

Harlow Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025 to 2030

Foreword by Cabinet Member for Housing

I am very pleased to introduce our new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, which will form the backbone of the work the Council does, with our partners, to tackle homelessness in our town.

We face a very unique set of challenges in terms of what this Council must do to meet local housing need. This framework is our route map to take us forward and to tackle those challenges head on, in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping and the underlying root causes of both.

Harlow is ranked in the bottom 40% of the most deprived lower tier authorities, it experiences high levels of housing need, alongside increasing house prices and lower than average salaries. Residents experience serious affordability issues when looking for a suitable housing solution to meet their needs.

Harlow sees consistently high levels of homelessness. The Council has at any one time in the region of 250 to 350 households living in temporary accommodation

This strategy has been developed at a time where there is much work being done locally, supported financially by central government – and sets out a commitment to end rough sleeping and to alleviate homelessness in Harlow.

It is intended that this strategy is a short, sharply focussed tool to guide the work of the council and its partners, ensuring shared objectives and desired outcomes are clear.

Councillor David Carter

Portfolio Holder for Housing

1. About Harlow

For most of its existence the village of Harlow was little more than a charming stopping point on the road between Cambridge and London. The original village was expanded after the Second World War to provide modern, secure housing for the thousands of Londoners displaced by the 'Blitz'. The older parts of the town were left in situ, linked by the new housing estates and a series of small shopping centres.

The new town was designed to complement the rural Essex countryside, with generous swathes of green areas and parkland dissecting the housing estates. Many

of the town's new buildings were designed in a contemporary, even futuristic style (for the pre 1970s).

Today Harlow continues to grow and its numerous facilities and proximity to London, Cambridge and Stansted International Airport, make it attractive to businesses, shoppers and commuters alike. There are plans to develop Harlow further with ambitious regeneration projects already underway, which include further investments in housing, business and recreation facilities, whilst preserving the town's green spaces.

Being just outside London, house prices are high. Around 40% of households in Harlow own their properties or with an outstanding mortgage. 26% of households rent privately and 34% live in social rented properties. There are significantly more social renters and less owner occupiers compared to national and regional averages.

Affordability of local homes is a real issue for residents. Many seek social housing, or low cost home ownership models, but supply cannot match demand. Local residents can be priced out. The most extreme form of this leads to homelessness. As a local authority, we will continue to work hard to tackle this – both at root cause level and the practical reality.

2. Introduction and strategic fit

This framework has the overarching objective of eliminating rough sleeping and providing a homelessness and housing needs service that focuses on the prevention of homelessness. Early intervention is the key to achieving this.

The framework identifies our priorities for tackling homelessness in Harlow over the next five years and beyond. Partnership working is at its heart. The three key priorities are:

Increase homelessness prevention

Access to suitable accommodation and support, including temporary accommodation, accessing the private rented sector, supported housing and home ownership

Eliminate rough sleeping completely

We consulted on these priorities and over 90% of respondents agreed these were the top priorities in tackling homelessness in our town.

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy sits under the umbrella of the wider Corporate Plan. The Strategy sits within **Mission 1** which is to **Transform Harlow's Housing**. This includes:

- Embedding our new housing allocations policy and processes to increase transparency and efficiency in our social housing allocations.
- Both directly delivering and encouraging developers to build more high-quality homes for local people.
- Embracing the new legislative changes to landlord provision particularly through the Social Housing Regulation Act and other similar changes.
- Delivering new high-quality council housing which incorporates sustainable construction approaches, energy efficient and photovoltaic technologies.
- Working with developers through the planning process to target sustainable approaches to the delivery of all new homes.

There are also key links to the Housing Strategy, the Tenancy Strategy, the Temporary Accommodation Plan and the Housing Allocations Scheme. These plans interact together to tackle housing need in our neighbourhoods and town.

Consultation

We have worked with partners to develop this framework, and we have consulted stakeholders and residents on challenges, priorities and action. We did this through a series of workshops and an online survey. Feedback was received from a range of partners including local housing associations, supported housing providers, neighbouring local authorities, key voluntary sector organisations including health partners, probation, Department for Work and Pensions and Essex County Council.

Council Members were involved in developing this strategy during a workshop in September 2024, and through the wider public consultation process.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to review and feedback on an early draft of the framework, and in shaping the nature of the wider consultation exercise.

Harlow residents were invited to have their say through an online consultation during autumn of 2024.

3. Building on our success

Our previous Homelessness Strategy generated significant levels of success. We are particularly proud of:

- The partnerships we have in place to deliver services to homeless people
- Our work on early intervention and prevention, meaning fewer people need temporary accommodation
- The work we have done so far on securing access to the private rented sector
- The work we have done to improve services to those surviving domestic abuse, including having a Housing IDVA working with us, through Safer Places
- Reviewing the Housing Allocations Policy and implementing a new policy to ensure homeless households are given due priority, and bringing local connection to the forefront

- Ensuring the quota scheme is targeted at the right organisations so as to have local impact, supporting local people
- The delivery of Bramley Cottages and the ongoing support of Streets for Homes
- Managing rough sleeping numbers so fewer people are hitting the streets and where they do, are being supported to move on.

This new strategy looks to build on these areas of success where they are still relevant. However, there are several challenges and emerging themes. These include:

- Affordability issues and cost of living crisis
- The gap between Local Housing Allowance and rent levels
- The increased use of housing stock in Harlow by London Boroughs
- Tackling the difficulties faced by those with mental health issues, in accessing and maintaining appropriate accommodation
- Tackling difficulties in accessing the private rented sector
- The impact of the Renters Reform Bill – will landlords exit that market? Will removing no-fault evictions ease homelessness levels?
- Managing pathways for care leavers and migrants
- Lack of support services to refer into, which would help prevent homelessness and increase sustainability chances. Sometimes tenancy breakdown is inevitable without these services
- Lack of tenancy training, which could help younger people (and others) prepare for the responsibility of holding a tenancy
- Lack of specialist supported accommodation, especially for young people and those with complex needs
- Lack of direct access accommodation, to prevent a first night on the streets
- Encouraging residents to seek help earlier enough, and removing the stigma of approaching the council
- Recruitment issues – difficulty in recruiting staff with the right skills and experience into the sector

We consulted on these challenges and respondents told us the top priority for them was tackling the affordability of local housing, as it was often too expensive for those on low income.

4. Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Harlow

What do we mean by homelessness?

A home is not simply a building. Although most people associate homelessness with rough sleeping, that is far from the whole story. The following are all examples of situations where it is considered people to be either homeless or threatened with homelessness:

- The household has no legal right to be in the property. This may include people staying with family or friends who want them to leave

- The household is being evicted from a tenancy or their house is being repossessed
- Members of the household are the subject of violence, threats of violence or abuse in their home
- The property is unsafe, or its condition is affecting the health of the occupants and there is no practical remedy
- People who are 'sofa surfing', moving between various friends and or family members
- The household is staying in a hostel, night shelter or bed and breakfast establishment. Temporary accommodation is not a home.

Key data – Homelessness in Harlow

Homelessness applications and decisions

The total number of decisions on homelessness applications made annually in Harlow over the last five years is shown in the chart below.

	Total annual applications made
2019-2020	273
2020-2021	315
2021-2022	350
2022-2023	392
2023-2024	354

Preventing homelessness

We aim to talk to people as early as possible about their housing options. Council officers will give advice to help people understand what their housing options are to enable them to make informed decisions. Where there is a threat of homelessness, our officer's work hard to prevent it from happening. This will include:

- Home visits
- Negotiation with landlords
- Use of Discretionary Housing Payments
- Signposting to support services
- Warm handovers to partner agencies for specialist casework
- Refer to debt counselling and money advice

Where we cannot prevent homelessness, we work to find a suitable housing alternative. This can include:

- Discussions with applicant about moving in with other family and friends
- Finding accommodation in the private rented sector
- Provision of temporary accommodation
- Personalised housing plans - each applicants receives a tailored housing plan

Homelessness acceptances

The table below sets out the different types of duties owed to those who approach as homeless.

The Homeless Reduction Act

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Prevention duty	73	81	159	186	160
Relief duty	186	207	181	186	176
Total owed a duty	259	288	340	372	336
Not threatened with homelessness	14	27	10	20	13
Total initial assessments	273	315	350	392	354

Where a local authority is satisfied that an applicant is threatened with homelessness and eligible, it must help the applicant secure that accommodation does not cease to be available for their occupation.

Where a local authority is satisfied that an applicant is homeless and eligible, it must help the applicant secure that accommodation becomes available for at least six months

Reasons for homelessness in Harlow

The main reasons for homelessness in Harlow are:

- ending of a private rented sector tenancy (38%);
- eviction by family or friends (23%)
- loss of accommodation through domestic abuse (7%) .

These are in line with the top 3 reasons nationally.

Local homelessness trends compared to national trends

The following chart compares rates of homelessness acceptances in Harlow with the regional figures for East of England and national figures for England. This is achieved by looking at the number of homelessness acceptances per 1000 households of the population for each area.

2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Harlow	2.90	2.50	4.00	2.20
East of England	1.80	1.70	1.80	2.30
England	1.70	1.70	1.80	2.20

Using Temporary Accommodation

In developing a plan to tackle homelessness, we have to make judgments on how to achieve best value for money in allocating limited resources in order to meet legal duties.

The use of bed and breakfast and other temporary accommodation is by far the most expensive and least satisfactory response for those in need. We use temporary accommodation whilst assessments are being carried out and we have a duty to provide housing for a homeless household but is not able to provide a permanent home at that point. At any one time we have in the region of 250 to 350 households living in temporary accommodation. This is a mix of housing association properties, council owned properties and properties secured in the private rented market.

We will continue to review the provision of resources to prevent homelessness and provide settled accommodation against meeting the costs of short term temporary accommodation provision. We want to reduce this number and have set aside a budget to make better use of private sector homes, which can either be sourced by our clients, or by us. This gives much more flexibility over the type and location of properties we can offer.

Types of temporary accommodation

We use a range of temporary accommodation to meet its duties towards homeless people. The table below shows a snapshot of the numbers living in each type of accommodation, as at September 2024.

Supported housing	6
Council owned stock	15

Nightly lets (rooms in shared properties)	86
Private provider (self contained family sized homes)	237
Emergency bed and breakfast	9

Rough Sleeping

The table below shows the rough sleeping figures for Harlow, East of England and England.

Rough sleeping data

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Harlow	3	4	0	4	7
East of England	458	266	240	285	337
England	4266	2688	2443	3069	3898

Breaking this data down further, it is interesting to see comparisons across Essex.

Essex Local Authority	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
Basildon	5	3	2	1	4
Braintree	5	0	5	3	7
Brentwood	0	0	0	0	1
Castle Point	0	1	3	2	2
Chelmsford	15	9	13	15	18
Colchester	10	4	2	7	4
Epping Forest	2	1	2	1	4
Harlow	3	4	0	4	7
Maldon	2	1	2	3	0
Rochford	1	1	1	0	2
Southend-on-Sea	32	8	10	16	35
Tendring	4	0	2	11	7
Thurrock	8	5	2	7	6
Uttlesford	0	0	1	2	0

The profile of rough sleepers shows they are mostly male, mostly over 25 and mostly from the UK. The causes of rough sleeping vary from individual to individual but in Harlow, rough sleepers have the following principle issues:

- The person is dealing with issues relating to mental health, drugs or alcohol (or a combination of these)

- The person is failing in making and sustaining long-term relationships
- The person is not able to sustain a tenancy
- The person's behaviour is often erratic and unpredictable
- In many cases, the issues the person is dealing with are very longstanding and entrenched

5. Our priorities

The progress and success of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will be regularly monitored by the Housing Advice and Options Manager and Assistant Director for Housing Operations, and at least annually by the Harlow Homelessness Partnership.

We have three key priorities:

Increase Homelessness Prevention Work

We will:

- Prevent homelessness through private sector supported by our Rent Bond Scheme;
- Work closely with partners to identify opportunities for earlier intervention
- Work to ensure those facing homelessness know where to go for help
- Continually develop our personalised housing plans
- Review and improve our offering to private sector landlords
- Explore the formation of a Landlords Forum
- Adapt and continuously review our homelessness prevention options in light of wider housing market pressures including welfare reform and the cost-of-living crisis
- Aim to create an approachable image for the Housing Options Service, to encourage early intervention opportunities

Eliminating Rough Sleeping Completely

We will:

- Drive forward our ambition to end rough sleeping in the district
- Make sure that we co-ordinate with other groups to raise awareness and build effective partnerships
- Provide an outreach service
- Provide in-reach support at Bromley Cottages
- Provide a Rough Sleeper Co-ordinator
- Enhance and continue to implement severe weather emergency protocols
- Explore opportunities that support tenancy sustainment
- Bid for all relevant funding opportunities

Provide access to suitable accommodation and support, including temporary accommodation,

We will

- Not use of bed and breakfast for homeless 16/17 year olds;
- Not allow homeless families with children (or pregnant family member) to occupy bed and breakfast for longer than six weeks
- Aim to place in emergency accommodation within the borough where safe and available;
- Make use of our own studio apartment properties as temporary housing
- Maximise opportunities within the private rented sector
- Promote home ownership opportunities

6. How we will deliver the Strategy

We will deliver the Strategy in a number of ways:

Direct delivery

We have a statutory duty to prevent homelessness and as such this priority will be directly delivered by our housing team and resources, in collaboration with housing providers and other statutory and voluntary organisations, assisted by occasional funding streams through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Delivery in partnership

Whilst overall responsibility for rough sleeping in the area lies with us, the ongoing progressive work of the Harlow Homelessness Partnership is crucial to ending rough sleeping locally.

We will work with stakeholders to:

- Make sure that we are all using the opportunities they have to identify people who may be at risk of homelessness
- Make sure that the formal process for agencies to refer people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness is fully understood and easy to use
- Involve other organisations in the identification and provision of opportunities to help people facing housing issues
- Explore and generate ideas for potential projects and monitor potential sources of funding such as community funds and government initiatives
- Maintain housing options for households in housing need
- Work with private sector landlords to secure private rented accommodation for households in housing need

Enabling

We will ensure delivery of new affordable housing in the district, working in partnership with key housing associations. We have an enabling role to support the delivery of new affordable housing opportunities and ensuring that new affordable delivery is appropriate in terms of its location, type, size and tenure. This includes our own new developments, and those provided by partner housing associations.

Strategic support and engagement

We engage with strategic stakeholders such as MHCLG, Homes England, housing associations, Essex County Council, and other local district authorities to support and enable the delivery of projects that will assist in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping. Partnership working strongly underpins this document and success of this strategy cannot be achieved working in isolation.

7. Funding

Government Grants for Homelessness

Since 2017/18 we have been allocated a Flexible Homelessness Prevention Grant to assist in the prevention of homelessness, following the introduction of the Homeless Reduction Act. The aim of this grant is to provide councils with the flexibility to use the grant in their work to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

Our Planned Expenditure

Our base budget is drawn from a mixture of government grants and council income. Resources are allocated to the Housing Options Service to cover the costs associated with our Allocation, Homelessness and Housing Options functions.

8. Leading change

This Homelessness and Rough Sleeping strategy will be delivered by the Harlow Homelessness Partnership, which is a strong group of organisations who work together to address the issues, problems and barriers that lead to homelessness in our town.

The group is chaired and lead by our Housing Options and Advice Manager.