

Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024–28

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Portfolio holder foreword



Councillor Dan Ledger
Sustainable Homes and Communities

I am really pleased to be introducing you to East Devon District Council's new Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024–28. The strategy outlines how we will be preventing and tackling homelessness including rough sleeping through our three key strategic priorities that have been updated since the last strategy to reflect the review carried out.

The three key strategic priorities for East Devon District Council are:

- Maximising prevention activities and supporting people to sustain existing tenancies
- Increasing the range of accommodation solutions available
- Ending rough sleeping

This strategy offers exciting opportunities for collaborative working across the statutory and voluntary sectors, to maximise the delivery of homelessness prevention and support services across the district.

We will also continue to prioritise the prevention of homelessness in these challenging times and provide a refuge for households fleeing domestic abuse, whilst taking a sensitive approach to making some homes available for Ukrainian and wider refugees fleeing war and persecution.

Additionally, the team are actively engaged in ending rough sleeping and ensuring a suitable pathway approach is available for those individuals who have been rough sleeping or at risk of rough sleeping on our streets.

Photo: Kyle Baker Photography

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Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 places a statutory obligation on local authorities to undertake a review of homelessness in their area and to develop and publish a strategy to prevent homelessness based on the findings of the review.

Homelessness can affect individuals and families and there is no typical 'homeless person'. The legal definition states that somebody is homeless if there is no accommodation that they are entitled to occupy or if they have accommodation, but it is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy this accommodation. A person is also considered to be 'threatened with homelessness' if it is likely that they will become homeless within 56 days.

There is much focus on rough sleepers throughout this strategy although within East Devon rough sleepers form a relatively small proportion of the homelessness cases that we assist with. In East Devon the main causes of homelessness over the last five years have been the loss of accommodation in the private sector followed by family evictions.

As a local authority we acknowledge the need to work in partnership to ensure we reach those in need of support at the earliest possible stage. It is widely recognised that housing is not always the single solution and that services need to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for households.

We will endeavour to not only work in partnership with agencies, but also expand on co-production opportunities, so that those with lived experience are given a voice and a place at the table to enable us to overcome local and national issues. There is no single reason why someone can end up without a home and we are committed to a person-centred approach with the right support to ensure positive outcomes.

Our starting point is prevention and early intervention, working to deliver the Council Plan commitment to providing better homes and communities for all. A key priority within our Housing Strategy is to provide a housing options service for all who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

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National and local challenges

The landscape we are working in has changed significantly in the last five years, with an increase in approaches for homelessness assistance. Our strategy will seek ways to address them to enable us to meet our priorities.



Help for people with support needs

There has been an increase in people presenting as homeless (or at risk of homelessness) who have complex needs that require additional support, from 13% in 2021/22 to 17% in 2023/24.

There is only one supported accommodation project based in East Devon. At any one time, this project provides a suitable accommodation option for 23 vulnerable residents with support needs and works to enable people to move on to more settled accommodation. This project does not cover all support needs, so we rely on access to other services in neighbouring districts as well.

Due to Devon County Council's funding position, all this provision is at risk. The strategy action plan will need to consider how the potential loss of supported accommodation provision would impact on our residents, and what alternative options may be available.



Cost of living crisis

The lack of affordable housing has been made worse by the cost-of-living crisis. This was triggered in part by the demand for fuel related to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Food prices have increased substantially. According to the Office of National Statistics, the overall price of food and non-alcoholic beverages rose by around 25% between January 2022 and January 2024.

In the previous ten years, overall prices rose by just 9%. This has left many households having to make difficult choices about how they prioritise food, housing and heating costs. This has led to rent arrears, evictions and then difficulties in finding alternative accommodation. As a social landlord, our strategy action plan needs to encompass our landlord responsibilities in addition to our statutory duties to prevent and relieve homelessness.



Housing affordability and availability

There is huge demand for all types of housing, but particularly in the private rented sector. Changes to rules and regulations for landlords proposed by the Rent Reform Bill, which include banning 'no fault' evictions and increased energy efficiency requirements, have prompted a number of landlords to leave the market.

As demand for private sector housing outweighs the supply, rental costs have continued to rise. Between 2017/18 and 2021/22 the median monthly private rental figures have increased by at least 8%, with one and two bed properties being over 10% more expensive. This has made the sector unaffordable for many of our residents. Furthermore, the disparity between social tenures impacts on affordability, with affordable rents at around 80% of market rents as opposed to the traditional social rent which sits around 60% of market rents.

The strategy action plan will need to consider what action can be taken to increase the availability of truly affordable housing, both through new developments and existing housing options.



Housing for refugees

East Devon District Council is committed to supporting the Home Office in the resettlement of refugees. This includes those from Ukraine and Afghanistan arriving through specific national schemes, but also refugees from other countries who may have arrived through alternative routes.

We have experienced an increase in homelessness applications from refugees owing to the closure of and eviction from bridging and asylum hotels. Whilst we continue to work with the government, our strategy action plan will need to consider this additional pressure on our housing supply and how best we can support vulnerable refugees.



Population and area overview

In 2021 the mid-year population estimates put East Devon's population at 152,120. This is a rise of 19,663 (6%) from the last census figure in 2011. East Devon has an older age profile with the median age of its residents being 50.9 years (the national equivalent is 40.7 years).

Deprivation

Overall, the district is relatively well-off and is in the 40% least deprived districts nationally; it is also one of the lowest crime rate areas in Britain. However, there are pockets within the district where deprivation is high.

Salaries in East Devon

The average salary in East Devon in 2023 was £32,799 compared with £35,536.80 for England as a whole.²

73%
owner-occupied homes

16%
private rented
20% national
average

10%
social rented
17% national
average

Housing in East Devon

There is a shortage of rented accommodation in our district. The 2021 census figures show there were 66,786 dwellings listed in East Devon. 73% of these homes are owner-occupied, 10% are defined as social rented housing (17% national average), and 16% privately rented (20% nationally).

As at January 2024, East Devon District Council currently owns 4,172 properties. 2,825 of these are classified as general needs properties, and 1,347 are sheltered properties where residents have access to alarm and support services through Home Safeguard. Social housing is also provided by 11 housing associations with roughly 2,650 homes in East Devon.

East Devon District Council is signed up to Devon Home Choice, alongside several other councils and housing associations, to manage the allocation of social housing for local residents.

¹ Map data © Crown Copyright and database rights 2024 Ordnance Survey 100023746

² Office of National Statistics: annual survey of hours and earnings 2023

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How this strategy was formed

This strategy has been produced in consultation with both internal and external partners. It sets out our broad strategic aims for preventing homelessness and rough sleeping. A live and evolving action plan will sit alongside this, providing more detail on how we intend to meet our objectives. This plan will be published on our website.

We have developed the strategy through consideration of national and local policy, analysing our local need, reviewing our previous priorities, recognising our achievements and bench marking our statistical data against other local authorities. We have also aligned the new strategy with wider East Devon District Council strategies and policies to ensure that our approach to tackling homelessness links to broader council objectives.

In preparation for the development of this strategy we held six focus groups. We talked with councillors, council staff, and our external partners and charities who work with people in homeless situations. We also spoke with former service users to gain a clear perspective of experiencing homelessness.

These focus groups discussed what currently works well, and where we could do better. They also addressed barriers to preventing homelessness and rough sleeping and how we could adapt our approach to overcome them.

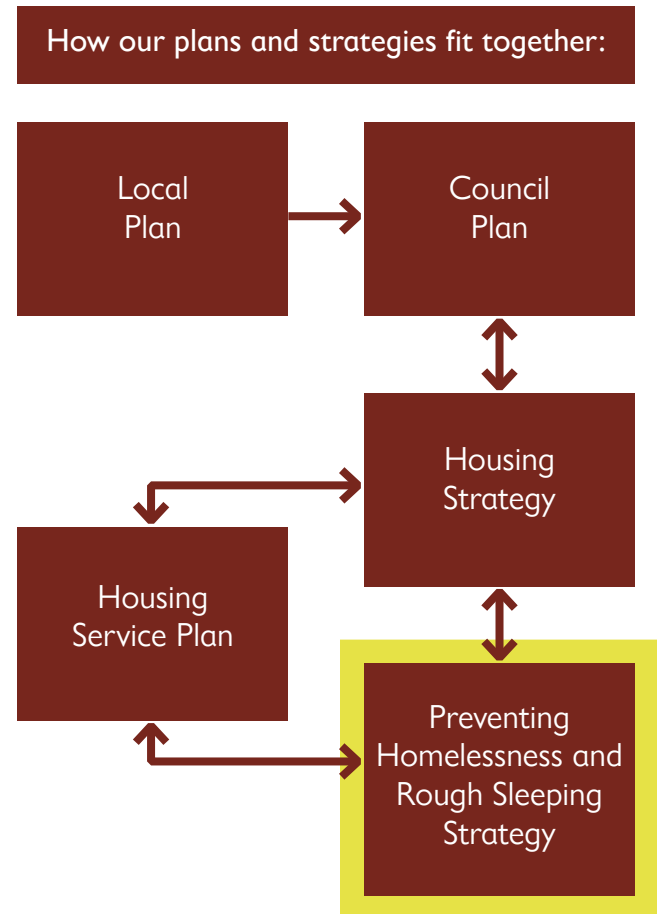
We used the findings of these discussions to produce a draft strategy document which we published as part of our six week public consultation. Opinions were sought on the strategic priorities, challenges and overall content of the strategy. We were grateful for the constructive responses we received – the majority reinforced the approach we planned to adopt. Suggestions for specific actions we could take to meet our priorities were also provided. These will be considered as we develop our action plan to support the delivery of this strategy.

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Strategic context

This strategy will set out how the council and its partners will work to reduce homelessness, end rough sleeping, and contribute towards the over-riding vision of the Housing Strategy to 'provide a decent home for all residents of East Devon'. It has been shaped to consider and address the changes to the housing environment and we will set out what our key priorities will be in tackling homelessness over the next five years.

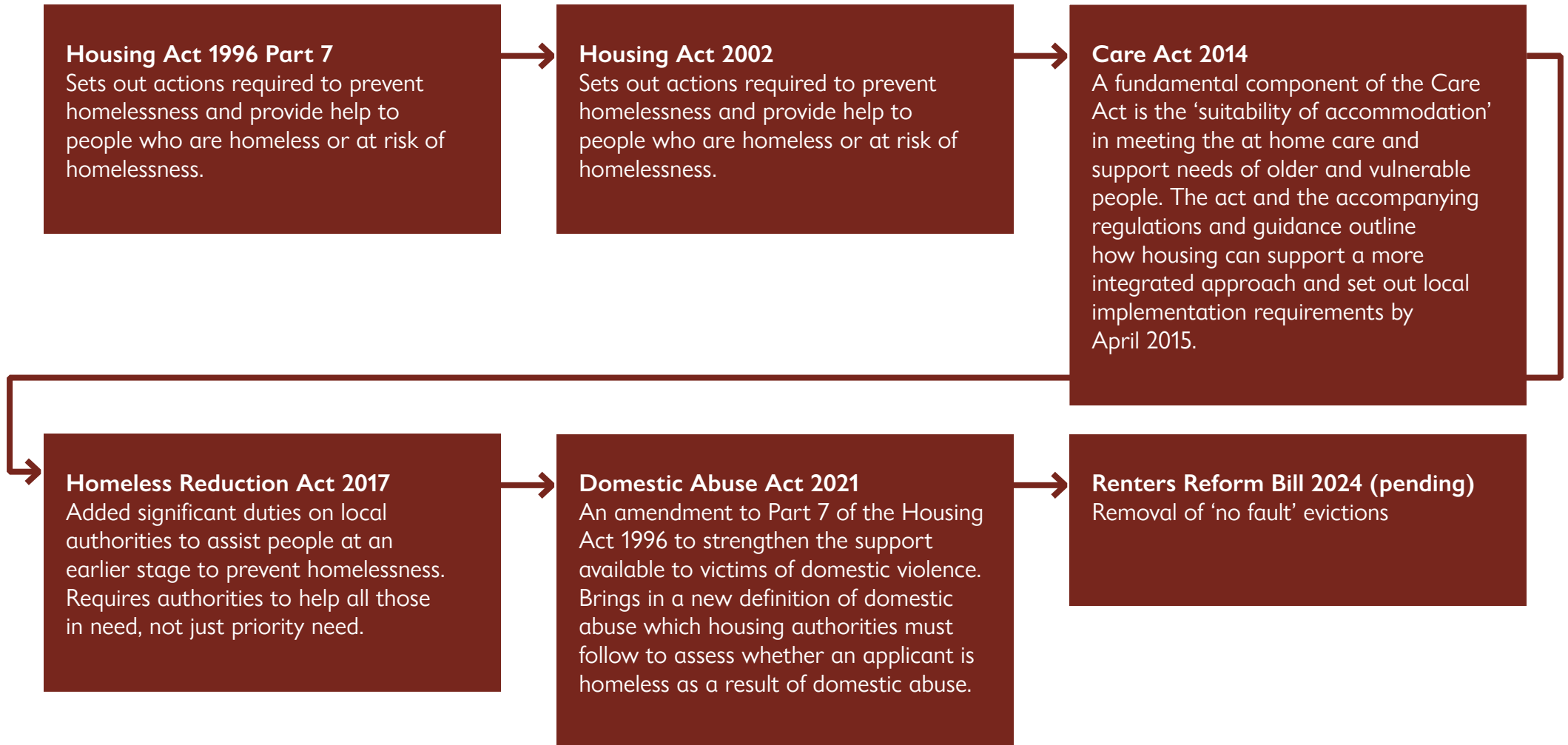
Within East Devon, there are a number of policies and strategies that link either directly or indirectly with the Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. It is important to map how the strategy feeds into overarching council strategies to ensure that the needs of people who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless are included and addressed.



National and local challenges

Key legislation

Our strategy is also bound by legislation that has developed over the last 30 years:



Our priorities



Maximising prevention activity and supporting people to sustain tenancies

Preventing people from becoming homeless has always been a key priority for us and we have a successful record of accomplishment in this area. We work closely with our Financial Resilience team to help us give financial support to residents, as well as offering guidance through our Housing teams and signposting to other debt support agencies.

We have recruited Temporary Accommodation Officers who work with households to prepare them for their move into more stable accommodation options, and our Private Sector Liaison Officers not only help source housing in the private sector but also support both tenant and landlord to maintain tenancies. To build on this excellent work, we have increased our efforts to support households to sustain tenancies, in response to the increased demand for assistance and the pressure this places on existing services.

We will continue to jointly fund a Homelessness Prevention Worker who works specifically with young people at risk of homelessness, to either mediate with family or to help them into supported housing projects for young people. Internally, we will strengthen our protocols with the Housing Rental and Estate Management Teams to better support households in council homes to sustain their tenancies. In addition, we will bolster the initial support for council tenants when they begin their tenancies with us to set them up to succeed.



Increasing the range of accommodation solutions available

There is a lack of affordable housing in East Devon and so alternative types of accommodation, for both temporary and permanent use, need to be explored. Supported housing options also require further consideration to ensure a sustainable option for those who are unable to live independently, due to a range of support needs. Over the last five years we have put a full time Empty Homes officer in place to assist in bringing empty homes back into use.

A refreshed Empty Homes Strategy will prioritise problematic empty homes and those homes in areas and of types in high housing demand across East Devon. We have a good understanding of what housing is needed in our district and have, where possible, sought to acquire suitable properties.

We have purchased two Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) to create temporary housing solutions for single households. We have introduced a Housing

First project which has provided a safe home for six rough sleepers, providing a platform from where intensive support can be provided by members of the team.

We have also successfully bid for government funding through the Local Authority Housing Fund which has provided six homes for a mix of general needs and refugee temporary accommodation. We will continue to explore opportunities to increase our permanent and temporary housing stock and seek funding to support this.

Over the next five years we will increase the number of council-owned properties set aside to be used as temporary accommodation as a cost-effective alternative to bed and breakfast and holiday accommodation. We will continue to bid for government funding to increase the amount of temporary accommodation in our district and meet our commitment to the national focus on refugee resettlement.



Ending rough sleeping

We have always sought to minimise rough sleeping in the district and have achieved success in this area. However, we are proposing to elevate our ambition to end rough sleeping in East Devon.

We have four Rough Sleeper Navigators in place who provide outreach and support to existing rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping. Their work is supported by a Private Sector Liaison Officer who focuses on supporting single person households to obtain and maintain settled accommodation.

We will continue to bid for funding to continue and expand this resource to focus more on areas, including prison and hospital discharges, to prevent rough sleeping.

We have also sought to improve public awareness of what to do if they suspect that someone is sleeping rough and will work closely with partner agencies and other organisations who are actively working to support rough sleepers in the community.

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Action plan monitoring and review

This strategy has been developed in partnership, including with our service users, and sets out a five-year plan. We believe that each of the strategic themes will stand the test of time during the life of the strategy.

However, new priorities may emerge over the next five years. Whilst we can anticipate that key themes will remain relevant, the way we deliver them may need to change. The Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will remain under review to ensure it is up to date and a action plan will support us to evidence the progress against the priorities.

The action plan will be a live document which is continually updated and will be published on the council's website in spring each year. It will set out the achievements and the challenges of the preceding financial year, along with any significant recommended changes to the action plan that may arise from emerging demand, guidance, legislation, or policy.

The strategy and action plan will be monitored by the Homelessness Strategy Review Group. The group will act as a 'critical friend', partnering the council in the delivery of its strategic plans. The group is made up of former service users, parters, councillors and council staff.

The council's Housing Service will brief the Scrutiny Committee annually regarding the operations of the Housing Service, and this will include aspects of our work to prevent and relieve homelessness against the three priorities.

The strategy action plan will set out specific, measurable, achievable, and time-phased (SMART) actions that contribute to meeting the overarching aims.

The action plan will be developed around the key priorities and themes identified in the evidence base and through consultation.

What are SMART goals?

S	Specific	What do you want to do?
M	Measurable	How will you know when you've reached it?
A	Achievable	Is it in your power to accomplish?
R	Realistic	Can you realistically achieve it?
T	Timely	When exactly do you want to accomplish it?

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