

Homelessness Strategy 2022-2025



St Albans
City & District Council



Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires local authorities to take strategic responsibility for tackling and preventing homelessness. There is also a requirement to publish a Homelessness Strategy (at least) every 5 years. The aim of the Strategy is to set out the objectives and actions of the local authority to address the issues which cause homelessness and rough sleeping. The Strategy will set out the Council's plans for ensuring that sufficient accommodation and support are or will be available for people who become homeless or who are at risk of becoming so.

Whilst the Council is responsible for delivering the Strategy, the key to success is working with local providers and support agencies. The Homelessness Forum, managed by the Council, is made up of key stakeholders delivering homelessness services. The Forum has been consulted on the aims included within the Strategy. The Strategy will be an evolving, dynamic document which will be monitored and reviewed to evaluate whether these objectives are achieved.

Local Context

The City and District of St Albans is characterised by high house prices and low unemployment. Unfortunately this results in a high demand for affordable housing and means that not everyone is able to access suitable accommodation.

The Council's Corporate Vision aims to achieve 4 key outcomes:

- A thriving community
- A great place to live and work
- A vibrant economy
- A cost - effective Council

Underpinning the Corporate Vision are 4 key priorities:

- Combat the climate emergency
- Deliver more social housing
- Enhance local business
- Develop community facilities

The Council recognises the importance of delivering modern, high quality, new social housing to address the needs of applicants in housing need. Developing a new Homelessness Strategy is highlighted in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-2026 as other background work being carried out in 2021-22 to support our communities.

Since the last Homelessness Strategy was developed, the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 has come into force. This has seen the introduction of new statutory duties to prevent and relieve homelessness for every household threatened with homelessness. This has not directly led to a significant increase in the number of homeless households. However, there is increased responsibility for St Albans Council to work with applicants and agencies to provide advice and support.

Overseeing the introduction of the HRA and implementing new ways of working has been the primary achievement since the last Homelessness Strategy was published. Other key successes include:

- Continued support for 'Home Truths' sessions. These are delivered by Herts Young Homeless to school children across the district.
- Setting up Mosaic Lettings, working with landlords to provide an affordable private rental option in and around the St Albans district.
- Supply of temporary accommodation kept under regular review to minimise use of Bed and Breakfast. Progress towards ending use of mobile homes to provide improved, modern, self-contained accommodation.
- Establishment of Rough Sleeping Steering Group. Working with partners to provide support and advice to those sleeping rough in the district.
- Appointing a Specialist Homelessness Advisor to work with those who are rough sleeping and are at risk of rough sleeping.
- Establishment of Multi-Disciplinary Tracker meetings with representatives from Probation, Mental Health, and Drug and Alcohol Services to discuss complex cases.
- Overseeing the roll out of Universal Credit in the district. The Council appointed a Welfare Reform Officer to work with partner agencies, raise awareness, provide advice and support to tenants and colleagues.
- Promoting SAHWR Specialist Domestic Abuse Services to be a Strategic Partner of the Council so it receives a longer-term funding commitment under the Voluntary and Community Sector grants funding.

The primary reasons for homelessness approaches in the district remain broadly the same since the last Homelessness Strategy. There were 798 approaches for homeless assistance and advice in 2020-21. The top 10 reasons for customers approaching the Council for assistance, and the number of approaches are:

Asked to leave by family	200	Friends no longer willing to accommodate	44
Fleeing Domestic Abuse	90	Rough Sleeping	39
Relationship Breakdown	79	Sofa Surfing	34
Section 21 Notice (private rental sector eviction)	61	Fleeing Harassment	29
Leaving Prison	49	Eviction From Supported Housing	26

The number of accepted homeless cases in the past 3 years has not been unduly affected by the impact of the HRA:

2018-19	91
2019-20	107
2020-21	78

The average number of households in Temporary Accommodation is:

2018-19	132
2019-20	130
2020-21	115

These statistics reflect the work of the Housing Options department and partners in providing effective advice and support in the relief and prevention of homelessness. In addition, the number of rough sleepers in the district has remained low. The official figures, recorded every Autumn, since the last Homelessness Strategy are:

2016	13
2017	5
2018	11
2019	9
2020	2



The Council has received funding to help deliver its homelessness services. This has increased with the introduction of Flexible Homelessness Support Grant. The funding allocation since the last Homelessness Strategy are:

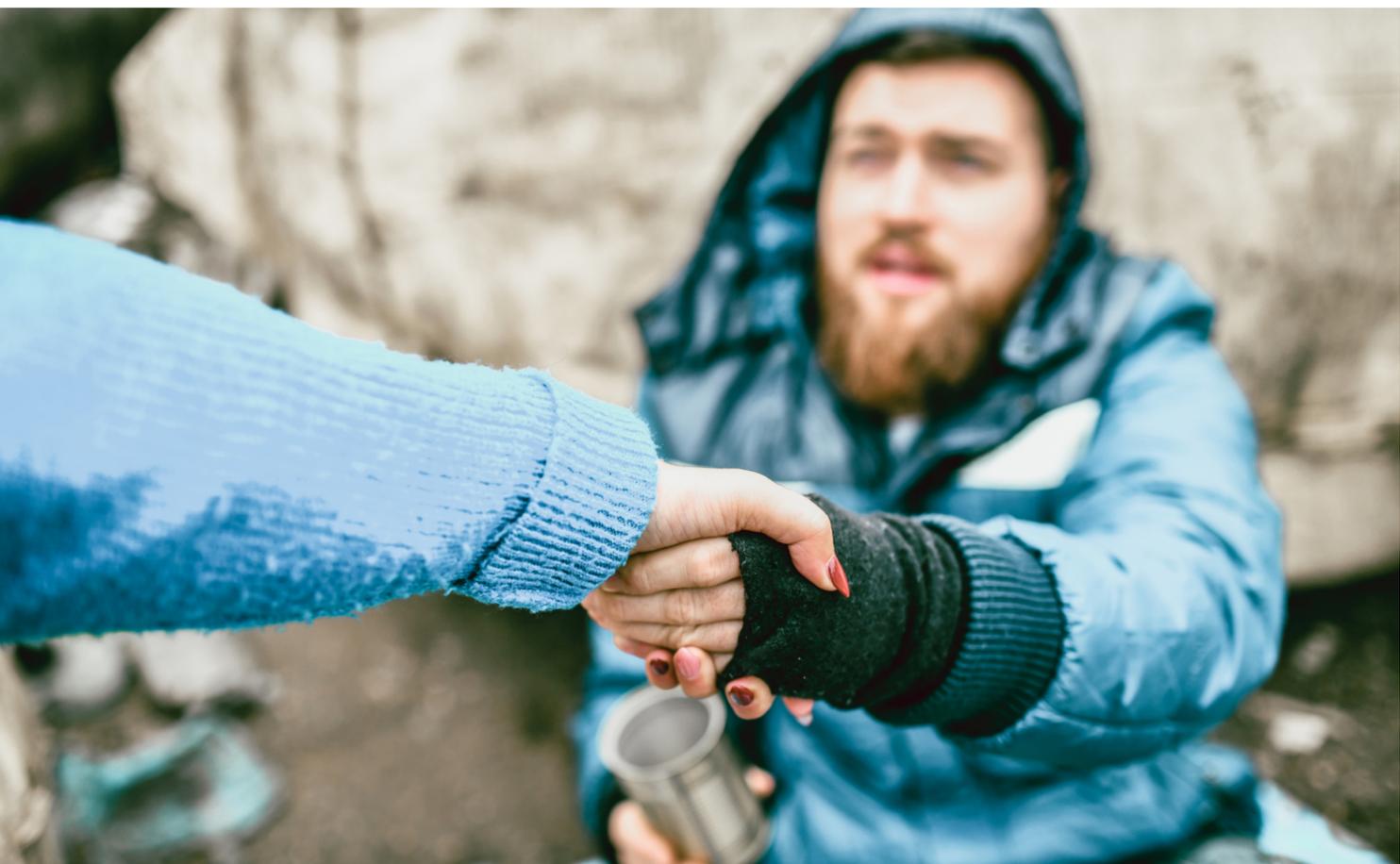
2016-17	£249,673
2017-18	£270,292
2018-19	£519,965
2020-21	£412,589
2021-22	£487,905

Alongside the annual grants, the Council have accessed other government funding streams relating to the Rough Sleeping Initiative, Cold Weather Funding and the Next Steps Accommodation Programme.

In March 2020, the government announced the 'Everyone In' programme in response to the COVID-19 crisis. St Albans Council embraced this project and by September 2020, 31 individuals had been accommodated across the district.

When people had moved into accommodation, the Council worked to move people onto more secure appropriate housing. By January 2021, 37 individuals had moved into settled accommodation or supported housing.

There are a number of people who remain in accommodation following the COVID-19 lockdown. The Council continue to provide advice and support to these individuals to ensure no one has to sleep rough.



National Context

The most significant change in homelessness legislation since the last strategy was the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Alongside the two new duties for local authorities, detailed above, Personal Housing Plans need to be developed with the customer. These plans are developed to set out the support and housing needs to those who are facing homelessness or are actually homeless. The introduction of the Duty to Refer for public sector organisations within the Act has also encouraged and strengthened partnership working.



The Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018 announced the government's commitment to halve the number of rough sleepers by 2022 and end it altogether by 2027. The focus is on prevention, intervention and recovery backed by government funding initiatives.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 has given protection to tenants, both in the social and private rented sector, from being evicted. Legislation was put in place to ensure bailiffs do not serve eviction notices, with only the most serious cases being exempt. This extension of time may allow for tenants to source alternative accommodation as required. Discretionary Housing Payments have also been made available to tenants who have fallen into COVID-19 related rent arrears.

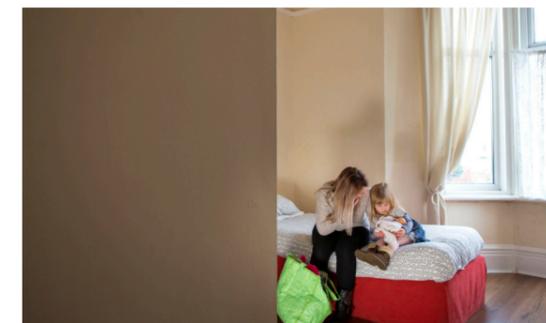
However, the full impact of the delay in evictions on homelessness services is unknown at the time of writing this Homelessness Strategy.

Also unknown at time of writing is the full impact of Brexit on homelessness and rough sleeping. From 1 January 2021, newly arrived citizens from the European Economic Area no longer have the right to reside under EU law. As a result, they will no longer be eligible for an allocation of social housing or assistance under homelessness legislation until they are granted indefinite leave to remain. Rough Sleepers with no right to remain in the UK will be asked to leave voluntarily. If they choose not to do so or engage with the support being offered there is the prospect of their forcible removal.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has been introduced to raise awareness and understanding of the issues relating to domestic abuse. The Act creates a statutory definition of domestic abuse. The definition emphasises that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but extends to emotional, coercive or controlling, and economic abuse.

There will be a duty on local authorities (in England) to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation.

As a result the definition of priority need will be extended to all eligible victims of domestic abuse who are homeless as a result of being a victim of domestic abuse as defined within the Act.



When implemented the Act will lead to updates to the Homelessness Code of Guidance that will include the new changes that Local Authorities will need to implement.

Alongside the new Homelessness Code of Guidance and the Hertfordshire County Council Domestic Abuse Strategy, the Council will ensure that victims are able to access the appropriate support.



The Council will assess every case of domestic abuse and each individual given access to the support they need. This includes The Mankind Initiative for male victims of Domestic Abuse and organisations that support individuals presenting from BAME backgrounds, disabled victims and those identifying as LGBTQ+.

St Albans Council has regular meetings with its dedicated Specialist Homelessness Advisor from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities to review funding opportunities. Within the lifetime of this Strategy, the Council expects to have accessed further support to enhance services to those persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in the district. This includes additional funding to provide resources in response to some of the challenges posed by the implementation of recent legislation outlined above.

Vision

This strategy has been prepared with the intention it will shape how the Housing department will deliver its service in partnership with local stakeholders and organisations.

The Council would like to develop an innovative approach in the field of homelessness prevention. We aim, through this strategy, to propose solutions and realistic outcomes by bringing key partners together to share information and ideas. This will include the development of the Council's private rental sector access scheme. Better relationships with landlords will be fostered to ensure that those at threat of eviction through Section 21 notices can be supported through mediation and advocacy.



The Council invited all members of the Homelessness Forum to help us determine what the Council's priorities should be. We outlined 8 key pledges, based on the local and national context and asked respondents to rank them from the most to least important. We also sought out views from service users at Open Door.

As a result of this feedback, and additional comments submitted, we have developed the key commitments below. Listed below each commitment is a series of actions the Council, alongside its partners, will take to ensure the Council delivers on these pledges.

Pledge 1 - Eradicate rough sleeping in the District

Aim	Measure
To ensure the principles and philosophy of Housing First are upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 3 Housing First placements per year. Continuation of funding of a Housing First Support Worker to help maintain a sustainable tenancy. Monthly meetings reviewing scheme and discuss case progress.
No rough sleepers in the district	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure no one is sleeping rough in the District. All individuals rough sleeping in the District are engaged and supported by the Outreach team.
Appointment of additional Outreach Worker based at Open Door	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of funding an additional Outreach Worker to work with rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping in the district.
Develop working relationship with Streetlink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All identified alerts from the general public regarding rough sleepers are actioned in conjunction with partner agencies. These identified rough sleepers are located and engaged with and supported into more settled accommodation.
Appointment of Specialist Homelessness Assessment Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of funding of specialist worker based at the Council.
Maximise funding opportunities to deliver an enhanced service to rough sleepers and homeless households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular meetings held with Homelessness Advisor from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to review funding opportunities, including continuation of Rough Sleeping Initiative funding. Funding applications made to develop services and / or provide improved accommodation.

Consultation with service users in the creation and development of services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular feedback is obtained from service users in temporary and move on accommodation. Feedback informs policy and consultation is considered where appropriate to ensure views on projects are heard. Service user involvement is a standing item at partnership meetings.
Deliver an every night Winter Beds service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council works in partnership with the Winter Beds Project to support an every night provision of accommodation to support Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) service.
Commissioning of Housing Related Support services, liaising with Hertfordshire County Councillors, to target the needs of rough sleepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accurate record keeping informs delivery of Housing Related Support commissioned services. The Council engages with Strategic Partners team at Hertfordshire County Council to inform future commissioning decision making. Housing pathways for individuals from commissioned services into the Council's homeless service are monitored and recorded.
Capitalise on success of Everyone In programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone sleeping rough in the district has an offer of accommodation available to them.
To work with rough sleepers who have no local connection to St Albans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide Outreach advice and support to reconnect people to where they have a local connection.
Promote rough sleeper services in the District and increase public awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and publicise information leaflet detailing rough sleeping and homelessness services. Identify opportunities for promotion of services including press releases, joint working with partners and posters.

Improve provision of social services, debt, mental health and drug / alcohol support open to all residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular Multi-Disciplinary Team meetings are held with external agencies to discuss complex cases. Continuation of funding for the St Albans Community Bank (formerly known as the St Albans Credit Union) and Citizens Advice in delivering services which prevent homelessness.
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Pledge 2 - Deliver a community based hub to provide services and facilities via the voluntary sector

Aim	Measure
Work with voluntary sector to establish a multi-disciplinary day centre which supports local homeless and other vulnerable people by providing signposting, healthcare services, daytime recreational services, skills building, training and employment opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of accommodation options to provide a community hub through the Homelessness Forum. The Council to lead on delivering a central location and liaise with other agencies to ensure services are provided.
Identify additional services required such as provision of generic advice, meals and food, and clothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review provision of food services including signposting to food banks and charities.
Regular housing surgeries and offering of drop in sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drop in surgeries are available to provide advice and support to those who require such services.

Pledge 3 - Develop and deliver a joint working practice to meet the needs of people fleeing domestic abuse

Aim	Measure
Development of services for vulnerable tenants and promote sustainable tenancies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular review meetings to ensure that SAHWR Specialist Domestic Abuse Services support households' resettlement process aiming to avoid loss of tenancy and repeat victimisation.

Partnership working with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) working with families with children (Families First)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council, in partnership with HCC, ensure that SAHWR provide comprehensive support to families in the community and within safe accommodation. Use of robust safeguarding measures to highlight safeguarding procedures.
Implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, including grant funding to partner agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service Level Agreement in place with SAHWR for core funding to provide services to victims of domestic abuse including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ safe accommodation ✓ community services ✓ Recognise Recovery Resilience programme ✓ services to children based in safe accommodation
Recognised pathways of support and re-housing for those fleeing Domestic Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HCC have a commissioned specialist domestic abuse service with clear pathways for victims to access specialist domestic abuse support either by self or agency referral. The Council has comprehensive community-based services and safe accommodation in the district provided by SAHWR for all victims of domestic abuse and violence. The Council has an established working agreement with SAHWR to fully assess the level of risk and suitability of approach on the grounds of domestic abuse to the Homelessness Team. Processes reviewed and developed on a bi-monthly basis.
Continued partnership work alongside SAHWR Specialist Domestic Abuse Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular refresher Domestic Abuse Awareness Training delivered by SAHWR. Support and advice provided by the Council to SAHWR on homelessness issues for victims of domestic abuse.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of all approaches to the Council by SAHWR on the grounds of domestic abuse, including comprehensive risk assessment, support needs as well as safety in the District. Regular agency meetings to share good practice and service provision.
Identify gaps in service provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlighting service gaps in partnership meetings, including clients with accessibility requirements, complex needs (drug, alcohol and mental health needs, and clients with no recourse to public funds.
Maintain and develop existing working partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular attendance at Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference meetings. Rotating of Chair of the Homelessness Forum to promote greater involvement and ownership of issues of homelessness.

Pledge 4 - Work to improve access to the private rented sector

Aim	Measure
Work with Probation services in relation to the Ministry of Justice funding programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement with local Probation services to identify suitable housing pathways. Promotion of Mosaic Lettings private sector access scheme. Surgeries offered to provide support and advice aiming to break the cycle of homelessness for those leaving prison.
Take into account service user feedback to identify common barriers to private rental sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular housing surgeries with rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping.
Supporting households through the use of a person centred action plan to deliver sustainable private rented sector housing options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone approaching the Council has a bespoke Personalised Housing Plan in place to ensure that the housing advice received supports their individual circumstances.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordability assessments are made to enable access into the private rental sector. At least one Mosaic Lettings placement per month.
Develop enhanced private rented sector access scheme to overcome challenge of high rents in the district	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an enhanced private sector access scheme to promote take up and accessibility to homeless households. Finalising a discharge of duty policy scheme. Landlords Forum to be held at least twice a year to promote Mosaic Lettings and issues within the private rented sector.

Pledge 5 - Develop proactive response to the level of family evictions

Aim	Measure
Support those at risk of homelessness to remain in their homes where possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor recent changes in the Allocations Policy promoting remaining at home. Provide housing support into the private sector if remaining in the family home cannot be maintained.
Work with partners on guidance within Joint Homeless Assessment Protocol to ensure that 16 and 17 year olds are accommodated safely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor implementation of Protocol, including staff attending appropriate training.
Increase the level of mediation work and home visits to households	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home visits are carried out by Housing Options Advisors when notified of every family eviction. Explore possibility of funding mediation services to be offered to households at risk of homelessness.
Raise awareness of impact of leaving family home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of funding of Herts Young Homeless 'Home Truths' sessions.

Conclusion

This strategy has been developed through consultation with partners attending the Homelessness Forum as well as Service Users who engage with homelessness services in the district.

A Community Impact Assessment will be carried out after the Strategy has been implemented to identify if anyone has been adversely affected by any of the measures.

It is considered that this Strategy demonstrates the Council's objectives of eliminating rough sleeping in the district by delivering services that are tailored for the needs of the individual.

Trends in homelessness approaches will be monitored and inform any changes in the action plan to deliver the aims and objectives of the Council's commitments. Any legislative changes will also be taken into consideration.

The Council will take ownership of monitoring the progress of the aims and measures within the strategy. This strategy will be analysed on a quarterly basis by the Homelessness Forum. An annual review of the Strategy's vision and commitments will be carried out and published on the Council's website. It is intended this strategy will be agile and organic, responding to local issues and identifying best practice both locally and nationally.

We will also carry out quarterly analysis of data and service user feedback to develop service improvements and monitor levels of homelessness. This will be used to enhance our commitment to meeting the key priorities outlined above.

The Council are grateful to all its partners who attend the Homelessness Forum and have helped shape this Strategy and will work with us to deliver the priorities:

- Centre 33
- Change, Grow, Live
- Citizens Advice
- Department of Work and Pensions
- De Paul Charity
- Druglink
- Emerging Futures
- Emmaus
- Hertfordshire County Council
- Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust
- Herts Young Homeless
- Hightown Housing Association
- HM Prison and Probations Service
- Open Door Night Shelter
- SAHWR Specialist Domestic Abuse Services





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www.stalbans.gov.uk/housing