

Cherwell

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026

Accessibility

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Executive Summary

Our strategy sets out our vision and commitment to prevent and resolve homelessness and rough sleeping over the next 5 years. We recognise that a system-wide approach is needed in order to address the underlying causes of homelessness that affect people in our community.

The strategy aims to address the environmental and structural issues that impact on levels of homelessness as well as the personal - such as vulnerability, poor health, loss of income or relationship breakdown. Our strategy recognises the important role and skills that the council, its partners and stakeholders have in delivering sensitive, person-centred, strengths-based solutions to reduce homelessness and end rough sleeping. When people are at risk of homelessness we will work cooperatively and non-judgementally to find homes for them, recognising the housing, healthcare, care and support that each person needs in order to resolve their homelessness and build personal resilience. The golden thread throughout this strategy is to have customers at the heart of what we do and to understand, involve and resolve their housing issues to the best of our ability. Our partnership with Oxfordshire County Council presents opportunities for us to maximise the use of skills and pool resources where this will benefit Cherwell and the wider Oxfordshire communities.

In response to Covid-19 and 'Everyone In' campaign in 2020, the council and partner agencies have worked more collaboratively to successfully deliver innovative housing solutions to meet the local needs. We need to ensure partnership working and service delivery remain flexible in order to respond to any future emergencies, the resulting economic impact and emerging risk of homelessness in our community, and to ensure that rough sleepers are able to quickly move into settled accommodation.

Our Vision is: To work in partnership, with customers at the heart of our approach, to understand, prevent and resolve homelessness so that no one has to sleep rough in Cherwell

The six strategic priorities for our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-26 are:

- Priority 1** Work with the County, City and District Councils and partner organisations across Oxfordshire to identify the causes of homelessness in our area, facilitate early interventions and responses to increase successful homelessness preventions, and make sure that no one has to sleep rough.
- Priority 2** Proactively identify, engage with and assist households who have difficulty accessing and receiving homelessness services.
- Priority 3** Proactively engage with and support households to develop housing resilience and when needed, to access suitable accommodation to meet their longer-term needs.
- Priority 4** Engage and work collaboratively with people with lived experience of homelessness and commission the right support to reduce, prevent and ultimately end homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Priority 5** Make sure that our service is flexible and equipped to deal with any future local Covid-19 outbreak or emergency.
- Priority 6** Work in partnership to increase supply of affordable housing and make sure that accommodation in the private sector is good quality, that tenants are treated lawfully and fairly, and there is improved access to affordable private sector accommodation for homeless households.

1. Introduction

This 5-year Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy sets out our aim to tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping across the district. It details how we will provide open and effective access to a range of housing services, support and other opportunities for any person affected by homelessness, to help them rebuild their lives. The golden thread throughout this strategy is to have customers at the heart of what we do and to understand, involve and resolve their housing issues to the best of our ability.

The strategy has been shaped by national policy, significant events caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and a closer working relationship with Oxfordshire County Council. Whilst the expected outcomes are challenging and aspirational, the strategy has been informed by a review of homelessness in the district, delivery of actions against the previous strategy, a comprehensive health check and an understanding that to tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping within the government timescale of 2027, we must work in partnership with Oxfordshire County, City and District Council partners, Health, and voluntary and community sector partners to collectively address local homelessness and rough sleeping issues. In 2019, Cherwell commissioned Shelter to conduct a health check of our services. The results were positive and provided helpful recommendations for some further improvements. An action plan was developed and successfully delivered through 2019/2020. The review inspired a way of working, putting the customer central to decision making and solutions.

The council's Homelessness Strategy 2018-20 dealt with the changes and implementation of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017. The Act brought in new duties and a comprehensive overhaul of the way in which homelessness preventions were actioned and recorded. The new way of working has now been embedded by the Housing Team and we are committed to delivering the service to a high level in line government guidance and good practice, however we can always improve. The focus of this strategy is to increase homelessness prevention, improve health, wellbeing and housing outcomes for people affected by homelessness, and to provide support to rough sleepers so that they do not need to return to sleeping on the streets. The strategy also recognises the unprecedented circumstances presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and how we can be flexible to meet the challenges of similar emergencies in the future. Importantly, the strategy also recognises the opportunities presented by the strong collaboration and partnership between Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council to maximise resources and expertise, and take actions forward to make a real difference to reducing homelessness, rough sleeping and improving the lives of vulnerable people in Cherwell and across the county who are traditionally hard to reach.

We will make sure that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness has access to meaningful help, advice and/or assistance irrespective of their priority need status or eligibility for housing in Cherwell District.

This strategy should be read along with Cherwell District Council's Housing Strategy and the Oxfordshire Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Defining homelessness

Homelessness does not just affect people visibly sleeping rough but includes those living in a range of temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast, hostels and refuges as well as people staying temporarily with family or friends (e.g. sofa-surfing) when they have no accommodation of their own. It can also apply to households who are living in such poor-quality accommodation it may not be reasonable for them to occupy it.

2. Challenges and opportunities

National challenges

Nationally, local authorities are experiencing significant budget pressures and increasing challenges to delivering housing and support services to meet the high demand for homelessness services, including the demand from an increasing number of people with high and complex needs and a peak in the number of people rough sleeping. The demand for social housing continues to outstrip supply. There is an increased pressure on mental health, health, social care, criminal justice, and addiction services and the welfare benefits system is complex to navigate. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment and the rate of national economic and social recovery, is not fully known.

The government has launched a range of funding streams to help meet short-term demand for accommodation and other support services i.e. Homes England Affordable Homes Programme funding, Rough Sleeping Initiative and Next Steps Accommodation Programme funding. However, funding is time-limited and, due to the competition for it, organisations are likely to design services to match the funding criteria. This approach does not always address the underlying root causes of homelessness (up-stream) for the individuals who receive the service.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government introduced temporary protections from eviction but as protections are lifted, there is likely to be a national (and local) increase in homelessness. The Rented Homes Bill 2021, proposes to abolish Assured Shorthold Tenancies which removes the fast track administrative court approach to evictions, substantially increasing the security of tenure for private renters. The Bill is due for enactment in 2021.

The proposed national planning policy changes and increased focus on promoting home ownership, as set out in the consultation documents launched in August 2020: 'Planning for the Future' and 'Changes to the current planning system', if introduced, are likely to reduce the number of social and affordable rented homes being delivered in future.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and government's Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018, prescribe how we must intervene at earlier stages to prevent homelessness and provide appropriate services to every household who is homeless or threatened with homelessness, not just to those households who are considered to be in priority need. To do this, and navigate the complexities described above, it is essential for us to enhance our partnership work with statutory, voluntary and community agencies to deliver positive outcomes for people and to change our current ways of working.

More detail about the national policy and legislative context, the impact on our service provision or customers and the relevance to our Homelessness Strategy 2021 – 2026, is set out in later sections of this document and in the Homelessness Service Review 2020 document.

Preventing and reducing homelessness in Oxfordshire

We are working with the County Council, City and District Councils across Oxfordshire to identify the gaps in our service provision and make joint funding bids for government funding to support the delivery of projects that will provide innovative solutions to improve homelessness prevention services and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping across the county.

In 2019, the five local housing authorities in Oxfordshire, coordinated by Cherwell District Council, submitted a joint bid and attracted funding from the MHCLG to create a new post of County-wide Strategic Lead Officer. The role of this Officer is to progress a county wide strategy and a coordinated and embedded approach to preventing and tackling homelessness, with a focus on single homeless people and rough sleepers.

Joint homelessness prevention approach – our partnership with Oxfordshire County Council

Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council are in a partnership with shared senior leadership and operational roles across the two organisations. This presents opportunities for us to maximise the use of skills and pool resources where this will benefit Cherwell and the wider Oxfordshire communities. We are working together with the City and Oxfordshire District Councils to deliver a countywide Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy to 2025 and facilitate a shared understanding and collaborative approach to supporting households to prevent homelessness and end rough sleeping. The countywide approach supports a Housing First and housing-led approach. We are already working at a small scale to deliver Housing First model accommodation in Cherwell however, to expand this further and deliver a housing-led approach, we will we will need to look at the whole system to identify and address any gaps in our service provision, and any policy or system barriers that prevent households from joining the housing register or being offered housing to meet needs.

Work is ongoing to integrate Housing with Adult Social Care services, including safeguarding, Family Solutions Plus and the joint working to recommission adult homelessness services (accommodation based and floating support), and Young People's Accommodation Services. The work of Vulnerable Adults Panel, Families at Risk and other multi-agency panel arrangements ensure that vulnerable individuals and families in Cherwell receive the necessary support to prevent or relieve their homelessness, even where there may be no formal duty to accommodate them. Combining expertise and resources can lead to tangible and positive resolutions for the individuals and families involved. This is supported by the research discussed below.

Joint commissioning of research to inform a housing-led approach to tackling homelessness

In 2020, Crisis, Oxfordshire County Council and the five city and district councils jointly funded and commissioned independent research consultants to explore the feasibility of moving to a housing-led approach to tackling single homelessness across Oxfordshire. The focus of the study was on single households because more than half of the homelessness presentations across Oxfordshire in 2018/19 were from this group, and this is reflected in data at our district level too. Family homelessness is also of concern, but prevention rates are slightly higher for families and the redesign of Children's Services aims to improve housing solutions for vulnerable families.

A housing-led or 'rapid rehousing' approach aims to end someone's homelessness by moving them into their own home as soon as possible. It operates under the guiding principle that everyone has a right to a home and does not rely on the condition that someone must be 'tenancy ready' before being offered their own home. The recommendations from this research will inform commissioning, design and delivery of services across Oxfordshire to end homelessness for single people. Importantly, it will place greater emphasis on the role that people with lived experience of homelessness will have in helping us to transform our services and expand housing choices, particularly for rough sleepers.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), Health and Wellbeing

The JSNA produced at county level, also provides us with local district data. This emphasises the differences in life expectancy, health inequalities, educational attainment and local indices of deprivation across Cherwell. Three wards within Banbury fall within the top 10% most deprived areas in the Multiple Indices of Deprivation. We will continue to work with Adult Social Care and Public Health departments to facilitate early identification of homelessness and ensure that people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, can be referred to services and have access to health care and support as needed, and safeguarding measures are in place to protect vulnerable people in our communities.

Preventing and reducing homelessness and rough sleeping in Cherwell

Delivering the priorities within this Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026 will enable us to meet our statutory obligations and contribute to delivery of ambitions set out in several other inter-linked local and national work programmes listed here:

Our Strategy's impact and influence:

National

'Everyone In' Campaign
Care Act 2014
Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) and
Housing Legislation
National Rough Sleeping Strategy (2018)
Welfare Reform

County

Oxfordshire 2030 Plan
Oxfordshire County Council Adult Services
Oxfordshire County Council Children Services
Oxfordshire Homeless Pathway
Oxfordshire Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
Oxfordshire's Health and Wellbeing Board
Young People's Supported Accommodation
Service

District

Armed Forces Covenant
Cherwell District Council Allocation Scheme
Cherwell District Council Annual Business
Plan
Cherwell District Council Housing Strategy
2019-2024
Cherwell District Council Tenancy Strategy
Empty Homes
Housing First
Private Rented Sector Housing Standards
Registered Providers of Social Housing
Registered Providers of Supported
Accommodation
Rough Sleeper Count
Verification and Outreach Services

The Cherwell District Council Business plan 2020/21 sets out 4 strategic priorities, one of which is 'Housing that Meets Your Needs'. This demonstrates the continued commitment of the council to deliver more affordable homes, prevent homelessness and rough sleeping, and deliver innovative housing solutions to meet local needs.

Extract from the Business Plan 2020/21 showing housing-related priorities:

The objectives of the 'Housing that meets your needs' priority are:

- Find new innovative ways to prevent homelessness
- Support the most vulnerable
- Deliver affordable housing
- Raise standards in rented housing
- Promote innovative housing scheme

The objectives of the 'Healthy resilient and engaged communities' priority are:

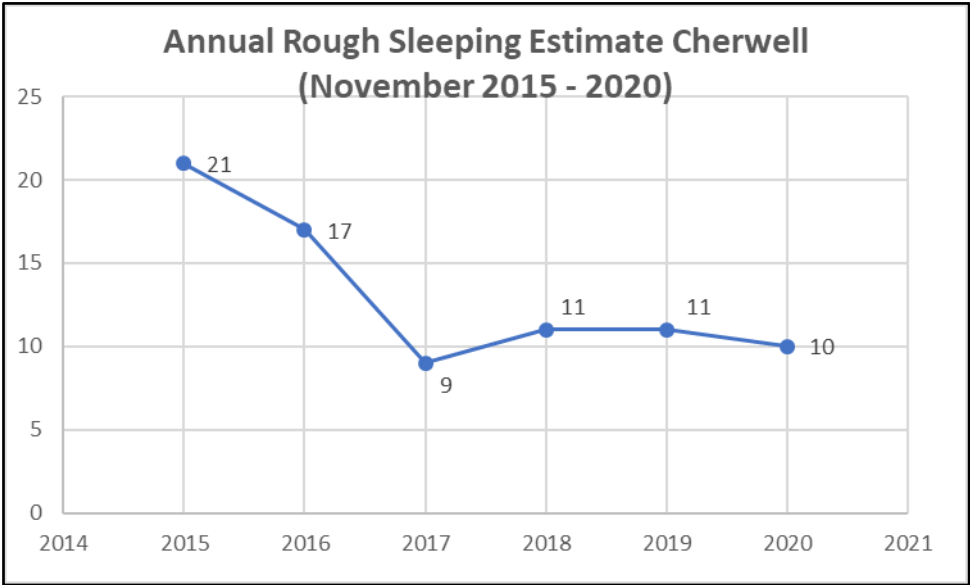
- Working with partners to address the cause of health inequality and deprivation
- Promote health and well-being in the community

Rough sleeping and future housing-led approach

Historically, the number of rough sleepers counted annually in Cherwell have been low. However, over the course of a year (2019/20) a total of 24 people were estimated to sleep rough at some point and we have a small number of people who have been sleeping rough long-term, and for whom bespoke solutions need to be found. We are clear that no one should have to sleep rough and, as

explained earlier, we are taking a countywide approach to achieve this aim but we will also examine our own Allocations Scheme, practices and procedures to make sure our services are accessible and households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and need to join our housing register to access accommodation, are assisted to do so.

All local authorities are required to carry out either an annual estimate or count and report the figures back to central Government about the number of people known to be rough sleeping on a given night. We have seen the numbers of people reported as sleeping rough, gradually reduce since 2015, in the last two years the rough sleeper estimate on the given night remained the same with a total of 11 people. In November 2020 the estimated number of people sleeping rough in the district was 10 (see chart below):



In March 2020 the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic saw the number of identified rough sleepers rise dramatically. Nationally, as part of the ‘Everyone In’ initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, around 15,000 people were placed into emergency accommodation. These people had been sleeping rough, were living in unsafe communal settings or were at imminent risk of rough sleeping. In Cherwell, there were 13 known rough sleepers at the start of lockdown, however 78 individuals were helped into accommodation in response to the *Everyone In* initiative, of which 38 individuals were helped to move on once the lockdown ceased. This is a significant success in a period of unprecedented circumstances. However, it highlights the ‘hidden’ homelessness in the district.

Countywide the records indicate that around 20% of those accommodated within county under Everyone In had No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) or were EEA workers who had lost their Worker Status. These are people who would usually be prevented by law from accessing mainstream housing, welfare benefits and employment. In Cherwell, customers who do not have recourse to public funds, will continue to receive statutory assistance and advice from Council officers. This can be in the form of referrals to specialist immigration hostels, referrals to the DWP, Citizens Advice or Oxfordshire Social Services depending on circumstances. All customers without statutory housing rights, will receive enhanced housing advice or assistance in repatriation.

The Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) was launched in July 2020, making government funding available to support local authorities and their partners to prevent people from returning to the streets. Cherwell District Council was successful with a bid for NSAP funding and the £120,400 award will be used to provide additional accommodation with support for single homeless people.

We know that many people sleeping rough require more support than just somewhere to live and need help from other services to help manage issues such as mental health and substance abuse. It is critical that we make sure vulnerable people are not at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping and can access the help and support they need, when they need it. We have put in place additional resources such as: access to support/advice via the drop-in services across the district; an enhanced Outreach Service; and the Single Homeless Specialist officer, to ensure that households who are traditionally 'hard to reach', are offered additional support to access and engage with housing solutions. However, we will need to secure resources to continue this work in future.

The council's Housing Team offer a full package of support and assistance to all households, with over 50% of cases (2018/19 and 2019/20) being single people. Our approach embraces the principals under the Homelessness Reduction Act, and we are committed and focussed on early intervention and 'upstream' prevention. This is reflected in the number of homelessness prevention cases recorded and few cases progressing to formal homelessness decisions.

We are focusing on strength-based assessments and taking a person-centred approach when considering suitable housing options, particularly for the most complex cases. This enables us to put the customer at the heart of service delivery. It will be important, if we are to implement a whole system approach to reducing homelessness and rough sleeping countywide, to make sure a shared vision is adopted and the workforce skills to embed the approach are developed locally.

Our small-scale Housing First project in Cherwell has worked well as an alternative housing offer for households who have been reluctant to enter or been excluded from existing pathway provision. We will need to extend this provision and continue to develop enough resources locally to avoid households having to take up accommodation outside of our district, where it is not their wish to do. This could be challenging within an environment of reduced budgets. However, we will maximise the opportunity to secure Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) and other government grant funding for all new or extended housing initiatives.

More information on what we plan to do, is set out in [Section 3](#) with supporting narrative and evidence provided in [Section 4](#) and in the separate Homelessness Service Review 2020.

Oxfordshire Homeless Movement (OHM)

The Oxfordshire Homeless Movement (OHM) is a charitable organisation and a partner of the many organisations working to ensure that nobody has to sleep rough on the streets of Oxfordshire. OHM has a homelessness [charter](#) and aims to raise awareness of all the work in the Oxfordshire area and guide new and existing volunteers, supporters and people who are homeless or experiencing housing difficulties, to the actions or services they are looking for. This is a recent partnership with Cherwell District Council, and we will work with OHM to ensure that their information and guidance includes the work we are doing to reduce homelessness and end rough sleeping locally.

Further partnerships may be developed over the life of this strategy to facilitate new housing initiatives and longer-term housing solutions. The input of groups such as the Lived Experience Advisory Forum and other groups who support and facilitate service users to express their opinion will be key to success. In addition, we can explore the opportunities to work with local authorities in areas outside of Oxfordshire to share best practice.

3. Homelessness Strategy 2021-2026 - Priorities

Our previous Homelessness Strategy 2018-2020 set out four priorities:

- Priority 1 Prevent and relieve homelessness in the district
- Priority 2 Prevent single homelessness
- Priority 3 Ensure vulnerable people can access appropriate help and support.
- Priority 4 Ensure homeless households can access suitable temporary and permanent accommodation.

Delivery of the Strategy Action Plan has been monitored and the majority of actions completed. A summary of the achievements can be found in the separate Homelessness Service Review 2020.

We have considered the findings from: the Homelessness Service Review 2020; the recommendations from the Shelter Health Check 2019; the independent research to inform a housing-led approach in Oxfordshire 2020; alongside the response required for local housing and economic recovery post Covid-19 pandemic, and the trends seen in national, county and local data. This has informed our vision for prevention, reduction and ending of homelessness and rough sleeping:

Our Vision is: To work in partnership, with customers at the heart of our approach, to understand, prevent and resolve homelessness so that no one has to sleep rough in Cherwell

To achieve this, we have identified six priorities to drive our service development and delivery forward over the next five years. The priorities, which will require significant partnership working to achieve, are explained below. More details about the reasons why these are priorities and the supporting evidence can be found throughout this strategy and in the separate Homelessness Service Review 2020 document:

Priority 1: Work with the County, City and District Councils and partner organisations across Oxfordshire to identify the causes of homelessness in our area, facilitate early interventions and responses to increase successful homelessness preventions, and make sure that no one has to sleep rough.

To deliver this priority, we will:

Work with partners countywide to explore the opportunities to implement an early intervention hub with locally accessible provision in Cherwell, to enable rapid access for all those sleeping rough or at immediate risk of rough sleeping, to a psychologically informed assessment of their specific needs.

Continue to facilitate provision of accommodation with support for people who are homeless or rough sleeping and have complex needs (including emergency and cold weather provision during winter months).

Engage in the commissioning and delivery of services to accommodate and support Young People (including care leavers) and to help them to move on to and sustain (including work to avoid eviction from), settled accommodation at the right time for them.

Engage in the commissioning and delivery of Adult Homeless Accommodation and county wide floating support services to ensure that the right housing choices and a range of support options are available to prevent (including work to avoid eviction) and assist recovery from homelessness.

Review our Allocations Scheme and Nominations Agreements to make sure they do not create barriers to housing, and that monitoring arrangements are robust to enable challenges to any inequity in social housing allocations.

Increase our homelessness prevention rates and improve our housing offer to single homeless customers by expanding the provision of Housing First and by building on a housing-led approach to meeting customer needs.

Support and expand the Cherwell Homelessness Network to ensure new representative groups e.g. Oxfordshire Homeless Movement, Lived Experience Adults Forum and others, are able to participate in the design and delivery of local housing solutions and share the learning to inform future delivery of services.

Proactively work with each of our partner organisations to emphasise and promote how they can improve identification of customers with early indications of homeless (nudge theory) and improve inter-agency referrals (through improved communication) to relevant advice services such as Debt and Money Advice Service and the council under the 'duty to refer'.

Improve monitoring data from delivery of existing service contracts, Personal Housing Plans, successful prevention cases, and obtain input from people with lived experience of homelessness, to identify what works locally to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping and deliver successful outcomes for the longer-term.

Priority 2: Proactively identify, engage with and assist households who have difficulty accessing and receiving homelessness services.

To deliver this priority, we will:

Make sure our commissioning process includes a contractual requirement to support service user engagement in the design and delivery of homelessness prevention and housing-related support services.

Engage with service providers, statutory and voluntary sector organisations and faith groups to explore how the council can better engage and gain the trust of households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (including sofa-surfers and others who may be 'hidden homeless'), and to deliver a strengths-based, person-centred approach to identify and resolve housing issues.

Carry out an equality audit on the council's housing service to identify improvements and actions to ensure the service and policies are fully inclusive and made more easily accessible to those who need them.

Build improved protocols and procedures with our statutory and non-statutory partner agencies to ensure that access to housing, health, social care and support services (including those providing mental health and substance misuse support) are interlinked and referrals made between organisations are efficient, and the services are responsive to customer needs at the point of contact (including early interventions that will prevent or eliminate the risk of eviction and homelessness).

Review and update the Homeless Pocket Guide and ensure this is widely promoted.

Priority 3: Proactively engage with and support households to develop housing resilience and when needed, to access suitable accommodation to meet their longer-term needs.

To deliver this priority, we will:

Continue to invest in the provision of effective floating support and outreach services that will support households, not only to access and sustain accommodation, but to enable them to build personal resilience and independence from support in the longer term.

Expand our provision of Housing First and develop a housing-led approach to resolving housing crisis in Cherwell district.

Provide additional 'Tenancy Prepared' courses and, work with Registered Providers and private landlords to assign tenancies to homeless households that have appropriate support in place and are 'tenancy supported'.

Use a strengths-based and person-centred approach to personalised housing plans that puts the person at the centre of their housing solution. This personalised approach will help the individual to understand what support they can expect and the actions they can take themselves to build confidence and resilience in a way that meets their housing needs, and within an agreed and reasonable timescale. Outcomes will be measured using feedback from customers, service users and achievements of key outcomes.

Ensure households in the private rented sector are able to receive early advice and money management support from the Debt and Money Advice Service provider, and support from the council's housing advice service to sustain their tenancy and avoid unnecessary evictions. Clear communications will be essential to support this to happen.

Evaluate the Cherwell pilot of Family Solutions Plus and implement the embedded housing worker into this service model to support early housing intervention with vulnerable families.

Work in partnership with Cherwell Homeless Network partners to improve communications to all households about the housing information, advice and support available so that they can access it at the earliest point and avoid housing crisis.

Priority 4: Engage and work collaboratively with people with lived experience of homelessness and commission the right support to reduce, prevent and ultimately end homelessness and rough sleeping.

In addition to the work undertaken to meet Priority 2 and Priority 3, to deliver Priority 4 we will:

Maximise the opportunity to secure MHCLG and other funding to support the commissioning of services that will help to prevent and end rough sleeping in the district.

Design feedback mechanisms for customers to comment on our services and engage with people with lived experience of homelessness and rough sleeping to ensure that we understand their experience of our services and use this to co-produce new responses.

Participate in the county wide workforce transformation initiative that will support our staff to undertake training and develop their skills, engage with people who have lived experience of homelessness, and adopt a person-centred approach to service delivery.

Monitor the support provided by council services and voluntary groups to ensure the correct housing advice and information is being provided, and opportunities to signpost to complementary services are being maximised.

Embed learning from the Shelter Health Check and refresh the 'Lean Review' of end to end homeless processes, working with service users to identify opportunities for improvements and efficiencies.

Priority 5: Make sure that our service is flexible and equipped to deal with any future local Covid-19 outbreak or emergency.

To deliver this priority, we will:

In partnership with other Oxfordshire Councils and stakeholders, we will undertake a 'lessons learned' review of our housing and support response to Covid-19. We will implement changes to ensure that our service is flexible and equipped to deal with any future local Covid-19 outbreak or emergency, as well as monitoring the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on homelessness levels.

Refresh the business continuity plan and demonstrate how we keep staff and our customers safe, particularly customers in emergency and supported accommodation.

Priority 6: Work in partnership to increase supply of affordable housing and make sure that accommodation in the private sector is good quality, that tenants are treated lawfully and fairly, and there is improved access to affordable private sector accommodation for homeless households.

It is important to note that delivery of affordable housing, including housing to meet Oxford's unmet housing need, and making best use of existing social and private rented sector housing stock in the district, are key priorities in CDC's adopted Housing Strategy 2019-2024. **However, to specifically deliver Priority 6 in this Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, we will:**

Maximise opportunities to attract Homes England, Growth Deal and other public subsidy to deliver a range of additional affordable homes – including more social rent tenure and suitable accommodation to meet the needs of single homeless households.

Maximise the opportunity to attract HMCLG and other funding to provide the appropriate support services and housing solutions in Cherwell to meet a range of housing and support needs, including move-on accommodation from supported living.

Widen accommodation options across Cherwell by capitalising on opportunities within the private market for Registered Providers or Build! to acquire additional affordable homes, or for the council to secure nomination rights.

Work with private sector landlords to maximise opportunities to accommodate refugees who are to settle in Cherwell area as part of the Global Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

Work with private sector landlords to secure more good quality properties to let to households who are working or receiving benefits, and to let them on longer-term tenancies through the Cherwell Bond Scheme, and to promote access to this viable housing option to households on our housing register or those who may not qualify for social housing but need to live in Cherwell district.

Continue the work of the Housing Options and Housing Standards Teams to reduce risk of homelessness due to poor housing standards.

4. Homelessness Service Review 2020 - summary

To inform the six strategic priorities within this Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, we undertook a review of our Homelessness Services in 2020. The review considered the:

- Council's achievements during the lifetime of the previous strategy.
- Actions outstanding from the previous strategy action plan (this has been done through the action plan monitoring process)
- Demand on homelessness services
- The Council's current provision of homelessness services
- Unmet demand for council homelessness services
- Future challenges facing the councils' homelessness service.
- Feedback from customers, stakeholders and partners, including the Shelter Health Check and the commissioned research into the feasibility of a housing-led approach in Oxfordshire.

In summary, the Review findings are as follows:

Strengths of the homelessness service

- **Quality of service via experienced staff** – The Shelter Health Check 2019 stated there was a good quality of advice and an excellent level of working with the spirit of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, not just “working by the numbers”. Experienced staff who work with a high level of integrity in challenging circumstances.
- **Provision of service beyond statutory housing duties** – e.g. Relief Plus; Housing First; extended Winter Beds provision, enhanced links with County Council Adult Social Care that enables responsive housing and support solutions; additional resources through Tenancy Support Officers; Cherwell Bond Scheme; commissioned services for debt and money advice, outreach services etc.
- **It is an inclusive service that aims to deliver service to all in need** – e.g. Personal Housing Plans; housing advice to all, not just those in priority need; housing and support for Syrian and UK Resettlement Scheme Families; cross-team working to secure adapted accommodation to meet specific customer needs.
- **Strong relationships with Registered Providers, support providers and effective countywide partnerships with Oxfordshire local authorities** to deliver responsive, innovative services and pool resources to maximise the benefit to meet customer and organisational needs e.g. funding for Adult Homeless Pathway, support services for people experiencing domestic abuse.
- **Private Rented Sector Offer** – Cherwell Bond Scheme (including the Keyworker Bond Scheme) provides opportunities for households on the council's housing register to access good quality homes in the private rented sector. Working across the various teams in Housing Service, officers are able to provide an attractive package for private landlords, including property inspections, contributions to gas and/ or electrical safety certificates and Bonds to guarantee the rent.
- **Accessible housing** – Officers across the Housing Service working together to secure new-build accessible properties and suitable adaptations to existing social and private rented sector homes to enable a return from hospital or to support continued independence of people with disabilities.

- **Specialist officers in Housing Needs Team** to support the work to accommodate armed forces personnel, rough sleepers, older people, young people leaving care. As part of our commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, officers have conducted housing advice surgeries in the Banbury Job Centre and for Armed Forces Veterans at the Upper Heyford base. In addition, officers consistently apply the reasonable preference categories as set out in the adopted Allocations Scheme.

Areas for development

- **Improve partnership working with the private rented sector, DWP, mediation and health services** to establish long-term accommodation and support solutions as early as possible – upstream prevention and promotion of the Duty to Refer and how referrals can be made.
- **Improving our understanding of different cultures and society needs** so that we can effectively engage with customers and promote early contact with our service to prevent homelessness. Improve our data collection, data analysis, and engage more with our service users.
- **Access to services** – ensure we maintain a flexible but accessible service to meet needs. Not everyone will be able to access digital information or access our services face to face within normal office hours. Promotion of our Enhanced Housing Options online service and support offered via the commissioned drop-in services may help.
- **Housing people locally** without the need for them to go out of our area where that is not their wish. Ideally, we need to provide a range of housing options within the district, including households with complex and/or support needs.
- **Maximise the use of social housing in the prevention of homelessness** – deliver more homes and work with partners to make best use of assets for this purpose.
- **Review our approach to service delivery** - Further develop the psychologically informed and strengths-based approach to how we work with people affected by homelessness and make sure our end to end services are efficient and effective. Supporting and developing the homelessness workforce both in-house and across our partners will be key to reducing and eliminating homelessness and rough sleeping countywide.
- **Undertake a collaborative approach to designing our services** - gain feedback and valuable input from people with lived experience of homelessness so that we can continuously improve our services, and effectively commission others.
- **Supporting and developing the homelessness workforce** – internally and across the system to develop the skills and knowledge to effect positive and inclusive change.
- **Review our Allocations Scheme and Nominations Agreements** – to be completed in partnership with Registered Providers to make sure there is some flexibility to house rough sleepers (Housing First or Rapid Re-housing solution) or those who have complex needs but need independent accommodation. The policies and practices between organisations need to be aligned to avoid rejections of households nominated for social housing. Setting annual lettings targets and improved monitoring of the delivery against the Allocations Scheme and Nominations Agreements (including reasons for rejections) will provide robust evidence of success or the need for further review.

Future Challenges

- **Security of resources – staff and finance.** Reductions in available council budgets whilst supporting post-Covid recovery in the community will have an impact on the available resources. Commissioned service providers need security of income. We need to find more ways of pooling resources, gaining economies of scale and of benefiting our communities by working cross-county to deliver joint outputs. We also need to maximise the opportunity presented by government funding announcements to provide more accommodation for those who are currently homeless, at risk of homeless or rough sleeping.
- **Provision of more affordable homes and move-on accommodation in suitable locations** – With limited available council-owned land, if the proposed changes (2020) to the planning system are introduced, there are likely to be fewer social and affordable rented homes delivered in future, as traditionally there has been a reliance on affordable homes delivered via S.106 obligations. More self-contained smaller accommodation is required in order to move away from shared supported accommodation. This will facilitate a housing-led approach to operate more effectively. Registered Providers and public bodies will need to support the council to deliver the additional homes through new-build and regeneration/best use of existing assets.
- **Provision of accommodation for younger people to prevent homelessness** – There is a gap in youth support provision and the young person supported pathway requires review.
- **Ageing population** - provision of accommodation for older people/people requiring Extra Care housing on discharge from hospital – formal agreements will need to direct routes to Social Care and provider landlords to secure a prompt response and access to suitable accommodation to prevent homelessness.
- **Challenges presented by increasing unemployment and impact of Covid-19 on economic recovery** – It will be important to maximise the opportunities presented through commissioning and partnership working to signpost customers to relevant debt and money advice, benefits advice, access to training, education and employment. An increase in demand is expected for tenancy support services in both social housing and private sector housing.
- **Reinstatement of eviction proceedings** – increase in the need for customer support after the government's ban on evictions (post Covid-19) is lifted. Whilst work is ongoing with identified customers, those who have not yet approached the council will require intense support to prevent their homelessness. An effective communications plan is required to promote early engagement with the council.
- **Affordability of accommodation** – rising house prices, unemployment rates, potential rise in debts, rise in rents in the private rented sector, and lack of social rented housing supply, will impact on the affordability of homes for many people, not only the 1300 households on our housing register. The highest cause of homelessness in Cherwell is the loss of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy in private rented properties, followed by family/friends no longer able to accommodate.
- **Improving standards in private rented sector accommodation** – the lack of social housing supply places a greater demand on the private rented sector (PRS). In an environment of low median income and high housing demand, it will be important to take enforcement action on landlords who do not keep up the property maintenance standards. Otherwise there will be very few suitable private sector housing options available.

- **Provision of accommodation to meet the needs of Gypsy and Traveller Communities –** as part of Cherwell District Council's Local Plan Review 2040, a Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment will be completed to identify additional needs for sites/pitches in Cherwell district. It will be important to ensure that the Communities are kept informed of all housing options available to them.

5. Resources

Cherwell District Council is planning ahead for the possibility of budgetary challenges in future. The challenges stem from local government funding reductions across the nation and the long-term impact of Covid-19. The council estimates that it may have to make around £9.5m of savings in 2021/22 with the final figure determined by the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review in November 2020, and updates from central Government on how business rates, the New Homes Bonus and other grants will be re-configured nationally. Given the significant savings to be made, it will be essential to work in partnership to undertake effective commissioning of services, and focus on joint bids with other Oxfordshire Councils to secure government funds and other investments to deliver our strategic priorities over the next five years. The dedicated resources to prevent and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping in the district are set out below.

Staff Resources

The Housing Needs Team is responsible for housing and homelessness advice, and the allocation of social housing. The team comprises:

1 x Housing Services Manager who manages the:

Homelessness and Housing Options Team comprising of:

- 1 x Senior Housing Officer
- 4 x Housing Options Officers
- 1 x Housing Options Officer (Single Homeless Specialist)
- 3 x Tenancy Support Officers
- 1 x Housing Options Officer (Temporary Accommodation)
- 1 x Assistant Housing Options Officer

Allocations and Cherwell Bond Scheme Team comprising of:

- 1 x Senior Housing Officer
- 5 x Housing Officers
- 2 x Assistant Housing Officers
- 1 x Housing Officer (Bond Scheme)

The Housing Service also includes the Housing Strategy and Development Team, Access and Grants Team and Private Sector Housing Standards Team. The teams work in collaboration with each other and across wider council and county partnerships to deliver the most suitable housing solutions to meet individual customer needs.

Flexible Homelessness Support Grant

Central Government allocates funding to local housing authorities for homelessness prevention work. The Flexible Homelessness Support Grant (FHSG) funding has been used by the Housing Needs Team to support a range of community and voluntary sector groups who provide services within the district that are focused on supporting the prevention of homelessness. For example, the provision of drop-in centres for people who are homeless or unsuitably housed, outreach and verification services for rough sleepers and outreach support for victims of domestic abuse. The Flexible Homelessness Support Grant allocation for each year since 2018 is as follows:

In 2018/2019: £178,538
In 2019/2020: £205,425
In 2020/2021: £265,225

Homelessness Reduction Act: New Burdens Funding

The government has provided funding to local authorities to help meet the cost of implementing the new burdens and additional duties set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. To date, Cherwell District Council has received the following and is awaiting confirmation on 2021/22 budget:

In 2018/2019: £43,277
In 2019/2020: £45,747
In 2020/2021: £142,826
Total Allocation: £231,850

In the winter of 2019, the Council was successful in attracting £25,000 Cold Weather Funding from MHCLG which was used to provide five temporary bedroom spaces with support services in Banbury, for rough sleepers who had higher level support needs. The scheme was extended during the Covid-19 lockdown period and subsequently all residents have been supported into longer-term accommodation or Housing First units with support. In October 2020, the government announced a £10 million Cold Weather Fund to support councils get rough sleepers off the streets during the winter by helping them to provide more self-contained accommodation. In addition to this, £2 million was made available to faith and community groups to help them provide secure accommodation for rough sleepers. We will maximise the opportunity to secure additional funds such as these to ensure that rough sleepers are safe, off the streets and have opportunities to build personal resilience that will enable them to end their rough sleeping cycle.

Service commissioning

Using FHSG, New Burdens funding and our own budgets, we commission a range of services to support our aim of reducing and preventing homelessness and rough sleeping. Where appropriate we have contributed to a pooled budget with other Oxfordshire councils to commission services that are countywide. The commissioned services are listed below:

- Debt and Money Advice c.£215,000 per annum to November 2022.
- Faithworks (furniture recycling project) (£15,000 in 2020/21)
- The Beacon drop-in centre supports people who are homeless or rough sleeping (£15,000 in 2020/21).
- The Salvation Army for homeless support (£15,000 in 2020/21)
- Cherwell DC contribution towards countywide domestic abuse services (£25,000 in 2020/21)
- Assertive Outreach and Verification Service was commissioned in 2020 using the council's allocated budget (c.£49,000 per annum to 2022)
- Pooled budget: Cherwell District Council's contribution towards the Single Homeless Pathway (£62,700 in 2020/21); Young People Supported Housing Pathway (£59,811 in 2020/21 then £119,000 per annum from April 2021 onward).

Additional services have been commissioned using Rough Sleeper Initiative Funding secured following joint funding bids made to MHCLG in 2019 and 2020. The RSI funding has been used as follows:

- Enhanced Floating Support Service that was commissioned with RSI 3 funding of £45,000. This service will be provided up until May 2021 with the current funding.

- RSI 3 funding was also secured to enable the council to fund a Single Homeless Options Officer (Rough Sleeping) role in the Housing Team, which will specialise in supporting rough sleepers and single homeless households and working with partner agencies to step up the outreach work. The funding awards are shown in the table:

Rough Sleeper Initiative funding round 2 (RSI2) in 2019/20 was £136,000

Purpose	Amount
Countywide Strategic Coordinator Post (2 years)	£46,000
Enhanced floating support to complement the Outreach and Verification Service in Cherwell	£40,000
Housing First (HF) 6 units in Cherwell	£35,000
Housing First Personalisation Fund	£15,000

Rough Sleeper Initiative funding round 3 (RSI3) in 2020/21 was £236,061

Purpose	Amount
Housing First 8 units in Cherwell	£50,000
Housing Options Officer Single Homeless Specialist	£48,561
Enhanced floating support to complement the Outreach and Verification Service in Cherwell	£45,000
10 beds for complex needs	£92,500

In response to the launch of the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) in July 2020, the council has been awarded £120,400 part of which will enable extended provision of emergency accommodation to March 2021 for the homeless households accommodated through the 'Everyone in' initiative. It will also cover staffing costs for one year, to provide housing-related support to settle single homeless households into new accommodation.

We have also secured £28,764 capital and £124,000 revenue from NSAP funding to refurbish 9 flats and use them as move on accommodation with support for single homeless households up until 2024.

6. Action plan and governance

We have developed a Housing and Homelessness Strategy Action Plan for the first two years of this strategy.

The action plan will be reviewed and updated annually with input from our stakeholders, partners and customers who use our service and who have lived experience of homelessness, to make sure the future actions we are planning to take, remain responsive to emerging local need, Government legislation and guidance.

We will report to our Homelessness Network of relevant stakeholders and Cherwell District Council Scrutiny Committee annually on the progress made in delivering the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan to ensure we remain on target.

7. Consultation

A Review of Homelessness Services in 2020 and a workshop with Registered Provider partners on 30 September 2020, informed the priorities for this Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026.

Between 30 November 2020 and 17 January 2021, the public, service users, stakeholders and partner organisations were consulted on the draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2021-2026 and associated action plan. Feedback received during the consultation was used to inform amendments to the draft strategy and action plan and also to update the Equality and Climate Change Impact Assessment.

This final strategy has been published following approval by the Council's Executive in March 2021.