

Homelessness Strategy

2015/16 to 2017/18

Epping Forest District Council



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Executive Summary

1. Foreword

- 1.1 Under section 1(3), (4) of the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities have a duty to review and publish their Homelessness Strategy on at least a 5 yearly basis. As this area of work regularly changes it was agreed that the Council's Strategy would be reviewed every three years. The Strategy links with the Council's Housing Strategy, Allocations Scheme, and the Corporate Plan. The Strategy sets out achievements since 2012/13 and incorporates the needs and demands on the service and actions that need to be undertaken over the coming three years.
- 1.2 The homelessness function is provided through the Community Directorate's Housing Options Section. A staffing structure chart is shown on the final page.
- 1.3 The Housing Service within the Communities Directorate continues to be accredited for the ISO 9001:2008 quality assurance scheme by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance. The Housing Service was also successful in retaining the Customer Service Excellence Award (formerly known as Charter Mark) for the fourth time in August 2013, for a further 3 years.

2. Background

- 2.1 The last three years have seen a high demand upon the Homelessness Prevention Team. The Service has been very successful in preventing homelessness in many cases. This has been possible due the Team maximising the use of the range of tools set out, in particular, in the Homeless Prevention Section of the Strategy.
- 2.2 At the time of this Strategy being produced, the Country is in process of an economic recovery; however there are still high numbers of people across the Epping Forest District in a Housing Need. This has led to an increase in demand on the Homelessness Prevention Service where people are seeking resolutions to their housing difficulties. This is especially prevalent amongst Households who are having problems sustaining and securing accommodation across the Private Rented Sector.

3. Housing Advice

- 3.1 The Council has a rolling Service Level Agreement with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in the District to provide a range of advice and support to those faced with housing difficulties. In addition, a signed protocol has been developed in conjunction with the National Homeless Advice Service.
- 3.2 The Housing Options Section within the Communities Directorate provides advice and information leaflets. General information on Housing Services can be obtained through the Council's website. Housing applicants are able to make an application for housing on line via the Council's Choice Based Lettings administrator's Locata Housing Service's (LHS) Website at HomeOption.org Applicants can also seek information from the Housing Options Section on accessing accommodation in the private rented sector and advice on dealing with difficult issues including domestic abuse etc.

4. Homelessness Prevention

- 4.1 The Homeless Prevention Service has been very successful in preventing homelessness during the last 3 years. The objective of reducing the number of households making a homeless application by providing effective prevention measures continues to be met. However, the Council is committed to ensuring that if homelessness cannot be prevented for any reason, it will accept a homeless application in order to decide what statutory duty may be owed to the household.

5. Housing Options Initiatives

- 5.1 Due to the demand on the Housing Options service, the Council has a number of initiatives to assist those who are experiencing housing difficulties and may be faced with losing their homes and are as follows:

Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS)

- 5.2 The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS) is a registered charity which operates on a voluntary basis to provide damage deposit guarantees (equivalent to one month's rent) to landlords on behalf of applicants to assist them in securing accommodation in the private rented sector.

Rental Loan Scheme

- 5.3 The Rental Loan Scheme assists applicants in securing accommodation in the private rented sector. Under the scheme, a loan is granted to meet the cost of the first month's rental in advance, repayable by the applicant interest free over a period of 24 months. An applicant can potentially benefit from both a rental loan and a damage deposit guarantee.

Mediation - Parental Exclusions

- 5.4 Young people can sometimes have volatile relationships with their parents and can be at risk of exclusion from their home. Since 2004, "Relate" have undertaken mediation in a number of cases to attempt to reconcile young people with their parents in order for them to remain at home. The Council also works with Essex County Council's Homelessness Response Team who also mediates with families.

Sanctuary Scheme

- 5.5 The Council set up a Sanctuary Scheme for victims of domestic violence or hate crime in April 2007. This scheme is an effective tool in the prevention of homelessness for high risk cases of domestic violence or hate crime. The intention of the scheme is to provide a safe room within the victim's home. The Housing Options Section works in partnership with Safer Communities, Essex Police, Essex Fire and Rescue and Safer Places (formerly known as Harlow Women's Aid). All referrals to the scheme are made through the Homeless Prevention Service. The Scheme is available to people on a tenure neutral basis.

Single Accommodation For Epping Forest (SAFE)

- 5.6 SAFE is part of NACRO Community Enterprises, a registered housing association and charity, and offers temporary accommodation with support to single homeless people. It works in partnership with the Council, Epping Assessment and Child Protection Team and Essex Probation Service (EPS).
- 5.7 It provides 37 bed spaces across the District in a mix of shared houses and individual units. Around 80% of all referrals are made by the Communities Directorate, Learning and Social Care, and Essex Probation Services. In addition, some self-referrals are made. Applicants must be single and homeless or at risk of homelessness. The target age group is 18 to 25 years, although others are accepted depending on their circumstances.

6. The Role of Essex County Council's Social Care

- 6.1 The majority of children's services are now provided on a 'quadrant basis'. Essex has been split into four geographical areas with each area being a quadrant. Children in the Epping Forest District receive services from the 'West Essex Quadrant'.
- 6.2 The Leaving & After Care Team takes casework responsibility for children up to the age of 15 years and six months. The team provides support whilst the young people are in care. The team also provides aftercare support according to the specific provisions of the Children Act 1989 as amended by the Children Leaving Care Act 2000.
- 6.3 The Council's Homelessness Prevention Team are notified by the Leaving and After Care Team prior to a young person leaving care in order that their housing needs can be assessed. In general, the Council will arrange for the SAFE Scheme through NACRO (a housing association providing specialist housing and support for young people) to accommodate young people leaving care to give them extra preparation for independent living. The Council then re-houses the young person when they move on from SAFE into Council accommodation often with Floating Support.
- 6.4 The Homeless Response Team is a small, centrally based team (located at County Hall, Chelmsford) which seeks to engage with 16 & 17 year olds on the verge of parental eviction and mediates with families to avoid homelessness and the necessity of providing accommodation under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The team works in partnership with the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team.
- 6.5 The Divisional Based Intervention Team (DBIT) respond to the immediate needs of children and families referred to the Children's and Families Service where an assessment of that need is required and especially in relation to "Safeguarding".
- 6.6 The Family Support and Protection Team responds in the longer term for those children subject to Child Protection Plans, and Child in Need plans.
- 6.7 The Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team refer people requiring housing and support to schemes in Ongar called Barnes Court, and Tolpuddle House which are owned and managed by East Thames Housing Association.
- 6.8 The Community Assessment Team for Older People assist people aged over 65 years. Initial referrals are received first by a central Essex team (Social Care Direct) and then passed where necessary to Goodman House, Harlow.
- 6.9 The Council has a Corporate Safeguarding Group. Key staff have received training on Safeguarding adults with care and support needs. The Council has a Safeguarding Strategy and a reporting form and has an e-learning package available to all staff.

7. Services for People Involved in Drug and Alcohol Abuse

- 7.1 The Housing Options Section deals mainly with referrals from the Community Drug and Alcohol Services known as "Choices". The service works with clients of all ages with their funding coming predominantly through the Essex Drug and Alcohol Partnership (EDAP) whose commissioning function is managed by the Essex Drug and Alcohol Action Team based at Essex County Council's offices in Chelmsford.
- 7.2 Some referrals are dealt with by the Alcohol and Drugs Advisory Services (ADAS). ADAS clients are assessed and complex alcohol cases are then referred to the Community Drug and Alcohol Team (CDAT) with Choices dealing with drug only cases. Client with Alcohol problems far outnumber those with drug problems.

- 7.3 Choices offer outreach services in Loughton and Waltham Abbey. Clients are referred through a number of sources including hospitals, ADAS, GPs, family members and self-referrals. The service is an all age recovery management service with links and referral routes to more structured treatment interventions where required. Family support is offered which helps young people remain in their own homes, but where necessary they are referred to emergency night shelters across the County.
- 7.4 The aim of Choices is to support clients and families to build recovery and to support them to re-integrate into society and to become free of drugs dependence. The intention is to also develop Alcohol prevention in a similar way in the future.
- 7.5 Homelessness is a common problem with drug and alcohol clients. In order to deal with the problem, the Council has entered into a local protocol with treatment providers to ensure effective working arrangements.

8. Applications, Decisions, Notifications and Reviews

- 8.1 The process of assessing homelessness applications is complex and governed by the provisions of Part VI1 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002). Careful attention is given to the Code of Guidance issued by the CLG and homelessness case law. Legislation on immigration is also observed.
- 8.2 All homeless applications are processed by the Homelessness Assessment Officers based within the Housing Options Section. In processing these applications regard is given to the Code of Guidance.
- 8.3 Homelessness enquiries may involve contact with previous landlords (both public and private), mortgage lenders, solicitors, environmental health officers, land registry, social workers, medical practitioners, occupational therapists, hospital workers, victim support groups, police, neighbours, relatives, and the UK Border Agency.
- 8.4 The Council adopts a 'firm but fair' approach to homelessness. The intention is only to secure accommodation when statutorily required to do so. However, applicants have a legal right of review on adverse homelessness decisions. Such reviews are conducted, depending on the nature of the case, by an officer more senior than the one who made the original decision or the Council's Housing Appeals and Reviews Panel, which comprises 5 District Councillors. If the applicant is dissatisfied with the decision made at the statutory review, they are advised they have the right to pursue an appeal, on a point of law, through the County Court.

9. Interim and Temporary Accommodation

- 9.1 The Council uses a variety of interim and temporary accommodation, including self-contained flats at Hemnall House, Epping, a Women's Refuge move-on scheme and rooms at the Homeless Persons' Hostel Norway House, North Weald where housing-related support is provided. Bed and breakfast accommodation for households without children is sometimes provided but is only used in exceptional circumstances, where an applicant has challenging behaviour or on rare occasions when there are no vacancies at Norway House.

10. Epping Forest District Council's Allocations Scheme

- 10.1 The Council operates a HomeOption choice based lettings scheme and has its own Housing Register in accordance with the provisions of the Housing Allocations Scheme, which is reviewed periodically by the Cabinet.

10.2 The Scheme includes vacancies in the Council's own housing stock and housing association properties for which the Council has nomination rights. Applicants are able to "express an interest" in properties advertised on the website and also through a fortnightly Property List.

10.3 The Council has reviewed its Housing Allocations Scheme. The revised Scheme comes into force on 27 July 2015 and can be downloaded from the Council's website at: www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/housing

10.4 Under the Scheme, applicants accepted by the Council as homeless, eligible for assistance, in priority need and not intentionally homeless under the Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 as amended who are living in:

- bed and breakfast accommodation secured by the Council, but excluding those in the process of being referred to another local housing authority under S.198 of the Housing Act 1996
- the Council's Homeless Persons Hostel (Norway House or Hemnall House), or a Women's Refuge
- homeless applicants living in Brookhaven for 6 months and have been served with a S 21 Notice (giving notice of ending the assured tenancy), where the Manager of Brook Haven has notified the Council that the tenant is ready to move on.

will be made one offer of suitable accommodation after receiving their S.184 decision letter, generally in flatted accommodation. If the offer is refused, the applicant will have the right to seek a Review of the suitability of the accommodation. If not successful, the Council's duty under the Homelessness Act 1996 as amended to provide accommodation will be considered to be discharged.

Applicants Living in Supported Housing

10.5 Homeless applicants to whom the Council does not owe the full homelessness duty, who and have been placed by the Council under its nomination rights or by a recognised Allocations Panel for a least 9 months and are ready to move on, at either the:

- S.A.F.E. (Single Accommodation for Epping Forest "NACRO") Project;
- Young Parent Scheme at Railway Meadow, Ongar
- Supported housing scheme for vulnerable adults at Tolpuddle House, Ongar
- Supported housing scheme at Elm Court, Theydon Bois
- NACRO scheme for those with mental health issues
- Young parent and child scheme at Bartletts, Chelmsford

Such homeless applicants will have a lesser residency criteria of 3 years and be made one offer of suitable accommodation at the end of their stay in supported housing, generally in flatted accommodation. If the offer is refused, the Council will make no further offers of accommodation.

11. Consultation

11.1 A consultation exercise on this Homelessness Strategy has been undertaken with all partner agencies, the DCLG, Town and Parish Councils, and the Council's Housing Select Committee. Following consideration by the Council's Housing Select Committee, the Strategy was approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder in August 2015.

12. Action Plans

12.1 The Action Plan sets out the actions required to implement this Strategy, identifying officers responsible for progressing those actions and setting targets for completion.

Foreword

1. Introduction

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- 1.2 The homelessness function is provided through the Communities Directorate's Housing Options Section. A staffing structure chart is shown on the final page.
- 1.3 The Housing Service within the Communities Directorate continues to be accredited for the ISO 9001:2008 quality assurance scheme by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance. The Housing Service was also successful in retaining the Customer Service Excellence Award (formerly known as Charter Mark) for the fourth time in August 2013 for a further 3 years.

2. Background to the Council's Homelessness Service

- 2.1 The homelessness service is provided by the Communities Directorate's Housing Options Section. The Council works within the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and follows the guidance set out in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Code of Practice in Rented Housing and the requirements of the Council's Equality Impact Assessments.
- 2.2 As at May 2015, the Council has 1,561 home seekers on its Housing Register and 203 home seekers on its Supplementary Waiting List. The Council has a housing stock of 6,391 properties.
- 2.3 The last three years have seen 145 new affordable homes provided within the Epping Forest District, an average of 48 new affordable homes per annum. At the time of writing (June 2015), there are 4 developments that are on site, which will deliver a total of 63 new affordable homes, and a further 3 sites with planning permission, which will deliver a further 22 new affordable homes by 2017. The Council has commenced its own house-building programme, with Phase 1 already on site. This will deliver 23 new homes (included in the number above). The Council's has a target of providing 30 new affordable homes each year for the next 10 years. The Council is in the process of drawing up a new "Local Plan" which will seek to identify a future supply of development sites for the next 10 years. The Plan is expected to be agreed from 2016/2017.

3. Tenancy Strategy & Tenancy Policy

- 3.1 The Localism Act 2011 requires local authorities to publish a Tenancy Strategy which, must set out the matters to which Registered Providers of Housing (including the Council) are to have regard in formulating their policies relating to:
 - The kinds of tenancies they grant;
 - The circumstances in which they will grant a tenancy of a particular kind;
 - Where they grant tenancies for a term certain, the lengths of those terms; and
 - The circumstances in which they will grant a further tenancy on the coming to an end of an existing tenancy

3.2 The West Essex Housing Forum, which comprises three local authorities in West Essex being Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford District Councils have adopted one Tenancy Strategy that covers the three local authorities' areas in West Essex. The Strategy was adopted by the Cabinet on 22 October 2012.

3.3 In addition, all Registered Providers are required to publish and be responsible for their own individual Tenancy Policy. The Council's Tenancy Policy came into force on 1 September 2013. The Cabinet agreed a Review of the Tenancy Policy on 9 March 2015; the revised Policy takes effect from 27 July 2015 and sets out:

- The kinds of tenancies granted;
- Circumstances where a tenancy of a particular type will be granted and the length of the term;
- Circumstances where a term of less than 5 years will be granted;
- Circumstances where another tenancy will be granted on expiry on the same or another property;
- How applicants/tenants can appeal against the length of the Flexible Tenancy or the decision not to grant a further tenancy;
- Taking account of the needs of vulnerable people;
- Provision of Advice and Assistance if another tenancy is not granted at the end of the term; and
- Discretionary succession rights

4. Welfare Reforms

4.1 Prior to the Welfare Reform Act 2012 coming into force, the Council introduced a number of measures to assist homeless applicants who were affected by the changes to welfare benefits. These included:

- Commissioning the Chartered Institute of Housing to undertake a major study into the implications of the Welfare Reforms on the Council, its tenants, private tenants and homelessness
- The appointment of one additional full-time Homelessness Prevention Officer
- Providing additional funding to the Epping Forest Citizens' Advice Bureau to enable them to employ two full-time debt advisors to provide advice to both homeless applicants and Council tenants who are affected by the welfare reforms
- Undertake pro-active engagement with the Citizens Advice Bureau, to ensure that their advisors are fully aware of the welfare reforms, the implications and who to contact within the Council to discuss clients' queries
- Encourage tenants to set up bank accounts to receive Universal Credit payments
- Ensure appropriate housing and housing benefit staff are briefed on the main elements of the welfare reforms, and trained on how to provide advice to customers
- Publicise the introduction of the welfare reforms and the implications and possible solutions for different categories of tenants in the Council's "Housing News" a periodic newsletter for tenants
- When the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme was reviewed in 2013, the sizes of properties allocated were in line with the size criteria under the Spare Room Subsidy limits to ensure no tenants at the point of allocation would be affected. The same sizes of properties are allocated under the Council's revised Scheme which came into force on 27 July 2015. The sizes of suitable accommodation directly offered to homeless applicants also meet with the same size criteria.

- 4.2 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 provides for the introduction of a “universal credit” to replace a range of existing means-tested benefits and could have a significant impact upon homelessness. Although universal credit has been implemented in some areas, it is not expected to be introduced in the Epping Forest District until sometime during 2016. When introduced all tenants will receive housing benefit direct and be responsible for paying their rent themselves.

Statistical analysis of homelessness

1. Incidence of Homelessness

- 1.1 Local housing authorities are required by Government to complete quarterly Housing Activity Returns, which include statistical information on homelessness. These include the information given in the table below on homelessness decisions made by the Council in the last 3 years.

Homelessness Information	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Number of applicants to whom a full duty is owed.	61	65	52
Number of applicants found to be intentionally homeless.	12	9	10
Number of applicants found not to be in priority need.	16	11	15
Number of applicants found to be not homeless.	25	18	16
Number of applicants found to be ineligible for assistance.	0	1	2
Total number of homelessness applications	114	104	95

- 1.2 As can be seen the number of applicants to whom a full homelessness duty is owed reduced from 65 in 2013/2014 to 52 in 2014/2015. It should be noted that the total number of homelessness applications has also reduced by 17% from 114 to 95 over the last three years. This is mainly due to both the positive proactive approach taken by the Homelessness Prevention service in achieving alternative housing solutions prior to a homeless application being received by the Council, and the appointment of one additional full-time Homelessness Prevention Officer in June 2013 as part of the Council's Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan.

- 1.3 Information on the ethnicity of all Homeless applicants is set out in the table below. The ethnicity of homeless applicants is recorded and included on quarterly Government returns:

Ethnicity	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
White British/Irish	72	59	56
Bangladeshi/Pakistani/Indian	3	8	9
African/Caribbean	0	1	1
Mixed Ethnicity	0	0	1
Other	0	3	0
Not stated	39	33	28
Total	114	104	95

- 1.4 Although Gypsies and Travellers are not identified as a group on Housing Activity Returns they do face particularly problems when homeless due to their cultural aversion to 'bricks and mortar'. A number have purchased land within the District on which they have sited caravans and mobile homes for residential purposes without planning permission. Some have exhausted appeals processes, been evicted, and sought homelessness assistance, others have been granted planning permission. There are currently 18 Gypsy and Traveller sites across the District totalling 95 pitches. Eleven of the sites include 75 pitches in Roydon and Nazeing. One site at Stanford Rivers is in the public sector and is owned Essex County Council. The remainder are on privately owned land. National policy requires that there is a significant increase in the number of gypsy and traveller sites in appropriate locations, with a focus on increased provision over the next 3-5 years.

1.5 The breakdown of the ethnicity of the population of the District is set out in the table below for information (source EFDC Census 2011):

Ethnic Group	Number	Percentage (%)
White: British/Irish	107,836	86.5
White: Other e.g. European etc.	5,033	4.04
Asian: Bangladeshi/Pakistani/Indian/Chinese/Sri Lankan	5,922	4.76
African/Caribbean	2,404	1.93
Mixed: Multiple Ethnic Groups in one household	2,649	2.12
Other non-British	815	0.65
Total	124,659	100

1.6 In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, the Council will monitor all of the Protected Characteristics of homeless applicants from April 2016.

2. Analysis of Priority Need

2.1 Priority need is determined by statute and prescribes categories of persons for whom local housing authorities must secure accommodation if they are homeless, provided they have not become intentionally homeless.

2.2 Set out in the table below is an analysis of applicants found to be in priority need, unintentionally homeless and owed a full homelessness duty, taken from the Council's Housing Activity returns. These form part of the Government's PI (E) return (statistical information which is completed by all authorities) confirming those households the Council has accepted as being in a priority need and the reasons:

Priority Need Category	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Applicant homeless because of fire, flood, storm or similar disaster.	1	0	1
Applicants with dependent children (including violent breakdown of relationship (partner))	53	50	37

Priority Need Category	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Applicants in priority need because of pregnancy but no other children.	1	3	0
Applicants aged 16/17 years	1	1	0
Applicants formerly in care and aged 18-20 years.	0	1	1
Applicants vulnerable due to old age.	1	3	1
Applicants vulnerable because of physical disability.	3	0	6
Applicants vulnerable because of mental illness or disability.	1	6	5
Applicants vulnerable due to alcohol dependency.	0	0	0
Applicants who were former asylum seekers.	0	0	1
Vulnerable for other special reason.	0	0	0
Applicant vulnerable having been in custody or remand.	0	0	0
Applicants vulnerable for formerly being in care.	0	0	0

Priority Need Category	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Applicants with care and support needs having served in HM Forces.	0	0	0
Applicants (with no children) vulnerable on account of violence including domestic violence.	0	1	0
Total applicants accepted for a priority need	61	65	52

- 2.3 The table above shows that households with dependent children (including violent breakdown of relationship (partner) represent the highest number of acceptances in each of the last 3 years. There has been a reduction in acceptances for those in priority need in 2014/15. These statistics again highlight the good success of the prevention service in being successful in identifying a housing solution to those households faced with a housing difficulty.

3. Reasons for Homelessness

- 3.1 Information on reasons for homelessness acceptances in priority need groups is set out in the table below:

Reason for Acceptance	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Parents not willing to accommodate	12	16	8
Other relatives not willing to accommodate.	7	2	6
Non-violent relationship breakdown.	4	1	3
Violent breakdown of relationship (partner)	6	4	6
Violent relationship breakdown (involving associated person i.e. relative)	0	0	0

Reason for Acceptance	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Racially motivated violence.	0	0	0
Other forms of violence.	1	1	0
Racially motivated harassment.	0	0	0
Other forms of harassment.	0	0	0
Mortgage arrears.	1	3	0
Local authority rent arrears.	0	2	0
Housing Association rent arrears.	0	0	1
Private rented rent arrears.	7	4	6
Termination of assured short-hold tenancy.	18	25	11
Reason other than termination of assured short hold tenancy i.e. tied accommodation.	5	5	7
Leaving asylum accommodation.	0	0	1
Leaving prison/remand.	0	0	0
Left hospital.	0	1	0
Left other institution or Care.	0	0	1
Leaving armed forces home.	0	0	0
Other reason.	0	1	2
Total	61	65	52

- 3.2 The figures show the two most common reasons for acceptances of homelessness. Firstly, the Termination of Assured Short-hold Tenancies leading to the loss of private rented accommodation which is mainly due to the above national average rent levels that are being seen across the Epping Forest District. Secondly, on account of parents no longer willing to accommodate their children.

Housing Advice

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Local housing authorities have a statutory duty to offer housing advice and assistance free of charge on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. They also have a duty to ensure that a Housing Allocations Scheme for determining priorities for allocating social housing is available for inspection and that a summary of that scheme is available, on request, free of charge.
- 1.2 Landlord authorities have a duty to provide their tenants with information on the express terms of their tenancies, including their statutory rights in respect of assignments, successions and assignments by way of mutual exchange.
- 1.3 Advice and assistance on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness can encompass a wide range of issues, many of which require specialist knowledge. Some cases, for example those involving debt management, are referred to the CAB. The CAB employs 2 full-time (temporary) Debt Advisors who provide advice to homeless people. Both Debt Advisor posts are funded by the Council under its Welfare Reform Mitigation Action Plan until March 2016 (for a period of 2 ½ years) in order to assist those who have been affected by the Welfare Reforms. Some cases may be referred to other agencies including the Council's Benefit Division.
- 1.4 Advice is given on a range of other matters including:
 - Harassment
 - Illegal evictions by private landlords
 - Properties in need of repair, including those which are unfit for habitation
 - Houses in Multiple Occupation
 - Charitable organisations assisting homeless people (including victims of domestic abuse)
 - Securing private rented accommodation
 - Access to shared ownership schemes
 - Property rights in cases of relationship breakdown or other domestic issues
 - Interim and temporary accommodation
 - Nominations to other local housing authorities

2. Provision of Information

- 2.1 A range of advice and information leaflets are made available, some produced by the Communities Directorate, others published by the National Homeless Advice Service and the CLG. Where English is not the first language of the client, assistance can be obtained through approved agencies and documents can be translated in appropriate cases. For the visually impaired, literature can be made available either in large print or by CD or Braille. The Council also provides assistance to adults with care and support needs (and those who may not have access to a computer) to make an on-line housing application to apply to join the Council's Housing Register. Where a profoundly deaf client is a sign user, the Council can arrange "signing" through an approved agency. A loop system for people with hearing difficulties is available at the Civic Offices and at the Area Housing Office (South) at The Broadway, Loughton. Home visits will be made in appropriate instances.
- 2.2 Under the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, fortnightly Property Lists are produced and are available at housing offices and the Council's Information Desks across the District giving details of properties in which home seekers can express an interest.

- 2.3 The Council's tenant's magazine "Housing News" is sent to all tenants 3 times each year, and when appropriate, to all home seekers providing advice on a range of Housing Services.

3. Liaison with the Citizens Advice Bureau

- 3.1 The CAB has offices in the District in Epping, Waltham Abbey and Loughton. The Council has a Service Level Agreement with the CAB to provide a range of advice and to support those who have difficulties expressing their needs effectively. The Council contributed £114,000 from its General Fund in 2014/15 towards CAB running costs.
- 3.2 The Council has formal arrangements for referring cases and, in addition to front-line liaison on a case by case basis, the Council's Assistant Director (Housing Operations), Housing Options Manager, Benefit's Manager and Policy Officer meets with the Bureau's office Managers each quarter.
- 3.3 Where a client is pursuing a review of a homelessness decision made by the Council they are advised in writing to seek assistance from the CAB or Shelter. Often, where applicants seek advice from one of the CAB's, they in turn seek specialist advice from their dedicated solicitor.

Homelessness Prevention

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Homelessness Prevention Team is an integral part of the Housing Options Service. The team is led by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness), assisted by 2 part-time Senior Homelessness Prevention Officers.
- 1.2 The work has proved highly effective which is explained at Section 2 below. As previously reported this has not only seen a huge reduction in the level of acceptances, it has also led to a high number of people being able to remain in their current homes.
- 1.3 The number of cases assisted with through homelessness prevention exceeds the number of homelessness cases to whom a statutory duty is owed. This proactive approach by the Council ensures that any unnecessary homeless applications no longer occur. However, despite this “gate keeping”, approach, the Council ensures that all its statutory duties are met under the Housing Act 1996 PT VII as amended and will always arrange for a homeless application to be received from a person who requires that safety net.

2. Statistics

- 2.1 Homelessness Prevention Officers now provide a comprehensive service with a range of initiatives at their disposal to assist them with resolving the housing difficulties of clients they are seeking to serve.
- 2.2 The table below shows the number of cases that presented to the Homelessness Prevention Service in the last 3 years and the preventative actions taken:

Prevention Action	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Mediation	0	2	2
Reconciliation	9	8	3
Financial payments from homelessness prevention fund.	6	3	2
Debt advice.	5	3	4
Resolving housing benefit problem.	10	13	6

Prevention Action	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Sanctuary scheme for victims of domestic violence.	2	5	2
Crisis intervention.	2	4	3
Negotiation to help someone remain in the private rented sector.	3	17	7
Providing other assistance to enable someone to remain in private rented sector.	18	28	30
Mortgage arrears.	4	15	5
Other homelessness prevention measure (where work has commenced but there has been no further contact and resolution is unknown).	167	234	274
Housed in hostel or HMO.	7	6	1
Housed in private rented sector with landlord incentive scheme.	85	91	66
Housed in private rented sector without landlord incentive scheme.	80	53	80
Accommodation arranged with friends or relatives.	22	39	30
Supported accommodation.	18	22	29
Social housing transfer.	7	9	8

Prevention Action	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Social housing: Housing Register offer.	48	41	45
Social housing: Housing Association direct offer.	4	10	13
Low cost home ownership scheme.	0	1	1
Other homelessness relieved.	4	9	4
Total cases prevented	496	613	615
Total cases	610	717	710
Percentage of cases prevented	81%	85%	87%

2.3 During the period set out in the above table, the Prevention Service dealt with 2,037 cases. The figures do not take into account the many other enquiries made by the general public. This has been a considerable achievement. These results have had a direct impact on the homelessness acceptance rate, which has significantly reduced during the same period.

3. Preventing Homelessness Initiatives

3.1 The Council has a number of initiatives in place to assist those who have either lost their home or are facing eviction. All of these initiatives are set out in this section of the Strategy and form part of the Council's plan to assist homeless applicants through the current financial climate and to prevent re-possession.

4. The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS)

4.1 One of the difficulties that homeless and other housing applicants have in accessing the private rented sector (especially those in receipt of housing benefit), is to provide damage deposit guarantees in advance of occupation, which is routinely required by private landlords. Because of this, many homeless applicants have no alternative but to seek accommodation from the Council. If they are in a priority need category, the Council then has a legal duty to provide accommodation.

4.2 The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS) is a scheme for helping homeless people to access private rented accommodation. It was set up in 1995 by a specially-created voluntary organisation as a registered charity, with financial support from the National Lottery Charities Board and the District Council, the respective contributions being £20,000 and £5,000. In early 2005, EFHAS learnt that their bid to the Big Lottery Fund for additional capital funding of £20,000 had been successful, which increased their funds to around £40,000 at that time. Furthermore, the Council's Cabinet agreed that £26,500 of additional CLG funding be used to assist the scheme in both 2011/2012 & 2012/13.

- 4.3 EFHAS is able to help homeless people by providing damage deposit guarantees to the landlords of the properties the applicant wishes to rent. All the guarantees are covered by money held in EFHAS's bank account. Furthermore, the Council has an Underwriting Agreement with EFHAS whereby it underwrites up to £40,000 of damage deposit guarantees in order to ensure that the guarantees did not over-commit EFHAS's available resources. Since the scheme has been introduced, the Council has not been called upon to pay out any of the underwritten guarantees.
- 4.4 Between 1995 and June 2015, EFHAS helped over 350 homeless families move into the private-rented sector in this way, who would otherwise probably have been unable to do so. Many of these families would have had to seek accommodation from the Council direct. Currently there are 75 guarantees in place totalling £58,000.
- 4.5 All referrals to EFHAS are made by the Council through the Housing Options Section. Families who are assisted with rental loans have their new accommodation inspected by the Council's Private Sector Housing Team to ensure they are suitable and free from any significant hazards.
- 4.6 Assistance can also be given to applicants who do not have sufficient furniture through the Furniture Re-use Project based in Epping.

5. The Rental Loan Scheme

- 5.1 The Rental Loan Scheme was set up in 2008/2009 following the Council receiving a grant of £10,000 from the CLG in recognition of its excellent performance in preventing homelessness. The scheme complements the EFHAS scheme and provides applicants with a rental loan to meet the costs of the first month's rent in advance when securing accommodation in the private sector. Applicants are required to repay the loan on an interest free basis over 24 months, thereby re-cycling the budget to enable others to benefit from the scheme in the future. In December 2008, the Cabinet agreed that an additional £20,000 would be made available for the scheme in order to assist applicants during the current financial climate. Furthermore, the Council's Cabinet agreed that £26,500 of CLG funding would be used to provide further rental loans in both 2011/12 & 2012/13. At the time of writing, there are funds to provide around a further 10 rental loans. Families who are assisted with rental loans have their new accommodation inspected by the Private Sector Housing Team to ensure they are suitable and free from any significant hazards.

6. Housing Association Leasing Direct (HALD)

- 6.1 The Council set up a Housing Association Leasing Direct (HALD) scheme with Genesis Housing Association in July 2010. The Council has assisted 22 households who would have otherwise been homeless in accessing accommodation under the scheme through nominations made by the Homelessness Prevention Team. Those referred must be eligible for full housing benefit in order to qualify for assistance, with the household being able to remain in the property for 2 years under an assured short-hold tenancy.

7. Private Lease Agreements Converting Empty Properties (PLACE)

- 7.1 The PLACE scheme has been set up by a consortium of 7 Councils including EFDC following a successful bid for DCLG funding. The Scheme offers a capital grant to owners of long-term empty properties to renovate their property to a standard suitable for letting. In return the owner is obliged to lease the property for three years to Genesis Housing Association and the accommodation will be made available to families nominated by the Homelessness Prevention Team. The Council has assisted 4 households in this way that would otherwise have been homeless.

8. Parental Exclusions

- 8.1 Young people can sometimes have volatile relationships with their parents and can be at risk of exclusion from their home. "Relate", who are a charity providing relationship support to people of all ages and backgrounds through its network of counsellors, receive referrals and seek a resolution to family difficulties and have an 80% success rate. In some cases, an exit plan is drawn up for the young person to move on to independent accommodation at the appropriate time. In the past year, the Homelessness Prevention Team has also worked with Essex County Council's Homelessness Response Team who also mediate between young people and families and provides other general support.

9. Young Parent Scheme

- 9.1 Railway Meadow in Ongar is a supported housing scheme built in partnership with Brentwood and Uttlesford Councils for young parents, which provides support to help young people overcome challenges during their pregnancy and the first year of their child's life. The scheme consists of 13 self-contained flats with a communal lounge, activity area, training kitchen and office. The accommodation is offered to young Mothers, Fathers and couples aged between 16 and 25 years of age. The support gives young people essential parenting and life skills to enable them to move on and live independent lives. The scheme is owned and managed by East Thames and referrals are received from the Council, and Brentwood and Uttlesford Councils, with residents being re-housed by their host authority at the appropriate time. Epping Forest District Council has nomination rights to 8 of the flats.

10 Epping Forest District "Sanctuary" Scheme.

- 10.1 The Council's "Sanctuary" Scheme assists victims of domestic violence or Hate Crime on a tenure neutral basis. The scheme provides a safe room within the victim's home. A typical sanctuary room would include a fire door with mortice locks, smoke detectors, fire blanket and two fire extinguishers. The victim would be supplied with a mobile phone to summon emergency assistance. The Council's works Safer Communities Team works in partnership with, Essex Police Hate Crime Unit, Essex Fire and Rescue and Safer Places (formerly known as Harlow Women's Aid) on the provision of the schemes. All referrals are made through the Homelessness Prevention Team. There are currently five "active" sanctuary rooms installed which have prevented homelessness. Since the scheme became operational in 2006 16 Sanctuary schemes have been installed across the Epping Forest District

11 Single Accommodation for Epping Forest (SAFE) Project.

- 11.1 SAFE is managed by NACRO Community Enterprises, a registered housing association and charity, which offers supported accommodation to single people. The scheme works in partnership with Social Care's Divisional Based Intervention Team, the Essex Probation Service, the Youth Offending Team and Family Mosaic Support. The project is used in resolving the housing difficulties of single people across the District who otherwise would become homeless. SAFE was set up in 1993 with funding from the former Housing Corporation, the Council and the Probation Service. The Council provided SAFE with land free of charge for the first of the developments and they now provide 37 Units of accommodation. This is in a mix of accommodation which is either shared or self-contained.

- 11.2 Properties in the scheme are furnished and managed by SAFE, which lets them under a licence or an assured short-hold tenancy. Most residents are at the scheme for around one year. The scheme is managed by a Project Manager and supported by a team of Project Workers. Around 75% of all referrals are made by the Council with the balance being made from other key agencies. The main client group is 16-18 year olds, although people up to the age of 25 years are accepted. Those referred are assessed by the Project Manager with a report on each case being referred to the SAFE Panel (comprising representatives from key agencies) for consideration. Those not accepted onto the scheme can appeal against the decision. On average there are 20 admissions annually to the scheme.
- 11.3 The Council can provide move-on accommodation by providing SAFE residents with a direct offer of accommodation under the terms of the Housing Allocations Scheme. However, other move on options can be considered by SAFE Staff.

12 Rough Sleeping

- 12.1 The Council has only identified a very small number of rough sleepers within the District. Much of this is due to the work of the Homelessness Prevention Team. The CLG awarded a grant of £361,000 to Essex County Council to assist authorities in Essex with the development of services to assist with dealing with rough sleeping. During 2014/15 a contract was awarded to "St Mungo's Broadway" who are now able to provide a proactive service to assist rough sleepers in the Essex area. This will involve workers visiting the rough sleeper and making immediate arrangements to reconnect with the area with which they have an established connection.

13. Preventing Repossession Fund

- 13.1 The Council received a grant of £47,500 from the Communities and Local Government (CLG) at the end of June 2009, to enable the Council to extend small loans to families at risk of homelessness through repossession or evictions. In March 2012, a further grant of £30,000 was received as part of a preventing re-possession national allocation. The Government issued guidance on the use of the grant and is keen that it supports the maximum number of households in need of financial assistance during these difficult times, enabling them to remain in their own homes.
- 13.2 Under the Government's guidance, financial assistance through small interest free loans ranging from £1,000 to £3,000 per household capped to a maximum of £5,000 available interest free is made available. Final decisions on how the money is deployed rest with the Council and are based on individual local need and circumstances. In addition to homeowners, the funding is to be used to assist residents in all forms of tenure that are struggling with their rental payments and face eviction.
- 13.3 Loans are agreed by senior officers and are repayable by the applicant over a period of 1-5 years depending upon the size of the loan and the circumstances of the applicant. This allows the money to be re-cycled to help other households in the future. Only those households who, following investigations, are found to be genuinely unable to pay their rent or mortgage, due to "income shock" caused by loss of earnings where there is no history of previous arrears, are able to benefit.

13.4 Loans are only be agreed, when the recipient is prepared to act on debt advice to make repayments more affordable following the intervention of an advisor. They will be provided where lenders cannot apply forbearance measures due to the level of arrears, but will freeze possession action as a result of the loan, on the basis that all parties are prepared to compromise on the debt owed and should be made to recover the position, (rather than fully clear arrears) where all other options have failed. Loans are not be made where there are other ways to resolve the problem. For example, if the arrears are caused by housing benefit delays, assistance should be given in dealing with the matter. Loans are only made where it would enable a household to remain in place where no other option would lead to this outcome.

14. Discretionary Housing Payment

14.1 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are sums of money paid to people who need help with their housing costs. Private sector tenants who have a change of circumstances, such as a loss of employment, may find that their contractual rent is higher than their housing benefit entitlement. DHPs can help private sector tenants meet the shortfall and prevent them going into arrears and subsequently becoming homeless. Payments are made over a short period until the tenant's circumstances improve or they obtain more affordable accommodation.

15. Government's "Gold Standard" for Homelessness Prevention Services

15.1 The Government launched its "Gold Standard" benchmarking scheme in April 2013. The scheme encourages councils to continuously improve and provide more effective and value for money Homelessness Prevention Services through sector-led diagnostic Peer Reviews. In order to achieve the Gold Standard, each service must demonstrate through the Peer Review that it meets with the Standard's 10 Key Deliverables which includes; restricting the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and providing a comprehensive homelessness prevention service which provides high quality housing advice and support to homeless people.

15.2 Although there is no legal requirement to reach the Government's Gold Standard, the Council is working with Brentwood Borough Council, Harlow District Council, Uttlesford District Council and Chelmsford City Council in order to achieve the Gold Standard. At the time of writing the Council is due to have its Homelessness Prevention Service reviewed by the partner authorities. Any recommendations for improvements made will be considered, and if appropriate actioned, with the intention of achieving the Gold Standard within this financial year.

15.3 Achieving the Gold standard could assist the Council in securing future Government funding for the Homelessness Prevention Service in future years.

Support schemes, welfare and mediation services

1. Introduction

- 1.1 A number of support schemes are in place in the District to support people who have been homeless or may be at risk of being homeless and are as follows:

2. Safer Places Floating Support Scheme (Stay Safe)

- 2.1 This is known as the 'Stay Safe' scheme and was launched in January 2003, and can assist up to 14 households at any one time.
- 2.2 The aim of Stay Safe is to assist any person experiencing (or at risk of) domestic abuse to remain safely in their own homes. It can also be used to support any person moving on from a refuge. There is access to a 24-hour emergency help line with contact being made by a Support Worker at least once each week. Risk assessments are undertaken and, if it is safe, meetings take place in clients' homes. Otherwise, local drop-in centres are used. On average, the Support Worker will spend around 3 hours per week on each case. Plans are made, setting out the action required to provide the practical support, information, advice and guidance needed in each case. These are kept under review with risk assessments updated.
- 2.3 Although referrals to Stay Safe may be made by other agencies, many are made through the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team. A number of referrals are also made from the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC).
- 2.4 Applicants can visit the drop-in centres and have access to a solicitor, if required. They can also attend various support sessions.
- 2.5 Stay Safe has a full-time Support Worker in the District who reports to an area co-ordinator based in Harlow and is also responsible for managing three Support Workers at similar schemes in East Hertfordshire, Broxbourne and Harlow.

3. Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)

- 3.1 The Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) draws together key agencies in a local forum to co-ordinate actions and resources towards addressing the highest risk victims of domestic violence. The Housing Options Team participates in the MARAC process and attends meetings.

4. Family Mosaic

- 4.1 In addition to providing floating support through the Tenancy Support Scheme, Family Mosaic provides floating support to vulnerable people irrespective of tenure across the Epping Forest District.
- 4.2 The service also provides a high level of support to homeless applicants placed in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 4.3 The Support Worker provides agreed levels of support with the client. This will include acting as a key link with other agencies and preparing the client to acquire the skills needed to sustain a permanent tenancy.
- 4.4 Support Workers also provide a service to people whom the Council does not owe a duty under homelessness legislation. All referrals to the scheme for those living in bed and breakfast accommodation are through the homelessness assessment officers.

- 4.5 The Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) meets on a monthly basis with Family Mosaic Managers to discuss contact and service delivery matters.

5 Epping Re-Use Furniture Project

- 6.1 The Epping Re-Use Furniture Project, offers good quality second hand furniture and household items at significantly reduced prices, and in some instances free of charge when referred by specific agencies. The Housing Options Section makes referrals in appropriate cases.

6. Essex National Probation Service

- 6.1 The Housing Options Section works with the National Probation Service's Housing Liaison Officer on cases referred by the Service. If a full housing duty is owed to the person referred, then the Council will continue to work with the Probation Service to ensure that they are able to sustain any permanent accommodation offered. A Protocol is in place between the Council and the Probation Service which sets out the way in which the service will be delivered effectively.

7. North Essex Mental Health Partnership

- 7.1 The Housing Options Section works in partnership with the North Essex Mental Health Partnership to ensure that housing advice and assistance is provided to people who are suffering from mental illness. The Council will arrange to visit clients either at their current place of residence or in hospital to discuss their housing situation. Clients may be provided with bed and breakfast accommodation in the first instance with a referral being made to Family Mosaic so that housing related support is provided from the outset. The Mental Health Team carry out their own assessment of the client's ability to live independently. In addition, some clients with low level mental health needs are placed in the Council's short-term accommodation at Hemnall House, Epping. A Protocol is in place between the Council and the Mental Health Partnership which sets out the way in which the service will be delivered effectively.

8. Multi-Agency Public Protection Panel Arrangements

- 8.1 The Council is a member of the Multi-agency Public Protection Panel Arrangements (MAPPA). The Panel is co-ordinated by Essex Police and manages high risk offenders. The Housing Options Manager and the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) attends when cases are being considered involving homeless applicants who are seeking assistance from the Council.

The Role of Essex County Council's Social Care

1. Introduction

- 1.1 There have been changes to Children's Social Care at Essex County Council. The majority of children's services are now provided on a 'quadrant basis' (Essex has been split into four geographical areas with each area being a quadrant) and children in the Epping Forest District receive services from the 'West Essex Quadrant'. Many staff providing services for Children in the Epping Forest District (under the West Essex Quadrant) are now located at Goodman House in Harlow.

2. Leaving and After Care Team

- 2.2 The Leaving & After Care Team is quadrant-based and located at Goodman House, Harlow. The team takes casework responsibility for children up to the age of 15 years and six months. The team provide support whilst the young people are in care, for example: assessing need, creating "Pathway plans" and assisting in the transition process of young people moving on from care. The team also provides aftercare support according to the specific provisions of the Children Act 1989 as amended by the Children Leaving Care Act 2000.
- 2.3 The Council's Homelessness Prevention Team are notified by the Leaving and After Care Team prior to a young person leaving care in order that their housing needs can be assessed. In general, the Council arranges for NACRO (a housing association providing specialist housing and support for young people) to accommodate young people leaving care in the SAFE Scheme to give them extra preparation for independent living. The Council then re-houses the young person when they move on from NACRO into Council accommodation with Floating Support.

3. Homeless Response Team

- 3.1 The Homeless Response Team is a small, centrally based team (located at County Hall, Chelmsford) which seeks to engage with 16 & 17 year olds on the verge of parental eviction and mediates with families to avoid homelessness and the necessity of providing accommodation under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989.
- 3.2 The team works in partnership with the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team and carries out joint assessments either through planned sessions or in response to urgent requests (whenever this is possible).

4. Assessment & Intervention Team

- 4.1 The Assessment and Intervention Team is also quadrant-based and located in Goodman House, Harlow. The Team respond to the immediate needs of children and families referred to Children's Social Care where an assessment of that need is required and especially in relation to "Safeguarding" (Child Protection) and "Children in Need". Referrals to this service are through the central Initial Response Team, with reference to Essex County Council threshold criteria. The Council will, in accordance with the Essex-wide Intentionally Homeless Families Protocol, alert Children's Social Care where families with dependent children are found to be intentionally homeless and are being required to leave their accommodation.

5. Family Support & Protection

- 5.1 The Family Support and Protection Team is Quadrant-based at Goodman House, Harlow responding in the longer term for those children subject to Child Protection Plans, and Child in Need plans, with reference to Essex County Council threshold criteria.

6. Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team

- 6.1 The Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team are quadrant-based and located at Goodman House, Harlow. New referrals are initially received by a central Essex team (Social Care Direct) and then forwarded to Goodman House for further assistance. The Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team refer people requiring housing and support to schemes called Barnes Court, and Tolpuddle House in Ongar which are owned and managed by East Thames Housing Association.

7. Community Assessment Team for Older People

- 7.1 The Community Assessment Team for Older People are quadrant-based and located at Goodman House. The team assist people aged over 65. Initial referrals are received first by a central Essex team (Social Care Direct) and then passed where necessary to Goodman House, Harlow.

8. Safeguarding Adults

- 8.1 The Council employs a full-time Safeguarding Officer who reports to the Safer Communities Manager within the Community Directorate's Community Safety Team. The Homelessness Prevention Team makes a number of referrals to the Safeguarding Officer for investigation. The Council has a Corporate Safeguarding Group Chaired by the Assistant Director (Community Services). Key staff has received training on Safeguarding. The Council has a Safeguarding Strategy and a reporting form and has an e-learning package on the subject available to all staff.

Services for people involved with drug and alcohol abuse

1. The Housing Options Section deals mainly with referrals from the Community Drug and Alcohol Services known as “Choices”. The service works with clients of all ages with their funding coming predominantly through the Essex Drug and Alcohol Partnership (EDAP) whose commissioning function is managed by the Essex Drug and Alcohol Action Team based at Essex County Council’s offices in Chelmsford.
2. Some referrals are dealt with by the Alcohol and Drugs Advisory Services (ADAS). ADAS clients are assessed and complex alcohol cases are then referred to the Community Drug and Alcohol Team (CDAT) with Choices dealing with drug only cases. Client with Alcohol problems far outnumber those with drug problems.
3. Choices offer outreach services in Loughton and Waltham Abbey. Clients are referred through a number of sources including hospitals, ADAS, GPs, family members and self-referrals. The service is an all age recovery management service with links and referral routes to more structured treatment interventions where required. Family support is offered which helps young people remain in their own homes, but where necessary they are referred to emergency night shelters across the County.
4. The aim of Choices is to support clients and families to build recovery and to support them to re-integrate into society and to become free of drugs dependence. The intention is to also develop Alcohol prevention in a similar way in the future.
5. Homelessness is a common problem with drug and alcohol clients. In order to deal with the problem, the Council has entered into a local protocol with treatment providers to ensure effective working arrangements.

Homelessness Assessments, Decisions, Notifications and Reviews

- 1.1 Around 80% of homelessness interviews are conducted by prior arrangement, helping staff to manage workloads and clients to avoid long waiting times. Home and hospital visits are offered when appropriate. Where English is not the first language of the client, staff are able to call upon interpretation services. A 'point card' can be used to establish which language is required and immediate translation can be effected by telephone. Document translation can also be arranged in appropriate cases.
- 1.2 The process of assessing applications is complex and governed by legislation. As homelessness law is always changing, all staff are kept up to date on any case law that may affect the decision-making process.
- 1.3 The Council adopts a proactive approach to preventing homelessness, placing applicants in accommodation when statutorily required to do so. Although the Council remains committed to meeting its statutory obligations, referrals are only made to Homelessness Assessment Officers if the Homelessness Prevention Team has explored every avenue in preventing homelessness. This approach has brought about a significant drop in homeless referrals.
- 1.4 Investigations include contact with previous landlords (both public and private), mortgage lenders, solicitors, Environmental Health Officers, Land Registry, Social Workers, Medical Practitioners, Occupational Therapists, hospital workers, victim support groups, Police, neighbours, relatives, and the Immigration & Nationality Directorate.
- 1.5 These investigations rest with the Homelessness Assessment Officer, who arranges interim and temporary accommodation as necessary. All homelessness decisions are signed off by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) prior to the applicant being notified of the decision.
- 1.6 Due to the shift in emphasis to prevention, the Homelessness Service was re-structured in 2010. There is now one full time and one part-time Homelessness Assessment Officer and 5.5 FTE Homelessness Prevention Officers being a ratio Homeless Case Workers and Homelessness Prevention Officers which is the national norm.
- 1.7 Progress of homelessness applications is monitored and overseen by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness). The Assistant Director (Housing Operations) chairs quarterly Customer Improvement Meetings which the Housing Options Manager attends to discuss performance over a range of indicators including homelessness.

2 Out of Hours Service

- 2.1 The Council provides a 24 hour 365 day per year emergency out-of-hours homeless response service. Members of the Homelessness Team are on call on a duty rota and will respond to cases where a person, for example, could become homeless due to fire or flood.

3. Reviews

- 3.1 Following any homelessness decision, applicants are advised of their legal right to request a review of the decision and agencies that can assist them in the review process including the CAB and Shelter.
- 3.2 Legislation requires that a request for a review of a homelessness decision should be made within 21 days of the notification of the original decision. If the applicant requests a review outside of the deadline, the Council may offer additional time depending upon the circumstances.

- 3.3 Some reviews are carried out by an officer senior to the person who took the original decision and had not been involved in the original decision. Regard is given to the Code of Guidance with all reviews.
- 3.4 However, many decisions on non-homeless and intentionality are considered by the Housing Appeals and Reviews Panel which comprises five District Councillors. Applicants are able to put their case both in writing and in person at Panel meetings. If they prefer, they can appoint a third party to represent them, for instance, a solicitor, friend, Ward Member or a representative from Shelter or the CAB.
- 3.5 All statutory reviews are completed within the statutory 56 days, unless otherwise agreed with the applicant. Ample time is given to applicants to provide documentary evidence prior to any decision being made.
- 3.6 If a homeless applicant is dissatisfied with a decision made at a statutory review, provided their application is made within 21 days of the statutory review decision, they have the right to pursue a further review on a point of law through the County Court. This is explained to applicants in decision letters.
- 3.7 Where a homeless applicant is in priority need and not intentionally homeless but has no local connection with the District, they may be referred to another local authority where they do have a connection. Each authority is required to abide by the Homelessness Code of Guidance on local connection rules. Should there be any dispute between local authorities on who owes the duty; an accredited arbitrator may be appointed by mutual agreement to resolve the matter. The Council has only appointed an arbitrator on one occasion when the case was found in the Council's favour.

Accommodating Homeless Households

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Where a local housing authority has reason to believe that a homeless applicant has a priority need for accommodation, it has a statutory duty to arrange interim accommodation for the applicant, pending completion of enquiries into the case. This duty arises under Section 188 of the Housing Act 1996 Part VII as amended. If, on completion of enquiries, it is decided that a full housing duty is owed to the applicant, temporary accommodation must be arranged until the full housing duty is discharged. This duty arises under Section 193.
- 1.2 The Council uses a variety of interim and temporary accommodation including its Norway House hostel, and a small block of self-contained flats at Hemnall House, Epping where tenants receive out-reach support from hostel staff. Homeless applicants are rarely placed in the Council's own housing stock. For management reasons, certain single homeless applicants are provided with Bed and Breakfast accommodation.
- 1.3 The table below shows the distribution of households between the different types of temporary accommodation for the past 3 years.

Year	Norway House Hostel	Hemnall House	Council Stock	Brook Haven And Women's Refuge	Bed & Breakfast	Total
2012/13	23	9	5	9	7	53
2013/14	28	4	4	4	7	47
2014/15	39	6	7	6	5	63

2. Homeless Persons' Hostel Norway House, North Weald

- 2.1 The Council's hostel, Norway House, North Weald (a Grade II listed building) underwent a major refurbishment and improvement scheme in 2004/05.
- 2.2 The hostel has a number of facilities including an enclosed garden which provides a play area for children under 5 and a play area for older children equipped by a group of volunteers, raising funds mainly through grants from Essex County Council Community Partnership and Essex Youth Development and Child-Care Partnership. In 2014, the Hostel had Wi Fi access installed which enables all residents to access the Internet. The Council works with the Norway House Stakeholder Partnership which comprises representatives from local schools, Churches and Health Service staff. The group aims to generally improve the quality of life for residents.
- 2.3 Norway House has ample parking facilities and a large secure store for residents' furniture, should they be unable to accommodate all their possessions in their rooms. Homeless households in other accommodation can also benefit from the storage.

- 2.4 There are 32 rooms on the ground and first floors which are let individually or as suites, as necessary. Four attic rooms have been refurbished, with their own private facilities. Two additional rooms are reserved for night and week-end emergencies, with beds made-up ready for use. Residents have use of communal kitchens, common rooms and laundry facilities. Over the last three years, the majority of rooms have been provided with their own bathroom facilities with the remainder being converted within the next year. A previously unused area outside of the communal kitchen has recently been converted into a meeting room.
- 2.5 The former Caretaker's accommodation has been converted to provide three separate rooms for 16-17 year olds in order to meet reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for this younger age group. Residents provide their own furniture, but where necessary basic items of equipment such as beds can be supplied from hostel stores.
- 2.6 In 1992, in response to an increase in homelessness at that time, five chalets providing accommodation for 10 families were built in the grounds to the rear of the main hostel, and continue to provide a valuable contribution to the assistance Norway House can provide.
- 2.7 The hostel has 5 staff supervised by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness). The hostel team includes the Manager, two Deputy Managers, a Caretaker and a part-time Cleaner. Hostel Management staff have a small office near to the entrance of the main building with a service reception area for residents' enquiries.
- 2.8 The hostel has a door-entry system for the main building and closed circuit television cameras cover external doors, parking areas and some communal areas internally. These systems are controlled from the Manager's office.
- 2.9 Office opening hours are 9 am to 5 pm weekdays. A service is also provided on Saturday mornings for between 2 and 4 hours. In addition, some cover is offered on Bank Holidays. The Manager and Deputy Managers are on call on a 24 hour, 365 day rota basis to deal with emergencies.
- 2.10 On admission to the hostel, residents are given a 'welcome' pack, which includes information about local schools, health services etc. They are helped to apply for housing benefit, if necessary, and a Supporting People Tenant Support Plan is maintained.
- 2.11 Residents have a licence agreement which sets out the conditions by which they live at the hostel.

3. Hemnall House, Epping

- 3.1 Hemnall House comprises 10 units of accommodation on two floors, mainly small studio flats with shared facilities, although there are some larger self-contained units.
- 3.2 The flats are occupied on a non-secure tenancy with the accommodation being carpeted and the kitchens equipped with refrigerators and cookers. Residents have use of a communal laundry room.
- 3.3 Staff offer support to tenants on an out-reach basis and visit the scheme each week. The flats are let to families with no more than 2 children (because of the limited size of the flats) who are able to live more independently than those at the hostel.
- 3.4 Some residents may be referred to Family Mosaic where additional support is needed.

4. Bed and Breakfast Accommodation

- 4.1 Following a competitive tendering exercise, the Council has appointed a number of hotels both within and outside of the District to provide bed and breakfast accommodation. All hotels used have been inspected to ensure that they provide adequate living conditions and meet all health and safety requirements. Fire Safety Risk Assessments are monitored on a six-monthly basis.

4.2 EFDC has on average 10 single people living in bed and breakfast accommodation at any one time who are generally housed there as a last resort for management reasons. The vast majority of occupants receive housing benefit.

5 Women's Refuges

- 5.1 The Council, in partnership with East Living provided the first Women's Refuge in the District, which opened in April 2005. It has a wide range of facilities and is supervised by a Scheme Manager and a part-time assistant.
- 5.2 It comprises 3 x 1 bedroom and 2 x 2 bedroom self-contained flats with their own kitchens and bathrooms. A Health Visitor attends regularly and the Scheme Manager ensures that all the tenants have access to a G.P. Legal advice is provided by a visiting solicitor. The Scheme Manager helps with training residents and assisting with issues such as returning to work with good links with local schools and nurseries being established.
- 5.3 Residents have Assured Short-hold Tenancies that can be renewed if they are not ready to move on. In order to be accepted on the scheme, residents must have been accepted for either the interim or full homelessness duty by the Council.
- 5.4 Safer Places is an independent domestic abuse charity dedicated to supporting adults and children affected by domestic abuse. They have refuges in Harlow, Broxbourne and Southend providing supported accommodation for up to 273 women. They also offer an outreach and floating support service in five Hertfordshire and Essex areas including the Epping Forest District. The outreach service is for persons who either cannot or will not go into a refuge. The Homelessness Prevention Team would refer households fleeing domestic violence for a refuge space. In addition, referrals are also made to Women's Aid a national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. They support a network of a range of domestic and sexual abuse services across the UK.

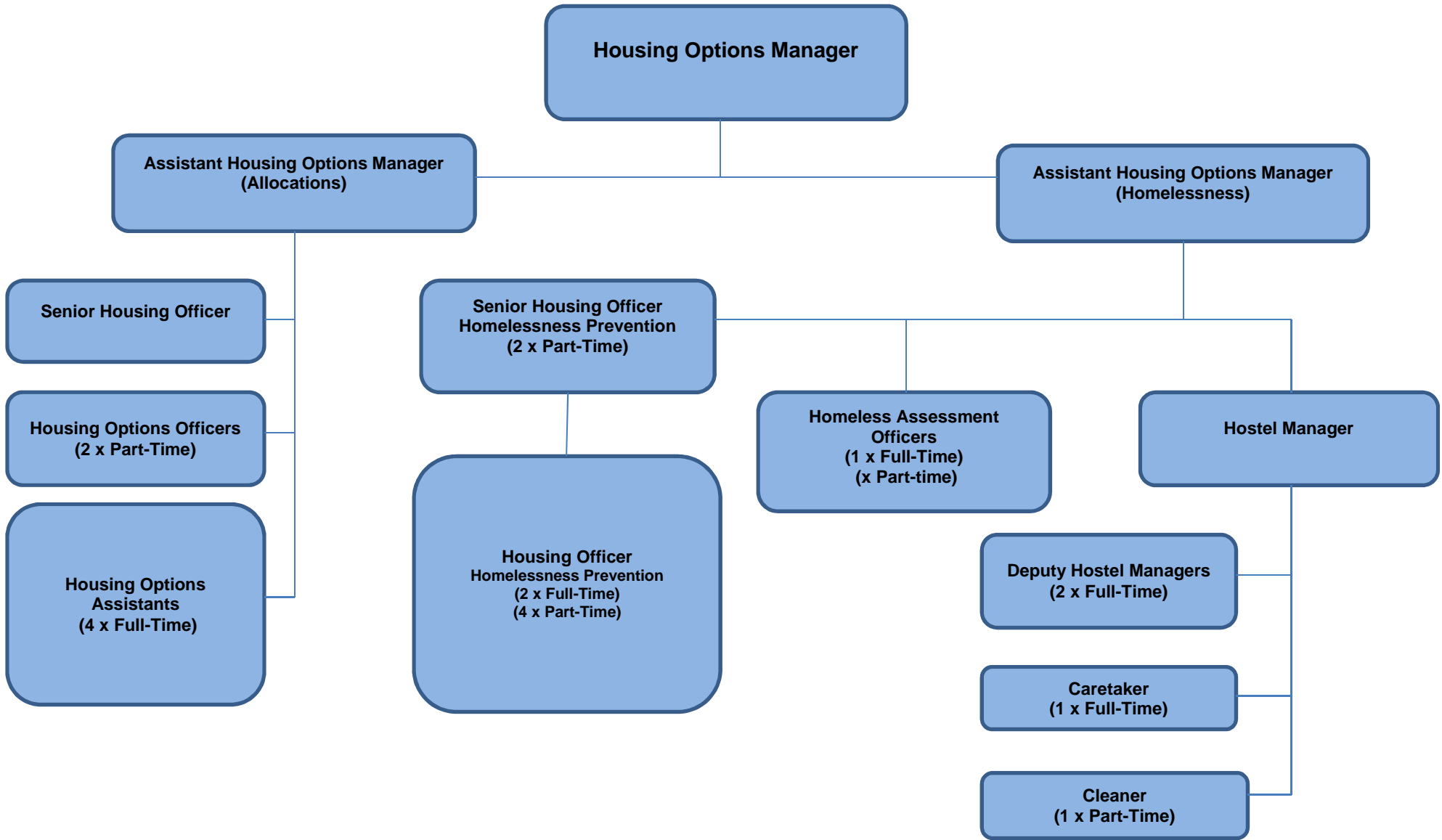
Consultation

1. A consultation exercise on the Strategy has been undertaken with all partner agencies, the Housing Select Committee and Town and Parish Councils. The Strategy was approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder in August 2015.
2. The Council undertakes periodic consultations with its customers including customer interview exit surveys. The homelessness service forms part of the three yearly tenant's satisfaction survey with all Housing Services.
3. The Housing Select Committee will review the Action Plan on a regular basis.

3. Action Plan

Action	Priority	Target Date	Comments	Responsibility
Continue to keep the number of households in temporary accommodation to a minimum and within the Council's Key Performance Indicator target of 65 households	High	On-going		Housing Options Manager
Continue to keep the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for the single homeless to a minimum	High	On-going	Bed and Breakfast accommodation will only be used for the single homeless where there are severe management difficulties	Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness)
Continue to ensure 40% affordable housing on large development sites	High	On-going	This will be achieved through local plan	Assistant Director (Property and Development)
Continuously Review the financial and underwriting support given to the Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme	High	On-going	This is essential in tackling homelessness	Housing Options Manager
Expand the "Sanctuary" Scheme for victims of domestic violence and hate crime	Medium	On-going	5 active schemes currently in place	Housing Options Manager
Review the budget for Rental Loan Scheme as only funds left for 10 further loans	Medium	September 2015	This is essential in tackling homelessness`	Housing Options Manager

Action	Priority	Target Date	Comments	Responsibility
Monitor the Protected Characteristics of homeless applicants from April 2016	High	From April 2016	The council already monitors the Protected Characteristics of all home seekers on its Housing Register and makes comparisons with those housed. This should be extended to include Homeless Applicants	Housing Options Manager
Proceed with any actions that may result on account of the Diagnostic Peer Review on the Homeless Service and achieve the Gold Standard	High	March 2016	This is an important objective for the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team	Housing Options Manager
Keep under review the possibility of additional chalets at Norway House	High	March 2016	Survey has been undertaken	Assistant Director (Property and Development)





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