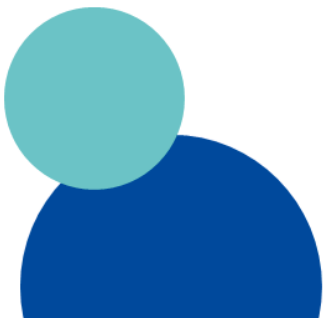




Waverley Borough Council
Homelessness Strategy
2023-2028

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Contents

Document Information & Governance	2
Approval & Publication:	2
Version Control Information:	2
Impact Assessments and Consideration:	2
Contents.....	3
Foreword.....	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Waverley’s Homelessness Strategy.....	7
2.1 Progress / achievements since the last Strategy	7
2.1.1 Prevention	7
2.1.2 Successful implementation of Homelessness Reduction Act 2017	7
2.1.3 Successful interventions to help rough sleepers during the pandemic under ‘Everyone In’	8
2.1.4 Successful Rough Sleeper Initiative bids (RSI)	9
2.1.5 Innovative use of ‘Guardian properties’ for rough sleepers/single homeless	10
2.1.6 Successful NSAP bid.....	10
2.1.7 Successful RSAP bid.....	10
2.1.8 Surrey County Council Grant.....	11
2.1.9 Successful adjustment to delivering the Council’s homelessness service primarily by phone and online	11
2.1.10 Forging new partnerships and developing existing ones.....	11
2.1.11 Successful completion of previous Homelessness Strategy targets	12
2.2 Principles behind Waverley’s Homelessness Strategy.....	12
2.3 Challenges, Risks and Opportunities	13
2.4 Priorities for Waverley’s Homelessness Strategy.....	15
2.5 Conclusion	15
3.0 Action Plan	16
Appendix – Review of Homelessness	
Appendix 2 - EQIA	

Foreword

The publication of Waverley's fifth Homelessness Strategy comes after a very challenging period as the country recovers from the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic and seeks to chart its way through the global political, financial and climate challenges.

A major change in homelessness legislation (Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 – HRA 2017) came into force shortly before the publication of the previous strategy in 2018. Despite the challenge of this and the additional impacts of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine; Waverley's innovative and dedicated approach in preventing homelessness has led to the Council continuing to maintain some of the lowest numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation in the South-East. In addition, the Council has also launched a responsive and effective rough sleeping outreach service with the help of additional Government funding. Waverley's excellent work in helping rough sleepers under 'Everyone In' during the pandemic resulted in a Waverley case study being included in a Local Government Association good practice report titled: 'Voice of the sector: supporting rough sleepers at a time of national crisis'. ([Voice of the sector: supporting rough sleepers at a time of national crisis | Local Government Association](#)).

Despite the above successes, the next few years are likely to bring considerable challenges to the Council. The pandemic has had a seismic impact globally, nationally and inevitably, locally. With the ability to continue to deliver services remotely the Council has reduced its office footprint and moved to a hybrid model of service delivery and staffing. As a result of the ever-increasing financial challenges, the Council has implemented a joint senior management structure across services serving both Waverley and its neighbouring Council, Guildford.

The conflict in Ukraine continues to have significant impacts, not just in regard to demand on the Council's services from those fleeing the conflict but also due to the knock-on impacts on utility costs, interest rates and cost of living.

Waverley's other challenges are well established and longer term. Whilst residents enjoy the benefits of Waverley's beautiful location and facilities, the borough's attractiveness means property prices to rent or buy are beyond the reach of many. This creates increased demand for more affordable housing which far outstrips supply. 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 and/or complex and difficult life experiences.

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 helped the Council in preventing and relieving homelessness in Waverley and that assisted in producing this strategy.

I am very 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.

Cllr Nick Palmer

Portfolio Holder for Housing

1. Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires that Local Authorities publish a Homelessness Strategy at least every 5 years. Waverley's last Strategy was published in July 2018. 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 must set out the local authority's plans to prevent homelessness and for securing sufficient accommodation and support are or will be available for people who become homeless or who are at risk of becoming so.

This Strategy includes two main sections with an appendix (the Homelessness Review) giving background context and statistical information:

Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

The Strategy highlights the progress and achievements 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).

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 Homelessness Review sets out in greater detail 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 coordinating 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.

2. Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

2.1 Progress / achievements since the last Strategy

2.1.1 Prevention

The Council has continued to tackle homelessness by embedding a proactive, preventative approach within its Housing Options Service and its wider work with its statutory and voluntary partners.

This means that resources are targeted at preventative housing advice and 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 approach has meant that despite the extra challenges of fulfilling its statutory homeless duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Council has continued to maintain its success in having to place very few homeless households into temporary accommodation. This not only provides increased stability and certainty for homeless households, but also reduces the costs to the Council in discharging its homelessness duties.

The low number of households having to be placed in temporary accommodation compared with other Surrey Boroughs, is shown in the table below:

	Surrey	Surrey Average	Waverley
Homeless households living in temporary accommodation as at 31 March 2023.	935	85	8

2.1.2 Successful implementation of Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

One of the considerable challenges highlighted in the previous strategy was the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA 2017) in 2018.

The new legislation represented the biggest change in homelessness assessment in 40 years. Whereas the previous legislation required the Council to assess whether a narrow range of household types were homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days, the new legislation placed a duty to assess whether all household types are homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days. Additionally, the legislation placed a duty for officers to try to prevent a household's homelessness over a 56-day period and if this was unsuccessful, a further duty to relieve the household's homelessness over a further 56 days. If these efforts were unsuccessful the Council would then assess its main homelessness duties, as existed under the previous legislation.

The requirements of the HRA 2017 also gave applicants many more rights of review of any decisions the Council made, as well as a requirement to collect very detailed household information to input onto a specialist IT system that could then report statistical information to the Government.

In summary the legislation required the housing options officers to work with more customers, over a longer period and with an additional administrative burden.

An understandable concern with the new legislation was the impact on staffing, IT, temporary accommodation numbers and the associated cost on the Council.

Staff caseload has been a considerable challenge and continues to be, particularly with additional pressures brought on by other factors such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Implementing a new IT system was not without its challenges but the system is now embedded in the work processes. As noted in i) above, the team have worked tirelessly to ensure that Waverley's successful approach in preventing homelessness prior to the new legislation has been maintained under the new legislation meaning TA numbers continue to remain low, though pressures to maintain this are increasing.

In regard to costs, the Council receives a Homelessness Prevention Grant from central Government to assist it in fulfilling its statutory homelessness duties. For 23-24 this grant is £616,834. This grant has been vital in enabling the Housing Options Team to commission additional supported housing bed spaces and to fund increased staffing within the team to enable them to deal with the increased duties under the HRA 2017.

2.1.3 Successful interventions to help rough sleepers during the pandemic under 'Everyone In'

At the start of the pandemic in March 2020 the Government launched the 'Everyone In' programme. Under this initiative local authorities were required to provide an emergency accommodation offer for all rough sleepers or those under threat of rough sleeping to help contain the spread of Covid and to protect vulnerable adults at the margins of society.

Waverley assisted over 30 households and through creative case management and help from its statutory and voluntary partners, was able to secure longer term accommodation for many of these

households. One case that Waverley assisted featured as a good practice study in a Local Government Association report titled: “Voice of the sector: supporting rough sleepers at a time of national crisis”. ([Voice of the sector: supporting rough sleepers at a time of national crisis | Local Government Association](#))

2.1.4 Successful Rough Sleeper Initiative bids (RSI)

Whilst in comparison to many other areas Waverley’s rough sleeping figures are modest (1-6 in annual rough sleeping counts), the pandemic showed that there are many more people on the cusp of rough sleeping as a result of ‘sofa surfing’ between friends and relatives. It is also the case that Waverley rough sleepers tend to gravitate to other areas with better accommodation and support structures in place for rough sleepers, such as Guildford and Woking and therefore will not be included in annual estimates of rough sleeping in Waverley.

Due to this and to build on its success in helping rough sleepers during the pandemic, Officers submitted a successful Rough Sleeping Initiative bid in February 2021. This secured a sum of £105,000 from the Government for 21-22. This funded:

- A full time Rough Sleeper Outreach Worker based at York Road Project in Woking
- A full-time Rough Sleeper Support Worker employed by Waverley and managed by the Waverley’s Homechoice Manager.
- An additional supported housing bed space at York Road Project
- Two complex needs supported housing bedspaces in Farnham with Transform Housing
- An emergency accommodation fund to secure Bed and Breakfast or hotel accommodation for clients when supported bedspaces are not available.
- A fund to assist in rough sleeper awareness raising and to help in buying furniture and white good for clients moving to new accommodation placements

Waverley’s Rough Sleeping Initiative has been transformative in how the Council can respond to reports of rough sleeping and in providing support and assistance to rough sleepers.

Due to the success of these initiatives, Officers made a further successful bid of £102,000 a year under a new round of RSI funding, to continue the majority of these services for 2022-2025. Funding constraints under the bidding round meant the awareness raising and the furniture fund were not bid for.

2.1.5 Innovative use of ‘Guardian properties’ for rough sleepers/single homeless

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the Council had been exploring ways to manage the challenge of having properties subject to future demolition standing empty and resulting in loss of rental income. A solution being developed was the introduction of a ‘Guardian Property Scheme’ where some council employees who were struggling with accommodation issues could potentially act as property guardians.

With the onset of COVID-19 and ‘Everyone In’, Officers decided to adapt this model to see if some rough sleepers who were engaging positively with the Housing Options Team during ‘Everyone In’, would be suitable to be offered guardian licences. In some ways this was a bit like a ‘Housing First’ model with support from the rough sleeping outreach officer. Since the pandemic 12 homeless clients have been assisted in this way and have sustained their accommodation. The value of the scheme is it gives a further period for a client to demonstrate that they can sustain accommodation and start to rebuild their lives.

2.1.6 Successful NSAP bid

One of the positives to come out of the pandemic and the ‘Everyone In’ programme was the fact that so many single households, who were previously excluded from accommodation assistance under the homelessness legislation, were able to be assisted with longer term accommodation. Due to this and to help meet its goal of eliminating rough sleeping by 2024, the Government announced a funding programme called the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP).

Waverley submitted a bid for 6 modular units under the NSAP programme. Whilst only two units were approved in this bidding round, these units have now been delivered in Farncombe and the first residents with a background of rough sleeping moved in in October 2021.

These units, along with the guardian properties, have provided an opportunity for Waverley to pilot a ‘Housing First’ type housing model where intensive housing support means clients with very complex needs can be housed. This helps break the cycle of revolving door, repeat homelessness. Support is primarily provided by Waverley’s Rough Sleeping Support Officer and the Rough Sleeping Outreach Officer. Additionally, very high need clients can also benefit from support through Surrey County Council’s ‘Changing Futures’ programme, along with specialist services such as i-access drug / alcohol services.

2.1.7 Successful RSAP bid

In September 2021 Waverley submitted another successful bid under the Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme (RSAP) to provide two self-contained units of accommodation in Farnham for rough sleepers. Due to planning constraints these units will now be developed in Godalming.

2.1.8 Surrey County Council Grant

In recognition that providing floating support can help vulnerable clients maintain their tenancies and prevent homelessness, Waverley has benefited from a grant from Surrey CC to help fund a floating support worker within its Specialist Housing Options Team. The team work alongside the Housing Options Team and help the more vulnerable clients, such as those homeless as a result of fleeing domestic abuse or with mental health needs. In recent years this Surrey funding has run from year to year but Surrey have confirmed that funding will be in place for 3 years from April 2022 to 31 March 2025, with the potential of 2 further years on top.

2.1.9 Successful adjustment to delivering the Council's homelessness service primarily by phone and online

The pandemic has had a profound effect on how public and private sector organisations deliver their services. Waverley had always planned to maximise opportunities for remote working and digital services in order to deliver budget savings. The pandemic brought the time frame for such changes ahead of schedule.

Waverley's Offices have been remodelled over a smaller footprint and the Housing Options and Homechoice Teams have adapted to a hybrid way of working as a result. This is not without its challenges, particular in regard to training new staff and ensuring sufficient Office presence to respond to clients presenting without an appointment and refusing to engage by phone or online.

There is also the impact of individual officers sometimes taking very challenging phone calls in their home environments and not having the support of colleagues at the end of such calls, that they would have had in an office environment. Recognising the impact this can have on staff, some Government grant is used to commission a Systemic Psychotherapist to have monthly 121 sessions with individual members of staff, should they want it, to talk through work or non-work issues/pressures.

There have, however, been benefits from hybrid working. These include better work/life balance for staff, time and money saved on commuting, reduced carbon footprint and greater participation and engagement from other statutory and voluntary services at case conferences and online meetings that would not have been the case in the past.

2.1.10 Forging new partnerships and developing existing ones

Fundamental to Waverley's success in preventing and relieving homelessness over the last 5 years is the fact that over many years Officers have forged invaluable partnership arrangements with statutory,

voluntary and private organisations. These include Surrey County Council, other Surrey Borough and District Councils, Surrey Police, Health Services, Public Health, York Road Project, Transform Housing, A2 Dominion, Ethical Lettings, Probation, Guildford Action, Citizens Advice South West Surrey, South-West Surrey Domestic Abuse Outreach service, local refuges, Riverside Housing, Move to Independence, Catalyst, I-Access, faith groups, Forward Trust, lettings agents and local landlords. These partnerships help maximise resources and open-up additional rehousing and support opportunities to customers that would otherwise not be available.

2.1.11 Successful completion of previous Homelessness Strategy targets

Of the 44 actions in the 2018 -2023 Strategy Action Plan, 39 actions were achieved and 5 were partially achieved.

2.2 Principles behind Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

Proactive – One of the reasons the Council has been successful in tackling homelessness over a number of years is it has taken a proactive and innovative approach. It has done this by anticipating trends and changes and embracing alternative options. Examples of innovation include commissioning homeless prevention units, sourcing/setting up move-on accommodation to free up supported housing, securing shared houses to assist homeless clients under the age of 35, successfully bidding for capital and revenue funds from the Government, radio advertising to attract private landlords and working with a social lettings agent (Ethical Lettings).

Partnership Approach – Waverley's Strategy aims to build upon the partnership working that has already contributed to the effectiveness of the current service. As noted above, the Council works with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies and private sector organisations to deliver housing and support to our homeless clients.

Personal responsibility - not incentivising homelessness — Before embracing a 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 amended 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 which has been instrumental in ensuring the number of households having to be placed in temporary accommodation is kept to a minimum.

Continuous improvement – despite Waverley's success to date, there are a number of challenges ahead including a national rise in homelessness numbers and those having to be placed in temporary

accommodation, a challenging post Covid economic outlook and the cost of living crisis, further exacerbated by the Ukrainian war. Despite these challenges, Waverley's Strategy aims to build on its past and recent successes by striving for continuous improvement to deliver the best possible housing options services to its customers.

Ensuring sufficient staffing capacity – Whilst Officers anticipated an increase in homeless applications following the introduction of the HRA 2017 in 2018, it was decided that rather than recruit additional staff immediately, it would be prudent to monitor the number of applications first. In this way any need for additional staffing could be targeted in the correct areas across the team e.g. admin, case work etc. Having worked under the new legislative regime for 5 years it has already been necessary to bring in additional fixed term posts - primarily case workers (Housing Options Officers). However, the team members have not felt the benefit of the additional resources due to the steady increase in the applications and the complexity of the presenting needs from homeless households. This strategy recommends a staffing review in the light of the increased demand and the fact that a larger number of roles are now on shorter term contracts. This will be challenging given that the Council only has certainty as to its Government Homelessness Grant until 31 March 2025 and unless there is a change in the Governments grant formula, Waverley grant will be nearly halved in 25-26.

Increase accommodation options – What has also become clear from the implementation of the HRA 2017 legislation is the need to provide additional accommodation to prevent and relieve homelessness, particularly for single people. As a result, Officers have continued to negotiate with statutory and voluntary partners to commission additional accommodation options where possible. This helps minimise emergency accommodation costs and the increased staffing costs that occur from prolonged customer engagement when a suitable housing solution is not available.

2.3 Challenges, Risks and Opportunities

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

- i) The fact that homelessness numbers for all household groups nationally, in Surrey and Waverley are on an upward trend and the challenge this represents.

20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24 to date (30 Sept 23)
622	695	744	412

- ii) The challenge of recruiting, training and retaining enough staff in order to manage the increased work-load, complexity of cases and expectations from customers.

- iii) The challenge that the relatively generous Government funding stream given to Waverley to help it meet the new HRA 2017 duties, is only guaranteed until 31 March 2025. This funding has been crucial in helping the Council with staffing costs, commissioning additional supported housing bedspaces and to fund initiatives to maximise access to the private rented sector such as the partnership with Ethical Lettings and radio advertising. On available information this grant could be cut from £622,744 In 24-25 to £346,380 in 25-26, unless the national formula is adjusted.
- iv) The risk that as a result of higher interest rates, the already shrinking private rented sector will become even smaller as private landlord's face mortgage increases that make the continued letting of their properties unviable.
- v) The challenge of steadily rising private rent levels coupled, with frozen Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates meaning benefit dependent households are priced out of accommodation. This affects both existing tenants facing unaffordable rent increases as well as the Council's ability to help those needing to access private rented accommodation to avoid homelessness and having to be housed in emergency accommodation. If the LHA rate remains frozen there is inevitably a smaller pool of affordable private rented properties available for housing benefit/UC dependent clients.
- vi) The challenge that whilst Councils, including Waverley, have adjusted their Housing Options Services to maximise the benefits of remote working, the Government are concerned that some homeless households may be disadvantaged by such an approach. Any Government directive to change to increased face to face contact will inevitably have an impact on service/staffing capacity and, potentially office capacity. Staff who have benefited from the flexibility to work more from home may be less motivated to adjust to an increased Office attendance, even though contractually they may be obliged to do so. This could then impact staff retention, particularly if staff already live some distance from Waverley.
- vii) The continuing risk of increased numbers of homeless households being placed in private rented accommodation in Waverley by neighbouring boroughs and by London Boroughs. We are already we are aware of households being placed in Waverley by a London Borough and given the extra pressures on all Councils, the competition to secure affordable private rented properties will increase. It is a sobering thought that a Surrey Borough on the outskirts of London that previously had very similar low numbers in temporary accommodation to Waverley in 2011, now has numbers above 100. This will partly be the result of London Boroughs widening their search to secure private rented properties in neighbouring Surrey Boroughs. This makes it much more difficult for the Surrey Boroughs and Districts to secure accommodation and drives up prices and costs of trying to incentivise private landlords to continue to let to welfare benefit dependent tenants.
- viii) The challenge that as a result of higher thresholds for clients to access support from social services and mental health services and the funding and staffing challenges these services have, Officers routinely face situations where safeguarding concerns are very evident when they are trying to assist applicants. This increasingly means more and more time is taken in reporting and trying to mitigate these concerns, resulting in reduced staffing capacity to effectively prevent and relieve homelessness. This also has an impact on the wellbeing of staff given the emotional impact of dealing with safeguarding concerns.

- ix) The ongoing impact of the Ukrainian war. This affects not only the number of Ukrainian households potentially approaching Waverley as homeless following their stay with sponsors ending but also economic impacts in regard to the cost of living and peoples' ability to sustain their current housing. Other conflicts have also increased demand on Waverley's (and other Councils') housing services such as the Syrian and Afghan crises.
- x) The opportunities the Council has in developing new affordable housing and building on its success in this area to date.
- xi) The opportunities to work collaboratively and innovatively with other Councils and statutory and voluntary partners as we all seek sustainable solutions to meet the increased demand on homelessness services. The collaboration with Guildford may provide opportunities to jointly commission services and share best practice.

2.4 Priorities for Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

Following feedback from stakeholders (statutory and voluntary partners and staff), Waverley's Homelessness Review and analysis of the challenges, risks and opportunities outlined above; five priorities have been identified to inform the Action Plan for Waverley's Homelessness Strategy:

- Rough Sleeping Interventions
- Prevention
- Accommodation
- Support
- 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.

2.5 Conclusion

Waverley and its statutory and voluntary partners have demonstrated an excellent track record in preventing homelessness in the Borough over the last five years – particularly taking into account the challenges of Covid, the cost of living crisis and the Ukrainian war. The Action Plan in Section 3 of the Strategy aims to build and improve on this success and mitigate some of the challenges ahead by continuing the homeless prevention / housing options / partnership approach and focusing resources on a variety of measures to ensure the good work is continued.