

**CABINET**  
**19 March 2024**

**PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**ADOPTION OF A NEW HOUSING STRATEGY (2024-2029)**

REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR – HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: COUNCILLOR SEAN PRENDERGAST

COUNCIL PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. As the local housing authority, the Council has statutory responsibilities to consider the housing needs of the district, to oversee and enforce housing standards and to prevent and manage homelessness.
- 1.2. The proposed Housing Strategy (2024-2029) provides a strategic framework for the Council to undertake these functions and succeeds the previous Housing Strategy (2019-2024).
- 1.3. A new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for the district is also incorporated within the proposed Housing Strategy.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1. That Cabinet approves the adoption of the Council's Housing Strategy (2024-2029).
- 2.2. That Cabinet delegates to the Director of Housing and Environmental Health in conjunction with the Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, the power to make minor amendments to the Strategy.
- 2.3. That Cabinet delegates to the Director of Housing and Environmental Health in conjunction with the Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, the power to agree an annual action plan which will set out the specific actions to be undertaken to implement the Housing Strategy.
- 2.4. For matters that are not reserved for Cabinet, the Cabinet delegates to the Director of Housing and Environmental Health in conjunction with the Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, the power to decide on the specific allocation of homelessness funding received from central government in order to meet homelessness priorities, for the duration of the Strategy.

### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1. The current Housing Strategy is coming to the end of its life. The proposed new Strategy will enable the Council to continue to undertake its strategic housing responsibilities over the next five years in a planned, transparent and inclusive manner.

### **4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 None. The current Housing Strategy was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2019 and it is now timely to update it.

### **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 The Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, Cllr Sean Prendergast, and the Deputy Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health, Cllr Dave Winstanley, have both been consulted and are supportive of the proposals contained in this report.
- 5.2 Public consultation took place over four weeks at the start of 2024, publicised via the Council's websites and social media platforms. Partners and stakeholders including local housing providers, other statutory bodies (including Hertfordshire County Council, health services and the police) and members of the Stevenage and North Herts Homeless Forum were also contacted separately. In total, over 450 completed responses were received with a majority in favour of the priorities proposed in the new Housing Strategy and many useful additional comments received. Appendix 1 summarises responses received.
- 5.3 All members were invited to an in-person briefing on the draft Strategy on 18 December 2023 with the presentation slides being circulated shortly after, inviting further comments.

### **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a Key Decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

### **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1. As the local housing authority, the Council has statutory functions to consider both housing conditions and housing needs in the district, with a responsibility to keep both under review (Housing Acts 2004 and 1985 refer respectively).
- 7.2. The Council also has specific duties with regards to the prevention, reduction and management of homelessness, as set out in the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- 7.3. The Housing Strategy provides a framework for these statutory functions, establishing high level objectives and identifying broad priorities within these. The proposed Housing Strategy is purposefully high level, in order that we can respond quickly to changes in legislation and shifting national and local issues as they develop. There are for instance forthcoming changes to the regulation of supported housing, the detail of which has yet to be confirmed by central government, and which are likely to have implications for the Council (as well as at county council level). There are also ongoing moves to reform the private rented sector and new regulations under way following the

government's review of the Decent Homes Standard. The detail of how the high-level priorities identified in the proposed Housing Strategy will be delivered will be set out in an annual action plan, which will also be able to capture new areas of work as they emerge.

- 7.4. Much of the delivery of the Strategy is dependent upon close working relationships with our partners including local housing providers, other statutory bodies such as health and social services, and the voluntary sector. Our partners have been consulted in the development of the proposed new Housing Strategy and we have multiple frameworks in place with them through which progress can be communicated, monitored, and reviewed.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 The current Housing Strategy has to a large extent been overshadowed by the immense and immediate demands of the Covid-19 pandemic which included requirements to accommodate large numbers of people at risk of rough sleeping and enforcement and management of Covid-19 restrictions district-wide. The aftermath of the pandemic has been accompanied by a cost-of-living crisis, growth in demand from people with multiple and complex needs and increasingly challenging interactions with local housing providers whose priorities do not always align with ours.

- 8.2 In light of these demands, some new and others ongoing, the proposed Housing Strategy (see Appendix 2 for the full text) sets out three main areas of focus for the coming five years:

- maximising delivery of genuinely affordable homes;
- ensuring high standards of housing; and
- preventing and managing homelessness.

- 8.3 A number of high-level priorities are identified within these areas, providing a robust response whilst being mindful of the ongoing challenges around local government finance.

- 8.4 We received a good response to our public consultation (see Appendix 1) which was overwhelmingly supportive of our proposed Strategy. Many views and comments were additionally submitted which reinforced our proposed approach, and we have taken on board other comments in this final version of the proposed Strategy and/or will do so in the accompanying action plan.

- 8.5 Maximising delivery of genuinely affordable homes remains fundamental to meeting the housing needs of the district. There is a significant need for new homes (both affordable and market) as evidenced in the Council's Local Plan 2011-2031, which will be a primary means of delivery. The proposed Strategy also recognises the need to ensure that the district's existing supply of homes is used as effectively as possible, including bringing empty properties back into use (the Council's Empty Homes Strategy was adopted at [Cabinet](#) on 6 February 2024). The public consultation also highlighted under-occupation of family sized accommodation as an area of concern, and this has now been included in the proposed Strategy as an issue for review.

- 8.6 The proposed Strategy's focus on maintaining high standards of housing recognises the pivotal role that access to good quality housing has on residents' health and overall wellbeing. As well as continuing to undertake our statutory functions, we recognise the need to consider how best to publicise advice and support services available, a

theme which also emerged from the public consultation. We also hope over the coming years to further develop our working relationships with relevant bodies working in the health arena to improve access to services and potential funding streams.

- 8.7 As a result of recent tragic occurrences in the domestic rented sector, the Council is developing a Tenants' Charter. Aimed primarily at tenants, this document will state the rights and responsibilities of all those associated with this sector and will empower tenants, who as long as they fulfil their statutory undertakings, will know how to better access the regulators linked to this sector, will have better knowledge of what standards they should accept, and know also that their landlords, private or social, will also know this, and so cannot hide behind unreasonable delays or avoidance. A key point of the Coroner's report into the death of Awaab Ishak was the lack of clarity between who held responsibility for the condition of the property; the Charter will start to address this, and help towards publicising the objectives of this strategy.
- 8.8 Over time, our housing stock will naturally deteriorate. It remains the responsibility of the owner to mitigate that disrepair as much as possible, either for their own benefit, or, if the property is rented, for the benefit of a tenant. The Tenants' Charter aims to better inform all those in the sector of their rights and obligations regarding the condition of the property, but the Council is also one of a number of regulators whose role it is to ensure the minimum legal and safety standards are maintained. In recent years, the Government has worked to develop specific first tier judicial public bodies, such as the [Housing Ombudsman](#) whose role it is to investigate complaints and resolve disputes involving tenants and landlords who are part of the scheme. Whilst this is the now preferred means to tackle these issues, the Council's Environmental Health service also has a responsibility to investigate housing defects and they too will work to address defects, including via enforcement, should the need arise.
- 8.9 The prevention and management of homelessness is a key aspect of the proposed Housing Strategy, providing a framework for the Council to meet its legal duties around homelessness. This section of the Strategy comprises our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, which has been informed by a separate review of homelessness in the district (for which views from the Stevenage and North Herts Homeless Forum and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities were sought). The review highlights the ongoing impact of a shortage of affordable accommodation options in the district, as well as new challenges from increasing demand from people with multiple disadvantages and those fleeing domestic abuse and other violence. Recent workshops held with advisors from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) have highlighted prevention as a key area of work, alongside improving the provision of good quality accommodation and support.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. The Cabinet's Terms of Reference provides at paragraph 5.7.15; *"To oversee the provision of all the Council's services other than those functions reserved to the Council"*.
- 9.2. The Housing Act 1985 Section 1(1) confirms that the District Council is the Local Housing Authority (LHA).
- 9.3. Section 1 of the Homelessness Act 2002 outlines the duty of LHAs to formulate a homelessness and Rough Sleeping review and strategy. Section 1(1)(a) and (b) note that a local authority may from time to time carry out a homelessness review for their district and formulate and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results of that review. Section 1(4) notes that a new homelessness strategy shall be published within

the period of 5 years beginning with the day on which their last homelessness strategy was published.

- 9.4. The Housing Act 1985 Section 8(1) specifies that LHAs shall consider housing conditions in their district and the needs of the district with respect to the provision of further housing accommodation.
- 9.5. The Housing Act 2004 Section 3(1) specifies that a LHA must keep the housing conditions in their area under review.
- 9.6. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 places a legal obligation upon local authorities to prevent or relieve homelessness. However, its aims to reduce, prevent and relieve homelessness will be undermined without improvements to wider housing and welfare policy, to address both the causes of homelessness and to ensure that homeless households have access to settled, affordable and suitable housing in each local authority area.
- 9.7. LHAs' homelessness duties are contained within the Housing Act 1996 Part VII, as amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which placed significant new duties on English LHAs. These include duties to prevent and relieve homelessness as well as accommodation duties for certain priority groups, including an interim (or emergency) accommodation duty.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The Council receives ring-fenced Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to deliver services to prevent and tackle homelessness. This is usually an annual allocation, but most recently, DLUHC has provided councils with a two-year allocation, for 2023/24–2024/25. The Council received total HPG funding of £746k plus an additional £71k for domestic abuse duties, with [Cabinet](#) approving the allocation of the majority of this funding at its meeting on 27 June 2023, for key services central to our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.
- 10.2 As part of the programme to allow residents to live better for longer in their own homes, the Council works to deliver and signpost grant funding. It has been recognised for many years that as we age, our housing needs change, and whilst alternative accommodation may ultimately be required, initially, many homes can be adapted or improved to make them more appropriate for the occupant. Disabled Facilities Grants offer assistance to those who for medical or physical reasons need help continuing to live in their homes, Housing Repairs Assistance Grants assist in the funding to address minor issues of concern whilst the various Eco Grants are aimed at helping to make homes more energy efficient. All of these grants are limited, targeted and means-tested, meaning that as a result, within the district, demand has regularly exceeded supply. Due to this, the Council will continue to work with its partner agencies to continue to make this money deliver as great a benefit as possible, whilst seeking to increase the funding to allow more of our residents to be assisted.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 There is a risk of the Council being legally and reputationally challenged if it does not comply with the requirement to publish a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

- 11.2 Although highly unlikely, there is no guarantee that further Homelessness Prevention Grant funding will be provided, for 2025/26 and onwards, or what the scale of such funding would be.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. A high-level Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is included at Appendix 3. The requirement for more detailed assessments will be considered in advance of the implementation of any specific policies.

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report. However, the proposals contribute to social value by providing community benefits that would otherwise not be realised.

## **14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to the proposals in this report.

## **15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1 None.

## **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix 1: Consultation on the Housing Strategy 2024 - 2029 – Summary of responses
- 16.2 Appendix 2: Proposed Housing Strategy (2024-2029)
- 16.3 Appendix 3: Equalities Impact Assessment

## **17. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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**18. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

18.1 [Review of homelessness](#) in North Hertfordshire.

## Appendix 1: Consultation on the Housing Strategy 2024 - 2029 Summary of responses

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### 1. Overview

- 1.1 Consultation on proposed changes to the Council's new Housing Strategy took place over the period 12 January to 11 February 2024 via an online survey. The consultation was advertised widely across Council social media platforms and website. Key stakeholders were also contacted, including registered providers with stock in the district, other Herts local authorities, Herts County Council, DLUHC, statutory services (including health, police etc) and members of the Stevenage & North Herts Homeless Forum. In total, we received 467 completed returns as summarised in table 1.

**Table 1. Profile of respondents**

	No.	%
Resident of North Herts	434	93%
Resident elsewhere	9	2%
In a professional capacity	16	3%
Preferred not to say	8	2%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>467</b>	<b>100%</b>

- 1.2 Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or not with each of the 12 headline priorities proposed in the new Housing Strategy. Respondents also had the opportunity to provide further comment against each priority. Table 2 summarises responses against each priority.

**Table 2. Summary of responses to proposed changes**

Proposed new priorities	Agree	Disagree	Additional comments received
<b>Maximise delivery of genuinely affordable homes</b>			
Maximise delivery of new affordable housing to meet local needs	88%	12%	168
Wherever possible, seek to champion the delivery of social rented homes	84%	16%	112
Work with local communities and partners to identify housing needs in rural areas and bring forward new affordable housing in line with this	88%	12%	119
Ensure affordable housing is allocated to those in most need	89%	11%	98



Proposed new priorities	Agree	Disagree	Additional comments received
<b>Ensuring high standards of housing</b>			
Help residents to remain in their homes for longer	91%	9%	99
Reduce the negative impact of homes in disrepair or causing nuisance to the community	95%	5%	104
Review housing conditions in the district and use the information to better target resources	93%	7%	61
Ensure houses in multiple occupation are safe and of good quality	91%	9%	71
<b>Preventing and managing homelessness</b>			
Prevent homelessness in all its forms	93%	7%	77
Increase provision of accommodation and support for homeless people facing multiple disadvantage, including people sleeping rough	87%	13%	82
Support victims and survivors of domestic abuse	93%	7%	50
Improve access to affordable, local housing options	81%	19%	86

## 2. Summary of additional responses

- 2.1 Respondents had the opportunity to provide open-ended comments against each priority and also any further comments at the end of the survey. These responses are summarised below. Note that the same comments were sometimes repeated across several different priorities or where they were not relevant.

### **Maximise delivery of genuinely affordable homes: Maximise delivery of new affordable housing to meet local needs**

- 2.2 88% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. A further 168 comments were received, providing further detail and views.
- 2.3 Over one-quarter (29%) of these were points related to planning concerns, most commonly:
- ensure the provision of appropriate infrastructure (schools, doctors, transport) to support new developments and integration with existing communities;
  - the greenbelt/countryside should be protected;
  - enforce planning obligations/conditions (including those relating to affordable housing and more widely).

2.4 Other commonly raised views were:

- the importance of homes being truly affordable (17% of total responses) – not just in relation to affordable/social housing but also the need for developers to provide smaller, less expensive market housing for sale as well as large executive/family homes. Some felt this could only be achieved if the Council owned its own stock;
- there needs to be more housing options for older people, to encourage them to downsize and free up family homes (11% of responses) – this included bungalows and smaller houses (rather than flats) for those who remained independent but also more housing with support/care. Some mentioned the importance of older people being able to move but remain in their communities;
- young people should be prioritised (7% of responses) – adult children are having to remain in the family home for longer and/or are having to move away from the area in order to afford housing.

2.5 Other points raised by a small number of respondents each (less than 10):

- providing housing that is affordable should not be at the expense of quality;
- local people should be prioritised;
- everyone should be able to access good quality, affordable housing;
- high cost of the private rented sector and (to a lesser degree) lower standard of housing;
- need to look at innovative solutions, including modern methods of construction, buying properties on the open market and use of empty homes.

2.6 A few respondents were of the view that the provision of affordable/social housing distorted the workings of the free market.

2.7 There was also a myriad of other diverse points mentioned by one or two respondents including: ending Right to Buy; limiting second homes; reference to neighbourhood plans; need for more funding; and need to consider local circumstances not just district-wide need.

Points to take away:

2.8 There is a commonly held perception that planning obligations are not being enforced (with regards affordable housing obligations and also wider obligations), therefore this should be reviewed to ensure there is adequate information on the Council's website.

2.9 Add consideration of under-occupation to relevant part of Strategy.

2.10 Pass on planning comments to Planning Policy team.

**Maximise delivery of genuinely affordable homes: Wherever possible, seek to champion the delivery of social rented homes**

2.11 84% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. A further 112 comments were received.

2.12 Mostly, these were statements in support of the priority (33% of responses), expressing objections to affordable rent, some concerns about our dependence on developers to

deliver affordable/social housing via planning obligations and preference for the Council to own its own stock. One or two pointed out that the costs of homelessness were far greater than the costs of subsidising provision of social rented properties.

- 2.13 Other respondents identified specific groups of people who they thought should be prioritised (less than 10 responses each): local people; young; families; older people; those needing adaptations.
- 2.14 Other points raised (fewer than 10 responses each) included:
- the need to enforce planning obligations and ensure appropriate infrastructure;
  - need for more shared ownership properties;
  - concerns about renting in the private sector.
- 2.15 12 respondents (11%) specifically expressed reservations over this priority, mostly because they had concerns about viability and believed it best to prioritise delivery of as much affordable/social housing as possible. Some thought it might negatively affect the quality of homes delivered or that set quotas should not be imposed, rather that local situations should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

**Maximise delivery of genuinely affordable homes: Work with local communities and partners to identify housing needs in rural areas and bring forward new affordable housing in line with this**

- 2.16 88% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 119 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.17 22% of further comments received expressed support for this priority, highlighting the importance of sustaining rural areas and tackling the challenges they face. Whilst some respondents specifically mentioned the needs of young people, it is interesting to note that others believed that young people were happy to move away or that rural areas were not the best places for young people anyway.
- 2.18 Another 50% of respondents expressed qualified support for development, citing:
- the need to protect greenbelt/rural character;
  - concerns over infrastructure which was felt to be poor anyway in rural areas;
  - development only where it is needed;
  - it must be in keeping with the surrounding area and impact on existing residents should be considered;
  - developments should be small scale; and
  - include small 'starter' market homes for sale.
- 2.19 Other comments of relevance (raised by few than 10 respondents include):
- housing should be for local people;
  - Council needs to work effectively with rural communities (including use of community housing models and use of existing rural exception policies);
  - use existing stock better – under-occupation and second homes;

- utilise brownfield sites first;
- housing for older people challenging in rural areas;

**Maximise delivery of genuinely affordable homes: Ensure affordable housing is allocated to those in most need**

- 2.20 89% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 98 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.21 Almost one-third (32%) of responses revolved around how need should be defined and which groups this should include, with views expressed around fairness, consideration of individuals' own resources and the idea of some groups 'deserving' help more than others. Some specific groups were mentioned for prioritisation – young people (including families), homeless people, those in overcrowded housing and those in low paid and/or public sector jobs.
- 2.22 Many felt strongly (30%) that local people (those who live and/or work in the area) should be prioritised for affordable housing.
- 2.23 6% believed that those waiting the longest should be prioritised over others.
- 2.24 Other relevant comments received (less than 5 each) include:
- concerns around housing in the private rented sector;
  - review households' eligibility for affordable housing more regularly;
  - would like to understand allocation process better.

Points to take away:

- 2.25 Publish summary results of CHAS consultation (provisionally due for May Outlook) and consider how the new CHAS should best be publicised to promote understanding.
- 2.26 Consider need to improve understanding around local connection rules.

**Ensuring high standards of housing: Help residents to remain in their homes for longer**

- 2.27 91% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 99 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.28 29% provided further statements in support of the priority, many pointing out the benefits (physical and mental health) to individuals of remaining in communities with existing support networks. Some also highlighted that this priority was also dependent on the availability of support with e.g. day to day needs (a Hertfordshire County Council function). A few thought a degree of turnover was necessary to free up family sized accommodation.
- 2.29 15% believed however that where older people (in the main) were in properties that were too large for their needs, they should be actively encouraged to downsize.

- 2.30 7% furthermore believed there needed to be more housing options available for those who wish to downsize, including bungalows and smaller properties as well as more affordable private sector retirement properties.
- 2.31 13% mentioned improvements to energy efficiency as being a priority, with a few respondents also acknowledging the role of central government in prioritising funding for this.
- 2.32 Other relevant comments included:
- some were unaware of the availability of grants;
  - concerns about private rented sector specifically;
  - Lifetime Homes to ensure homes that can be easily adapted to future needs.
- 2.33 Respondents who did not agree with this priority raised the following points:
- delivery of more affordable housing viewed as a greater priority;
  - depends on personal circumstances, some might be better off moving to a smaller home that is cheaper to run.

Points to take away:

- 2.34 Consider reviewing how grants are publicised to improve awareness. Also seemed to be some confusion amongst respondents about who is eligible for assistance (social housing tenants only vs private renters and owners).

**Ensuring high standards of housing: Reduce the negative impact of homes in disrepair or causing nuisance to the community**

- 2.35 95% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 104 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.36 Bringing empty properties back into use was a key theme mentioned by 20% of respondents, with one or two also suggesting the use of empty commercial properties.
- 2.37 A further 19% provided general statements of support, pointing out that all homes should be of a high standard, highlighting the impact on health of poor housing and views that we should look after existing stock before building more homes.
- 2.38 Other points raised (less than 10 each):
- recognise restrictions in terms of funding, resourcing and not having our own stock;
  - private sector landlords should be responsible for maintaining properties – enforcement;
  - social tenants should be responsible for looking after their homes, with incentives as necessary e.g. deposit scheme, reduced rents, tenant/landlord charters;
  - there can be underlying reasons behind disrepair - an individual's poor health (e.g. hoarding being a mental health condition), lack of information/knowledge, not feeling valued or connected to a place, poverty;
  - concerns over damp and mould;

- a few mentions of anti-social behaviour;
- housing providers need to maintain their stock better and more effectively;
- it is not always cost-effective to repair older properties.

2.39 Of those who disagreed with this as a priority, most said that delivery of more affordable homes was more pressing. A few believed this priority should only cover the public sector.

Points to take away:

2.40 Consider whether there is need and/or scope to undertake more prevention/education (or better publicise existing advice) around common disrepair issues e.g. damp and mould and addressing underlying causes of disrepair.

**Ensuring high standards of housing: Review housing conditions in the district and use the information to better target resources**

2.41 93% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 61 respondents provided further comment.

2.42 Most respondents provided general comments of support, although some felt that more information was needed about this priority. A few also qualified their support by saying this would only be a useful exercise if it was conducted on a more regular basis and if practical actions were taken as a result. Some also noted the importance of communication around the exercise.

2.43 Other comments were mostly regarding other priorities as already raised e.g. points on planning and new developments.

**Ensuring high standards of housing: Ensure houses in multiple occupation are safe and of good quality**

2.44 91% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 71 respondents provided further comment.

2.45 Almost half (45%) of respondents provided general comments around supporting this sector in order to protect tenants, some of whom are particularly vulnerable, but also to improve the standing of an often stigmatised but valuable form of housing. Some pointed out that HMOs are used by a wider section of society than we had communicated – more generally by those unable to afford other accommodation such as single people.

2.46 14% stated the need for stricter enforcement and more regular inspections (although some questioned where the resourcing would come from).

2.47 11% did not support this priority, believing that HMOs caused nuisance to neighbours whilst others said that there should be limits to occupancy.

Points to take away:

2.48 Update text in Strategy about groups who use HMOs.

**Preventing and managing homelessness: Prevent homelessness in all its forms**

- 2.49 93% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 77 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.50 Almost one-third (31%) provided general comments of support, including views that this should be a top priority.
- 2.51 Another 23% provided comments (fewer than 5 each) illustrating the complex nature of the problem:
- more accommodation needed, including hostels;
  - some hostels are not able to accommodate those with complex needs;
  - some people are difficult to engage/work with;
  - need for earlier intervention;
  - need for better education e.g. around budgeting;
  - some factors are beyond the control of the Council.
- 2.52 16% felt that local people should be prioritised for help.
- 2.53 A further 12% mentioned other specific groups that they felt should be prioritised: veterans, care leavers, the vulnerable and those who are homeless through no fault of their own.

**Preventing and managing homelessness: Increase provision of accommodation and support for homeless people facing multiple disadvantage, including people sleeping rough**

- 2.54 87% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 82 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.55 One-quarter (26%) of respondents identified the need for the Council to work in partnership with other agencies in order to provide effective, coordinated interventions to fully support homeless people - Herts County Council (social services) was mentioned most often, with some respondents also mentioning other local authorities, specialist agencies and the voluntary sector.
- 2.56 11% raised the question over where resourcing would come from.
- 2.57 Other points raised (fewer than 5 responses each):
- prioritise those who are homeless through no fault of their own;
  - encourage self-reliance and education;
  - prioritise local people;
  - small scale schemes better;
  - need for good quality accommodation;
  - need to measure effectiveness of interventions.
- 2.58 Other points raised were not specific to this priority and had already been raised previously e.g. need for more affordable housing.

### Points to take away:

- 2.59 Amend priority to: “Increase provision of good quality accommodation and support for homeless people facing multiple disadvantage, including people sleeping rough.”
- 2.60 A lot of this feedback expresses exactly what we want to do, and the challenges we face. Consider whether we need to be better at communicating this.
- 2.61 For action plan – consider how best to monitor interventions and publish results.

### **Preventing and managing homelessness: Support victims and survivors of domestic abuse**

- 2.62 93% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 50 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.63 Over one-quarter (28%) mentioned the need for a multi-agency approach, particularly the need to work with police in securing convictions.
- 2.64 Other comments (less than 5 each):
  - need for effective sanctions against perpetrators;
  - recognised complex nature of the issue with some victims returning to abusers, and the need for education and thorough and delicate investigations;
  - questioned the availability of resourcing.

### **Preventing and managing homelessness: Improve access to affordable, local housing options**

- 2.65 81% of respondents agreed with this as a priority. 86 respondents provided further comment.
- 2.66 Most comments (35%) focused around challenges in this area:
  - private rented sector is too expensive, with poor housing standards and insecurity of tenure;
  - there is not enough supply of privately rented accommodation (including a few comments that government legislation was hindering the sector);
  - need to better enforce standards in the sector;
  - would need to be innovated to help people into the private rented sector but was not a long term solution.
- 2.67 A further 22% believed more affordable housing is important, including a few mentions of stopping Right to Buy.
- 2.68 Other comments repeated those raised previously, including comments about bringing empty properties back into use and prioritising local people.
- 2.69 5% stated in further comments that they did not see this as a priority, or believed that the Council should not work with private landlords.



## **Any other comments**

2.70 173 respondents provided additional comments at the end of the survey.

2.71 Almost one-third (29%) related to planning matters, most commonly the need to protect greenbelt and rural characteristics and the need for better infrastructure when planning new developments. There were also a few comments about streamlining the planning process, enforcing planning obligations and environmental/eco considerations (e.g. Code for Sustainable Homes).

2.72 Other common views were:

- 11% believed there should be more affordable/social housing, including some advocating for council housing;
- 7% related to the allocation of social housing, mostly around the need to make allocation fair and to ensure that it is not taken advantage of;
- 5% expressed concerns over the private rented sector, citing the expense in particular with others wanting better/more enforcement;
- 5% mentioned the need to use existing housing more effectively, including bringing empty homes back into use (also in town centres) and encouraging downsizing;
- 5% questioned the availability of resourcing for the Strategy, with some concerned about the impact on the public purse (believing we should only do the statutory minimum);
- 5% said market housing was not affordable and there should be more smaller properties built on new developments;
- 4% felt that local people should be prioritised;
- 3% raised issues about rural developments, mostly wanting smaller scale developments.

2.73 Other responses received (each with less than 5 comments):

- need for more accessible homes, including affordable/social;
- need for multi-agency working;
- the Strategy contained too many priorities;
- all priorities were important;
- tackling homelessness should be the top priority.

### Points to take away

2.74 Add in some information to relevant part of Strategy about planning obligations around environment/energy efficiency.

## **Appendix 2: Housing Strategy 2024 – 2029**

## Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce our latest Housing Strategy for North Hertfordshire. This is an ambitious document that sets our priorities and objectives over the next 5 years.

Housing is a fundamental human right that not only provides shelter and security but also plays a vital role in determining the overall well-being and prosperity of our residents.

In recent years, North Herts has experienced the far-reaching impacts of the housing crisis, including rising housing costs and limited availability of affordable homes.

This Housing Strategy provides a robust response to these challenges and sets out how we will maximise the supply of affordable housing, ensuring that we work closely with developers to achieve up to 40 percent affordable housing on new sites, as outlined in our Local Plan.

This document also outlines a multifaceted approach to housing that will help bring properties back into use, prevent homelessness, and provide continued support to meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents.

Moreover, this Strategy recognises the importance of strengthening partnerships within all sectors to influence resources and expertise in pursuit of our housing goals.

As we implement this Strategy, we must remain mindful of the ever-evolving nature of the housing landscape. We must remain flexible and adaptable, and strive for continuous improvement as we work to address emerging needs and challenges.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all the residents and stakeholders who shared their views throughout the consultation process. Your input has been invaluable in shaping this strategy, and your ongoing engagement will be vital to its success.



**Councillor Sean Prendergast**

Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health

# Purpose of the Housing Strategy

North Herts Council, as the local housing authority, is responsible for working to meet the housing needs of our local residents. This is a wide remit, ranging from tackling homelessness to delivering new affordable housing to overseeing housing standards in the district.

Our Housing Strategy sets out our main areas of focus for the coming five years, namely:

- maximising delivery of genuinely affordable homes
- ensuring high standards of housing
- preventing and managing homelessness

Experience of the past few years has shown us that our Strategy needs to be agile, so that we can respond quickly and effectively to changes in legislation and shifting national and local issues as they develop. This Housing Strategy is therefore purposefully high level, with detail about how we will achieve our priorities set out in an Action Plan which we will publish each year.

Homelessness and housing are inextricably linked and we have therefore incorporated our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for 2024-2029 within this Housing Strategy. Please see also the accompanying [review into homelessness](#) in North Herts, which informs the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

## The Housing Strategy in context

A decent, affordable home is so much more than just a roof over a person's head – it provides safety and stability from which people can lead healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.

Housing is therefore a core thread which runs through the Council's work, overlapping across other key policy areas including health, economic development, [climate change](#), [equality and inclusion](#) and safe and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Our Housing Strategy will support the delivery of the four key themes that have been identified in the [Council Plan 2022-2027](#) as areas of focus for the next five years:

- **Our environment:** a duty to protect and a commitment to tackle climate change
- **Our local economy:** supporting our towns and rural areas to thrive and grow
- **Our places:** creating spaces and infrastructure to meet the needs of our residents and a commitment to providing affordable housing
- **Our services:** welcoming and accessible and a commitment to invest in our staff

It also sits within the framework of the district's [Local Plan 2011-2031](#) which sets out how and where new homes will be delivered in the district and is a key delivery route for additional affordable housing. Also particularly relevant are the Council's [Tenancy Strategy](#), which sets out recommendations for local housing providers on tenancies and rents, the [Environmental Health Enforcement Policy](#) (an appendix to the Council's Enforcement Policy) and the [Policy for Licensing Houses in Multiple Occupation](#). The Tenants' Charter is being developed to provide information and clearly state the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the residential rented sector. It has been recognised that many in this sector, both as tenants and housing providers either do not know their rights or obligations, or try to hide behind this lack of knowledge to avoid their responsibilities; the Tenants' Charter will help to mitigate this.

The Council's work on homelessness and housing standards in particular are tightly governed by legislation<sup>1</sup> which sets out the Council's duties (what it has to do) and powers (what it may choose to do).

## **Equality and diversity**

The Council also has legal obligations to fulfil under the Equality Act 2010. In our work across all service areas, we are committed to promoting equality of opportunity, to eliminating discrimination and to fostering good relations between diverse groups in our community.

## **Strong local partnerships**

The Council does not own or manage any housing and we therefore rely on strong partnerships with local housing providers, government bodies, statutory services (such as health and social care) and a range of voluntary and other third-sector organisations to help us to deliver our priorities.

Annex 1 provides a broad overview of our key relationships.

## **Resourcing**

Realistically, resourcing will always be the ultimate limiting factor to the extent of our ambitions. We are doubtless all aware of the enormous pressures on local government funding and the demand for Council services. This is compounded by the typically short-term nature of funding settlements from government which makes it extremely difficult to plan strategically for the longer-term.

The Council legally has to provide certain services, such as accommodation for priority homeless households and disabled facilities grants for eligible applicants, and these will always be prioritised where resources are short. However, with the help of our local partners, and by pursuing additional funding opportunities and new ways of working where they arise, we will aim to achieve more, as set out in this strategy.

# **Housing in North Herts**

North Herts is a predominantly rural district with four main settlements (Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City and Royston) and about 40 villages and hamlets. Its current population is estimated at just over 133,000<sup>2</sup> and this is projected to grow by around 6,600 by 2031<sup>3</sup>. The vast majority of growth is expected to stem from increases in the older population, with people aged 80-84 the largest growing group (by 43%<sup>4</sup>).

Overall, North Herts is an attractive place to live and work, with good rail and road connections and house prices reflect this.

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<sup>1</sup> Primary homelessness legislation is contained within the Housing Act 1996. It is amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The Housing Act, 1988 also addresses the end of tenancy arrangements.

<sup>2</sup> ONS, mid-2021 population estimates.

<sup>3</sup> North Herts District & Stevenage Borough Councils Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2023, Opinion Research Services.

<sup>4</sup> ONS, 2018-based subnational population projections.

## Median house prices, year ending March 2023

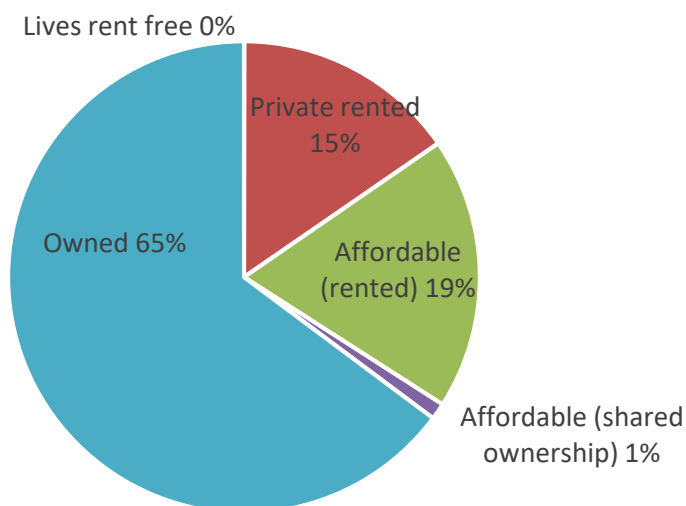
	North Herts	Herts	East	England
All house types	£407,000	£460,000	£342,500	£290,000
Detached	£675,000	£830,000	£480,000	£440,000
Semi-detached	£451,375	£550,000	£350,000	£264,000
Terraced	£370,000	£422,500	£310,000	£240,000
Flats	£226,555	£261,000	£210,000	£232,000

Source: House Price Statistics for Small Areas, ONS September 2023

Affordability of home ownership was identified as a key challenge in our previous housing strategy and it remains a significant hurdle, with house prices over nine times average annual earnings<sup>5</sup>.

A small and in-demand private rental sector means that there are also stark affordability issues here, with most low-income households priced out of the sector due to benefit levels (local housing allowance) not keeping up with market prices (see our [Tenancy Strategy](#) for further detail). The sector is furthermore characterised by small-scale or 'accidental' landlords, making the local supply of rental properties more sensitive to changes in landlords' personal circumstances and any uncertainties that may accompany legislative reform of the sector.

### Household tenure in North Herts



Source: Census 2021, ONS

Affordable (also known as social) housing in North Herts is owned and managed by registered providers of social housing, with the [Regulator for Social Housing](#) overseeing the sector. Settle is the largest provider of social housing in the district, but there are over 30 in total. Demand is consistently high for affordable housing, with generally around 2,500 households on our register for affordable housing at any one time (see [statistics](#) on our website, updated annually).

In total, there are around 59,000 homes in North Hertfordshire<sup>6</sup>. The vast majority of these are in generally good condition with no obviously large concentrations of poorly performing

<sup>5</sup> ONS house price to residence-based earnings ratios 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Census 2021.

dwellings in the district Latest data<sup>7</sup> however suggest that over 10% of households in the district suffer from fuel poverty and are unable to afford to heat their homes sufficiently. A housing condition survey is due to be carried out during 2024 which will look at a number of relevant key housing associated criteria, including the tenure, the state of the property, the type and extent of the heating, housing alteration needs, etc., all of which contribute to the affordability and suitability of the home for the occupant. It is already well known that many homes in the rented sector in the district are social housing, and partly due to the increasing pressures on these landlords, it is likely that they will face an increasing challenge as they try to meet their obligations whilst working with an aging housing stock.

There are around 200 Houses in Multiple Occupation in the district, with the Council having licensing responsibilities for just under 40 of these. There are also a small number of park homes which offer an alternative to the main housing stock.

We have conducted a detailed [review of homelessness](#) in the district to inform our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

## Maximising delivery of genuinely affordable homes

### Key priorities

- Maximise delivery of new affordable housing to meet local needs
- Wherever possible, seek to champion the delivery of social rented homes
- Work with local communities and partners to identify housing needs in rural areas and bring forward new affordable housing in line with this
- Ensure affordable housing is allocated to those in most need

### The need for more affordable homes

Affordability of local housing for our residents remains a key challenge, with house prices over nine times average annual earnings. By 2031, over 3,000 additional local households will be in need of affordable housing, with 29% of newly forming households estimated to be unable to afford to rent or buy on the private market locally<sup>8</sup>.

Affordable housing is defined within the national planning policy framework<sup>9</sup> and refers to homes let at social and affordable rents, typically 50-80% of market rents. It also includes a range of intermediate housing products which are homes for rent or sale above social/affordable rents but below market levels. In North Herts, intermediate housing is generally provided via [shared ownership](#). Affordable housing is also known as social housing.

The Council's [Local Plan](#) for 2011-2031 aims to deliver at least 11,600 net new homes to meet the district's needs for market and affordable housing. The Local Plan provides for 33% of all homes over the plan period to be delivered as affordable housing, with targets of 40% affordable housing on the largest sites<sup>10</sup>. We will negotiate with developers to ensure that maximum viable affordable housing is delivered on new sites to meet the district's

<sup>7</sup> Sub-regional fuel poverty data in England 2023 (2021 data), Department for Energy Security & Net Zero.

<sup>8</sup> North Herts District and Stevenage Borough Councils Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2023, Opinion Research Services.

<sup>9</sup> [National Planning Policy Framework](#), December 2023.

<sup>10</sup> See also [Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document](#), January 2023.

identified housing needs. In instances where on-site provision of new affordable housing is not possible or appropriate, planning obligations<sup>11</sup> set out requirements for off-site provision or an equivalent financial contribution (commuted sum) from the developer, in lieu, which is used for the delivery of additional affordable housing on other schemes.

It is important to recognise that the availability of land locally is extremely limited and is a key constraint on the provision of additional affordable housing. The lack of viable sites outside of those identified in the Local Plan means that we are largely reliant on planning gain for the delivery of new affordable housing. Whilst the majority of the district's overall need for affordable housing should be met by planning gain if the Local Plan targets are achieved (and taking account of homes already delivered), developer activity is dependent upon prospects for the economy as a whole.

## **Housing for older people and vulnerable households**

Our population is ageing. By 2031, people aged 65 and over will account for almost one-quarter (23%) of the district's projected population. Fortunately, we are living longer, healthier lives and most older people will continue to live independently in their own homes or to do so with a minimum of support. We recognise the need to develop a range of attractive housing options for older people to suit how people wish to live now and in the future.

We set out in the next section options for those who wish to stay independent in their own homes for longer.

The Local Plan includes provision for a range of newbuild older persons housing. On certain development sites, this may include bungalows or smaller homes which meet accessible and adaptable standards. Larger sites will be able to support some sheltered housing (some of which will be affordable homes, in line with planning requirements), which is usually designed specifically for those over the age of 55 and provides for independent living with modest levels of support.

The Local Plan also sets out requirements for older people who require higher, specialist, levels of support in supported accommodation. Specialist supported housing may in fact be required by people of all ages, who have physical or mental health requirements or other support needs such as substance abuse issues or being at risk of violence or abuse.

The provision of supported accommodation is primarily a Hertfordshire County Council function and they also have key responsibilities for providing practical support to help people to live independently and stay safe and well. We will continue to work closely with the County Council to assess the accommodation needs of local residents, and bring forward opportunities to meet these.

The new Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023 introduces changes to how certain supported accommodation is regulated. It allows for the government to create new national supported housing standards and introduces a requirement on local authorities to review supported accommodation in their area and publish a supported housing strategy. This additional area of work will be covered in our Action Plan, once further detail is available from government.

Housing grants are also available in some circumstances to help occupants remain in their homes. All of the grants are limited, targeted and means-tested, but are available to help different sectors within our community if they have a qualifying need. Disabled facilities grants are available to help facilitate adaptations and alterations to a dwelling to allow the beneficiary to continue to live with greater independence. Housing Repairs Assistance Grants are available to help address relatively minor matters including disrepair, again to



help keep the property suitable to live in for longer. Also, for many years, it has been recognised that our housing stock is largely not as energy efficient as it needs to be. In recent years, the energy crisis has exacerbated this, with many becoming more concerned about their abilities to feed or heat their homes. Various energy related grant schemes have been used over time, with the embodiment of these currently being the Eco Schemes, which are Government funded via the energy companies, and aim to help improve the energy efficiency of qualifying homes. Whilst not exclusively available to the elderly or vulnerable, these groups do tend to be major beneficiaries of these grants, and although demand far exceeds funding, at least in North Herts, the Council will continue to deliver or sign-post to these grants.

## Ensuring genuinely affordable housing

Affordable rents, which are set at up to 80% of market rents, and therefore, unlike social rents, are not linked to local incomes, are increasingly unaffordable for local households especially those reliant upon benefit receipt. Our [Tenancy Strategy](#) sets out our concerns in detail and provides guidance based on latest available evidence on affordability for housing providers operating in North Herts. This includes a core requirement that rents should be no higher than Local Housing Allowance levels for the area.

However under the national planning policy framework, the majority of rented homes delivered through planning gain are for affordable rent rather than social rent as these are more viable for developers. As more new homes are delivered, and older stock is replaced, so affordable rent is likely to make up an increasing proportion of our total affordable housing stock. In 2022/23, properties let at affordable rent made up 20% of lets compared to only 8% in 2019/20<sup>12</sup>.

### Affordable housing completions in North Herts

	Social rent	Affordable rent	Intermediate	Total
2019/20	0	38	40	78
2020/21	71*	47	41	159
2021/22	2	83	50	135
2022/23	54*	39	5	98
2023/24 (estimate)	0	95	41	136

Source: NHC monitoring.

\* independent living units for people aged over 55.

The Council will promote the delivery of genuinely affordable homes, supported by up-to-date evidence including that provided by our latest Strategic Housing Market Assessment. In many instances, evidence shows this will be through the delivery of social rented properties . and keeping all rents within local housing allowance (LHA) rates Whilst most affordable housing is delivered through the planning system, we will continue to work in partnership with local housing providers and other partners to bring forward other affordable housing sites where opportunities become available and where funding can be secured whilst also considering enforcing options when housing obligations remain undelivered.

## Working with rural communities

<sup>12</sup> NHC analysis of lets.

There are unique challenges around the provision of affordable housing in our rural areas, where affordability is often the most challenging and homes scarce. Without sufficient affordable housing for young people in particular, rural communities will struggle to remain sustainable into the future.

We will continue to work with Community Development Action, parish councils and registered providers to identify housing needs in rural areas and bring forward new affordable housing for local people as appropriate through a programme of rural housing needs surveys.

### **Allocation of affordable housing**

With many households unable to afford to rent or buy a home on the private market, there is high demand for affordable housing and often long waits for those registered for rented affordable housing.

The Council, together with settle housing, manages and operates the [Common Housing Allocation Scheme](#) for North Herts. This sets out who can apply for rented affordable housing and how households meet local connection criteria and are prioritised for housing. We keep the allocation scheme under regular review in order to ensure that it remains up-to-date (for example following changes in legislation) and that affordable homes continue to be allocated to those in most need.

We recognise that some affordable housing is under-occupied, mostly by couples (both of pensionable age and younger) who no longer have children living with them. We will continue to review options to encourage people to downsize where appropriate, although the lack of attractive alternative housing options is a particular barrier.

## **Ensuring high standards of housing**

### **Key priorities**

- Help residents to remain in their homes for longer
- Reduce the negative impact of homes in disrepair or causing nuisance to the community
- Review housing conditions in the district and use the information to better target resources
- Ensure houses in multiple occupation are safe and of good quality

### **Help to remain in the family home**

It is now well recognised, that as well as wishing to live in their family home for longer, people also tend to remain healthier for longer if they are able to do so. Unfortunately, as we become older or less able, this preference to remain independent becomes harder to achieve.

Providing targeted grants to assist residents to maintain homes in a good state of repair and to improve their energy efficiency is one way in which the owners of these homes can be helped to remain independent for longer, thereby allowing more of our residents to remain in their community for longer. The Council will work with our communities to make available as much grant aid as practicable, not just for the benefit of current residents, but to prolong the effective lifespan of the homes, thereby helping to the community to improve the living conditions for more people into the future.

As previously mentioned, for some of our residents, grants may be available to either adapt or repair their homes, or help to make them more energy efficient. Although this assistance is limited, and so can only help a small proportion of our residents, the grants do help people

to remain in their homes for longer, and so reduces the demand to additional housing, even if in the longer term, more suitable housing will still be required.

## **Empty homes**

Within the district, there are a significant number of empty homes, which for a number of reasons, have been removed from the housing sector, whether for a short or long-term period. Homes which are vacant for a short period of time, especially if they are undergoing repair or are mid-sale, are an essential, albeit small part of the private sector housing establishment.

However, there is a small but significant number of private houses which have been kept vacant by the owners for many months (including second homes), and often for many years, and these are known as long-term vacant dwellings. We wish to engage with the owners of these homes to better understand why they are not being brought back into use, and ultimately to increase the housing stock within the district. The Council adopted an Empty Homes Strategy at the start of 2024 and this will form the basis of a targeted intervention (alongside increased Council Tax premiums) to better manage this resource, helping owners to make available a valuable commodity and at the same time, reducing the impact of any unwanted blight and nuisance caused by vacant homes left to fall into disrepair.

## **Enforcing housing standards**

It is recognised that homes, just as everything else, deteriorate over time. It is also accepted that home-owners have the responsibility to repair their homes, at least in the manner and to the standard they wish, although in certain aspects, e.g., electrical defects, structural issues, etc., minimum legal standards exist and defects or repairs falling below this minimum limit, or adversely affecting neighbours may require a more formal intervention to facilitate the repair.

Homes in the rented sector also mirror the above points, with the owner again responsible to ensuring a minimum standard of housing conditions are available, albeit, for the comfort and safety of their tenant, rather than themselves. Due to the nature of this type of tenure, there is a greater focus on the roles and responsibilities of both the landlord and the tenant although the objective remains the same. Unfortunately, for many reasons, many tenants do find they are living in homes not fully meeting the minimum standards, and whilst they often have a contractual means of redress, when the defects fall below legal standards, regulatory agencies can act on behalf of the tenant to ensure those standards are achieved. The Council's Environmental Health service has championed this response for many years, and will continue to do so where the defect poses a risk to health of the occupant or others, or a statutory breach is the problem. However, recently, the Government has developed and introduced a range of first tier judicial agencies who look at specific areas of the law and aim to resolve disputes faster and in a more focussed way. The Housing Ombudsman is one such agency, and they aim to resolve tenancy disputes, including the failure of the landlord to provide a home at least meeting minimum reasonable standards of repair.

## **Reviewing housing conditions**

It is important that the Council has a good understanding of the nature and characteristics of the housing in their district, especially when associated with the demands of the community. Through their normal daily interactions officers understand this, and use this information to better target any formal response to complaints and interventions, but a more formal assessment of the local housing conditions, will be via a Housing Stock Conditions Survey. The survey is due to take place during 2024 and will review a high number of characteristics associated with our housing stock and allow us to identify and better target our resources and service delivery to accommodate our housing conditions needs. Previous surveys have helped the Council focus its service delivery to the greater need, and it is expected that this survey will do the same.

## **Fuel poverty/energy efficiency?**

It has long been recognised that our housing stock is not as energy efficient as it could be, meaning that it costs more to effectively heat and run our homes, when compared to the best standards which are already available, but tend not to be incorporated into homes. Even new build housing, although more energy efficient than previous homes, still fall far behind many European neighbours housing standards or what is also available in the UK, albeit at a higher initial cost. Add to this an energy crisis of rapidly escalating fuel costs, for the first time in many years, more people are becoming increasingly conscious that changes to their homes, or heating practices need to be made to improve matters.

As part of an assistance programme to address at least some of the issues linked to this, the Government has, for many years, made available grant funding targeted and aimed at the more vulnerable household. This is currently in the form of the Eco Grants Scheme, and works with the larger energy companies funding a private sector scheme working to improve residential energy efficiency, including in North Herts.

In addition to the Eco schemes, subject to the limitations of the other grants, the Housing Repairs Assistance Grant can also contribute to improving energy efficiency matters, but only insofar as replacing defective systems, but this too continues to be available for qualifying residents.

## **Provision of safe and good quality houses in multiple occupation**

Houses in multiple occupation (HMO) provide an essential resource for those who are otherwise unable to secure private housing by themselves or need to live affordably in a location for a short time, but are unwilling or unable to occupy a whole house, e.g., transient workers or students. HMOs are essentially privately rented homes occupied by more than one household, living with a substantial degree of separation between the households, but sharing facilities such as a kitchen, a bathroom or the living area.

Currently in the UK, there are legally two types of HMOs, those, which due to their household size and composition are required to be licensed before they can be occupied, and those which are smaller HMOs, which do not require a licence. The Council will work with all those involved in this sector to ensure that all HMOs are legally compliant, that they are safe and in a good state of repair, and that their impact on the local community is controlled and beneficial, and that they too can also be a valuable commodity to the local housing sector.

## **Park homes**

Park homes are a small but important part of the housing sector. All park home sites are required to be licensed; a license can only be obtained once planning permission has been given for a park home site. The Council has sought to promote good standards on park home sites over the years. All sites are periodically inspected and the Council adopted new model standards in December 2013.

# **Preventing and managing homelessness**

## **Key priorities**

- Prevent homelessness in all its forms
- Increase provision of good quality accommodation and support for homeless people facing multiple disadvantage, including people sleeping rough
- Support victims and survivors of domestic abuse

- Improve access to affordable, local housing options

## **Homelessness prevention work**

Preventing homelessness from occurring in the first place is key to tackling homelessness and its causes in North Herts. Homelessness is devastating for the individual and can have long term impacts upon health, wellbeing and other life outcomes, particularly if it is repeated. Children are especially hard hit with potential disruption to education, support networks and the stability that comes from a safe, secure home.

Homelessness takes many forms, from highly visible street homelessness (or rough sleeping), to 'sofa surfing' where someone moves between a series of family and friends' homes because they have nowhere else to stay.

The Council has [legal duties](#) to prevent and relieve homelessness as well as accommodation duties towards certain, priority groups of people including families with dependent children and individuals who are vulnerable due to physical or mental health needs for example. As summarised in our [review of homelessness](#) for the district, last year (2022/23), we owed duties to prevent or relieve homelessness to over 400 households. In addition, we owed a main housing duty to secure accommodation for just over 120 households.

We work closely with local partners to provide prevention services, including specialist support and advice for young people and those fleeing domestic abuse (more below) and advice and a range of support to tackle affordability issues (e.g. benefit advice, affordable loans, mediation with landlords) and help people stay in their homes.

However, more people continue to approach us for help at the point of homelessness, rather than earlier, when more can be done to help. This is despite well-publicised, easy-to-access online assistance being available through the Council's website and the range of prevention services delivered through specialist organisations. Two-thirds of those who approach at the point of crisis are single households and they are most likely to approach because they are being asked to leave accommodation by family or friends or because they are fleeing domestic abuse. We are committed to ensuring that our services are approachable and accessible to all and will continue to look at ways to improve this. We will also work to strengthen and develop our local partnerships to improve early identification of people at risk of homelessness and pre-crisis intervention.

## **Supporting people facing multiple disadvantage**

A growing number of people who approach the Council for homelessness assistance face multiple disadvantage, that is to say, a combination of problems including homelessness. Over half of the single people that we placed into temporary accommodation in 2022/23 for example had two or more support needs. Mental health issues are extremely prevalent, and poor physical health is also very common. Many of the people we work with are also at risk of, or have experienced abuse of different forms (including domestic abuse), have histories of substance misuse and/or contact with the criminal justice system. Many have experienced repeated cycles of homelessness, including rough sleeping, with accommodation placements often failing due to unmet support needs. In recent years, the Council has also faced additional accommodation demands from refugee households as a result of global conflicts (most notably in Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan) and the government's asylum dispersal policy.

People who sleep rough typically face a complex range of issues, with many having had multiple spells of street homelessness, interspersed with spells of sofa surfing and other temporary accommodation arrangements. About half of this group will have been previously refused entry or evicted from local supported housing schemes or affordable housing as a result of their behaviour and multiple support needs.

We are striving to put an end to the revolving door of homelessness. The complexities of peoples' support needs however, which span a range of services outside of housing, including adult social care, health services and the criminal justice system, mean that we cannot fix this on our own. That is why we are committed to the Herts [Making Every Adult Matter](#) partnership, which brings together the range of local services to provide a person-centred approach to help people move on with their lives. Our rough sleeping outreach service operates on similar principles, helping individuals not just into emergency accommodation but also to access appropriate support across the range of services.

Availability of good quality, local accommodation-based support is a core element of the pathway out of homelessness and towards independence, providing safe, suitable accommodation from which people can receive the support they need. We have worked hard during the pandemic and since to increase provision of this type of accommodation, however some of the provision is temporary and demand continues to outweigh supply. We will continue to seek to secure additional accommodation, wherever funding is available, in order to stabilise provision.

People on the pathway are supported by [housing related support](#) services commissioned through Hertfordshire County Council, including specialist mental health and substance abuse support. We will be working closely with the County Council in the commissioning of services into the future, ensuring that residents' support needs are met. Timely and relevant support services also have an important prevention role, reducing the risk of future, repeat homelessness.

## **Supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse**

There has been a notable increase over the last few years in people facing homelessness due to domestic abuse, making up 15% of cases in 2022/23. Unfortunately, the national picture is similar, with restrictions during the covid-19 pandemic serving to isolate victims and the current cost of living crisis adding to tensions in many homes.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced, amongst other measures, a statutory definition of domestic abuse (emphasising that it is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, controlling or coercive, and economic abuse) and provided that victims of domestic abuse automatically have a 'priority need' for homelessness assistance.

As part of the Hertfordshire Domestic Abuse Partnership, we are committed to preventing domestic abuse wherever possible, and where it is not, supporting victims and survivors to stay safe and rebuild their lives. We have worked with Survivors Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) for many years in order to do so, offering advice, emotional and practical support and crisis intervention where necessary (including Safe Space emergency accommodation).

## **Limited affordable, local housing options**

A shortage of accommodation that is affordable in the district is a significant underlying reason behind homelessness in North Herts. Whilst home ownership is out of reach for many local people, especially the young, our private rental sector is small and in high demand. Affordable housing is in constant high demand with generally around 2,500 households registered at any one time for rented affordable housing.

Our review of homelessness identified tenants in private rented accommodation as being at particular risk of homelessness, with almost one quarter of homeless cases in 2022/23 due to private rented tenancies coming to an end. Many of these cases are due to tenants falling into rent arrears but some are also because landlords are selling their properties or wish to take them back.

For some of the people we work with however, who do not qualify for affordable housing locally (due to outstanding debt or criminal convictions for example), the private rented sector is their only housing option. We will be working to engage more intensively with local landlords to try and improve access to the sector for groups such as these.

For those for whom affordable housing is an option, our Common Housing Allocation Scheme provides reasonable preference for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Scheme is also an important prevention tool, incentivising young people in particular to remain in the family home until they can successfully bid for an affordable home.

Our work to maximise delivery of genuinely affordable homes will also go some way to increasing the housing options available to local people.

## Annex 1: working with our partners to deliver for North Herts

### Registered housing providers

Own and manage housing stock in North Herts (general needs, retirement living and supported housing).

### Hertfordshire County Council

Responsible for provision of supported accommodation and housing related support for homeless and vulnerable households. Also a key landowner in the district. Lead for resettlement work with refugee households.

### Other Herts local authorities

Partnership working and sharing best practice across housing and homelessness.

### North Herts & Stevenage Homeless Forum

Central forum for all partners and stakeholders involved in delivery of local homelessness services, including:

Beam  
 Black Squirrel Credit Union  
 Change Grow Live (CGL)  
 Citizens Advice Bureau  
 DWP  
 Emerging Futures  
 First Garden Cities Homes  
 Herts County Council  
 HertsHelp  
 Herts Mind Network  
 Hertfordshire Constabulary  
 Herts Young Homeless  
 Housing brokerage service  
 Keystage Housing  
 Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing  
 NHS  
 No More service  
 North Herts Council  
 One YMCA  
 Peabody housing  
 POhWER  
 Probation Service  
 Resolve  
 Safer Places  
 settle  
 Stevenage Borough Council  
 Survivors Against Domestic Abuse (SADA)  
 Turning Point

### Homes England

Funds affordable housing.

### North Herts Housing Partnership

Manages and administers the allocation of affordable housing in the district.

### North Herts Council:

- maximising delivery of genuinely affordable homes
- ensuring high standards of housing
- preventing and managing homelessness

### Regulator of Social Housing

Promotes a viable, efficient and well-governed social housing sector.

### Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation

A key landowner in the district.

### Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements

Brings together key agencies to manage offenders.

### Homelessness Advisory and Support Team (DLUHC)

Provides targeted advice and supports delivery of homelessness services.

### Herts Home Improvement Agency

Provision of home adaptations.

### Multi-disciplinary team arrangements

Brings together key agencies and services to discuss complex cases

### Herts Making Every Adult Matter partnership

A coordinated approach to helping people with multiple disadvantage.

### Community Development Action Herts and parish councils

Meeting rural housing needs.

### NHS trusts

Deliver healthcare and community based services

### East of England Strategic Migration Partnership

Coordinates and supports delivery of national



### Appendix 3: Equality Impact Analysis

1. Name of activity:	<b>NHC Housing Strategy (2024 – 2029)</b>							
2. Main purpose of activity:	To provide a strategic framework to enable the Council to undertake its statutory housing functions and to set high level priorities for the next five years. Work will focus on three key areas: (i) maximising delivery of genuinely affordable homes; (ii) ensuring high standards of housing; and (iii) preventing and managing homelessness. This Strategy replaces the previous Housing Strategy for 2019-2024.							
3. List the information, data or evidence used in this assessment:	The Housing Strategy is evidenced by a wide range of sources including: the Council's <a href="#">Review of Homelessness in North Hertfordshire</a> ; the district's <a href="#">Strategic Housing Market Assessment</a> (to be published shortly); published housing market data (including house prices, rents, local housing allowance levels); Council data on affordable housing and <a href="#">allocations</a> . See also <a href="#">Trying Times: how people living in poor quality housing have fared during the cost of living crisis</a> (Resolution Foundation, 2023), <a href="#">Young people's future health and the private rented sector</a> (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2019), <a href="#">Homelessness in the countryside: a hidden crisis</a> (University of Kent & University of Southampton, 2023), <a href="#">Costly differences: living standards for working-age people with disabilities</a> (Resolution Foundation, 2023)							
<b>4. Assessment</b>								
<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Neutral</b> (x)	<b>Negative</b> (x)	<b>Positive</b> (x)	Describe the person you are assessing the impact on, including identifying: community member or employee, details of the characteristic if relevant, e.g. mobility problems/particular religion and why and how they might be <b>negatively or positively</b> affected. <b>Negative: What are the risks?</b> <b>Positive: What are the benefits?</b>				
<b>Community considerations</b> (i.e. applying across communities or associated with rural living or Human Rights)			x	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #e0e0e0;"><b>Negative</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #e0e0e0;"><b>Positive</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td>There are unique challenges around the provision of affordable housing in our rural areas, where affordability is often the most challenging and homes scarce. Young people in particular are often unable to afford to continue living in villages in which they were brought up, with implications for viability and sustainability of rural communities. The Housing Strategy includes measures to bring forward new housing in rural areas, working with local communities, where need is identified.</td> </tr> </table>	<b>Negative</b>		<b>Positive</b>	There are unique challenges around the provision of affordable housing in our rural areas, where affordability is often the most challenging and homes scarce. Young people in particular are often unable to afford to continue living in villages in which they were brought up, with implications for viability and sustainability of rural communities. The Housing Strategy includes measures to bring forward new housing in rural areas, working with local communities, where need is identified.
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<b>Positive</b>								
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A person living with a disability			x	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #e0e0e0;"><b>Negative</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #e0e0e0;"><b>Positive</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td>The Housing Strategy identifies as a priority the need to help people to remain in their homes for longer, where they wish to do so. This includes provision of Disabled Facilities</td> </tr> </table>	<b>Negative</b>		<b>Positive</b>	The Housing Strategy identifies as a priority the need to help people to remain in their homes for longer, where they wish to do so. This includes provision of Disabled Facilities
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<b>Positive</b>								
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				Grants for those needing adaptations to make their properties suitable for disabled living. For those requiring alternative accommodation and who are unable to meet their own needs, the Housing Strategy includes measures to ensure that scarce affordable housing continues to be prioritised for those who need it the most (which will include disabled households) and measures to maximise the supply of new affordable housing.
A person of a particular race	x			<b>Negative</b>  <b>Positive</b> 
A person of a gay, lesbian or bisexual sexual orientation	x			<b>Negative</b>  <b>Positive</b> 
A person of a particular sex, male or female, including issues around pregnancy and maternity	x			<b>Negative</b>  <b>Positive</b> 
A person of a particular religion or belief	x			<b>Negative</b>  <b>Positive</b> 
A person of a particular age			x	<b>Negative</b>  <b>Positive</b> <p>The Housing Strategy also identifies the housing needs of older people as a specific area of focus, given the ageing population of the district (by 2031, people aged over 65 will account for 23% of the district's projected population). It includes provision for new build older persons housing (in line with the district's Local Plan 2011-2031), help for those who wish to stay independent in their own homes and collaborative work with Hertfordshire County Council which is responsible for the provision of supported housing for those with support needs. Younger people may also positively benefit from measures to increase the delivery of affordable housing as it is typically young people who find it most difficult to afford housing of their own.</p>

Transgender	x			Negative
				Positive

### 5 Results

	Yes	No	
Were positive impacts identified?	x		<p>The Housing Strategy includes measures to meet a wide range of housing needs in North Herts. Many of these measures cover statutory functions, particularly those around homelessness and housing standards.</p> <p>Some of these measures will benefit a wide tranche of residents, such as improving delivery of affordable housing and measures to bring empty homes back into use. The majority of interventions however will benefit (indeed are targeted at) the most vulnerable of our residents, including those who are homeless and rough sleeping, those who are living in poverty in hazardous housing conditions, people fleeing domestic abuse and those with multiple support needs. Much of this is governed by the legislative framework which e.g. sets eligibility criteria for services/assistance.</p>
Are some people benefiting more than others? If so explain who and why.	x		The Council's statutory housing functions, as framed in the Housing Strategy, are directed at assisting those in greatest housing need.
Were negative impacts identified (what actions were taken)		x	

### 6. Consultation, decisions and actions

If High or very high range results were identified who was consulted and what recommendations were given?		
Public consultation took place over January/February advertised through the Council's website and social media channels. Over 450 completed responses to a consultation survey were submitted, with a majority being in favour of each of the priorities identified in the Strategy. Many useful additional comments were provided and some of these have been included in the Strategy whilst others will be taken up in the annual action plan.		
Describe the decision on this activity		
No negative impacts identified and therefore no changes required to be made.		
List all actions identified to address/mitigate negative impact or promote positively		
Action	Responsible person	Completion due date
We will publish the new Housing Strategy on our website. Annual action plans will also be published with information on priorities for the forthcoming year and progress over the year.	Strategic Housing Manager	Strategy to be published by 1 April 2024. Action plans to be published annually.
When, how and by whom will these actions be monitored?		
Actions to be monitored by the Strategic Housing Manager, with reporting of performance indicators at corporate level as relevant.		

<b>7. Signatures</b>	
Assessor	
Name: <b>Tiranan Straughan</b>	Signature** T F Straughan
Validated by	
Name: <b>Martin Lawrence</b>	Signature** M S Lawrence
<b>Forward to the Corporate Policy Team</b>	
Signature** G R Chapman	
Assessment date: <b>23/02/2024</b>	Review date: <b>23/02/2024</b>

**\*\* Please type your name to allow forms to be sent electronically.**

***A copy of this form should be forwarded to the corporate policy team and duplicate filed on the council's report system alongside any report proposing a decision on policy or service change.***