

# Waverley Borough Council Homelessness Strategy

2018 - 2023

The logo for Waverley Borough Council is located in the bottom right corner. It features a large blue circle with a smaller, lighter blue circle overlapping its top-left edge. The word "Waverley" is written in a white, cursive script font across the middle of the blue circle. Below it, the words "BOROUGH COUNCIL" are written in a smaller, white, sans-serif, all-caps font. A white curved line underlines the word "Waverley".

Waverley  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

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## Foreword

The publication of Waverley's fourth Homelessness Strategy comes at a very exciting and challenging time for housing in Waverley.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA 2017) comes into force on 3 April 2018 and it represents one of the most significant changes in homelessness legislation for 40 years. The need for the Council to produce its fourth Homelessness Strategy therefore comes at a very opportune time as the Council and its statutory and voluntary partners seek to work together to meet the requirements of the new Act and provide better outcomes for customers facing homelessness in Waverley.

Despite the economic challenges over recent years, Waverley's innovative and dedicated approach in preventing homelessness has led to the Council continuing to maintain some of the lowest number of homeless households in temporary accommodation in the South East.

The Council's excellence in its Housing Options Service and its partnership working to prevent homelessness was recently recognised by the Silver Standard Award from the National Practitioner Support Service (one of only 14 Councils nationally).

Despite the above successes, the next few years are likely to bring considerable challenges to the Council. Homelessness in Surrey and the UK is steadily rising and the continued role out of welfare reform measures will inevitably impact on many households who are already seeking housing advice and support from the Council.

Whilst Waverley residents enjoy the benefits of its beautiful location and facilities, Waverley's attractiveness means property prices to rent or buy are beyond the reach of many. This creates demand for more affordable housing for which the demand far outstrips the supply. The lack of supply means households either have to find accommodation in less expensive areas outside of Waverley or have to live in far from ideal circumstances in the homes of friends or relatives. Such situations inevitably trigger tensions in homes that in some cases can lead to homelessness. This can particularly be exacerbated for households with additional needs due to their vulnerability and/or complex and difficult life experiences.

This Strategy outlines both the successes in tackling homelessness over the last few years as well as the challenges ahead and proposed actions to meet these challenges.

The Council is indebted to the many people and organisations that have assisted in producing this strategy and would like to thank them for contributing to its content and their commitment to achieving its aims.

I am very pleased to commend this Strategy and hope it will help the Council and its partners build on the good work that has already taken place.

Carole King  
Portfolio Holder for Housing

# Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires that Local Authorities publish a Homelessness Strategy at least every 5 years. Waverley's last Strategy was published in July 2013. The Strategy should be the result of consultation and partnership working with Waverley's statutory and voluntary partners. It should include a review of the current levels of homelessness in Waverley and the services and accommodation available to meet the needs of those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

It should also take into account Government priorities in terms of tackling homelessness as well as link in with the Council's own strategies and the strategies of its partner agencies. The Strategy must set out the local authority's plans to prevent homelessness and for securing sufficient accommodation and support are or will be available for people who become homeless or who are at risk of becoming so.

This Strategy is divided into 2 main sections with an appendix (the Homelessness Review) giving background context and statistical information:

## **Section 1 – Waverley's Homelessness Strategy**

The Strategy highlights the progress and achievements made in tackling homelessness since the last strategy. It then outlines the principles behind the strategy, the risks, challenges and opportunities ahead and the priority areas for the Action Plan (Section 2).

## **Section 2 – Action Plan**

The Action Plan outlines the steps the Council and its partners will take over the next 5 years to meet the challenge of preventing homelessness. As the Strategy will be reviewed annually the Action Plan mainly focuses on actions for the first year.

## **Appendix – Waverley's Homelessness Review**

The Homelessness Review sets out in greater detail the background context, including statistical information, case studies and details of the services in and around Waverley for homeless people.

Whilst the Council has taken the lead in co-ordinating and producing the strategy, thanks are also due to service users and representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies for their invaluable contribution to the Strategy through the consultation process and through day to day partnership working to address homelessness.

# Section One

## Waverley's Homelessness Strategy

### a) Progress / achievements since the last Strategy

#### i) Prevention

The Council has continued to tackle homelessness by embedding a proactive, preventative approach within its Housing Options Service and its wider work with its statutory and voluntary partners.

This means that resources are targeted at preventative housing advice and support to help people remain in suitable accommodation.

Where prevention is not appropriate or achievable, the Council has worked very hard at helping people access alternative housing options such as accommodation in the private sector or supported accommodation.

This approach has meant that the number of households formally applying as statutorily homeless to the Council and being accepted as homeless has continued to remain very low. This in turn has meant that numbers of households having to be placed into temporary accommodation has also remained low and Waverley continues to have among lowest number of homeless households in temporary accommodation in the South East.

The low number of households having to be placed in temporary accommodation compared with other Surrey Boroughs is shown in the table below:

	Surrey	Surrey Average	Waverley
Homeless households living in temporary accommodation as at 31 March 2017	830	75	1

#### ii) Successful completion of previous Homelessness Strategy targets

Of the 33 actions in the 2013 -2018 Strategy Action Plan, 31 actions were achieved and the remaining 2 were partially achieved.

#### iii) Silver Award for Waverley's Housing Options Service

One of the Action Plan targets from the previous Strategy was to participate in the National Practitioner Service Gold Standard Award challenge. Following a rigorous peer review by representatives from Woking and Guildford Councils and the National Practitioner Service, Waverley achieved a 72% rating. The Council was then able to apply to be assessed in regard to different aspects of its homelessness service such as its work to prevent homelessness, its homelessness strategy, its minimal use of bed and breakfast accommodation etc. Following assessments in 2017, Waverley is one of only 14 Councils nationally to be awarded Silver Standard for its housing options and partnership work in preventing homelessness.

#### **iv) Increased help for rough sleepers and single people**

During the course of the last Strategy Waverley has significantly improved the help it offers to rough sleepers, those at threat of rough sleeping and single people. With other West Surrey Councils a successful bid was made for a DCLG grant to fund an outreach service for rough sleepers run by the York Road Project in Woking (YRP). Following the success of the service Waverley has maintained the funding. More recently Guildford Waverley and Woking Councils, YRP and Riverside Housing were successful in bidding for further Government funding to provide a service to increase mental health and well being support for rough sleepers. Waverley has also provided move-on accommodation in Farnham and Milford so vulnerable Waverley clients can move-on from higher support schemes in Woking and Guildford. The Council has also purchased bed spaces at YRP for single homeless clients and has been piloting a shared house scheme with Woking Borough Council and Ethical Lettings.

#### **v) Transfer of the management of the Housing Register for non social housing tenants to the Housing Options Team**

During 2016 - 2017 the Council conducted a service review of the work of the Housing Options and Homechoice Teams. The purpose of the review was to ensure that teams were best placed to meet customer needs as well as prepared to rise to the challenges of the likely introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Following the review and staff consultation, it was decided to transfer the management of the majority of the Housing Register from the Homechoice Team to the Housing Options Team and this change was implemented in August 2017. This has benefited customers in that the same team that is providing housing options advice and collecting important household information to prevent homelessness can also provide advice about longer term social housing options. This means customers do not have to be passed to a separate team and has already resulted in faster housing application turnaround times. The change has also meant that additional staffing sources have been transferred to the Housing Options Team. This provides additional capacity and resilience to the Options Team and allows flexibility for the Housing Options Manager to target staffing resources where they are most needed. This will be particularly useful with the introduction of the additional statutory duties under the HRA 2017, although, as the Homelessness Review and Action Plan highlight, it is still anticipated the further staff resources will be required in due course.

### **b) Principles behind Waverley's Homelessness Strategy**

**Proactive** – One of the reasons the Council has been successful in tackling homelessness over the last few years it has taken a proactive and innovative approach. It has done this by anticipating trends and changes and embracing alternative options. Examples of innovation include commissioning homeless prevention units, sourcing move on accommodation to free up supported housing, launching the online housing options wizard, radio advertising to attract private landlords, working with a social lettings agent (Ethical Lettings) and the employment of a Welfare Benefits Officer to help Council tenants deal with challenges from welfare reform.

**Partnership Approach** – Waverley’s Strategy aims to build upon the partnership working that has already contributed to the effectiveness of the current service. The Council works with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies in its work to prevent homelessness such as Citizens Advice Waverley, Social Services, Housing Associations, Ethical Lettings, supported housing providers, private sector lettings agents and landlords, Surrey County Council, Three Counties Money Advice, Police, other Councils and Health.

**Personal responsibility - not incentivising homelessness** — Before embracing a housing options, preventative approach to homelessness, the way Councils dealt with homelessness was frequently perceived to incentivise homelessness. Some applicants saw being accepted as homeless as the first step to becoming a Council tenant. To address this issue Waverley’s Allocation Scheme was amended in 2007 to give equal Housing Register priority to those with a local connection to Waverley whether they are homeless, living with friends or relatives, or in private rented accommodation. This in turn means that those who are under threat of homelessness are incentivised to help themselves find alternative accommodation, often in the private sector, and not see homelessness as a means to a Council tenancy. Waverley’s strategy aims to maintain this approach which has been instrumental in ensuring the number of households having to be placed in temporary accommodation is kept to a minimum.

**Continuous improvement** – despite Waverley’s success to date there are a number of challenges ahead including a national rise in homelessness numbers, a potentially challenging economic outlook following Brexit, the reduction in first and second tier local authority funding, the continued role out of welfare reform and the new duties under the HRA 2017. Waverley’s Strategy aims to build on its past and recent successes by striving for continuous improvement to deliver the best possible housing options services to its customers.

**Increased staffing – a ‘wait and see’ approach** – It is very likely Waverley will need to invest in increased staffing to manage the increased number of presentations and administrative burdens from the HRA 2017. A number of Surrey Borough and District Councils have already created additional posts ahead of the legislation – one Council has created 7 new roles in its Housing Options Team. Waverley has taken the view that it is better to see the impact of the legislation first so that any need for increased staffing can be targeted in the correct areas. Budget has been set aside for this eventuality from the new burdens and flexible homelessness Government funding so that the Council can move very swiftly if/when recruitment is needed.

**Increase accommodation options** – What is clear from the legislation is the need to provide additional accommodation to prevent and relieve homelessness, particularly for single people. As a result, Officers have been negotiating with statutory and voluntary partners to commission additional accommodation options. This helps minimise emergency accommodation costs and the increased staffing costs that occur from prolonged customer engagement when a suitable housing solution is not available.

## **c) Challenges, Risks and Opportunities**

Following the consultation and review of services, certain challenges, risks and opportunities were identified – these include:

- i) The fact that homelessness numbers for all household groups nationally and in Surrey are on an upward trend and the challenge this represents.
- ii) The challenge of helping customers and supporting and training staff through the significant changes being introduced by the HRA 2017 and the continued role out of welfare reform measures.
- iii) The challenge of recruiting and retaining staff following implementation of the HRA 2017 in order to manage the likely increased work load and expectations from customers.
- iv) The risk of increased numbers of homeless households being placed in private rented accommodation in Waverley by neighbouring boroughs and by London Boroughs. We are already aware of households being placed in Waverley by a London Borough and given the extra pressures on London Boroughs will face under the new legislation, the competition to secure affordable private rented properties will increase. It is a sobering thought that a Surrey Borough on the outskirts of London had very similar low numbers in temporary accommodation to Waverley in 2011. Now this Council has numbers above 100. This will partly be the result of London Boroughs widening their search to secure private rented properties in neighbouring Surrey Boroughs. This makes it much more difficult for the Surrey Boroughs and Districts to secure accommodation and drives up prices and costs of trying to incentivise private landlords to continue to let to welfare benefit dependent tenants.
- v) The risk that if Waverley is not able to successfully adapt its service to fulfil the new duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, particularly towards single households, temporary accommodation numbers and associated costs will rise. One Surrey Borough spent in excess of £1 million pounds on emergency temporary accommodation costs alone in 2015-16.
- vi) The reduction in Housing Related Support funding across Surrey for floating support and supported accommodation service for vulnerable single clients. Such services will have reduced capacity placing increased pressures on Borough and Districts to source and fund alternative accommodation and support.

- vii) The Government is proposing a very radical change in how short-term supported housing schemes are funded from 2020. There are risks that if these proposals do not properly reflect concerns raised by local authorities and supported housing providers, existing schemes may not continue and there will be little appetite for the development of new provision.
- viii) The opportunity for Surrey Borough and Districts to directly purchase bed spaces in the supported housing schemes negatively affected by the cuts in Housing Related Support funding by Surrey.
- ix) The opportunities the Council has in developing new affordable housing and building on its success in this area to date.
- x) The opportunities to work collaboratively and innovatively with other Councils and statutory and voluntary partners as we all seek sustainable solutions to meet the increased demand on homelessness services.
- xi) Whilst temporary funding streams have been introduced to help Council's transition to meet the new HRA 2017 duties, these are only guaranteed for 2-3 years. Councils with high temporary accommodation numbers and expenditure may be able to re-invest any savings from any increased homelessness prevention resulting from the legislation. However, given Waverley already has very low numbers and expenditure in regard to emergency accommodation, the Council's ability to fund on going staffing and accommodation costs will be much more challenging if time limited Central Government funding streams are not renewed.
- xii) The opportunity to review how Discretionary Housing Payments are targeted so that the budget is maximised to reduce the need for significant homelessness budget increases on the General Fund.

## **d) Priorities for Waverley's Homelessness Strategy**

Following feedback from Waverley's Homelessness Strategy Consultation event held in October 2017, liaison with statutory and voluntary partners, Waverley's Homelessness Review and analysis of the challenges, risks and opportunities outlined above, five priorities have been identified to inform the Action Plan for Waverley's Homelessness Strategy:

- Homelessness Reduction Act 2017
- Prevention / Early Help
- Accommodation
- Support
- Partnership Working

Although the Strategy covers a five year period, the intention is to review it annually so the majority of the actions relate to the first year.

## **e) Conclusion**

Waverley and its statutory and voluntary partners have demonstrated an excellent track record in preventing homelessness in the Borough over the last five years. The Action Plan in Section 2 of the Strategy aims to build and improve on this success by continuing the homeless prevention / housing options / partnership approach and focusing resources on a variety of measures to ensure the good work is continued.

# **Section Two**

## **Action Plan**