



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Preventing Homelessness Strategy 2018 – 2023



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Introduction

There is a significant interest in housing at the national level. The recent Housing White Paper - 'Fixing our Broken Housing Market' sets out the government's current position by outlining plans for how developers and councils can assist in increasing supply, primarily through increased funding opportunities.

Alongside increasing the supply of new homes, the government is also keen to see improvements in standards within the private rented sector. It is planning to extend mandatory licensing to include more Houses of Multiple Occupation, and, through the Housing and Planning Act 2016, it is providing Councils with new powers to tackle rogue landlords.

There is also a focus on tackling homelessness, with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 setting out new duties on councils to prevent homelessness for everyone, regardless of their priority need.

The Preventing Homelessness Strategy 2018 - 2023 provides details of how we will deliver housing services within the coming years. It will:

- Ensure compliance with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017;
- Ensure we remain focused on continuous improvement in the way we respond to homelessness;
- Support reform across the wider system and improve the support available to local residents who find themselves in difficulty.

It will be delivered effectively, efficiently and in keeping with our core values and commitment to excellence in customer service.

The Homelessness Act 2002 introduced a requirement for local authorities to undertake a review of homelessness, including consultation, and to use the results of the review to inform a homelessness strategy.

It is widely acknowledged that homelessness does not simply mean the absence of a home; it also carries a number of other problems associated directly or indirectly with it. Mental and physical health problems, substance misuse/addiction, unemployment, child poverty, offending, chaotic lifestyles, and anti-social behaviour are often issues associated with a person experiencing homelessness. These additional problems may lead to a cycle of homelessness. The rural nature of the District and high housing costs means households are also affected by affordability issues which impacts on levels of homelessness and our ability to prevent and relieve homelessness in West Oxfordshire.

Resolving homelessness is not only about providing suitable accommodation. Partnership working is essential to address the households' many needs and ensure they can sustain their tenancy.

The factors expected to have the greatest impact on homelessness services in West Oxfordshire over the life of this strategy are welfare reform, supply of affordable accommodation and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

The Strategy's priorities are to:

PRIORITY 1:

Prevent homelessness and meet our obligations under the Housing Reduction Act 2017

We recognise that to prevent and tackle homelessness we need to work in partnership with a range of statutory, non-statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations to secure support for people to manage finances and sustain their existing accommodation, or access an alternative, and to provide accommodation and support for those in housing crisis by working to empower people to secure settled accommodation that can be sustained.

To prevent homelessness and meet the needs of vulnerable people we will:

- Review and update all internal processes and procedures to ensure they reflect an 'engage and support; model and that they are HRA compliant.
- Work with partners including elected members to ensure all support staff receive necessary training which gives them skills and knowledge to work with clients to obtain positive outcomes.
- Identify customer groups who are at high risk of homelessness and develop options to prevent this.
- Develop a 'fit for purpose' Rent Deposit Scheme.
- Families First – Young Person Pathway/Mediation – create an early identification and intervention protocol.
- Work with County on Trailblazer project/ Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.
- Develop transparent Homeless Prevention Fund criteria / process.
- Produce up to date policies around Local Connection Referrals.

PRIORITY 2:

Secure accommodation for homeless households

The number of households approaching the Council as homeless has been increasing as housing costs rise. With a new duty on public services to notify the local authority if they believe someone to be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless this number could potentially increase. We recognise that a key step to ending homelessness is the adequate provision of good quality, affordable housing across all tenures.

To secure accommodation for households who are homeless we will:

- Secure emergency accommodation within West Oxfordshire district to avoid people being placed outside the district and losing local support networks.
- Work with local property owners and promote the private sector as an option for homeless households.
- Work with home owners of long term empty properties to increase the availability of much needed accommodation.
- Develop and improve access to the private sector by exploring incentives for landlords.
- Work closer with Housing Associations to provide temporary accommodation.

PRIORITY 3:

Provide support for homeless households

Every household is unique, for many households, a roof over their head is only one aspect of a solution that will allow them to live independently in a home of their own that they can afford. Additional support and assistance can often be required. Households may require help in learning the necessary skills to manage budgets and debt. Ongoing support may be required for instances such as domestic violence. It will be necessary to coordinate support across agencies to provide the household with the support they need to maintain their home.

To provide the support for households we will:

- Explore accommodation and support options for those entrenched customers who struggle to live independently.
- Work with landlords to understand the implications of universal credit and develop appropriate strategies to encourage private landlords to accept customers in receipt of universal credit.
- Ensure Client Support officers work collaboratively across partnerships / organisations to support those vulnerable and at risk of eviction.
- Give support to households/individuals through the Oxfordshire Trailblazer project with health, criminal justice, social care and other services to identify and help people at risk of homelessness before they reach crisis point.
- Develop in house Debt and Money Advice.
- Develop in house mediation through our Families First work.

The legal framework for homelessness

With a complex legal framework, the Council delivers services to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. This framework sets out duties it must perform and powers it can exercise with discretion.

The Housing Act 1996, Part 7 has been amended over the years, but remains the primary legislation prescribing how local authorities should deliver services, and what duties they must owe to homeless persons.

The Housing Act 1996, Part 7 has most recently been amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The new Act represents fundamental amendments to the existing homelessness legislation.

It introduces new requirements to “prevent” and “relieve” homelessness and in that context, sets out a ranges of new duties.

Strategic background

National

Housing and Planning Act 2016:

- Key changes that could impact on homelessness in West Oxfordshire, primarily by reducing the supply of social housing are:
- Right-to-buy for Housing Association tenants
- Changes to succession rights
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Green Paper – A new deal for social housing

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017:

This Act will have the most significant impact on service delivery. The key points are:

- An extension of the period during which an authority should treat someone as threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days
- A new duty to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness, regardless of priority need or local connection
- A new duty to assess what led to each applicant's homelessness and set out a personalised action plan to resolve this. This plan should set out actions for the customer and council to take, in order to prevent or relieve homelessness
- A new duty on public services to notify a local authority if they believe someone to be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless
- If homeless households refuse to engage, their support will be limited, showing that it has to be a two-way process of engagement
- Young people leaving care will have a local connection to the authority where they were looked after and who therefore owes them leaving care duties.

The Council's Corporate Plan 2016 – 2019 sets out the council's priorities which are:

- To protect the environment whilst supporting local economy
- Working with communities to meet the current and future needs and aspirations of residents
- To provide efficient and value for money services, whilst delivering quality front line services.
- The Homelessness Strategy compliments the Corporate Plan by directly contributing to all its objectives.

The local context

West Oxfordshire is a rural area covering 71,494 hectares. With around 108,600 people living in the district, it is the second most sparsely populated of the 67 local authorities in South East England. A third of the district is in the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 2% lies within the Green Belt surrounding Oxford city.

The district has 83 parishes, ranging from towns to hamlets with its population spread out over a wide area; however it is mainly concentrated in the towns of Witney and Carterton. Other towns are Burford, Charlbury, Chipping Norton and Woodstock.

41% of the total population lives in the district's two largest towns - Witney (over 28,000) and Carterton (around 16,000).

The proportion of older people in West Oxfordshire is above average with 3% aged over 85 compared with 2% nationally.

Population forecasts show an increase of 9% by 2023 of which 16.66% relates to older persons, 6.55% relates to working age, and 9.52% relates to young people.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) the ethnic breakdown for West Oxfordshire is as follows:

Ethnic breakdown	%
White British	89.95
Mixed	1.27
Asian/Asian British	1.85
Black/Black British	0.98
Chinese	0.39

About 71% of the 48,116 homes in the District are owner occupied, 12% of housing is affordable and 17% is privately rented.

Over 62% of the residents are of working age. West Oxfordshire has a strong and diverse economy and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country:

Unemployment rates	%
Unemployed in District	2.1%
Unemployed in South East England	3.2%
Unemployed in England	4.4%

Only 0.9% of working age residents is claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) compared to 1.3% in the South East and 2.2% in Great Britain.

The average weekly salary of West Oxfordshire residents is £631.00 compared to £597.00 in the South East and £553.00 in Great Britain.

The median house sale price in the District is £310,000 compared to £311,000 in the South East and £242,286 in Great Britain.

The Council transferred its housing stock to Cottsway Housing Association (formerly West Oxfordshire Housing) by way of large scale voluntary transfer in March 2001.

The Council has a target of providing 2,700 new homes between April 2018 and April 2023 of which there is a variable affordable housing requirement across the District averaging 40%.

There are just over 2,650 applications registered on the waiting list for affordable housing.

The Council can expect to nominate to around 270 vacancies per year, including transfers between dwellings.

Key local needs and issues

High house prices and land values coupled with relatively modest local income levels and a buoyant private rented sector at high rental levels has led to a severe shortage of affordable accommodation for local people.

Findings from the Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) suggest that the pressure on demand against supply is relatively high in the district, with high price houses, high market rents and poor affordability.

New housing with support solutions are needed for a range of clients including young people, women fleeing domestic violence, those recovering from mental ill health, adults with learning disabilities and older persons. Adults with complex needs such as substance misuse issues combined with mental ill health are particularly difficult to find long term lasting

solutions for and often need a comprehensive support package from several different providers.

There is a significant shortfall in existing provision for single people and insufficient move-on accommodation for those who are homeless and in need of support.

Rural isolation, loss of local facilities and lack of public transport are issues for persons living outside the main population centres. A lack of affordable accommodation in the rural area has led to a drift into the larger towns away from any local support networks from family and friends.

A small and dispersed local population of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups makes it difficult to identify housing issues specific to different ethnic groups.

Homelessness in West Oxfordshire

To give a picture of homelessness in West Oxfordshire we have put together the following information based on statistical returns provided to Central Government for the period April 2013 to March 2018.

Homelessness applications

This table shows the levels of recorded homelessness within the District i.e. those people who actually become homeless.

Homeless application processed	1 Apr 13 - 31 Mar 14	1 Apr 14 - 31 Mar 15	1 Apr 15 - 31 Mar 16	1 Apr 16 - 31 Mar 17	1 Apr 17 - 31 Mar 18
Accepted as homeless. Duty to secure permanent accommodation	27	52	45	43	88
Intentionally homeless	13	11	8	9	7
Non priority	0	0	9	7	82
Not homeless	1	1	12	14	37
Ineligible households	0	0	0	0	1

Types of household becoming homeless

This table shows the needs of those homeless applicants who have been accepted as homeless. The majority of households accepted as homeless have dependent children.

Household type	1 Apr 13 - 31 Mar 14	1 Apr 14 - 31 Mar 15	1 Apr 15 - 31 Mar 16	1 Apr 16 - 31 Mar 17	1 Apr 17 - 31 Mar 18
Dependent children	20	45	29	46	47
Pregnant	1	4	9	9	4
Mental health	0	0	2	3	6
Physical disability	1	3	4	0	7
Elderly	0	3	1	0	5
Other reasons	0	1	0	0	4
Applicant aged 16/17 yrs	5	1	0	0	0

Main reasons for homelessness

The table below shows the main reasons for why 'Accepted' people have become homeless:

Reason for homelessness	1 Apr 13 - 31 Mar 14	1 Apr 14 - 31 Mar 15	1 Apr 15 - 31 Mar 16	1 Apr 16 - 31 Mar 17	1 Apr 17 - 31 Mar 18
Loss of accommodations with parents	9	17	19	16	13
Loss of accommodation with relatives/friends	3	4	2	4	10
Violent relationship breakdown	1	2	0	6	9
Non-violent relationship breakdown	1	1	6	3	7
Assured short hold tenancy ended or other reason for loss of rented or tied	9	23	18	16	34
Mortgage arrears	0	0	0	0	0
Rents arrears on private or social rented	2	1	1	0	1
Other reasons	2	3	0	0	7

Preventative action

Financial difficulty

Landlords issuing a section 21 notice seeking possession do not have to declare a reason for as to why the notice was issued therefore figures around homeless presentation due to rent arrears are likely to be under reported. However with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act and the government's new H-CLIC reporting system which requires each housing case to be broken down into much more detail, the true figures are likely to increase in coming years.

With the new legislation also increasing the duties to provide solutions to non-priority and intentionally homeless households, there is likely to be an increased demand on Rent Deposit schemes and Discretionary Housing budgets to assist households with current and former rent arrears.

An Eviction Protocol has been designed to give early warning of a possible eviction to the Council in order that prevention action can be taken to avoid eviction. This protocol has been revised over recent years to strengthen the simultaneous referral to both Housing and Housing Benefits so that a full review of a person's entitlement to Housing Benefit and/or Universal Credit is carried out.

Housing Associations in the District actively engage with us at both strategic and operational levels and we have a shared objective to prevent homelessness and meet the needs of vulnerable people and client groups that do not fit within established arrangements including move on from supported housing projects.

There is a collaborative approach to the prevention of tenancy breakdown either by use of effective utilisation of housing related support or by use of the Eviction Protocol.

In addition, the implementation of Universal Credit is also likely to have an adverse impact on those households who are less able to manage their financial affairs. Safeguards have been put in place to help those who are most likely to struggle to make online claims and manage their finances, but there are risks that in spite of these safeguards some households will fall into rent arrears and become homeless.

Married quarters

There are around 880 married quarters at RAF Brize Norton. Occupation of married quarters in the locality now gives a local connection for personnel who are required to vacate married quarters when their service tenancy ends. Members of the armed forces have a local connection to the district of their choice.

A working protocol has been developed with the Defence Estates who manage the married quarters in order to provide the local housing authority with ample notice of impending eviction so that the housing application can be prioritised for rehousing prior to homelessness arising. Special rules are required for those in the armed forces to comply with the Localism Act recognising the services they have offered the country. It is dependent on their priority and needs as to what Band they are assigned.

Gypsy and travellers

Under the Housing Act 2004 the local authority must assess and plan for the housing needs of all communities residing in their area. There is a small gypsy and traveller community within West Oxfordshire. The County Council have a duty to all gypsy and travellers within the District to address their welfare, health and education needs. Homeless applications from gypsy and travellers are very few in number but where an application is made, regard is had to whether or not the household is seeking a 'bricks and mortar' solution or whether they have a preference to continue to be mobile.

Ex-offenders

Homelessness legislation has extended in recent years the priority needs categories to include those who are vulnerable as a result of having been in custody or on remand. The District Council housing officers work with the prison service at HMP Bullingdon to provide advice and information at an early stage to persons who are likely to be without a home upon release from prison. Very few homeless applications are made by ex-offenders; however, this may change after October 2018 when there is a 'duty to refer' for all public bodies, including the Prison and Probationary Services.

Use of temporary accommodation

Local authorities have a duty to secure accommodation for statutorily homeless households. Households who are eligible and unintentionally homeless may be placed in temporary accommodation while their application is in progress, or after being accepted as homeless but while waiting for secure accommodation to become available.

The table below shows the number of households in temporary accommodation.

Period	Number of households	Number per 1,000 households in West Oxfordshire	Number per 1,000 households in South East England	Number per 1,000 households in England
2013 - 2014	14	0.3	1.4	2.6
2014 – 2015	12	0.3	1.6	2.8
2015 - 2016	12	0.3	1.9	3.1
2016 - 2017	5	0.1	2.2	3.3
2017 - 2018	10	0.2	2.2	3.4

It should be noted that not all homelessness is recorded in official statistics. Households may not approach the local authority, or may not meet the statutory criteria for help. From 1 April 2018 however, the Homelessness Reduction Act has put a duty on all local authorities to prevent or relieve homelessness for anyone eligible to public funds.

Types of temporary accommodation

Emergency accommodation

This is nightly charged self-contained or bed and breakfast accommodation. It has become increasingly difficult to secure such accommodation within West Oxfordshire resulting in emergency accommodation being sourced from outside the district. However, it should be noted that in some instances it is not applicable to source accommodation locally due to a person's circumstances.

Families are generally placed in self-contained accommodation because of the requirement that bed and breakfast should only be used in an emergency and for a maximum of six weeks.

There are no hostels in the District and so single persons in need of such accommodation must be referred to either Oxford's O'Hanlon House if they are over the age of 25 years. For those young persons under the age of 25 years are referred to St Mungo's which cater for young people.

We are trying to reduce the number of homeless households placed outside of the district and are securing a property in the north of the district to service these needs. This property, in Chipping Norton should be available to the local authority in October 2018.

Any privately owned accommodation that is used on an emergency basis must comply with the Suitability of Accommodation Order 2012 and the Council's standards.

Temporary accommodation

If a person and/or household qualify for the main housing duty, the council must provide suitable temporary housing whilst a longer-term solution is obtained.

Temporary accommodation within the district is limited and there have been occasions where households have been placed outside of West Oxfordshire. In some instances the individual needs and/or requirements of a person or household means that it would not be suitable or safe to place them within the district, and in these circumstances accommodation is found in another area.

Occasionally the local authority have been able to offer accommodation in the existing housing association stock on a temporary basis pending a move to an area that the applicant would prefer or where the property may not meet other requirements that they have.

The property in which the local authority has secured within Chipping Norton has a self-contained apartment in situ which will assist the limitations in available temporary accommodation in the district.

Where a single person is threatened with homelessness and they have a need for support, referrals are made to any suitable vacancies in supported accommodation at the earliest possible opportunity.

Where an applicant is able to make their own alternative arrangements for temporary accommodation on a short term basis, they are considered to be 'homeless at home' and are prioritised for alternative accommodation in either privately rented or housing association properties.

Temporary accommodation reduction plan

We will regularly monitor demand for temporary accommodation. Whilst the current use remains relatively low, we cannot be complacent. The new duties arising from the Homelessness Reduction Act may lead to more households being accommodated in temporary accommodation for longer.

The Appendix sets out our priorities and how we hope to reduce the use of temporary accommodation.

Homelessness as a result of domestic abuse

The numbers of persons accepted as homelessness because of domestic abuse remains very low; however, many people losing their home as a result of domestic abuse either go into a refuge or even more frequently will go to family or friends on a temporary basis and seek re-housing from that address to give themselves time to secure accommodation in their area of choice.

Local staff training programmes is in place to improve the response from front-line Housing officers, to help identify, support and refer people affected to the most appropriate services.

There is a network of trained domestic violence champions, supported and resourced practitioners across a range of agencies who are committed to helping victims of domestic abuse. One is Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Services (ODAS) who offer emotional and practical support to victims suffering or fleeing domestic abuse.

Within West Oxfordshire the approach is to support victims to remain in their own home wherever possible. However, where victims have to move out, they are assisted into suitable alternative accommodation as quickly as possible.

Young people

Nationally the number of young people (aged 16 - 24 years) who are accepted as homeless is approximately 20% of all homelessness acceptances. In West Oxfordshire, the percentage is higher at 38%, suggesting that we need to place greater emphasis on finding a wider choice of prevention solutions for this age group.

Prevention action

We have officers who specialise in cases with support needs, including young people. The local authority is part of the County partnership for the Young Persons Pathway. Led by the County Council's Children and Young Families Team the partnership is Oxfordshire's response to tackling homelessness among young people and vulnerable families. Its aims are to work across the County in a co-ordinated manner to prevent homelessness by:

- Identifying young people at risk;
- Ensuring good assessments, advice and planning;
- Providing access to high quality housing;
- Enabling successful transition from childhood to adulthood

In West Oxfordshire the Young People's Supported Housing Pathway is for vulnerable and homeless 16 - 22 year olds in Oxfordshire who need supported accommodation to gain and maintain independence skills, to be facilitated into education, employment or training, and to gain the knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their accommodation options outside of the Pathway.

Partnership working within the Pathway ensures that young people are able to access supported accommodation, and additional support or services where required in a timely, coordinated and safe manner. The pathway provides a range of supported housing services and, where a young person is assessed as homeless and unable to return home, they are supported within their wider family and friends' network or helped to access private rented housing. The local authority works in partnership within a Joint Housing Protocol that is in place across Oxfordshire for assessing and assisting homeless 16-17 year olds. As a housing authority, we do not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. Where needed, we will also refer young parents to the Oxfordshire Young Parents scheme. The current services commissioned within the Young Persons pathway are due to end in March

2020, therefore Oxfordshire County Council have initiated a project to begin to review these services prior to the tendering process. This project is currently in its draft stage and will evolve throughout the life of this strategy

In terms of young people leaving care, the local authority works closely with statutory partners to ensure that accommodation and support is provided. In the last two years, the number of young people (aged 18-20) who were formerly in care and who have applied to the local authority for housing assistance has been low. However, partner agencies have highlighted the need to provide more suitable and affordable accommodation for care leavers (especially those with more complex and continuing support needs). The provision of accommodation for Care Leavers could become a pressure point to local housing authorities due to the changes introduced by the Homeless Reduction Act 2017, in respect of local connection. We will work with statutory and non-statutory agencies plus other key stakeholders to establish what type and model of accommodation (and related support) would best assist young people leaving care in transitioning to independence.

The local authorities Housing Options Team currently employ a specialist 'Families First' officer working with young people to support them with their housing needs. This includes undertaking Young People's Housing Assessments and making referrals to young people's projects. The officer works with care leavers and social services in order to avoid young people becoming street homeless.

Availability of accommodation with support

Due to restrictions on entitlement to Housing Benefit and/or Universal Credit there are difficulties in accessing private rented accommodation. We can help young people with a deposit through the Deposit Guarantee Scheme as well as assistance with Rent in Advance. There are only a small number of supported accommodation units in the District and there is no direct access supported accommodation. The majority of the accommodation based support is in shared accommodation which presents additional challenges.

Housing related support

There are a number of Supported housing projects in West Oxfordshire that a person can be referred to. Priority for referrals is given to persons that are in need of the support that the particular project offers and who are either homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Accommodation based support	
Godstow Cottage, Witney (Stonham Housing Association)	6 bed-spaces for families/parents. All self-contained.
St Mungo's	27 bed-spaces for 16–25 year olds across Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton.
Bramlings, Witney (Mind)	6 bed-spaces for single persons with low to medium support (mental health); aged 16–65. Shared accommodation.
Hedgerows, Witney (Mind)	3 x 1 bedroom houses; 2 bed spaces in shared accommodation for single people with mental health problems aged 16–65.

Persons housed in supported housing projects usually stay for at least 6 months, after which they become eligible to be nominated to the Council for “Move-on” providing they have complied with the rules of the project and are considered able to live independently. A ‘gold’ priority need band is given to enable them to bid on suitable housing association vacancies or they are assisted to access suitable private rented accommodation.

Floating support

Floating support is a flexible way of providing practical assistance and support to people with housing and other practical needs. Support workers can also provide contact with more specialist organisations that can help with situations that are more difficult to tackle.

Floating support helps people in their own accommodation and may help in preventing homelessness. Support is also available to those people moving to their own accommodation from supported accommodation.

Support will range from two to ten hours per week depending on the individual’s needs. The objective of the support is to prepare the person to live independently and so support tends to be time limited. Where an individual is in a crisis situation, support can be increased.

Connections are the main provider of floating support in West Oxfordshire.

Rough sleepers

Background and context

People sleeping rough are more likely to die younger (Homelessness Kills, Crisis 2012), suffer ill-health and be more vulnerable to violence than those in the wider population. Therefore it is important that no one has to sleep rough on our streets.

Rough sleeping and the impact of the wider street population have an effect on everybody living in or visiting West Oxfordshire. The impact of increased numbers of people sleeping rough is experienced by businesses, residents and tourists through increased visibility of people begging, street drinking and incidences of anti-social behaviour.

According to Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), a person sleeping rough is defined as:

“People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). People in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations or “bashes”).

West Oxfordshire District Council, as well as all other local authorities in the country, uses this definition when submitting a single figure to central government of the number of rough sleepers following a street count. This definition is used in order to make comparisons with other national data.

Local context

West Oxfordshire's official (estimated) street count identified that in 2017 there were 7 rough sleepers, an increase from 2 in 2013. It is recognised that the 'actual' number of people sleeping rough could be higher than figures indicate due to the potential for 'hidden' rough sleepers i.e. those who are rough sleeping but who are not bedded down or are transient at the time of the count.

Number of rough sleepers			
	West Oxon	South East	England
2013	2	532	2,414
2014	3	609	2,744
2015	3	827	3,569
2016	0	956	4,134
2017	7	1,119	4,751

Notification of individuals potentially identified as being a rough sleeper is normally referred to the local authority by local residents or by Street Link. Details are then forwarded to 'Connections' who will endeavour to visit them where they are reported to be in order to:

- Verify they are a rough sleepers; and
- Discuss their circumstances and housing options

If a rough sleeper is considered to be vulnerable in accordance with the legislation, then temporary accommodation would be arranged and their needs assessed in line with the Housing Reduction Act and the new duties to relieve homelessness for all eligible people, regardless of priority need and intentionality.

We have a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) in place with local homelessness agencies to ensure that extra bed spaces are provided to rough sleepers during severe and cold weather. The protocol has been developed in line with guidance from Homeless Link.

SWEP usually opens on the first night of a period when the night temperature is forecast by the Met Office to be zero or below for three consecutive nights.

The provision is coordinated by O'Hanlon House in Oxford city.

The outcome of the Government's consultation on its proposals for funding housing costs for sheltered and Extra Care accommodation, and housing costs for short-term supported accommodation, is awaited. The consultation paper, which was launched in October 2017, suggests the introduction of a Sheltered Rent from 2020 and ring-fenced grant allocations to Local Authorities for short-term supported accommodation. The local authority will need to consider and respond to any related Government Policy or funding changes as they are introduced.

Housing advice and information

Locally the main sources of free housing advice and information are the local authority and Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire (CAWO) which has been commissioned by the Council through a tendering exercise. CAWO provides free legal advice on a wide range of other related subject areas. It works in partnership with other organisations to provide a wide range of services that help a broad range of client groups to access advice and information that is tailored to their particular needs.

They are actively involved in working with housing associations and support providers to prevent homelessness.

Liaison with the private sector

The private sector is the least regulated part of the of the rental market, and yet it has become increasingly the tenure of choice for many, particularly for those who are unable to afford to buy their home. At the time of the 2011 census over 6,700 of homes within the district were let as private rents, representing approximately 17% of the market. With private rents increasing significantly in recent years we can be confident that the sector has continued to grow within West Oxfordshire since then.

Good landlord liaison is a critical element of a strong prevention strategy in terms of being able to work with landlords to prevent possession proceeding being taken or to delay eviction until alternative accommodation can be secured in terms of enabling access to the sector for potentially homeless households. The focus of working with landlords is on negotiation and conflict resolution rather than assertion of legal rights to continued occupation. Tenants in arrears are assisted to pay the rent and further support is offered by the local authority Client Support Officers who offer specialist services in partnership with WOCA.

Additionally, the local authority has recruited property professionals whose objective is to maximise opportunities in terms of properties available for private rental and work closer with property owners with the aim of making available additional properties for rent. The district has approximately 325 long term empty homes currently, (i.e. homes that have been empty for 6 months or more), and are keen to reduce this number.

Future trends and opportunities

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced wide-ranging changes to the benefits system. These include:

- A benefit cap limiting the amount of benefit that working age people can receive.
- The Social Sector Size criteria which mean that households who are deemed to be under-occupying receive reduced Housing Benefit.
- A limit on the amount under 35s (previously under 25s) could receive towards their rent if renting privately, limited to a 'single room' rate i.e. the rate of a room in a shared house.
- Community care grants and crisis loans abolished and replaced by locally administered schemes.
- A freeze on welfare benefits increases to 2020, including Local Housing Allowance.
- The phasing-in of Universal Credit. This benefit will combine and replace a number of existing benefits for households both in work and who are out of work but on low incomes.

The continued freeze on Local Housing Allowance will create even more pressures on low-income households trying to access and remain in the private rented sector should private rents continue to rise. It is therefore anticipated that the loss of private rented accommodation could remain the main cause of homelessness in the district. Equally, it will become even more challenging for our housing service to find homes in the private rented sector for households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

The implementation of Universal Credit began in the district in November 2017 and will continue over the next few years as more households are migrated onto this benefit. Households will be responsible for making online claims, managing

their money and paying their rent (rather than payments going directly from the local authority to their landlord) and for some this will be a new way of managing their financial affairs. For those who do not have access to the internet and/or have no suitable devices at home to make online claims for benefit, the challenges increase further. It stands to reason that the most vulnerable are the ones most at risk of falling into arrears and becoming homeless, in spite of the safeguards that have been put in place.

The Homeless Reduction Act 2017 which went live from April 2018 significantly increased the statutory duties on councils to prevent and relieve homelessness.

The Act places a new duty on councils to help prevent homelessness on all families and single people, regardless of priority need, who are eligible for assistance and threatened with homelessness.

There is an emphasis on intervention and acting quickly to provide advice and to take action to prevent homelessness, rather than only intervening at crisis point.

The Act also comes with 'new burdens funding' which West Oxfordshire District Council is using, in combination with other time-limited funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). We will be using this funding, and the opportunities arising from the Act, to support the priorities we have identified from the strategy. These are detailed in the Appendix.

Appendix I: Aims and objectives

PRIORITY 1:

Prevent homelessness and meet our obligations under the Housing reduction Act 2017

Key action requirement	Timescale	Responsible officer
Review and update all internal processes and procedures to ensure they reflect an 'engage and support' model and that they are HRA compliant.	March 2019	Housing advice
Work with partners, including elected members to ensure all support staff receive necessary training which gives them skills and knowledge to work with clients to obtain positive outcomes.	March 2019	Housing advice
Identify customer groups who are at high risk of homelessness and develop options to prevent this.	June 2019	Housing advice
Develop a 'fit for purpose' Rent Deposit Scheme in partnership with Housing Property Manager / Private Letting Officer.	March 2019	Private Letting Officer / Client Support
Families First – Young Person Pathway / Mediation – create an early identification and intervention protocol.	March 2019	Families First Officer
Work with county on Trailblazer project / Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.	Ongoing	Housing Manager
Develop transparent homeless prevention fund criteria / process.	March 2019	Service Manager(s)
Produce up to date policies around Local Connection Referrals.	March 2019	Housing Manager

PRIORITY 2:

Secure accommodation for homeless households

Key action requirement	Timescale	Responsible officer
Young Peoples Services recommissioning project / Joint Housing Steering Group.	Ongoing	Housing Manager
Secure Horsefair for emergency accommodation.	December 2018	Service Manager(s) / Private Letting Officer
Develop private sector in partnership with Housing Manager / Private Letting Officer.	March 2020	Housing Manager / Private Letting Officer
Campaign to landlords/private property owners to raise awareness of private rented sector should they wish to let their property privately as an alternative to housing option for people who are unable to secure home ownership or a social rented home.	June 2019	Private Letting Officers / Internal Communication Team

Key action requirement	Timescale	Responsible officer
Reduce number of long term empty properties within the district and therefore increase the availability of much needed accommodation.	June 2019	Private Lettings Officer / Revenues Manager / Legal Team
Improve access to private sector properties by incentivising landlords: explore such things as 'bond', 'assistant management of tenants' for landlords.	March 2020	Private Lettings Officer / Housing Manager / Legal Team
Source additional emergency accommodation in district.	December 2018	Private Lettings Officer / Housing Manager
Work with housing associations to provide temporary accommodation in district.	June 2019	Private Letting Officer / Housing Manager

PRIORITY 3:**Provide support for homeless households**

Key action requirement	Timescale	Responsible officer
Explore accommodation options and support for those entrenched customers who struggle to live independently.	June 2019	Housing Manager / Client Support
Work with landlords to understand the implications of universal credit and develop appropriate strategies to encourage private landlords to accept customers in receipt of universal credit.	June 2019	Private Lettings Officer/Client Support
Families First – develop a robust referral and case tracking process to ensure support provided and homelessness prevented.	April 2019	Families First Officer / Housing Manager
Client support – ensure collaborative working across partnerships / organisations to support those vulnerable and at risk of eviction.	March 2019	Client Support Lead
Development of the Trailblazer project / Embedded worker project.	Ongoing	Housing Manager
Customer services development to provide first point of contact advice.	Ongoing	Housing / Customer Service
Full evaluation and development of ‘self-help’ documentation / leaflets / signposting.	June 2019	Client Support Lead
Ensure that the domestic abuse contract is properly monitored, providing the necessary support and that it remains VFM.	March 2019	Housing Manager
Develop in house debt and money advice.	March 2020	Client Support Lead Families First Officer / Housing Manager
Develop in house mediation / Families First work.	March 2019	Housing Manager
Duty to refer project – consistent approach.	October 2018	Housing Manager
Upgrade IT in local authority reception areas.	June 2020	ICT
Develop homelessness pocket guide.	June 2020	Housing Manager / Client Support

Most of the above ‘key actions’ have been initiated and will continue to evolve over the period of the strategy