



East Cambridgeshire District Council

**HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY
2015 - 2018**

Foreword

At East Cambridgeshire we are proud of our small and highly motivated Housing Options Team. During the last 18 months we have transformed our service with a focus on preventing homelessness.

The team are very much proactive in ensuring that everyone has a decent home to live in. They have also worked very hard to engage with other partners, both voluntary and statutory. We have good relationships with local housing associations and there are regular forums for local landlords and a free resolution service offered to landlords to help them with tenancy issues.

The introduction of our Monday to Wednesday 'drop ins' for advice has resulted in early intervention and helped those in crisis. This early action has resulted in more than 300 households from becoming homeless during 2014/15. The council has also seen no households in bed and breakfast accommodation since August 2013.

We have introduced a highly successful young parents' project in Soham which offers accommodation, support and advice to young couples to enable them to become self supporting. For youngsters in need we have provided a 'crash bed scheme which provides emergency accommodation for 16/17 year olds alongside working with them proactively to prevent long term homelessness.

A home environment is the hub of life. Health, well being, education and employment are mainly dependant on someone having a place they can call home. To become, or at risk of, homeless is one of the most frightening experiences imaginable. At East Cambridgeshire we are determined to do everything we can to prevent this happening to our residents.

I would like to thank all those who have worked so hard and positively in dealing with homeless prevention which is one of the most important and sensitive areas of the council's work.

Clr Mike Rouse
Housing Champion

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1. Introduction

East Cambridgeshire District Council continually strives to make East Cambridgeshire the best possible place to live, work and visit. This ambition is embedded in both the Councils Corporate Objectives and the Corporate Plan. All residents should have access to a home that is of a good standard which they can afford and are able to sustain and maintain.

2. Background

Sections 1-3 of the Homelessness Act 2002 requires all Councils to produce a Homelessness Strategy every five years. The purpose of the Strategy is to:

- Address the causes of homelessness in the Councils area;
- Introduce initiatives to prevent homelessness wherever possible;
- Ensure measures are in place to secure sufficient temporary accommodation for those households that are or may become homeless; and
- Ensure that appropriate support is available for people who have previously experienced homelessness in order to prevent it happening again.

The Council has a legal duty to ensure that there is a free advice and information service about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness in the district. The Council also has a duty to take reasonable steps to make sure that accommodation continues to be available for someone who is threatened with homelessness and is likely to have a priority need under the terms of the homelessness legislation. The Code Of Guidance that accompanies the homelessness legislation goes further in that it states that Councils should offer a broad range of advice and assistance and not wait until homelessness is a likelihood or imminent before taking action.

3. The 2013-16 Strategy

The Councils Homelessness Strategy 2013-16 focused on introducing measures to reduce the number of people housed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation and identified new processes for homelessness prevention.

Key successes of the 2013-16 Homelessness Strategy:

- Silo approach to homelessness prevention eradicated as a result of close partnership working with relevant agencies
- Introduction of new homelessness prevention tools
- Solution based approach to homelessness; proactive as opposed to reactive

Pre 2013 the team comprised one Head of Housing, one Senior Housing Officer and three Housing Options Officers. There were no prevention initiatives in place and as such the team were reactive as opposed to proactive.

There were 137 applicants in Band A for homelessness. Due to this level of homelessness the hostels were oversubscribed hence the need for use of bed and breakfast accommodation. In 2012/13 there were approximately 34 families housed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation which amounted to a cost of approximately £500,000 per annum.

With this level of demand the housing register, in effect, became the homelessness register as only Band A homeless applicant were being housed.

The Council recognised that it could not continue with its practices and as such reviewed processes and redesigned the service. As a result of this new Housing Service was born and the team came together with new found pride and confidence.

With a new structure, processes and relationships in place, by August 2013, the Council reduced applicants placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation to 0 and the housing register was 'freed up' for all who qualified, not just the homeless.

How did the Council achieve this?

The following prevention tools were introduced:

Drop in Services- The introduction of 3 drop in surgeries a week enabling easier access to a Housing Options Officer without having to wait for an appointment.

Home Visits- Increased use of home visits; enabling people with mobility or transport issues access to advice. The ability to verify living conditions and mediating with family members for a planned move out before they hit crisis point.

Floating Support- Introduction of a part-time Floating Support Officer dedicated to preventing families from homelessness. Whilst this was additional support, costing £10,000 per annum, it formed part of the spend-to-save initiative. Every prevention represented a £1,000 saving to the Council, i.e. cost of accommodating a family that had become homeless.

Rent Deposit- Rent deposit scheme brought back 'in-house' this reduced costs to the Council and enabled the Council to employ a full-time Income and Recovery Officer which then provided the Council with the ability to recycle funds received. A full income and expenditure is carried out to tailor a clients individual circumstances and repayments then set at an affordable rate.

Joint Assessments- The Council was the first authority in the district to trial joint assessments with Children and Young People Services. This joint approach enables the Council to provide a much better valued and informed service to young people.

Crash Beds- Negotiation with our Registered Provider to bring back into use an unused annexe adjacent to one of our hostels. This then provided 3 crash beds specifically for 16 and 17 year olds at no cost to the Council.

Young Parents Project- The Council opened a four bedroom young parents project; providing supported accommodation with no additional funding. Working with young parents aged 16-24, providing support to help them into education, training or employment. This resulted in residents being able to maintain their own tenancies.

Bed and Breakfast/Removals Recharging- A review of the policy for Bed and Breakfast and removals recharging led to a 100% recharge and thus increasing Council income for utilisation in homelessness prevention.

Strategies- Developed a strategy to concentrate on homeless prevention which has generated savings of £150,000.

Prevention Fund- A £10,000 prevention fund is available. This facilitates small one off grants to enable applicants to sustain an existing tenancy for at least another 6 months. The fund also enables other small grants to be made to prevent homelessness.

Sanctuary Scheme- Introduced a Sanctuary Scheme for safe room and target hardening to enable domestic violence victims to remain safely in their own homes.

Landlord Events- The Council hosts and runs landlord events and provides a free landlord resolution service which seeks to encourage landlords to work with the Council and potential tenants in receipt of benefits.

Experian- Use of Experian to detect and prevent fraud; this protects Council funds.

Hostel Voids- The Council now lets void hostel rooms to other Council's in the region enabling us to reduce our own void costs.

Champion Roles- Expansion of our specialist champion roles for our dedicated Housing Options Officers.

Reports- Introduction of Quarterly Performance Reports for staff and Members.

Relationships- Better working relationships; internally and externally, and adopting a multi-agency approach.

Homelessness- Homelessness duties discharged in a swift and timely manner.

Leaflets- Introduction of leaflets covering housing options, 16 and 17 year olds, debt worries, mortgage advice, domestic violence, disrepair, foreign nationals and private rented.

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)- Formed a relationship and joint working approach with a local church to provide SWEP.

Choice Based Letting (CBL)- Reduced bidding period from 3 months to 1 bidding round under homelessness on CBL and reduced bed blocking in temporary accommodation.

In addition to these changes we have successfully produced multi-agency protocols; including 16 and 17 year olds, prison and hospital release. The Council now works closely with the Police, Social Care providers, private landlords and sheltered and older people housing providers.

This new approach to housing advice and options means that the Council is now leading the way, in the sub-region, for preventing and reducing homelessness applications.

How do we do it?

Initially an Officer will assess whether they can work with the household to resolve the issue, whatever it may be, and try and help them stay in their current home. This could be by:

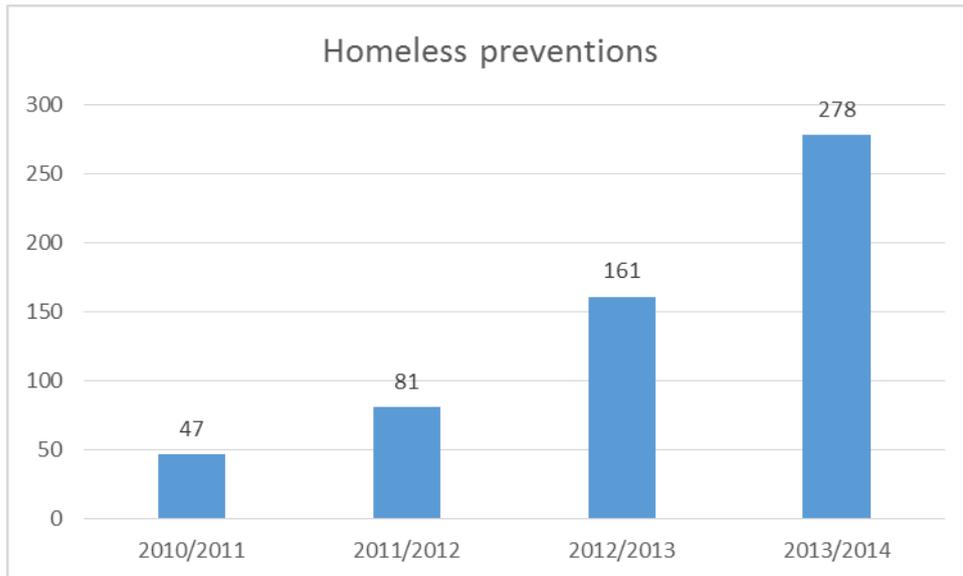
- Negotiating with family and friends; this includes acting as a mediator;
- Negotiating with private landlords and agents; or
- Assisting with maximising income, for example help with applying for benefits and demonstrating effective budget management.

The Council has been able to achieve this by introducing a Tenancy Support Officer

and Private Landlord Liaison Officer.

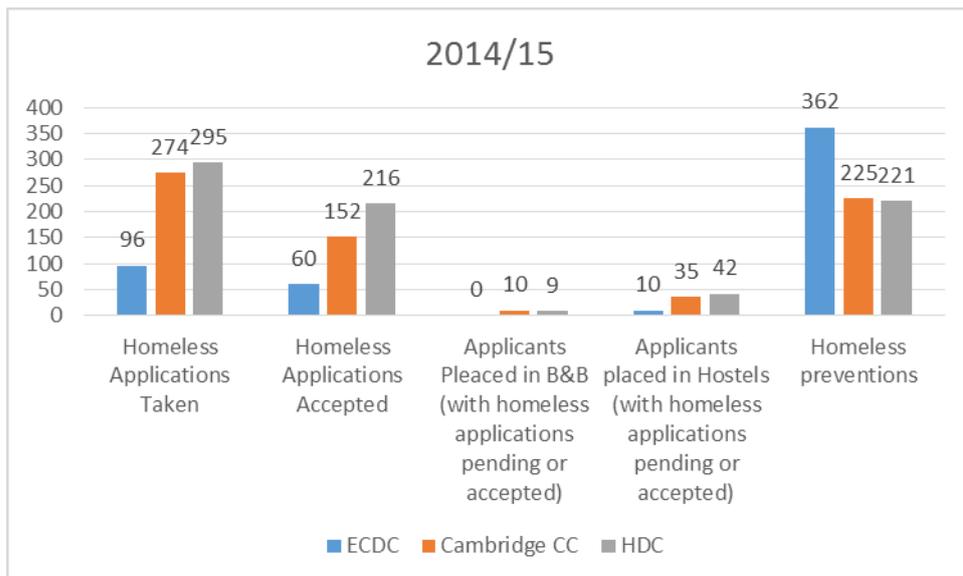
Where homelessness cannot be prevented different housing options are considered. Each option is tailored to suit the individual household. Advice is provided on the different tenures available including private rent, low cost home ownership and social rent.

Since these initiatives have been introduced the Councils preventions have risen by 170% and homeless applications have decreased by 50%. The Council has successfully sustained 0 households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation since August 2013.



The Housing Advice and Homelessness Services are run in-house by the Council with Sanctuary Housing administering the Housing Register on the Council's behalf.

How do we compare?

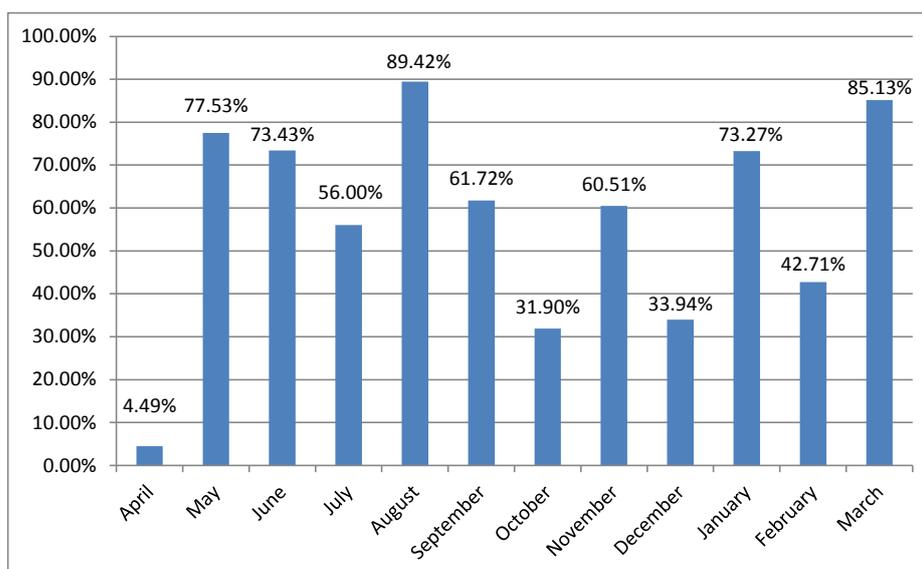


All of the authorities across the sub-region are using the Councils void hostel rooms to reduce their use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

4. Where are we now?

The Council has continued to sustain zero families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation since August 2013.

Since bringing the rent deposit scheme in-house we now have recycled funds and are able to use such funds to assist more people in private rented accommodation. As a result of robust procedures, approved by internal audit, introduced by the Income Recovery Officer, collection rates have increased. Additional support is provided by Rossendale's Debt Recovery, who work on behalf of Anglia Revenues Partnership.



(Rent collection for 2014/15)

5. Strategy for 2015-2018

The Council will continue to focus on prevention, encouraging clients to seek advice at the earliest possible opportunity.

Evidence shows that the main reasons for homelessness remain the same; eviction from private rented accommodation, relationship breakdowns and family/friend evictions.

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Eviction by relative or friend	26	42	30	24
Relationship breakdown	15	30	24	27
Loss of private sector tenancy	17	43	33	26
Other*	14	24	16	18
Total	72	149	103	95

*Includes mortgage arrears, leaving prison, hospital or forces or fleeing harassment or violence.

While these figures consider those vulnerable households to whom the Council owes a statutory duty (being mainly those with children) there are many single non-vulnerable people who have difficulty in securing affordable accommodation in East Cambridgeshire. This strategy seeks to ensure that their needs are also considered and, where appropriate, ensure that advice, options and support is made available.

What is being done and what will be done?

The Council is working with local landlords and letting agents. There has been considerable success to date resulting in landlords now wanting to work with the Council to enable clients to be housed in private sector housing.

Officers will continue to work with private landlords to ensure that private renting is a viable option for clients.

The Council has previously set up 3 Houses of Multiple Occupancies (HMOs). This has enabled the facilitation of housing more single non-priority people within a matter of days.

Officers will continue to work towards increasing the number of HMOs in the district.

The Council has housed 15 families in private rented accommodation since introducing a Private Landlord Liaison Officer. The Council now has 10 new private landlords willing to rent to clients.

Officers will continue to seek out new private landlords to house clients.

The Council has hosted and run two successful landlord forums. These forums have been a good platform for the Council to dispel some of the myths around social housing to private landlords and agents and encourage more private landlords to work with the Council.

Officers will continue to host and run these forums.

The Council has a duty to provide certain homeless households with temporary housing whilst it attempts to help them resolve their housing difficulties. As with many areas, the limited number of social rented properties available for letting and the increasing demands on these properties leads to homeless households having to spend longer than would be desirable in temporary accommodation.

Temporary accommodation, and in particular Bed and Breakfast, is recognised as being unsatisfactory for households, especially those with children. In many cases it provides accommodation with shared facilities away from support networks at a cost to both the Council and the household. It is estimated that temporary accommodation for homeless families costs approx £18,000 per year which is a significant cost to the public purse.

Temporary accommodation is currently provided in three hostels within the district with accommodation available for 18 households. This does not include our Young Parents Project in Soham which has 4 rooms or our 3 crash beds for 16 and 17 year olds. Our Burwell hostel is currently sub-let to West Suffolk District Council to reduce our void costs.

There is no direct access accommodation for single non-priority homeless people within East Cambridgeshire, although there are three 5-bedroomed shared houses with direct referral rights and another 3 potential properties across the district are in the pipeline.

Officers will continue to work on the prevention programme to ensure that the number of people in temporary accommodation is kept as low as possible. Officers will continue to work on initiatives to increase the stock of shared houses with direct referral rights.

6. What are the challenges ahead?

Universal Credit

The first phase of Universal Credit begins in December 2015. This will apply to all single new claimants. Vulnerable people and households will be paid all of their benefits in one monthly lump sum. It is anticipated that the threat of homelessness may increase as a result of these changes.

What is the Council doing?

The Council is working with Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP) and the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) to see how Officers can protect vulnerable clients rents by enabling them to be paid direct to landlords.

A training programme is being prepared by ARP and DWP and will be delivered to the Housing team prior to the first phase in December 2015.

Welfare Reform/Budget Changes

From April 2017 a minimum age of 21 threshold will be introduced for new claims in housing benefit (or the housing element of Universal Credit).

There will be some exceptions; parents, vulnerable groups i.e. care leavers, claimants in temporary accommodation, and people who could previously afford their rent without assistance.

Universal Credit will also be reduced from April 2017. All new claims will be limited to 2 children only. This is likely to cause financial hardship to larger families on benefits as they may not be able to financially sustain their accommodation.

What is the Council doing?

The new threshold will have a big impact on the work currently being done with young people. Officers will need to continue to work closely with Social Care through joint assessments. The impact of these changes will be on Social Care to accept more young people as 'Looked After' and the costs of accommodating will fall to them.

It will become more difficult to house homeless 18-21 years olds if they are not in receipt of housing benefit. Officers will need to continue building on the good work already carried to assist young people in gaining employment or apprenticeships.

The full impact of these changes cannot be fully assessed at this time. Officers will continue, wherever possible, to put in place measures to prevent homelessness and work with the multi-agencies to ensure that the right advice and support is provided.

Gypsy & Traveller Provision

We currently have 3 sites across the district providing 9 pitches in Burwell, 11 in Earith and 9 in Wentworth.

Earith and Wentworth are extremely settled and stable sites.

Unfortunately due to a fatal shooting we have had to temporarily close our Burwell site and full refurbishment is now needed.

Earith and Burwell are currently owned by the County Council and managed by ourselves, we are currently being offered the option to take on 99 year leases for both these sites at a cost of £1. County are also looking to fund the new septic tank at Earith at an approx cost of 70K.

The benefits of us taking on these leases would mean we would have complete control over who we accept on these sites, we would be able to set our own rent and service charge levels and we would have full access to Government grants.

This will be a report that will be brought to committee in the near future.

We will be working with Strategic Planning in terms of reviewing the existing local plan and evidencing future need.

At present we have 4 applicants on our waiting list for pitches, 3 of these are out of county applications and have no connection to East Cambridgeshire.

7. Objectives for the Future

The Council recognises the significant social hardship that homelessness has on affected households. It also recognises that there is a significant monetary cost to households as well as the Council as a result of its statutory duties towards the homeless.

Prevention of homelessness, or where prevention is not possible, minimising the detrimental effects of homelessness, remains at the heart of what the Council aims to achieve for the residents of the district.

Understanding the future challenges and setting objectives around these challenges enables the Council to take a holistic view of the demands and pressures that it faces and facilitates the provision of a proactive service that seeks to tackle these issues.

The following objectives have been developed to address homelessness in East Cambridgeshire:

Objective 1- Maintain no families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation.

Objective 2- Reduce the number of private sector leased properties with King Street Housing as these properties are becoming more unaffordable for our clients.

Objective 3- Expansion of the Landlord Resolution Service by encouraging more landlords to work with the Council in using private rented accommodation.

Objective 4- Continue to implement the policies in procedures that are currently in place and ensure that they continue to be fit-for-purpose.

Objective 5- Increase the collection of rent deposit loans which will enable increased recycled funds to assist more clients.

Objective 6- Explore the potential of a Landlord Accreditation Scheme.

Objective 7- Manage the introduction of Universal Credit and Welfare Reform changes.

Objective 8- Ensure that information and advice on housing and homelessness prevention is widely available and that our customers are seen at the earliest possible opportunity.

Objective 9 – Determine the future of existing Gypsy and Traveller Sites.

8. Action Plan

Appendix 1 of this Strategy set out how the Council will achieve the objectives set out within the strategy.

Appendix 1- Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2015-18

Objective	Action	Target date	Officer(s)
1. Maintaining no families in B&B accommodation	Ensure clients are seen at the earliest opportunity to enable prevention of homelessness.	ongoing	All
	Develop the Council's web pages to ensure that up to date information is available on housing options.	ongoing	All
	Work with social housing providers to reduce the risk of homelessness from welfare reforms & Universal Credit through joint initiatives to provide early information and advice	ongoing	All
2. Reduction in our Private Sector Lease Properties (King Street Housing)	To hand back properties when a landlord gives notice.	ongoing	HOM IRO
	To hand back hard to let and unaffordable 4 beds (large families hit by benefit cap)	April 2017	HOM IRO
	Project to be carried out to assess remaining families in these properties to plan move on into alternative affordable properties.	completed	HOM HOO
3. Expansion of our Landlord Resolution Service	Work with Private Land lords and Letting agents to encourage them to work with us, enabling us to house more clients into the Private Rented Sector	ongoing	PLLO
	To host 2 Landlord Forums per annum	Ongoing	PLLO
	To continue to work with landlords in setting up Houses of Multiple occupation to house single non priority clients	ongoing	PLLO
4. Continue to implement the policies in procedures that are currently in place and ensure that they continue to be fit-for-purpose.	Review recharging policy for bed and breakfast, removals and storage	completed	HOM
	Review Rent Deposit procedure.	ongoing	HOM
	Introduce a move on from supported accommodation procedure and policy	ongoing	HOM

Objective	Action	Target date	Officer(s)
5. Increase the collection of rent deposit loans which will enable increased recycled funds to assist more clients.	Increase collection rate to 95%, ensuring more recycled funds are available to help new clients.	completed	IRO
6. Explore the potential of a Landlord Accreditation Scheme.	To explore the possibility of setting this up across East Cambridgeshire enabling us to ensure that goods and services are safe within the private rented sector.	May 2017	PLLO
7. Manage the introduction of Universal Credit and Welfare Reform changes.	Ensure all officers within the team have had relevant training	ongoing	All
	To work with registered providers to try and minimise the impact on residents, preventing any potential homelessness.	ongoing	All
	Undertake an assessment within 6 months of Phase 1.	ongoing	HOM
8. Ensure that information and advice on housing and homelessness prevention is widely available and that our customers are seen at the earliest possible opportunity.	To keep all leaflets up to date to reflect services provided by the council	ongoing	All
	Ongoing development of our website, ensuring relevant and up to date information is shown	ongoing	All
	To continue to see our clients at the earliest opportunity to explore all avenues of prevention	ongoing	All
	To undertake and demands analysis of our clients to ensure we providing the best service.	completed	HOM
9. Determine the future of existing Gypsy & Traveller Sites.	Negotiate new leases with County Council	completed	HOM
	Apply to Government for funding for refurbishment/new sites	ongoing	HOM
	Present recommendations to Asset Development Committee	ongoing	HOM

(HMO- Housing Options Manager, HOO- Housing Options Officer, PLLO- Private Landlord & Liaison Officer, IRO- Income Recovery Officer)