



Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

2024 to 2029

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Foreword



By Councillor Alan Shield
Portfolio Holder for Equality and Inclusion

“I am proud to introduce this proactive strategy which sets out our vision, priorities and actions to address and prevent homelessness and rough sleeping across all areas of County Durham.”

Being at risk of, or losing a home, can be the result of many different structural or personal factors. Unless these factors are addressed, the ability of an individual or family to become resilient and improve their chance of a positive future is greatly reduced, placing them at risk of becoming trapped in a cycle of homelessness.

Homelessness can lead individuals and their families and friends into a cycle that can have a profound effect on all aspects of life. It is not just a lack of accommodation; homelessness can affect our physical and mental health and wellbeing, educational achievement, ability to gain and sustain employment and puts pressure on personal and family relationships. The impact of homelessness devastates lives, and it is often a long journey for an individual to build their life up again.

We need to work together with our partners and stakeholders to address homelessness and prevent people from living in precarious housing circumstances, including temporary accommodation, hostels, and B&B's.

This strategy shows the current and future trends in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping across County Durham, as well as the challenges that we face as a housing authority. It also highlights how we will tackle the complex causes of homelessness by focusing on prevention and early intervention.

Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 brought about a more strategic approach to tackling and preventing homelessness, in particular the requirement for the development and publication of a homelessness strategy for every housing authority every 5 years.

This strategy has been developed following a detailed review of homelessness and rough sleeping. The review highlighted the demands on the council and the gaps that need addressing to ensure that homelessness is prevented and addressed as effectively as possible. The four priorities within this strategy have been developed to ensure that the needs of people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, are achieved over the next 5 years, covering the period 2024 – 2029.

We will carry out a light touch review annually to address any policy or funding changes, as well as taking into consideration any significant differences in demand for the service.

The evidence base that has been used to inform this strategy has analysed data from April 2019 through to October 2022, looking at the current and future trends in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping and the challenges that we face as a housing authority. The data has shaped the four priorities of the strategy, which were consulted upon with the public, key partners and stakeholders, from December 2022 to March 2023.

The scope of the strategy recognises all types of homelessness needs:

- Those who are considering their housing options and require advice,
- Those at risk of homelessness,
- Those who are statutory and non-statutory homeless,
- Those who are street homeless and are rough sleeping,
- Children who experience being homeless,
- Those who are moving on from homelessness (moving from temporary or supported accommodation and require longer term accommodation).

Strategic Context

The vision and priorities of this strategy are set within the context of national strategies and plans. There are two main national policy drivers that apply to homelessness and rough sleeping; the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the Government's 'Ending Rough Sleeping for Good' Strategy 2022.

The Homeless Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 extended the responsibilities of local authorities towards people that are homeless, or those at risk of becoming homeless. In particular, the duty to prevent homelessness, as well as the requirement to assess and provide more meaningful assistance to all people who are eligible and homeless, or threatened with homelessness, irrespective of their priority need status.

Between 2010/11 and 2018/19 there was a 12% increase in the number of homeless people nationally, this increased again by a further 19% up to 2021/22.

'Ending rough sleeping for good' is a cross-government strategy setting out how the government and its partners will work together to deliver on their commitment to end rough sleeping, by laying the foundations for a long-term system change to end rough sleeping sustainably and for good. The strategy has four key themes; Prevention, Recovery, Intervention and a Transparent and Joined up System. The strategy sets out for the first time a clear definition of what the government means by ending rough sleeping, which is that it is prevented wherever possible, and where it does occur it is rare, brief and non-recurrent.

There has been a new national focus on rough sleeping since the Covid-19 pandemic with the government's 'Everyone In' policy. This ensured all rough sleepers were housed in temporary accommodation to keep them safe during the pandemic. 37,000 people were helped through this scheme. This policy enabled councils to build relationships and reach homeless people who had been either unknown to, or ineligible for, local housing services previously. In addition, the temporary eviction bans during the pandemic also kept people in their homes who may have otherwise become homeless. These policies have since ended, but we want to build on this momentum to tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping.

The number of people estimated to be sleeping rough across England on a single night in autumn 2022 was 3,069, this is an increase of 26% from 2020 and a 74% increase since 2010, when the average number sleeping rough on a single night was 1,768. The numbers did peak in 2017, with an estimated figure of 4,751.

To assist with the delivery of the government's Rough Sleeping Strategy, £2 billion will be invested over a three-year period from 2022 to 2025, including an expanded £500m Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) and £200m Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme (SHAP).

£20m was made available by the government as part of the Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP), to help address poor quality supported housing and improve standards of support.

Homelessness can happen to anyone at any time, generally associated with a period of crisis or trauma. Homelessness permeates all aspects of a person's life including housing, health and employment and can lead to people falling into extreme poverty.

Our other strategic partnerships and their strategies and plans, focus on things such as poverty, employment, education, safety of our neighbourhoods, the quality of our homes and the environment we live in. Each of these will play a key role in helping us deliver the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. These strategies and plans include, but are not limited to:

- Council Plan 2019 - 2035
- County Durham Vision 2035
- County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy
- County Durham Plan
- County Durham Housing Strategy
- County Durham Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2020 – 2025
- Growing up in County Durham Strategy 2023 – 2025
- Sufficiency and commissioning strategy for children looked after and care leavers 2022 – 2024
- Safe Durham Partnership Plan

Local context and challenges in County Durham

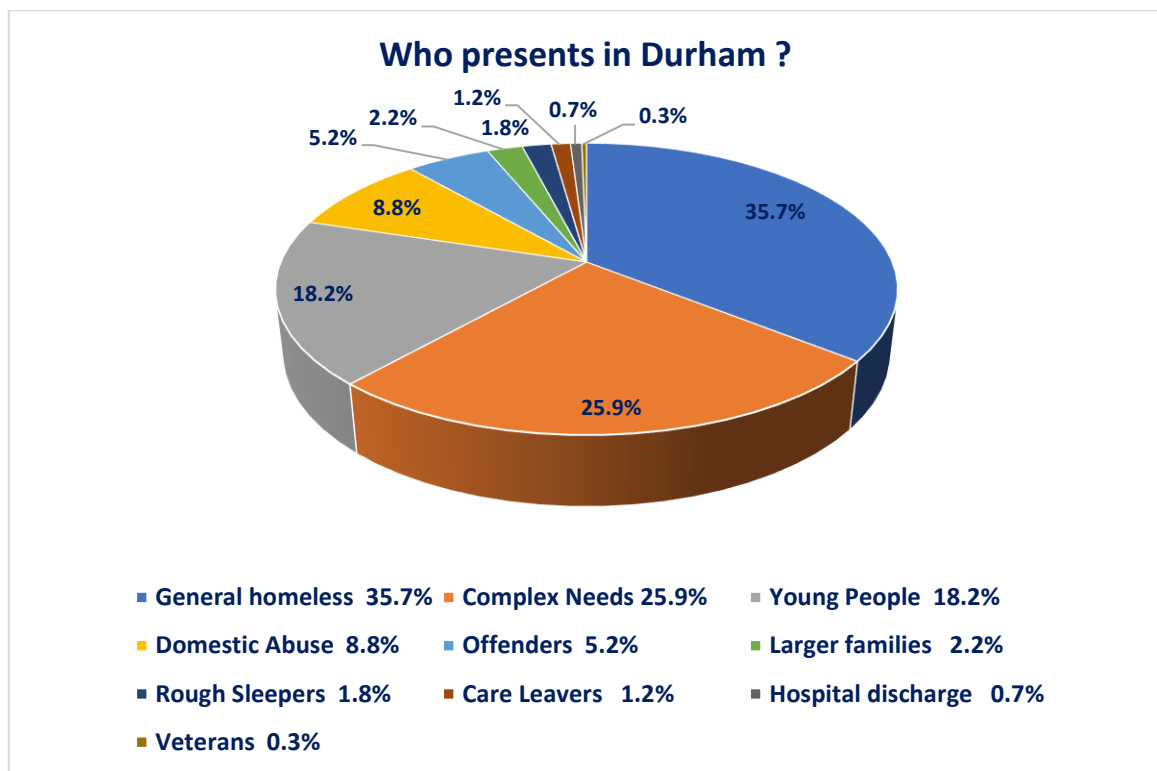
In Durham, the number of people that approach the council when they require housing advice, are homeless, or at risk of being homeless, has remained broadly consistent over the last three years, with 7,846 people presenting in 2021/22 compared to 7,497 in 2019/20. Between April 2019 and September 2022, the number of people requiring housing advice increased by 96%. The number of people who were assessed in line with homeless legislation and owed a homeless duty reduced by 19%.

Single households remain the largest group presenting as homeless, making up around 58% of the total, 31% are households with children and 11% couples with no children.

The main reasons why people present to the housing service have remained consistent over the past three years:

- private rented tenancy is ending (30% in 2021/22),
- family no longer willing to accommodate them (23% in 2021/22), and
- victims of domestic abuse (11% in 2021/22).

As well as considering why people present as homeless, we have identified the groups of people who are most likely to become homeless.



This diagram shows the percentage of each group presenting as homeless, or potentially homeless in County Durham. The percentages are as follows: General homeless 35.7%, Complex Needs 25.9%, Young People 18.2%, Domestic Abuse 8.8%, Offenders 5.2%, Larger families 2.2%, Rough Sleepers 1.8%, Care Leavers 1.2%, Hospital discharge 0.7%, Veterans 0.3%.

There is a shortage of affordable housing across all sectors. The annual target for the delivery of affordable housing is 836, however only 464 affordable units per year have been delivered on average over the last seven years. This means that since 2016, 2,601 fewer affordable houses have been delivered across County Durham than required to meet identified housing need. The County Durham Housing Strategy sets plans to meet this shortfall in future years.

The availability of accommodation is reducing in the private rented sector. Recent increases in interest rates are having an impact on landlords, forcing them to sell properties or increase their rents, which is resulting in people being evicted or making the sector less affordable for those on lower incomes. People leaving the private rented sector is the main reason why people are homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless; this number has increased by 6%.

Younger people under the age of 35 are experiencing increasing difficulties to secure affordable, independent accommodation, particularly when on a low-income, this can be seen across both the private rented and social housing sectors.

The number of people presenting with complex needs has increased by 13%. This is the largest increase across all groups, making up 26% of all presentations. There is a lack of appropriate housing options for people with complex or additional support needs, including those with poor mental health, substance misuse and a history of homelessness and rough sleeping. There is a clear correlation between complex support needs and those people repeatedly presenting as homeless. It is therefore important to secure appropriate accommodation for this group with the right level of support to prevent evictions and repeat presentations.

Domestic abuse is a significant reason why people present as homeless in County Durham. The number of people that moved to suitable alternative accommodation when fleeing domestic abuse has reduced by 16% between 2019/20 and 2022/23. This is due to a lack of readily available affordable housing, resulting in placements into temporary accommodation, which is often not an ideal solution for families.

There are increasing pressures in utilising temporary accommodation due to the lack of council owned stock. This has been exacerbated by the number of people requiring placements increasing by 47%, resulting in increased costs to the council. On average in 2023 there are between 80 and 90 households in temporary accommodation at any one time, in comparison to around 48 households in temporary accommodation at any one time during 2018/19.

During 2022/23, around 126 people were found rough sleeping, an average of 11 on a single night. Around 42% were new to rough sleeping, the remaining had previous experiences of sleeping on the street. One of the main reasons why people end up rough sleeping, is due to them being evicted from supported accommodation. Most of our rough sleepers are found in Durham City, although we do respond to reports in outlying towns including Seaham, Peterlee and Consett.

Vision, approach and priorities

Our vision

“Durham is a county where we all work together to eradicate homelessness and rough sleeping and where everyone has a safe place to call home.”

This strategy and its vision will support the delivery of the County Durham Housing Strategy, which identifies the key housing opportunities and challenges facing County Durham.

It is recognised that a partnership approach is required to successfully achieve our vision and deliver on the priorities set out in this strategy. This will tackle issues that increase the likelihood of someone becoming homeless, including the shortage of affordable housing and rising household poverty.

The priorities were agreed following consultation with a range of partners and members of the public, including people with lived experience of homelessness and rough sleeping.



Priority 1: Prevent people from becoming homeless

Preventing someone from becoming homeless is far more effective than intervening afterwards. The best way to do this is to support a household to remain in their current home, providing it is suitable, or proactively support a move to alternative suitable long-term accommodation.

Issues that can lead to someone becoming homeless, or being threatened with homelessness, are multi-faceted and we recognise that working with people to overcome and resolve these at the earliest opportunity is the best way of preventing homelessness. In recent years this has become increasingly more challenging due to a reduction in the availability of affordable accommodation across the private rented sector and social housing, and increasing numbers of people with complex support needs.

It is recognised that the principle of 'invest to save' must be rooted across our prevention offer. By providing financial incentives and support to help people remain in their existing home, not only prevents homelessness, but also prevents the need, and cost, of having to source alternative accommodation or avoid utilising temporary accommodation.

It is important to understand the early causes of homelessness, to ensure that the right intervention can be made. Some of these include domestic abuse, substance misuse, poor mental health, financial difficulties and criminal activity. We need to address the inequalities that exist in people accessing employment, education, training and health services, all of which are negatively impacted if someone is homeless, threatened with homelessness or otherwise living in unsuitable conditions.

There has been a significant increase of 34% in the number of people who have been unable to remain in their existing home which has resulted in them becoming homeless. This is seen mainly where private rented tenancies are ending due to landlords selling, or where the tenant has fallen into rent arrears and where people are suffering from domestic abuse. We must therefore ensure that a more proactive and preventative approach is taken to avoid people being in a homeless crisis situation.

To prevent people from becoming homeless we will:

- Review our allocations scheme to prioritise prevention over homelessness, ending the use of homelessness as a housing option.
- Ensure people receive appropriate and relevant advice and support as early as possible, including improved information and signposting and the development of an online self-help tool.
- Ensure early intervention is targeted towards people who are most likely or identified to be at risk of homelessness, through the introduction of specialist teams and dedicated support.
- Ensure front line staff are equipped with the tools and techniques to help them prevent households from becoming homeless, e.g. negotiating with private landlords and mediating between family members.
- Work with the private rented sector, registered providers and supported accommodation providers to establish new approaches to reduce evictions and assist people to remain at home.

- Work with people with lived experience to involve them in designing services to make sure they are accessible.
- Intervention through “trauma informed practice”, which seeks to understand and respond to the impact that trauma has had on somebody’s life, which can include physical, psychological and emotional, and how it may lead to homelessness.
- Develop creative approaches to working earlier with young people in schools, youth groups and young people within the care system to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.
- Work with our partner registered providers to review the lettings policy to ensure that the housing register is accessible and assists homeless households.
- Establish a multi-agency Homelessness Partnership with a focus on developing, designing and implementing solutions to help reduce homelessness.

Priority 2: Improve access to and supply of accommodation

This priority is focused on improving how people who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness, can better access the most appropriate type of accommodation to meet their needs. In the longer term, addressing the supply of accommodation to ensure that Durham has the right type and mix of accommodation in the required locations. The housing options available are:

- Private rented sector
- Social housing
- Supported accommodation
- Low cost home ownership

Whilst we recognise the necessity of a more proactive, preventative approach, we must also ensure there is an effective response for those who present as homeless in an emergency or crisis situation. Groups that are recognised as predominantly affected in this area are private rented sector tenants, people experiencing domestic abuse, young people experiencing parental exclusion, people with multiple and complex needs, people with drug and or alcohol addiction, and street homeless people.

Housing options for people on low incomes or in receipt of welfare benefits is becoming limited. Average rents in the private rented sector are increasing, making this option less accessible for many households. However, the private rented sector is helping to accommodate those homeless households in a crisis situation across all cohorts. This comes at an increased cost as landlords price the risk.

The turnover of stock amongst registered providers is reducing, making the social rented sector less reachable for many households. The number of people who were homeless and in a crisis situation and accommodated in this sector has reduced by around 11%. The main two groups being accommodated are those people with no support needs and victims of domestic abuse. This means that many people who are homeless and in housing need are unable to access the social housing sector.

Supported housing is accommodating the majority of people who face homelessness in a crisis situation, mainly where family are no longer willing to accommodate. This sector accommodates the majority of people with complex support needs and those under the age of 25 including care leavers. In line with the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023, local authorities must ensure that the standard of accommodation and support provided is sufficient to meet housing needs. The Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP) will assist with the delivery of the Act and ensure that the supported accommodation offer for homeless people is fair and consistent.

The number of people placed into temporary accommodation has seen a significant increase. The main reasons why people require temporary accommodation is due to domestic abuse, family no longer willing to accommodate or because their assured shorthold tenancy has ended. The council is often forced to use holiday lets and bed and breakfast due to the lack of availability of appropriate temporary accommodation in County Durham. These are both costly and unsustainable in the longer term.

To improve access to and supply of accommodation we will:

- Utilise the Council House Delivery Programme to provide additional affordable housing and move on options.
- Work with registered providers and developers to increase the supply of accommodation for:
 - vulnerable households including; victims of domestic abuse, people with complex support needs, ex-offenders, rough sleepers (specialist 24/7 provision) and people included within the humanitarian support programme,
 - households on low incomes, in particular younger people,
 - larger families.
- Expand the Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme, working with property owners to bring empty and dilapidated homes back into use in return for medium to long term leases to use for temporary and permanent housing.
- Increase the supply of council owned and commissioned temporary accommodation, rather than rely on B&B and hotels.
- Work with commissioning teams to ensure appropriate accommodation is available, in particular additional dispersed properties for victims of domestic abuse and additional supported accommodation for those with complex needs.
- Work with supported accommodation providers to deliver the Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP).
- Develop clear housing pathways for the most vulnerable people, including; those leaving prison, hospital, rough sleepers, those experiencing domestic abuse and those leaving the care system.
- Make information readily available setting out the various housing options available, how people can access those options and how they can help themselves.

Priority 3: Ensure the appropriate support is available for people who are homeless (work with partners to build resilience in people)

This priority is focussed on providing people with the most appropriate type of support to meet their needs and to enable them to access and maintain sustainable accommodation.

It is vital that a person, or household who becomes homeless, or is at risk of homelessness, is provided with the most appropriate support at the earliest opportunity. Durham has a range of support services available, provided via a combination of commissioned services and in house support, provided by staff working in the housing solutions team. These services need to be made as accessible as possible for all clients to assist with homeless prevention, as well as supporting people through their homeless journey.

The review of homeless and rough sleeping identified that the number of homeless people with two or more support needs has increased significantly, with almost 40% of people with a support need suffering from a history of mental health problems. There is clear correlation between the number of support needs and the number of times a person presents as homeless. The main household type with multiple support needs is amongst single people.

People with complex and multiple support needs can end up being inappropriately housed in accommodation that doesn't provide the right type of support, which can result in tenancies failing and people re-presenting back to housing solutions as homeless. It is important to prevent this happening by ensuring that the support needs are being met, as well as their housing needs.

To ensure the appropriate support is available for people who are homeless, we will: -

- Map all available support services to determine their effectiveness for homeless people using this to improve and target provision where required.
- Ensure that support needs are identified when developing personalised housing plans and the necessary referrals are made to the most appropriate support and accommodation to meet the needs of the individual.
- Work with partner agencies to ensure referral pathways are in place and are effective to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness.
- Increase specialisms within housing solutions including social workers, trauma informed, dual diagnosis and drug and alcohol workers, who may form a central service accessible to all teams.
- Ensure the existing range of health initiatives are co-ordinated and fully utilised.
- Review support needs and ensure that support services are available to cater for them.

Priority 4: Reduce rough sleeping

This priority is focused on reducing the number of people that sleep rough across County Durham. In alignment with the government's Ending Rough Sleeping for Good Strategy, we aim to prevent rough sleeping wherever possible and where it does occur, ensure that it is rare, brief, and non-recurrent.

Across County Durham there is a flow of people who are street homeless. During 2022/23, around 126 people were found rough sleeping, an average of 11 on a single night. Around 42% were new to rough sleeping, the remaining had previous experiences of sleeping on the street.

The majority of people within this group have multiple complex needs, including mental health and substance misuse problems, which is often the reason why their previous housing situation has failed.

We know that the main reasons why people find themselves sleeping rough is because their family will no longer accommodate them, they have been evicted from supported accommodation, or their private rented tenancy has ended.

Around 60% of those sleeping rough are accommodated in supported accommodation, less than 5% are accommodated with a registered provider or in the private rented sector.

There is a dedicated rough sleeper team that operate within County Durham, consisting of a co-ordinator, two navigators and two outreach staff that focus on those with drug and alcohol support requirements. The team has access to accommodation dedicated for rough sleepers, which includes:

- Nine short term commissioned bedspaces to enable further assessment to be carried out and longer-term accommodation to be sourced.
- Seven (24/7) supported housing bed spaces for complex rough sleepers and two individual properties with support which helps individuals to live independently. The dispersed properties are used as step down accommodation for those people that are ready to move onwards from the intensive supported housing project.
- Individual properties with support provided by the council to live independently for rough sleepers requiring low level supported accommodation.

Despite having access to commissioned and in house provision, it can still be difficult to find accommodation for the most chaotic and complex rough sleepers, particularly if they have a high-risk offending history, or require support with drug and alcohol misuse and have complex mental health.

There is a night shelter that operates in Durham City during the winter months, however as it relies upon volunteers the hours are not 24 hours, seven days a week, which makes it difficult to accommodate rough sleepers during periods of severe winter weather emergencies.

To reduce rough sleeping and the themes set out in the governments Rough Sleeping Strategy, we will:-

- Work with health and social care professionals to understand the underlying factors that result in people sleeping rough and formulate strategies to deal with these.
- Work with supported housing providers to establish new approaches to reduce evictions and prevent rough sleeping.
- Develop awareness around rough sleeping and begging through the introduction of a communications campaign and co-ordinate the reduction of cash donations to rough sleepers by establishing an alternative method, working with local charitable groups.
- Work with partners to improve access and supply to accommodation for those most complex and hard to house rough sleepers, including the provision of specialist support where requested.
- Liaise with local stakeholders, particularly Durham University and Durham Business Improvement District in relation to rough sleeping in Durham City.
- Establish a night shelter that can be accessed all year round.
- Develop a pathway to independent living designed around the needs of rough sleepers.
- Develop a “Housing First programme” which focuses on first giving someone immediate access to a settled and secure home with access to appropriate support where requested by the client, including services to cater for those who may be alcohol or drug dependant.

Delivering the Strategy

As part of the delivery of the strategy, a one-year delivery plan has been developed to ensure that implementation can commence immediately after adoption of the document. We will develop a more detailed delivery plan with our partners, this will be in line with each of the four strategic priorities, as outlined in this strategy. This will clearly show how we will tackle and address homelessness and rough sleeping in the next five years.

This delivery plan will cover a range of more detailed actions and will include timescales, funding and clear milestones. This will be developed in line with our existing partnerships as part of the County Durham Partnership Structure, a range of other partnerships linked to homelessness, regional and national colleagues and with people with lived experience.

It is proposed to set up a Homelessness Forum with all relevant partners. This Forum will oversee the implementation and monitoring of the delivery plan. This will include a range of partners from other public bodies, landlords, charities and others.

The monitoring of the strategy will be reported annually to a range of forums as part of the County Durham Partnership including the Safer Durham Partnership, Health and Wellbeing Board, The Housing Forum and others.

An annual refresh of the evidence base and a review of the delivery plan will take place to analyse updated data, address any policy or funding changes as well as taking into consideration any significant differences in demand on the service. This will be overseen by an internal housing project group, the Homelessness Forum and will be reported to Cabinet annually.