



# **Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2018**

Watford Borough Council

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Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2013-2018

## Introduction

For the purposes of the Homelessness Act 2002, “homelessness strategy” means a strategy formulated by a local housing authority for

- (a) preventing homelessness in their district;
- (b) securing that sufficient accommodation is and will be available for people in their district who are or may become homeless;
- (c) securing the satisfactory provision of support for people in their district:
  - (i) who are or who may become homeless;
  - (ii) who have been homeless and need support to prevent them becoming homeless again.

A homelessness strategy may include specific objectives to be pursued, and specific action planned to be taken, in the course of the exercise of:

- (a) the functions of the authority as a local housing authority;
- (b) the functions of the social services authority for the district.

A homelessness strategy may also include provision relating to specific action which the authority expects to be taken:

- (a) by any public authority with functions mentioned which are capable of contributing to the achievement of any of the objectives mentioned above.
- (b) by any voluntary organisation or other person whose activities are capable of contributing to the achievement of any of the objectives mentioned above.

The number of households applying to Watford Council for assistance under homelessness legislation and the number of households being accepted for assistance under homelessness legislation have increased significantly since the last homelessness review and strategy was produced in 2008. This is particularly the case during the two year period between 2011 and 2013. Homelessness is not just a housing-related problem; it usually affects the most vulnerable members of the community, and sometimes incurs a high cost of other public sector areas such as health, education and welfare benefits.

The Homelessness Review and Strategy look at homelessness in a very broad way to take account not only of people without accommodation but also those at risk of losing their home, whether it is shared with others, a rented property or a home which they own.

## A Diagnosis to define the nature of the challenge

Homelessness is the opposite of a planned route to settled accommodation. It poses the following problems for households, local authority authorities and other public sector agencies:

- Prior to making a homelessness application a household can be living in poor housing conditions, ranging from overcrowded homes and poor quality housing to the worst manifestation of homelessness which consists of sleeping outdoors.
- Homelessness incurs substantial costs to local authorities in accommodating households in temporary housing while they await the outcome of their homelessness application or an offer of settled accommodation.
- Its sudden nature can dislocate households from support networks, often leading to increased levels of stress and poor health.
- It can prevent households from focusing upon education and employment opportunities while they are in temporary accommodation. Homeless households may give up their jobs prior to moving into temporary accommodation because they have had to move further away from their place of work.
- High levels of homelessness can concentrate allocations of social housing disproportionately highly to homeless households, while households who attempt to access social housing as part of a planned move to settled accommodation have to wait longer to be allocated accommodation.
- Homelessness can impact on the stability of communities, particularly in areas where homelessness is very visible and there is high turnover of housing and population.

Our research has shown the levels of stress caused by housing conditions which lead to homelessness, as illustrated in eviction letters. These letters describe arguments, severe relationship breakdowns, cramped living conditions, high levels of stress and deteriorating levels of personal health.

## The Guiding Principles

The Guiding Principle is an overall approach chosen to cope with or overcome the obstacles identified in the diagnosis. The policy adopted to guide the homelessness strategy will take the following three approaches:

- To **prevent homelessness** occurring by assisting households in remaining in their current settled home, or by encouraging them to follow planned pathways to a settled home.
- Where homelessness cannot be prevented, to provide **sufficient support** to prevent homelessness occurring in the future, and to improve aspects of the lives of homeless households including health, access to education and employment opportunities.
- To **work in partnership** with organisations in and around Watford to prevent and tackle homelessness

- To **manage demand** for local services and the supply of affordable housing.

## **A set of Coherent Actions**

The Homelessness Strategy Action Plan will contain a set of coherent actions that are designed to carry out the guiding principles. These steps will be co-ordinated with one another to work together in accomplishing the guiding principles. The actions will be grouped into these four strategic priorities:

- a) Prevention of homelessness
- b) Making best use of temporary accommodation.
- c) Improving access to settled accommodation.
- d) Providing support to manage health and life issues.

## **Achievements from the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2008-2013**

Examples of achievements under the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2008-2013 are:

### **Prevention of Homelessness**

- An audit of services was completed so that partners would have an improved understanding of the full range of relevant services available across the borough.
- A severe weather plan has been completed and has been used between 2009 and 2013.
- Increased outreach work by Watford New Hope Trust has been funded.
- A local ex-offenders project has been piloted for six residents, providing an important opportunity to inform future provision.
- Joint working with Herts Young Homeless Schools Prevention Project. This has delivered sessions aimed at homelessness prevention in Watford and Three Rivers.
- An agreement has been reached with Children, Schools and Families to improve the management of housing care leavers.

- A money advice worker, supported by a small pot of funding, has been instrumental in avoiding repossession for homeowners in mortgage arrears and for a small number in arranging Mortgage Rescue.

### **Monitoring the supply and use of temporary accommodation**

- Arrangements were put in place to monitor:
  - ~ households in temporary accommodation and the average length of stay
  - ~ applicants and lettings via Choice Based lettings
  - ~ new affordable housing
  - ~ homelessness applications and decisions
  - ~ homelessness prevention activity.

### **Access to settled accommodation**

- At total of 716 new affordable homes were completed in Watford between April 2008 and March 2013.
- A total of 208 existing homes were let to households in housing need through the Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme.

### **Provide support to manage health and life issues**

- Counselling was made available via Herts Young Homeless and YMCA counsellors.
- A Lifeskills, employment and training event was held with Prevention of Single Homelessness (PoSH) partners.
- Structured workshops for clients have been put in place at Watford New Hope Trust.

## **The Homelessness Review 2013-2018**

In order to inform the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2013-2018, the Homelessness Review contains the following information:

- a) Homelessness – links to other policies and strategies
  - i) The Watford Borough Council Corporate Plan 2013-2017
  - ii) One Watford: Watford Sustainable Community Strategy
  - iii) The Watford Council Nominations Policy

- iv) The Watford Council Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy
- v) The Watford Council Housing Strategy
- vi) The Housing and Regeneration Initiative (HARI) Homelessness Prevention Agreement

b) The Watford Scene:

- i) A portrait of Watford
- ii) Deprivation in Watford
- iii) Changes to welfare benefit levels – impacts in Watford.
- iv) Housing costs in Watford
- v) Incomes in Watford
- vi) The Housing Register in Watford
- vii) Lettings of affordable housing for rent
- viii) Increasing the supply of new homes for households in housing need

c) Homelessness in Watford

- i) The local authority role
- ii) The Voluntary Sector role
- iii) The role of registered providers

d) Contexts for the Homelessness Review and Strategy

- i) The changing context since 2008
- ii) The contexts for the Homelessness Review and Strategy 2013-2018

e) Resources

- i) Council staffing
- ii) Homelessness Grant
- iii) Discretionary Housing Payments
- iv) The Hertfordshire Welfare Assistance Scheme
- v) Housing-related support

- vi) HARI (Housing and Regeneration Initiative) resources
- vii) Single Homelessness Fund

### **Priorities:**

- **Red Category – high priority**
- **Amber Category – medium priority**
- **Green Category – low priority**

With the multiplicity of changes which are affecting levels of homelessness, the Watford Council homelessness review and strategy will be reassessed on an annual basis to ensure that it is responsive to changes which will impact on homelessness.

Because of the discrete level of resources for preventing and tackling homelessness, the homelessness strategy and action plan will focus upon the most urgent and widespread homelessness causes and issues. The principles upon which high priority for resources and action will be chosen are:

- High numbers of households experiencing particular types of homelessness in Watford.
- Identified gaps in provision for particular groups.
- Identified ability of certain projects to have a high impact in preventing or tackling homelessness.
- Capacity of project leads to make progress

### **The Red Category - high priority**

These homelessness causes and issues will all be included in the homelessness strategy action plan, and specific tasks will be assigned to them. The homelessness causes and issues which will be included in the Red Category in 2013 are:

- a) Preventing and tackling homelessness due to Parental eviction
- b) Ending of tenancies in the private rented sector
- c) Households in temporary accommodation
- d) Single person households with an element of vulnerability.

Welfare Reform is a cross-cutting issue which affects all of the groups in the Red category. The impact of the Welfare Reform Act on the above priority groups will be monitored. This will inform the setting of priorities for 2014/2015.

### **The Amber Category – medium priority**

These homelessness causes and issues will not, at present, be included in the homelessness strategy action plan, unless partners are already progressing



initiatives which link to them. However, because of changes to legislation and/or demographic changes, “amber issues” may rise in prominence within the levels of homelessness in Watford. Therefore, they will be scrutinised at the first annual review and decisions will be made as to whether they may require specific tasks assigned to them in the updated homelessness strategy action plan. Work may already be carried out to assist households in the Amber Category by stakeholder organisations. The homelessness causes and issues which will be included in the Amber category in 2013 are:

- a) Eviction from social rented housing due to changes introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012.
- b) Domestic Violence
- c) In-migration from residents of central and eastern European countries
- d) In-migration from households from London.
- e) Overcrowded households.

### **The Green Category – low priority**

These homelessness causes and issues will not feature in the homelessness strategy action plan at present unless partners are already progressing initiatives which are linked to them. However, they may also be included as part of the annual review if this is considered advisable. The homelessness causes and issues which will be included in the Green category in 2013 are:

- a) Mortgage Arrears
- b) Non-violent relationship breakdown
- c) Ex-offenders leaving prison.
- d) “New” client groups

The tasks in the homelessness strategy action plan which are relevant to each of the four Red Category priority areas are:

<b>Preventing and tackling homelessness due to Parental Eviction</b>
<p><u>Tasks:</u></p> <p>Task 1 Herts Young Homelessness Schools Project</p> <p>Task 2 Implementation of the HARI Homelessness Protocol</p> <p>Task 4 Review of the Housing Advice Offer</p> <p>Task 5 Home Visits programme</p> <p>Task 8 Training and employment opportunities with Job Centre Plus</p> <p>Task 12 Defining a new Private Rented Sector Offer</p> <p>Task 16 Introduce an Emergency Fund with Watford Credit Union (loans)</p>

## **Ending of privately rented tenancies and creating an offer to Private Landlords**

### Tasks:

- Task 2 Implementation of the HARI Protocol
- Task 3 Prevention of Illegal Eviction
- Task 4 Review of the Housing Advice Offer
- Task 5 Home Visits Programme
- Task 12 Defining a new Private Rented Sector Offer
- Task 16 Pilot Emergency Fund with Watford Credit Union (loans).

## **Households in temporary accommodation**

### Tasks:

- Task 2 Implementation of the HARI Protocol
- Task 8 Training and employment opportunities with Job Centre Plus
- Task 11 Expand portfolio of good standard temporary accommodation options.
- Task 16 Pilot Emergency Fund with Watford Credit Union (loans).

## **Single homeless persons with an element of vulnerability**

### Tasks

- Task 1 Implementation of the HARI Protocol
- Task 4 Review of the Housing Advice Offer
- Task 6 Single Homelessness Project implementation
- Task 7 Hospital Discharge Protocol
- Task 8 Training and employment opportunities with Job Centre Plus
- Task 9 Herts Young Homeless Dual Diagnosis Project
- Task 10 Re-launch of the Prevention of Single Homelessness Group (PoSH)
- Task 13 New housing options for single females without dependants
- Task 14 Watford New Hope Trust – Street Outreach work.
- Task 16 Pilot Emergency Fund with Watford Credit Union (loans).

## Putting the findings of the review into action

By analysing the data in the Homelessness Review and the results of the stakeholder consultation exercise, we have produced action plan tasks in response to the findings:

Key findings from the Homelessness Review	
The Watford Context	Possible impact upon levels of homelessness
Overall	<p>Watford is a highly dynamic borough which has seen significant housing-related changes between 2001 and 2011. This includes demographic, economic and tenure-related changes. The changes can lead to increased competition for the borough's housing stock in terms of both purchasing or renting a home in which to live or purchasing a home as an investment. Homelessness in Watford is dominated by an increase in households whose economic and personal circumstances preventing them from competing successfully in acquiring a home in the borough.</p> <p><u>Relevant Tasks in the action plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Task 2</li> <li>~ Task 3</li> <li>~ Task 6</li> <li>~ Task 8</li> <li>~ Task 10</li> </ul>
Deprivation in Watford	<p>There is evidence that households living in deprived neighbourhoods are more likely to become homeless for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><i>Income deprivation, Employment deprivation, Education deprivation, Barriers to housing and other services (housing affordability)</i></b> – households are less likely to have the economic means to acquire their own home.</li> <li>• <b><i>Crime deprivation and Living Environment deprivation</i></b> – It may no longer be safe for a household to continue living in their current home or neighbourhood.</li> <li>• <b><i>Health and disability deprivation</i></b> – It may no longer be reasonable for a household to continue living in their current home because of health problems or a disability. A person may have a mental health issue which increases their vulnerability to becoming homeless.</li> </ul> <p><u>Relevant Tasks in the action plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Task 7</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Task 8</li> <li>~ Task 9</li> <li>~ Task 13</li> <li>~ Task 14</li> <li>~ Task 15</li> <li>~ Task 17</li> </ul>
Housing costs in Watford	<p>Watford is a popular place to live and there is high demand for all types of housing in the borough. Consequently a large proportion of households are unable to afford market-priced housing in either the owner-occupied or privately rented sector. Housing which is priced at levels below market rates need to be available to meet the housing needs of this group.</p> <p><u>Relevant Tasks in the action plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Task 12</li> <li>~ Task 16</li> </ul>
Incomes in Watford	<p>Watford has a successful economy which can offer highly paid employment to suitably qualified individuals. However, a considerable number of residents working in sectors essential to the local economy, e.g. service industries, do not earn a sufficient income to acquire market priced housing.</p> <p><u>Relevant Tasks in the action plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Task 8</li> <li>~ Task 12</li> <li>~ Task 16</li> </ul>
The Housing Register and the supply of Affordable Homes	<p>Information in this section shows that demand for affordable housing greatly exceeds supply. Households who are unable to wait to bid successfully for accommodation through the housing register and who have not explored other housing options may resort to applying for accommodation through homelessness legislation.</p> <p><u>Relevant Tasks in the action plan</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Task 12</li> <li>~ Task 17</li> </ul>

Key Findings from the Stakeholder consultation exercise.	Relevant tasks in the action plan
<p><b>Prevention of homelessness at an early stage is crucial</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities:-</u></p> <p>a) <i>Prevention of homelessness</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Task 1</li> <li>Task 2</li> <li>Task 3</li> <li>Task 4</li> <li>Task 5</li> <li>Task 6</li> </ul>

	<p>Task 7 Task 8 Task 9 Task 10 Task 14 Task 15 Task 16</p>
<p><b>There is an insufficient supply of affordable housing in Watford</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities</u> c) Improving access to settled accommodation</p>	<p>Task 6 Task 12 Task 13 Task 17</p>
<p><b>Rough sleeping continues to be a problem</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities</u> c) Improving access to settled accommodation d) Providing support to manage life and health issues</p>	<p>Task 6 Task 14 Task 15</p>
<p><b>Private sector housing is a key resource for meeting housing need. Further work is required to improve access to privately rented housing.</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities</u> b) Making best use of temporary accommodation c) Improving access to settled accommodation</p>	<p>Task 3. Task 6 Task 11 Task 14</p>
<p><b>Partnership working and cross-boundary working are essential to ensure joined-up approaches and to maximise available resources.</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities</u> b) Making best use of temporary accommodation c) Improving access to settled accommodation d) Providing support to manage life and health issues</p>	<p>Task 2 Task 4 Task 6 Task 7 Task 8 Task 10 Task 16 Task 17</p>
<p><b>Targeted approaches are needed for the most common types of homelessness e.g. parental eviction, ending of privately rented tenancies.</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities</u> a) Prevention of homelessness c) Improving access to settled accommodation d) Providing support to manage life and health issues</p>	<p>Task 1. Task 3. Task 5 Task 6 Task 7 Task 8 Task 9 Task 10 Task 13 Task 14</p>
<p><b>Watford is a hub of services for single homeless people. This group requires a particular approach for preventing and tackling homelessness.</b></p> <p><u>Strategic Priorities</u></p>	<p>Task 2 Task 4. Task 6. Task 7</p>

<i>a) Prevention of homelessness</i>	Task 8
<i>b) Making best use of temporary accommodation</i>	Task 9
<i>c) Improving access to settled accommodation</i>	Task 10
<i>d) Providing support to manage life and health issues.</i>	Task 13
	Task 14
	Task 16