maintains and builds on this success. This includes developing our partnership approach in tackling homelessness and continuing to use budgets flexibly on a 'spend to save' basis to prevent homelessness where it is in the Council's and the applicant's interests to do so.

The Council will monitor the impact of welfare reform changes to ensure that resources are targeted at those most in need. It will further promote its online Housing Options Wizard so customers can receive the best advice and also help customers needing to downsize through awarding priority on its housing register and help to swap their home through Homeswapper. It will also ensure that its discretionary housing payment budget is targeted at those in most need.

The power given through the Localism Act 2011 for Councils to discharge their homelessness duties with a suitable offer of private sector accommodation will further strengthen Waverley's ability to prevent homelessness.

The Council will also continue to support Step by Step's school education project for Waverley schools. This project not only provides a valuable insight to school age children about homelessness but also helps develop the skills and employment prospects of the homeless young people that deliver the training.

Other prevention tools outlined in the action plan include Waverley's Sanctuary Scheme that provides additional security measures for some victims of domestic abuse.

- ii) Accommodation** Among the contributory factors for homelessness is a lack of affordable housing in Waverley. Waverley is one of the most sought after and expensive places to live in the UK, which means that house prices and private rent levels are often beyond the reach of many people. As a result people have

to live with relatives and friends far longer than either party would wish and this in turn can create tensions in households that leads to homelessness.

The development of a range of affordable and supported housing and making best use of existing housing plays a key role in reducing homelessness and providing accommodation for those who are under threat of homelessness.

One welcome development is that under the new financial arrangements for funding its landlord service, as outlined in the Council's HRA business plan, Waverley is now able to invest some of its rental income in the development of new Council homes. Over the next five years the Council is aiming to develop 50 affordable homes per year.

Linked to provision of affordable housing is maximising existing social housing stock. Waverley's allocation scheme supports this by prioritising households who are under-occupying social housing for moves to smaller accommodation. Whilst the recent welfare reform measures will create a challenge to those reliant on benefits, under pensionable age and under-occupying social housing; it is likely to mean that more family sized units will be released for those on the housing register. The Council's plans in its tenancy strategy to introduce 5 year flexible tenancies for new tenants of social housing will also help ensure that best use is made of its housing stock.

As the Council has been very successful in preventing homelessness the number of households needing to be placed in temporary accommodation has been kept to a minimum. As a result Waverley has been able to reduce its stock of temporary accommodation and the properties have either been re-developed as permanent social housing or sold and the proceeds invested in the Council's housing stock. However, throughout Surrey and nationally the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation is steadily rising and welfare reform changes are likely to increase the demand on the Council's Housing Options Team. To ensure that the Council can fulfil its statutory duties to homeless households, temporary accommodation provision is required to avoid the use of more expensive bed and breakfast accommodation wherever possible. However, a sensitive balance needs to be made to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to meet the Council's statutory responsibilities but not too much capacity that would result in excessive rent loss and not making best use of the Council's assets.

Key to Waverley's partnership approach in tackling homelessness has been the way the Council has forged links with private sector landlords and lettings agents. This has enabled the Council, through its deposit bond scheme, to place households threatened with homelessness into suitable private rented accommodation. The Council will continue to work with private landlords and identify ways to incentivise private landlords take to low income tenants. Welfare reform changes have already led to a number of London Councils assisting their customers into private sector accommodation in Surrey. Waverley therefore needs to ensure that its rent deposit bond scheme remains attractive to landlords in the face of increased competition and demand. The action plan outlines measures that can be explored to tackle an increase in homelessness such as formalising 'golden hello' incentive payments to private landlords, review the

emerging 'social lettings' private sector market, private sector leasing and, if required, creating an additional accommodation officer role within the Options team to ensure that the Council maximises the opportunities of using the private sector to prevent homelessness. These measures, along with others outlined below, will help mitigate the potential risks of increased general fund expenditure from a rise in homeless applications and the reduction in Waverley's temporary accommodation stock.

The recent Localism Act 2011 power noted above enables the Council to discharge its homelessness duties to households with an offer of private sector accommodation. This will mean that homeless households will no longer be able to refuse accommodation in the private sector, unless it is unsuitable.

One way in which the Council has minimised the number of households in temporary accommodation, is by identifying a small number of new build housing association properties for homeless prevention. 11 homeless prevention homes have been developed and additional properties may be identified in the future. These have been useful to help provide accommodation to prevent homelessness for households where their previous housing and financial history or vulnerability means it is more difficult to access a private rented property.

Supported accommodation is a key resource in helping the Council to fulfil its homelessness responsibilities. During the period of the previous strategy Waverley invested £100,000 of capital in return for nomination rights to three supported accommodation units in Aldershot for young homeless people. This strategy outlines plans to maximise supported housing places by providing a move on satellite house in Waverley so vulnerable Waverley clients can access more intensively supported housing in Guildford. For Waverley to be able to continue to access hostel placements outside of the Borough it needs to demonstrate that it will help Waverley clients move on through different accommodation pathways so the accommodation does not become 'silted up'.

Plans are being explored to offer office space for a supported housing provider that would free up an additional supported housing unit in Milford. The Council will also explore whether a difficult to let unit in Churt could be leased to a supported housing provider as accommodation for clients with learning difficulties. The Council will continue to fund a supported lodgings placement for young people with Step by Step.

Transform Housing and Support are planning to develop three move-on units in Farnham for those with low support needs and two move-on units in Godalming for those with mental health issues. In addition, there will be three new bed-spaces in Farnham for ex offenders and four bed spaces in Farnham for those in the early stages of recovering from drug and alcohol problems.

iii) Improvement The Coalition Government has set Councils ten challenges in regard to how they discharge their homelessness/housing advice duties known as the **Gold Standard**:

1. Adopt a corporate commitment to preventing homelessness which has buy in across all services;

2. Actively work in partnership with voluntary sector and local partners to address support, education, employment and training needs;
3. Offer a Housing Options prevention service including written advice to all clients;
4. Adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative;
5. Have housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support;
6. Develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups including advice and support to both clients and landlords;
7. Actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme;
8. Have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually so that it is responsive to emerging needs;
9. Not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in Bed and Breakfast accommodation; and
10. Not place any families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and then for no longer than 6 weeks.

The Government is encouraging Local Authorities to take part in the Gold Standard Challenge and thereby commit to continuous service improvement. A participating Local Authority must first undertake a peer review with a minimum of two buddies, using a diagnostic toolkit and score at least 60%. The Authority may then apply for the Gold Standard for a minimum of three challenges at a time. Once the challenges are verified, the Authority may apply for another three challenges achieving Bronze, Silver and then Gold. The strategy and action plan recommends that the Council apply for the Gold Standard to commit to continuous service improvement and deliver any efficiency savings.

Beside working to achieve the Gold standard the action plan outlines plans for other improvements such as expanding its consultation with customers, offering an online landlord resource centre for landlords who work with Waverley and improving the assistance available for single homeless applicants as part of the Surrey Homelessness Alliance.

- iv) Support** One of the key ways to ensure that homelessness does not occur is to ensure that households receive the necessary support to enable them to maintain their tenancy. This can include help such as assistance with filling in forms to claim benefits or set up utility bills to advocacy to properly engage with social care/health professionals. Since the last strategy Waverley launched its Don't Lose your Home or Business support service to give targeted advice and advocacy to those negatively affected by the economic downturn. Now based in the housing options team this service continues to provide much needed, proactive support to those threatened with homelessness or struggling managing their financial or business circumstances.

When re-structuring the housing options service in 2010 the Council took the decision to use funding from the retirement of its temporary accommodation officer to mainstream a housing support officer post within the team that otherwise would have been lost due to cuts in Supporting People funding. This role has helped stabilise vulnerable customers and prevent 'revolving door' homelessness.

Aware of the challenges presented by welfare reform the Council has been proactive in appointing a Welfare Reform Officer to help ensure that Council tenants negatively affected by the changes are given the necessary advice and support to maintain their tenancies.

The Council benefits from a Supporting People funded housing support officer role for vulnerable Council tenants as well from a multi tenure generic floating support service managed by Riverside Housing Association. Chapter One housing association provides outreach support to victims of domestic abuse across Guildford and Waverley.

- v) **Partnership Work** The Council continues to fund Citizens Advice Waverley in its work in providing independent advocacy and advice on the full range of issues facing Waverley residents such as welfare benefits, debts, housing, relationship breakdown, employments issues etc.

Building on its partnership work with Social Services, Police, Education and Health, Waverley has also been at the forefront in developing a 'troubled families' team known as Waverley Family Support. This service will also contribute to the prevention of homelessness agenda by providing co-ordinated support and advocacy for some of the most vulnerable households in Waverley and help them get their lives back on track.

Among those that require assistance due to homelessness are those with vulnerabilities and support needs. The Council works in partnership with supported housing providers, Social Services, health services and the police to ensure that those less able to manage their affairs or at risk of homelessness receive the necessary support. The Council officers often attend Adult and Child Protection meetings as well as multi agency public protection meetings regarding ex offenders and risk management meetings for victims of domestic abuse.

Waverley will continue its partnership work with Guildford and Woking Councils in arranging Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) for Waverley clients and work with colleagues in the other Surrey Councils as part of the Surrey Homelessness Alliance to improve the level of assistance offered to rough sleepers and single homeless people.

As part of the Surrey Homelessness Alliance Waverley officers are helping other Surrey Districts and Boroughs in the procurement and implementation of the housing options wizard, an online housing advice tool that Waverley already benefits from.

e) **Conclusion**

Waverley and its statutory and voluntary partners have demonstrated an excellent track record in preventing homelessness in the borough. The Action Plan in Section 2 of the Strategy aims to build and improve on this success by continuing the homeless prevention / housing options / partnership approach and focusing resources on a variety of measures to ensure the good work is continued.

Section 2

Action Plan