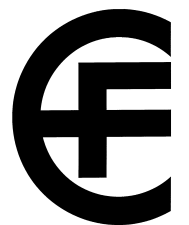


Homelessness Strategy

2012/13 to 2014/15

Epping Forest District Council



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Executive Summary

1. Foreword

- 1.1 Under section 1(3), (4) of the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities have a duty to review and publish their Homelessness Strategy on at least a 5 yearly basis. As this area of work regularly changes it was agreed that the Council's Strategy would be reviewed every three years. The Strategy links with the Council's Housing Strategy, Allocations Scheme, the Housing Services Strategy on Housing Advice and Allocations, and the Corporate Plan. The Strategy sets out achievements since 2008/09 and incorporates the needs and demands on the service and actions that need to be undertaken over the coming three years.
- 1.2 The homelessness function is provided through the Housing Directorate's Housing Options Section. A staffing structure chart is shown at Appendix 2.
- 1.3 The Council's Housing Directorate continues to be accredited for the ISO 9001:2008 quality assurance scheme by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance. The Housing Directorate was also successful in retaining the Customer Service Excellence Award (formerly known as Charter Mark) for the third time in August 2010, for a further 3 years.

2. Background

- 2.1 The last three years have seen a high demand upon the Homelessness Prevention Team. The Service has been very successful in preventing homelessness in many cases. This has been possible due the Team maximising the use of the range of tools set out, in particular, in the Homeless Prevention Section of the Strategy.
- 2.2 At the time of this Strategy being produced the Country is in recession. This has led to an increase in demand on the Homelessness Prevention Service where people are seeking resolutions to their housing difficulties. This is especially prevalent amongst owner occupiers who are having problems maintaining mortgage repayments.

3. Housing Advice

- 3.1 The Council has a rolling Service Level Agreement with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) in the District to provide a range of advice and support those faced with housing difficulties. In addition, a signed protocol has been developed in conjunction with the National Homeless Advice Service.
- 3.2 The Housing Options Section within the Housing Directorate provides advice and information leaflets. General information on Housing Services can be obtained through the Council's website, from which housing application forms can be down-loaded. Applicants can also seek information on accessing accommodation in the private rented sector and advice on dealing with domestic violence issues etc.

4. Homelessness Prevention

- 4.1 The continuation of the Homeless Prevention Service has been significant during the last 3 years. The objective of reducing the number of households making a homeless application by providing effective prevention measures continues to be met. However, the Council is committed to ensuring that if homelessness cannot be prevented for any reason, it will accept a homeless application in order to decide what statutory duty may be owed to the household.

5. Recession Planning

- 5.1 Due to the current economic climate, the Council has put in place a number of initiatives to assist those who are experiencing housing difficulties and may be faced with losing their homes which are as follows:

Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS)

- 5.2 The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS) is a registered charity which operates on a voluntary basis to provide damage deposit guarantees (equivalent to one month's rent) to landlords on behalf of applicants to assist them in securing accommodation in the private rented sector.

Rental Loan Scheme

- 5.3 The Rental Loan Scheme was set up in order to assist applicants in securing accommodation in the private rented sector. Under the scheme, a loan is granted to meet the cost of the first month's rental in advance, repayable interest free over a period of 24 months. An applicant can potentially benefit from both a rental loan and a rent deposit guarantee.

Parental Exclusions

- 5.4 Young people can sometimes have volatile relationships with their parents and can be at risk of exclusion from their home. Since 2004, "Relate" have undertaken mediation in a number of cases to attempt to reconcile young people with their parents in order for them to remain at home. The Council also works with Essex County Council's Homelessness Response Team who also mediates with families.

Sanctuary Scheme

- 5.5 The Council set up a Sanctuary Scheme for victims of domestic violence or hate crime in April 2007. This scheme is an effective tool in the prevention of homelessness for high risk cases of domestic violence or hate crime. The intention of the scheme is to provide a safe room within the victim's home. The Housing Options Section works in partnership with Safer Communities, Essex Police, Essex Fire and Rescue and Safer Places (formerly known as Harlow Women's Aid). All referrals to the scheme are made through the Homeless Prevention Service. The Scheme is funded jointly by the Safer Communities Team and the Housing Directorate and is available to people on a tenure neutral basis, e.g. tenants, owner occupiers, private rented sector etc.

Single Accommodation For Epping Forest (SAFE)

- 5.6 SAFE is part of NACRO Community Enterprises, a registered housing association and charity, and offers temporary accommodation with support to single homeless people. It works in partnership with the Council, Epping Assessment and Child Protection Team and Essex Probation Service (EPS).
- 5.7 It provides 37 bed spaces across the District in a mix of shared houses and individual units. Around 80% of all referrals are through the Housing Directorate, Learning and Social Care, and Essex Probation Services. In addition, some self-referrals are made. Applicants must be single and homeless or at risk of homelessness. The target age group is 18 to 25 years, although others are accepted depending on circumstances.

Mortgage Rescue

5.8 In January 2009, the CLG announced the introduction of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme. The intention of the scheme is to assist the most vulnerable households who are at risk through re-possession. Between 1 July 2009 and 1 July 2011, the Council, in partnership with the lead provider for Essex, Moat Homes Limited, assisted a total of 7 households to keep their homes through Mortgage Rescue. Since July 2011, no further households have been assisted because of restrictions that have been placed upon the scheme. These include the price cap on the value of a property being reduced to less than £200,000, and only freehold properties being rescued (i.e. houses not flats). As the values of most, if not all eligible properties in the District are well above the cap, the use of Mortgage Rescue is now therefore limited.

6. The Role of Essex County Council's Social Care

- 6.1 The majority of children's services are now provided on a 'quadrant basis' (Essex has been split into four geographical areas with each area being a quadrant) and children in the Epping Forest District receive services from the 'West Essex Quadrant'.
- 6.2 The Leaving & After Care Team takes casework responsibility for children up to the age of 15 years and six months. The team provides support whilst the young people are in care. The team also provides aftercare support according to the specific provisions of the Children Act 1989 as amended by the Children Leaving Care Act 2000.
- 6.3 The Council's Homelessness Prevention Team are notified by the Leaving and After Care Team prior to a young person leaving care in order that their housing needs can be assessed. In general, the Council will arrange for the SAFE Scheme through NACRO (a housing association providing specialist housing and support for young people) to accommodate young people leaving care to give them extra preparation for independent living. The Council then re-houses the young person when they move on from SAFE into Council accommodation often with Floating Support.
- 6.4 The Homeless Response Team is a small, centrally based team (located at County Hall, Chelmsford) which seeks to engage with 16 & 17 year olds on the verge of parental eviction and mediates with families to avoid homelessness and the necessity of providing accommodation under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The team works in partnership with the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team.
- 6.5 The Assessment and Intervention Team respond to the immediate needs of children and families referred to the Children's and Families Service where an assessment of that need is required and especially in relation to "Safeguarding".
- 6.6 The Family Support and Protection Team responds in the longer term for those children subject to Child Protection Plans, and Child in Need plans.
- 6.7 The Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team refer people requiring housing and support to schemes in Ongar called Barnes Court, and Tolpuddle House which are owned and managed by East Thames Housing Association.
- 6.8 The Community Assessment Team for Older People assist people aged over 65 years. Initial referrals are received first by a central Essex team (Social Care Direct) and then passed where necessary to Goodman House, Harlow.
- 6.9 The Council has a Corporate Safeguarding Group. Key staff have received training on Safeguarding vulnerable adults. The Council has a Safeguarding Strategy and a reporting form and has an e-learning package available to all staff.

7. Services for People Involved in Drug and Alcohol Abuse

- 7.1 The Housing Options Section deals mainly with referrals from the Community Drug and Alcohol Team (CDAT). However, there is also occasional contact from the Alcohol and Drugs Advisory Service (ADAS) and the Essex Young Peoples' Drug and Alcohol Service (EYPDAS). All ADAS clients are assessed with complex cases being referred to CDAT. Clients with alcohol problems far outnumber those with drug problems.
- 7.2 CDAT offers outreach services in Loughton and Waltham Abbey. Clients are referred through a number of sources, including hospitals, ADAS, GPs, family members and self-referrals. The minimum age for clients is 16 years with no upper age limit.
- 7.3 Homelessness is commonly a problem for CDAT clients. Since the Council has closer links with CDAT, a local protocol has been agreed to enhance good partnership working.
- 7.4 EYPDAS is based in Chelmsford but offers services across Essex. It is one of a number of the Children's Society's projects but receives funding from diverse sources. It works with clients until they reach the age of 19 years but also offers support to families, carers and professionals.
- 7.5 This family support helps young people remain in their own homes, but when necessary they are referred to the emergency night shelters in Colchester or Chelmsford.
- 7.6 The work of EYPDAS in the Epping Forest District has included a number of information sessions, but it has fewer clients in this locality than others.

8. Applications, Decisions, Notifications and Reviews

- 8.1 The process of assessing homelessness applications is complex and governed by the provisions of Part VI1 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002). Careful attention is given to the Code of Guidance issued by the CLG and homelessness case law. Legislation on immigration is also observed.
- 8.2 All homeless applications are processed by the Homelessness Assessment Officer based within the Housing Options Section. In processing these applications the Code of Guidance is complied with.
- 8.3 Homelessness enquiries may involve contact with previous landlords (both public and private), mortgage lenders, solicitors, environmental health officers, land registry, social workers, medical practitioners, occupational therapists, hospital workers, victim support groups, police, neighbours, relatives, and the UK Border Agency.
- 8.4 The Council adopts a 'firm but fair' approach to homelessness. The intention is only to secure accommodation when statutorily required to do so. However, applicants have a legal right of review on adverse homelessness decisions. Such reviews are conducted, depending on the nature of the case, by an officer more senior than the one who made the original decision or the Council's Housing Appeals and Reviews Panel, which comprises 5 District Councillors. If the applicant is dissatisfied with the decision made at the statutory review, they are advised they have the right to pursue an appeal, on a point of law, through the County Court.

9. Interim and Temporary Accommodation

- 9.1 The Council uses a variety of interim and temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast accommodation for households without children, self-contained flats at Hemnal House, Epping, a Women's Refuge move on scheme and rooms at the Norway House Hostel, North Weald where housing-related support is provided.

10. Epping Forest District Council's Allocations Scheme

- 10.1 The Council operates a HomeOption choice based lettings scheme and has its own Housing Register in accordance with the provisions of the Housing Allocations Scheme, which is reviewed periodically by the Cabinet.
- 10.2 The Scheme includes vacancies in the Council's own housing stock and housing association properties for which the Council has nomination rights. Applicants are able to "express an interest" in properties advertised on the website and also through a fortnightly Property List.
- 10.3 The degree of priority awarded to applicants on the Housing Register is assessed by reference to a banding system. The banding system is currently devised to afford homeless people, those at risk of homelessness and those who have been homeless, a reasonable degree of preference for long-term accommodation.

11. Consultation

- 11.1 A consultation exercise on this Homelessness Strategy has been undertaken with all partner agencies, the CLG, Town and Parish Councils, the Tenants and Leaseholder's Federation and the Council's Housing Scrutiny Panel. The Strategy was approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder in August 2012.

12. Action Plans

- 12.1 The Action Plan sets out the actions required to implement this Strategy, identifying officers responsible for progressing those actions and setting targets for completion.

Foreword

1. Introduction

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- 1.2 The homelessness function is provided through the Housing Directorate's Housing Options Section. A staffing structure chart is shown at Appendix 2.
- 1.3 This Council's Housing Directorate continues to be accredited for the ISO 9001:2008 quality assurance scheme by Lloyds Register Quality Assurance. The Housing Directorate was also successful in retaining the Customer Service Excellence Award (formerly known as Charter Mark) for the third time in August 2010 for a further 3 years.

2. Background to the Council's Homelessness Service

- 2.1 The homelessness service is provided by the Housing Directorate's Housing Options Section. The Council works within the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and follows the guidance set out in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Code of Practice in Rented Housing and the requirements of the Council's Equality Impact Assessments.
- 2.2 As at June 2012, the Council has 6,219 homeseekers on its Housing Register, and has a housing stock of 6,538 properties.
- 2.3 The last three years have seen only 259 new affordable homes provided within the Epping Forest District, an average of just 86 new affordable homes per annum. At the time of writing (June 2012), only 6 developments have planning permission to provide 183 new affordable homes over the next 3 years (2012/13 – 2014/15), an average of just 61 per annum. The reason for the current lack of development sites within the District is due to developers' reluctance to develop in the current economic climate. However, the Council's own new House Building Programme should provide around 20 new affordable homes per annum, with the first developments expected to start on site in 2014.

3. Localism Act 2011

- 3.1 Under the Localism Act, although a Government Commencement Order is yet to be issued, it is proposed that councils will be given powers to discharge their Homelessness Duty by offering suitable accommodation in the private rented sector with or without the consent of the applicant. The accommodation must be provided for a minimum term of 12 months in order to end the Council's duty. If the accommodation is lost by the applicant within a period of 2 years of the offer then they can re-apply, regardless of priority need and if appropriate referred back to the host authority. When the Government Commencement Order is received, the Council will be considering whether it wishes to use these powers and agree a policy on when private sector offers will be made.

4. Welfare Reforms

4.1 The Welfare Reform Act 2012 provides for the introduction of a “universal credit” to replace a range of existing means-tested benefits and could have a significant impact upon homelessness. Between October 2013 and April 2014, 500,000 new claimants will receive universal credit. The Council has taken a pro-active approach in commissioning the Chartered Institute of Housing to undertake a major study into the implications of the Welfare Reforms on the Council, its tenants, private tenants and homelessness. The key findings of the study (which is still in draft form) and the matters recommended to be included in a future Strategy and Action Plan relating to homelessness are as follows:

- Explore the use of existing funding for prevention of homelessness and the options for investing more in prevention and interventions bearing in mind the increased demand for, and cost of, temporary accommodation.
- Corporately set up a Welfare Reform Response Group including officers from across the Council to focus on sharing information, tracking and reporting the impact of the changes and to put in place focused measurable initiatives around advice, support, communications and financial inclusion activities.
- Review staffing resources against the Welfare Reform Strategy and action plan ensuring they are focused on delivering the actions that will have most impact and making changes where they are not.
- Scope out the availability of debt advice and counselling services including under the SLA with CAB, setting out how many clients are dealt with, client categories, nature of advice including level of priority and non priority debts dealt with and trends in type of issue and support needed. All this to be set against the type and number of household most likely to need assistance as a result of welfare reform.
- Anticipating the increased need for financial inclusion services – explore through the corporate Welfare Reform Response Group. Looking at access to and the promotion of affordable credit, access to bank accounts, co-ordinated work to deter use of “loan sharks”, take up of welfare benefits including Council Tax benefit
- Put in place a communication plan linked to corporate communications that sets out the who, when and how around how on the impact of welfare reform and the availability of support, communicating with staff, tenants, residents, landlords and partner agencies.
- Undertake pro-active engagement with the Citizens Advice Bureau, to ensure that their advisors are fully aware of the welfare reforms, the implications and who to contact within the Council to discuss clients’ queries
- Consider whether the annual grant to the CAB should be increased to recognise and reflect the additional work that the CAB will be undertaking for the benefit of Epping Forest residents.
- Consider and adopt a clear policy on the use of Discretionary Housing Payments, to ensure that the budget (funded by DWP) is maximised and is targeted at preventing homelessness
- When the Council reviews its Housing Allocations Scheme in the light of the Localism Act and the CLG’s new guidance on allocations, ensure that the Housing Allocations Scheme is aligned with the welfare reforms, in terms of the size of properties offered to applicants of different household sizes and children’s ages and how overcrowding (for which increased priority is given) is assessed with regard to household size and children’s ages

- Encourage tenants to set up bank accounts to receive Universal Credit payments
- Ensure appropriate housing and housing benefit staff are briefed on the main elements of the welfare reforms, and trained on how to provide advice to customers
- Consider the benefits and associated costs of appointing permanent or temporary welfare advice staff (perhaps from existing HB staff) to provide advice to the Council's tenants and private tenants on welfare reforms as the DWP are unlikely to provide such a service locally.
- Publicise the introduction of the welfare reforms and the implications and possible solutions for different categories of tenants in the Council's "Housing News" a periodic newsletter for tenants

Statistical analysis of homelessness

1. Incidence of Homelessness

- 1.1 Local housing authorities are required by Government to complete quarterly Housing Activity Returns, which include statistical information on homelessness. These include the information given in the table below on homelessness decisions made by the Council in the last four years.

Homelessness Information	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Number of applicants to whom a full duty is owed.	71	48	58	60
Number of applicants found to be intentionally homeless.	10	11	4	5
Number of applicants found not to be in priority need.	15	12	12	13
Number of applicants found to be not homeless.	24	27	20	22
Number of applicants found to be ineligible for assistance.	0	0	0	1
Total number of homelessness applications	120	98	94	101

- 1.2 As can be seen, the number of homelessness applications increased slightly last year and is expected to increase in future years due to the economic climate, the increased cost of private rented and owner occupied accommodation and the Government's Welfare Reforms. However, due to the success of the Homelessness Prevention Service it should be noted that the number of homelessness applications has reduced from 477 in 2005/2006 to 101 in 2011/2012 a reduction of 79% which is considered to be a major achievement. Statistical information on this area of work is set out under the Homelessness Prevention section of the Strategy.

- 1.3 Information on the ethnicity of all Housing Register applicants, which is reported to the Council's Housing Scrutiny Panel, is set out in the table below. The ethnicity of homeless applicants is not currently monitored, although this is being explored for the future:

Ethnicity	2008/09 (%)	2009/10 (%)	2010/11 (%)	2011/12 (%)
White British/Irish	78.0	79.0	77.3	74.95
Bangladeshi/Pakistani/Indian	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.8
African/Caribbean	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.72
Mixed Ethnicity	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.29
Other	5.0	4.4	5.0	6.06
Not stated	12.0	11.5	12.4	13.18

- 1.4 The 2001 Census showed that ethnic minorities made up just under 5% of the population of the District at that time. Following the National Census 2011, updated figures on the ethnicity of the District will be available in 2013. It is considered that the statistics do not raise any concerns about any particular group being discriminated against. The Council undertakes Customer Equality Impact Assessments across all of its front-line services.
- 1.5 Although Gypsies and Travellers are not identified as a group on Housing Activity Returns they do face particularly problems when homeless due to their cultural aversion to 'bricks and mortar'. A number have purchased land within the District on which they have sited caravans and mobile homes for residential purposes without planning permission. Some have exhausted appeals processes, been evicted, and sought homelessness assistance, others have been tolerated and some have been granted planning permission. There are currently 18 Gypsy and Traveller sites across the District totalling 95 pitches. Eleven of the sites include 75 pitches in Roydon and Nazeing. One site at Stanford Rivers is in the public sector and is owned Essex County Council. The remainder are on privately owned land. National policy requires that there is a significant increase in the number of gypsy and traveller sites in appropriate locations, with a focus on increased provision over the next 3-5 years.

2. Analysis of Priority Need

- 2.1 Priority need is determined by statute and prescribes categories of persons for whom local housing authorities must secure accommodation if they are homeless, provided they have not become intentionally homeless.
- 2.2 Set out in the table below is an analysis of applicants found to be in priority need, unintentionally homeless and owed a full homelessness duty, taken from the Council's Housing Activity returns. These form part of the Government's PI (E) return (statistical information which is completed by all authorities) confirming those households the Council has accepted as being in a priority need and the reasons:

Priority Need Category	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Applicant homeless because of fire, flood, storm or similar disaster.	0	0	0	0
Applicants with dependent children (including violent breakdown of relationship (partner))	50	24	37	47
Applicants in priority need because of pregnancy but no other children.	1	7	3	4
Applicants aged 16/17 years.	6	2	2	1
Applicants formerly in care and aged 18-20 years.	1	0	0	1
Applicants vulnerable due to old age.	0	2	1	1
Applicants vulnerable because of physical disability.	3	1	4	0
Applicants vulnerable because of mental illness or disability.	6	9	10	5
Applicants vulnerable due to alcohol dependency.	1	0	0	0
Applicants who were former asylum seekers.	0	0	0	0
Vulnerable for other special reason.	0	0	0	0
Applicant vulnerable due to drug dependency.	0	0	0	0

Priority Need Category	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Applicant vulnerable having been in custody or remand.	0	0	0	0
Applicants vulnerable for formerly being in care.	0	0	0	0
Applicants vulnerable having served in HM Forces.	0	0	0	0
Applicants (with no children) vulnerable on account of violence including domestic violence.	3	3	1	1
Total applicants accepted for a priority need	71	48	58	60

- 2.3 The analysis of priority need groups shows that the number of applicants accepted for a housing need has increased in the past 2 years and that the largest household group accepted as being in a priority need for accommodation are households with dependant children which account for around 78% of the total. Due to the success of the Homelessness Prevention Service it should be noted that the number of homelessness applications accepted as having a priority need, unintentionally homeless and owed a full duty has reduced from 207 in 2005/2006 to 60 in 2011/2012, a reduction of 71% which is considered to be a major achievement.

3 Reasons for Homelessness

- 3.1 Information on reasons for homelessness acceptances in priority need groups is set out in the table below:

Reason for Acceptance	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Parents not willing to accommodate	17	10	18	15
Other relatives not willing to accommodate.	0	4	4	5
Non violent relationship breakdown.	10	4	3	3
Violent breakdown of relationship (partner)	8	4	11	11

Reason for Acceptance	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Violent relationship breakdown (involving associated person i.e. relative)	0	0	0	0
Racially motivated violence.	0	0	0	0
Other forms of violence.	1	1	0	1
Racially motivated harassment.	0	0	0	0
Other forms of harassment.	0	0	0	0
Mortgage arrears.	2	1	1	0
Local authority rent arrears.	0	0	0	0
Housing Association rent arrears.	0	0	0	1
Private rented rent arrears.	3	4	3	5
Termination of assured short-hold tenancy.	21	10	12	12
Reason other than termination of assured short hold tenancy i.e. tied accommodation.	1	7	5	7
Leaving asylum accommodation.	0	0	0	0
Leaving prison/remand.	1	0	0	0
Left hospital.	2	0	1	0
Left other institution or Care.	1	1	0	0
Leaving armed forces home.	2	0	0	0

Reason for Acceptance	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Other reason.	2	2	0	0
Total	71	48	58	60

- 3.2 The figures show that the two most common reasons for acceptances of homelessness were on account of parents no longer willing to accommodate their children and loss of rented accommodation, including the end of an Assured Short-hold Tenancy and the loss of private rented accommodation.

Housing Advice

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Local housing authorities have a statutory duty to offer advice and assistance on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. They also have a duty to ensure that an Allocations Scheme for determining priorities for allocating social housing is available for inspection and that a summary of that scheme is available, on request, free of charge.
- 1.2 Landlord authorities have a duty to provide their tenants with information on the express terms of their tenancies, including their statutory rights in respect of assignments, successions and assignments by way of mutual exchange.
- 1.3 Advice and assistance on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness can encompass a wide range of issues, many of which require specialist knowledge. Some cases, for example those involving debt management, are referred to the CAB. The CAB has a dedicated “money advisor” who deals exclusively with debt referrals from the Homelessness Prevention Team. Some cases may be referred to other agencies included the Council’s Benefit Division.
- 1.4 Advice is given on a range of other matters including:
 - Harassment
 - Illegal evictions by private landlords
 - Properties in need of repair, including those which are unfit for habitation
 - Houses in Multiple Occupation
 - Charitable organisations assisting homeless people (including victims of domestic violence)
 - Securing private rented accommodation
 - Access to shared ownership schemes
 - Property rights in cases of relationship breakdown or other domestic issues
 - Interim and temporary accommodation
 - Nominations to other local housing authorities

2. Provision of Information

- 2.1 A range of advice and information leaflets are made available, some produced by the Housing Directorate, others published by the National Homeless Advice Service and the CLG. Where English is not the first language of the client, assistance can be obtained through approved agencies and documents can be translated in appropriate cases. For the visually impaired, literature can be made available either in large print or by CD or Braille. The Council has published its Housing Application form in an easy-read format to meet the need of any applicants who have learning disabilities. In addition, the Housing Application form will soon be available to complete on-line. Where a profoundly deaf client is a sign user, the Council can arrange “signing” through an approved agency. A loop system for people with hearing difficulties is available at the Civic Offices and at the Area Housing Office (South) at The Broadway, Loughton. Home visits will be made in appropriate instances.
- 2.2 Under the HomeOption choice based lettings scheme, fortnightly Property Lists are produced and are available at housing offices and the Council’s Information Desks across the District giving details of properties in which homeseekers can express an interest.
- 2.3 The Council’s tenant’s magazine “Housing News” is sent to all tenants 3 times each year, and when appropriate, to all homeseekers providing advice on a range of Housing Services.

3. Liaison with the Citizens Advice Bureau

- 3.1 The CAB have offices in the District in Epping, Waltham Abbey and Loughton. The Council has a Service Level Agreement with the CAB to provide a range of advice and to support those who have difficulties expressing their needs effectively. The Council contributed £114,000 from its General Fund in 2011/12 towards CAB running costs.
- 3.2 The Council has formal arrangements for referring cases and, in addition to front-line liaison on a case by case basis, the Assistant Director of Housing (Operations), the two Area Housing Managers and the Housing Options Manager, meet with the Bureau's office Managers each quarter.
- 3.3 Where a client is pursuing a review of a homelessness decision made by the Council they are advised in writing to seek assistance from the CAB or Shelter. Often, where applicants seek advice from one of the CAB's, they in turn seek specialist advice from their dedicated solicitor.

Homelessness Prevention

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Homelessness Prevention Team is an integral part of the Housing Options Service. The team is led by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness), assisted by the Senior Homelessness Prevention Officer.
- 1.2 The work has proved highly effective which is explained at Section 2 below. As previously reported this has not only seen a huge reduction in the level of acceptances, it has also led to a high number of people being able to remain in their current homes.
- 1.3 The number of cases being dealt with through homelessness prevention exceeds the number of cases being dealt with as homeless. This approach has ensured that any unnecessary homeless applications no longer occur. However, despite this “gate keeping”, approach, the Council ensures that all its statutory duties are met under the Housing Act 1996 PT VII as amended and will always arrange for a homeless application to be received from a person who will require that safety net.

2. Statistics

- 2.1 Homelessness Prevention Officers now provide a comprehensive service with a range of initiatives at their disposal to assist them with resolving the housing difficulties of clients they are seeking to serve.
- 2.2 The table below shows the number of cases that presented to the Homelessness Prevention Service in the last four years and the reason, with the numbers of cases prevented set out in the final row:

Prevention Action	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Mediation	3	4	8	4
Reconciliation	17	12	13	25
Financial payments from homelessness prevention fund.	0	4	4	3
Debt advice.	6	4	1	2
Resolving housing benefit problem.	14	9	5	3
Resolving rent arrears.	4	6	0	3

Prevention Action	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Sanctuary scheme for victims of domestic violence.	4	2	2	2
Crisis intervention.	0	1	5	3
Negotiation to help someone remain in the private rented sector.	0	1	7	3
Providing other assistance to enable someone to remain in private rented sector.	9	29	16	13
Mortgage arrears.	1	19	12	21
Other homelessness prevention measure (where work has commenced but there has been no further contact and resolution is unknown).	192	165	159	134
Housed in hostel or HMO.	11	22	9	8
Housed in private rented sector with landlord incentive scheme.	75	63	61	53
Housed in private rented sector without landlord incentive scheme.	42	60	55	69
Accommodation arranged with friends or relatives.	16	12	26	46
Supported accommodation.	5	5	18	9
Social housing management move.	3	6	4	5

Prevention Action	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Social housing: Housing Register offer.	29	19	39	30
Social housing: Housing Association direct offer.	1	1	5	6
Low cost home ownership scheme.	0	2	0	0
Other homelessness relieved.	28	5	14	4
Total Cases	580	549	557	547
Total cases prevented	460 (79%)	451 (82%)	463 (83%)	446 (82%)

2.3 During the period set out in the above table, the Prevention Service dealt with 2,233 cases of which 1,820 (82%) have been prevented. The figures do not take into account the many other enquiries made by the general public. This has been a considerable achievement. These results have had a direct impact on the homelessness acceptance rate, which has significantly reduced during the same period.

3. Preventing Homelessness Initiatives

3.1 The Council has a number of initiatives in place to assist those who have either lost their home or are facing eviction. All of these initiatives are set out in this section of the Strategy and form part of the Council's plan to assist homeless applicants through the current financial climate and to prevent re-possession.

4 The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS)

4.1 One of the difficulties that homeless and other housing applicants have in accessing the private rented sector (especially those in receipt of housing benefit), is to provide damage deposit guarantees in advance of occupation, which is routinely required by private landlords. Because of this, many homeless applicants have no alternative but to seek accommodation from the Council. If they are in a priority need category, the Council then has a legal duty to provide accommodation. In some circumstances, single homeless applicants have to be accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation in the first instance, which is not only inferior to normal residential accommodation, it is also at a cost to the Council's General Fund.

4.2 The Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme (EFHAS) is a scheme for helping homeless people to access private rented accommodation. It was set up in 1995 by a specially-created voluntary organisation as a registered charity, with financial support from the National Lottery Charities Board and the District Council, the respective contributions being £20,000 and £5,000. In early 2005, EFHAS learnt that their bid to the Big Lottery Fund for additional capital funding of £20,000 had been successful, which increased their funds to around £40,000 at that time. Furthermore, the Council's Cabinet agreed that £26,500 of additional CLG funding be used to assist the scheme in both 2011/2012 & 2012/13.

- 4.3 EFHAS is able to help homeless people by providing damage deposit guarantees to the landlords of the properties the applicant wishes to rent. All the guarantees are covered by money held in EFHAS's bank account. Furthermore, the Council has an Underwriting Agreement with EFHAS whereby it underwrites up to £40,000 of damage deposit guarantees in order to ensure that the guarantees did not over-commit EFHAS's available resources. Since the scheme has been introduced, the Council has not been called upon to payout any of the underwritten guarantees.
- 4.4 Between 1995 and June 2012, EFHAS helped 327 homeless families move into the private-rented sector in this way, who would otherwise probably have been unable. Many of these would have had to seek accommodation from the Council direct. All applicants to EFHAS come from within the Epping Forest District and are referred to EFHAS by the Council's Housing Directorate.

5 The Rental Loan Scheme

- 5.1 The Rental Loan Scheme was set up in 2008/2009 following the Council receiving a grant of £10,000 from the CLG in recognition of its excellent performance in preventing homelessness. The scheme complements the EFHAS scheme and provides applicants with a rental loan to meet the costs of the first month's rent in advance when securing accommodation in the private sector. Applicants are required to repay the loan on an interest free basis over 24 months, thereby re-cycling the budget to enable others to benefit from the scheme in the future. In December 2008, the Cabinet agreed that an additional £20,000 would be made available for the scheme in order to assist applicants during the current financial climate. Furthermore, the Council's Cabinet agreed that £26,500 of CLG funding would be used to provide further rental loans in both 2011/12 & 2012/13.

6. Housing Association Leasing Direct (HALD)

- 6.1 The Council set up a Housing Association Leasing Direct (HALD) scheme with Genesis Housing Association in July 2010. The Council has assisted six households who would have otherwise been homeless in accessing accommodation under the scheme through nominations made by the Homelessness Prevention Team. Those referred must be eligible for full housing benefit in order to qualify for assistance, with the household being able to remain in the property for 2 years under an assured short-hold tenancy. The Council is now working with another provider to set up a further scheme in the near future.

7 Parental Exclusions

- 7.1 Young people can sometimes have volatile relationships with their parents and can be at risk of exclusion from their home. Relate, who are a charity providing relationship support to people of all ages and backgrounds through its network of counsellors, receive referrals and seek a resolution to family difficulties and have an 80% success rate. In some cases, an exit plan is drawn up for the young person to move on to independent accommodation at the appropriate time. In the past year, the Homelessness Prevention Team has also worked with Essex County Council's Homelessness Response Team to also mediate between young people and families and provide other general support.

8 Young Parent Scheme

- 8.1 Railway Meadow is a supported housing scheme built in partnership with Brentwood and Uttlesford Councils in Ongar for young parents and is designed to help young people overcome challenges during their pregnancy and the first year of their child's life. The scheme consists of 13 self-contained flats with a communal lounge, activity area, training kitchen and office. The accommodation is offered to young Mothers, Fathers and couples aged 16-25 years. The support gives young people essential parenting and life skills to enable them to move on and live independent lives.

The scheme is owned and managed by East Thames and referrals are received from the Council, and Brentwood and Uttlesford Councils, with residents being re-housed by their host authority at the appropriate time. Epping Forest District Council has nomination rights to 8 of the flats.

9 Epping Forest District Sanctuary Scheme.

- 9.1 The Council's "Sanctuary" Scheme assists victims of domestic violence or Hate Crime on a tenure neutral basis, e.g. owner occupiers, tenants etc. The scheme provides a safe room within the victim's home. A typical sanctuary room would include a fire door with mortice locks, smoke detectors, fire blanket and two fire extinguishers. The victim would be supplied with a mobile phone to dial 999. The Council works in partnership on Sanctuary Schemes with the Safer Communities Team, the Essex Police Hate Crime Unit, Essex Fire and Rescue and Safer Places (formerly known as Harlow Women's Aid). All referrals to the scheme are through the Homelessness Prevention Team. Since its introduction, five Sanctuary rooms have been installed and have prevented homelessness.

10 Single Accommodation for Epping Forest (SAFE) Project.

- 10.1 SAFE is managed by NACRO Community Enterprises, a registered housing association and charity, which offers supported accommodation to single people. The scheme works in partnership with Social Care's Assessment and Child Protection Team, the Essex Probation Service, Connexions, the Youth Offending Team and In-Touch Support. The project is used in resolving the housing difficulties of single people across the District who otherwise would become homeless. SAFE was set up in 1993 with funding from the former Housing Corporation, the Council and the Probation Service. The Council provided SAFE land free of charge for the first of the developments and they now provide 37 Units of accommodation. This is in a mix of accommodation which is either shared or self contained.
- 10.2 Properties in the scheme are furnished and managed by SAFE, which lets them under a licence or an assured short-hold tenancy. Most residents are at the scheme for around one year. The scheme is managed by a Project Manager, supported by a Deputy Project Manager and three House Managers. Around 35% of all referrals are made by the Council with the balance being made from other key agencies. The main client group is 16-18 year olds, although people up to the age of 25 years are accepted. Those referred are assessed by one of the House Managers with a report on each case being referred to the SAFE Panel (comprising representatives from key agencies) for consideration. Those not accepted onto the scheme can appeal against the decision. On average there are 20 admissions annually to the scheme.
- 10.3 The Council provides move on accommodation by providing SAFE residents with priority under the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme, by placing them in Band 1 after 6 months at the SAFE Scheme

11 Mortgage Rescue

- 11.1 In January 2009, the CLG announced the introduction of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme. The intention of the scheme is to assist the most vulnerable households who are at risk through re-possession. Referrals can only be made where householders have between 20% negative and 40% positive equity. Mortgage Rescue is a last resort when all other lender "hardship tools" have been exhausted. Following consultation with the Citizens Advice Bureau's (CAB) debt advisor on the financial viability of the rescue, the case is referred to the lead provider for Essex being Moat Homes Limited. Depending upon the available equity, the applicant will be assessed for either "mortgage to rent" or a shared equity loan. The Council has been commended by the CLG for its assistance in taking this initiative forward and for referring cases soon after the commencement of the scheme.

11.2 Between 1 July 2009 and 1 July 2011, the Council, in partnership with the, Moat Homes Limited, assisted a total of 7 households to keep their homes through Mortgage Rescue. However, since July 2011, no further households have been assisted because of restrictions that have been placed upon the scheme by the Government. These include the price cap on the value of a property being reduced to less than £200,000 with only freehold properties being rescued (i.e. houses not flats). As the values of most, if not all eligible properties in the District are well above the cap, the use of Mortgage Rescue is now therefore limited.

12 Rough Sleeping

12.1 The Council has only identified a very small number of rough sleepers within the District. Much of this is due to the work of the Homelessness Prevention Team. The CLG awarded a grant to all Essex authorities to assist with the prevention of rough sleeping in 2011/12. The Council received £4,500. In order to continue to prevent any rough sleeping in the District the grant was passed to both Colchester and Chelmsford night shelters equally, which enables the Council to continue to nominate those threatened with rough sleeping to the two shelters.

13 Preventing Repossession Fund

13.1 The Council received a grant of £47,500 from the Communities and Local Government (CLG) at the end of June 2009, to enable the Council to extend small loans to families at risk of homelessness through repossession or evictions. In March 2012, a further grant of £30,000 was received as part of a preventing re-possession national allocation. The Government issued guidance on the use of the grant and is keen that it supports the maximum number of households in need of financial assistance during these difficult times, enabling them to remain in their own homes.

13.2 Under the Government's guidance, financial assistance through small interest free loans ranging from £1,000 to £3,000 per household capped to a maximum of £5,000 available interest free is made available. Final decisions on how the money is deployed rest with the Council and are based on individual local need and circumstances. In addition to homeowners, the funding is to be used to assist residents in all forms of tenure that are struggling with their rental payments and face eviction.

13.3 Loans are agreed by senior officers and are repayable by the applicant over a period of 1-5 years depending upon the size of the loan and the circumstances of the applicant. This allows the money to be re-cycled to help other households in the future. Only those households who, following investigations, are found to be genuinely unable to pay their rent or mortgage, due to "income shock" caused by loss of earnings where there is no history of previous arrears, are able to benefit.

13.4 Loans are only to be agreed, when the recipient is prepared to act on debt advice to make repayments more affordable following the intervention of an advisor. They will be provided where lenders cannot apply forbearance measures due to the level of arrears, but will freeze possession action as a result of the loan, on the basis that all parties are prepared to compromise on the debt owed and should be made to recover the position, (rather than fully clear arrears) where all other options have failed. Loans are not made where there are other ways to resolve the problem. For example, if the arrears are caused by housing benefit delays, assistance should be given in dealing with the matter. Loans are only made where it would enable a household to remain in place where no other option would lead to this outcome.

14. Discretionary Housing Payment

- 14.1 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are sums of money paid to people who need help with their housing costs. Private sector tenants who have a change of circumstances, such as a loss of employment, may find that their contractual rent is higher than their housing benefit entitlement. DHPs can help private sector tenants meet the shortfall and prevent them going into arrears and subsequently becoming homeless. Payments are made over a short period until the tenant's circumstances improve or they obtain more affordable accommodation. In 2011/2012, £29,000 in Discretionary Housing Payments was allocated.

Support schemes, welfare and mediation services

1. Introduction

- 1.1 A number of support schemes are in place in the District to support people who have been homeless or may be at risk of being homeless. There are two floating support schemes provided in the District by Safer Places (formerly Harlow Women's Aid) and Family Mosaic (formally "In Touch Support").

2. Safer Places Floating Support Scheme (Stay Safe)

- 2.1 This is known as the 'Stay Safe' scheme and was launched in January 2003, funded through Essex County Council's Supporting People Team and can assist up to 14 households at any one time.
- 2.2 The aim of Stay Safe is to assist women experiencing (or at risk of) domestic violence to remain safely in their own homes. It can also be used to support women moving on from a refuge. There is access to a 24 hour emergency help line with contact being made by a Support Worker at least once each week. Risk assessments are undertaken and, if it is safe, meetings take place in clients' homes. Otherwise, local drop-in centres are used. On average, the support worker will spend around 3 hours per week on each case. Plans are made, setting out the action required to provide the practical support, information, advice and guidance needed in each case. These are kept under review with risk assessments updated.
- 2.3 Although referrals to Stay Safe may be made by other agencies, many are made through the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team. A number of referrals are also made from the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC).
- 2.4 Applicants can visit the drop-in centres and have access to a solicitor, if required. They can also attend various support sessions.
- 2.5 Stay Safe has a full-time Support Worker in the District who reports to an area co-ordinator based in Harlow and is also responsible for managing three Support Workers at similar schemes in East Hertfordshire, Broxbourne and Harlow.

3. Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)

- 3.1 The Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) draws together key agencies in a local forum to co-ordinate actions and resources towards addressing the highest risk victims of domestic violence. The Housing Options Team participates in the MARAC process and attends meetings.

4. The Tenancy Support Scheme

- 4.1 The Council works with the County Council's Housing Related Support Team's appointed provider of housing related support, Family Mosaic, to provide support to vulnerable people who are housed in Council and other accommodation.
- 4.2 The Council is represented on a Panel of Stakeholders including Family Mosaic, the Community Mental Health Team, and Community Drug and Alcohol Team which meets monthly to discuss prospective referrals and operational issues.
- 4.3 Once a person is accepted onto the scheme, they receive support from the floating support worker until they have sufficient skills to live more independently.
- 4.4 This is the only scheme of its kind in Essex.

5. Family Mosaic

- 5.1 In addition to providing floating support through the Tenancy Support Scheme, Family Mosaic provides floating support to vulnerable people irrespective of tenure across the Epping Forest District.
- 5.2 The service also provides a high level of support to homeless applicants placed in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 5.3 The Support Worker provides agreed levels of support with the client. This will include acting as a key link with other agencies and preparing the client to acquire the skills needed to sustain a permanent tenancy.
- 5.4 Support Workers also provide a service to people whom the Council does not owe a duty under homelessness legislation. All referrals to the scheme for those living in bed and breakfast accommodation are through the homelessness assessment officers.
- 5.5 The Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) meets on a monthly basis with Family Mosaic Managers to discuss contact and service delivery matters.

6 Essex National Probation Service

- 6.1 The Housing Options Section works with the National Probation Service's Housing Liaison Officer on cases referred by the Service. If a full housing duty is owed to the person referred, then the Council will continue to work with the Probation Service to ensure that they are able to sustain any permanent accommodation offered. A Protocol is in place between the Council and the Probation Service which sets out the way in which the service will be delivered effectively.

7 North Essex Mental Health Partnership

- 7.1 The Housing Options Section works in partnership with the North Essex Mental Health Partnership to ensure that housing advice and assistance is provided to people who are suffering from mental illness. The Council will arrange to visit clients either at their current place of residence or in hospital to discuss their housing situation. Clients may be provided with bed and breakfast accommodation in the first instance with a referral being made to Family Mosaic so that housing related support is provided from the outset. The Mental Health Team carry out their own assessment of the client's ability to live independently. In addition, some clients with low level mental health needs are placed in the Council's short-term accommodation at Hemnall House, Epping. A Protocol is in place between the Council and the Mental Health Partnership which sets out the way in which the service will be delivered effectively.

8. Multi-Agency Protection Panel Arrangements

- 8.1 The Council is a member of the Multi-agency Protection Panel Arrangements (MAPPA). The Panel is co-ordinated by Essex Police and manages high risk offenders. The Housing Options Manager and the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) attends when cases are being considered involving homeless applicants who are seeking assistance from the Council.

The Role of Essex County Council's Social Care

1. Introduction

- 1.1 There have been changes to Children's Social Care at Essex County Council. The majority of children's services are now provided on a 'quadrant basis' (Essex has been split into four geographical areas with each area being a quadrant) and children in the Epping Forest District receive services from the 'West Essex Quadrant'. Many staff providing services for Children in the Epping Forest District (under the West Essex Quadrant) are now located at Goodman House in Harlow.

2. Leaving and After Care Team

- 2.2 The Leaving & After Care Team is quadrant-based and located at Goodman House, Harlow. The team takes casework responsibility for children up to the age of 15 years and six months. The team provide support whilst the young people are in care, for example: assessing need, creating "Pathway plans" and assisting in the transition process of young people moving on from care. The team also provides aftercare support according to the specific provisions of the Children Act 1989 as amended by the Children Leaving Care Act 2000.
- 2.3 The Council's Homelessness Prevention Team are notified by the Leaving and After Care Team prior to a young person leaving care in order that their housing needs can be assessed. In general, the Council arranges for NACRO (a housing association providing specialist housing and support for young people) to accommodate young people leaving care in the SAFE Scheme (see paragraph 10.1 page 22) to give them extra preparation for independent living. The Council then re-houses the young person when they move on from NACRO into Council accommodation with Floating Support.

3. Homeless Response Team

- 3.1 The Homeless Response Team is a small, centrally based team (located at County Hall, Chelmsford) which seeks to engage with 16 & 17 year olds on the verge of parental eviction and mediates with families to avoid homelessness and the necessity of providing accommodation under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989.
- 3.2 The team works in partnership with the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team and carries out joint assessments either through planned sessions or in response to urgent requests (whenever this is possible).

4. Assessment & Intervention Team

- 4.1 The Assessment and Intervention Team is also quadrant-based and located in Goodman House, Harlow. The Team respond to the immediate needs of children and families referred to Children's Social Care where an assessment of that need is required and especially in relation to "Safeguarding" (Child Protection) and "Children in Need". Referrals to this service are through the central Initial Response Team, with reference to Essex County Council threshold criteria.

5. Family Support & Protection

- 5.1 The Family Support and Protection Team is Quadrant-based at Goodman House, Harlow responding in the longer term for those children subject to Child Protection Plans, and Child in Need plans, with reference to Essex County Council threshold criteria.

6. Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team

- 6.1 The Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team are quadrant-based and located at Goodman House, Harlow. New referrals are initially received by a central Essex team (Social Care Direct) and then forwarded to Goodman House for further assistance. The Learning Disability and Physical Impairment Team refer people requiring housing and support to schemes called Barnes Court, and Tolpuddle House in Ongar which are owned and managed by East Thames Housing Association.

7. Community Assessment Team for Older People

- 7.1 The Community Assessment Team for Older People are quadrant-based and located at Goodman House. The team assist people aged over 65. Initial referrals are received first by a central Essex team (Social Care Direct) and then passed where necessary to Goodman House, Harlow.

8. Safeguarding Adults

- 8.1 The Council has a Corporate Safeguarding Group. Key staff have received training on Safeguarding vulnerable adults. The Council has a Safeguarding Strategy and a reporting form and has an e-learning package available to all staff.

Services for people involved with drug and alcohol abuse

1. The Community Drug and Alcohol Team (CDAT)

- 1.1 The Community Drug and Alcohol Team (CDAT) are based in Harlow.
- 1.2 The team assists clients suffering with drug and alcohol abuse. The staff includes a Clinical Psychiatrist, Clinical Psychiatric Nurse and a Social Work and Administration Team.
- 1.3 Clients are referred to CDAT through a number of channels including hospitals, the Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service (ADAS), GPs, family members and self-referrals; with a minimum age for clients being 16 years and no upper age limit. People with alcohol problems far outnumber those with drug problems.
- 1.4 All CDAT clients are risk assessed, with particular attention being paid to any risks linked to abuse, for example, mental health problems, risk of violence to self or others, and neglect. All clients have a physical assessment and a community care plan. A Panel meets monthly to prioritise cases.
- 1.5 Some clients may be referred for rehabilitation, which may be residential, usually for 6 months, or may be day attendance based. These services are provided outside the local area, which is seen as beneficial to clients.
- 1.6 There is an agreed protocol for the provision of the service. There is a high success rate which has resulted in low levels of repeat homelessness, with many clients being able to sustain a permanent tenancy.

Homelessness Assessments, Decisions, Notifications and Reviews

- 1.1 Around 80% of homelessness interviews are conducted by prior arrangement, helping staff to manage workloads and clients to avoid long waiting times. Home and hospital visits are offered when appropriate. Where English is not the first language of the client, staff are able to call upon interpretation services. A 'point card' can be used to establish which language is required and immediate translation can be effected by telephone. Document translation can also be arranged in appropriate cases.
- 1.2 The process of assessing applications is complex and governed by legislation. As homelessness law is always changing, all staff are kept up to date on any case law that may affect the decision-making process.
- 1.3 The Council adopts a firm but fair approach to homelessness, placing applicants in accommodation when statutorily required to do so. Referrals are only made to Homelessness Assessment Officers if the Homelessness Prevention Team has explored every avenue in preventing homelessness. This approach has brought about a significant drop in homeless referrals.
- 1.4 Investigations include contact with previous landlords (both public and private), mortgage lenders, solicitors, Environmental Health Officers, Land Registry, Social Workers, Medical Practitioners, Occupational Therapists, hospital workers, victim support groups, Police, neighbours, relatives, and the Immigration & Nationality Directorate.
- 1.5 These investigations rest with the Homelessness Assessment Officer, who arranges interim and temporary accommodation as necessary. All homelessness decisions are signed off by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness) prior to the applicant being notified of the decision.
- 1.6 Due to the shift in emphasis to prevention, the Homelessness Service was re-structured in 2010. There is now just one full time homeless caseworker and five FTE Homelessness Prevention Officers being a ratio 1:5 between Homeless Case Workers and Homelessness Prevention Officers which is the national norm.
- 1.7 Progress of homelessness applications is monitored and overseen by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness). The Director of Housing chairs quarterly Customer Improvement Meetings which the Housing Options Manager attends to discuss performance over a range of indicators including homelessness.

2 Out of Hours Service

- 2.1 The Council provides a 24 hour 365 day per year emergency out-of-hours homeless response service. Members of the Homelessness Team are on call on a duty rota and will respond to cases where a person, for example, could become homeless due to fire or flood.

3. Reviews

- 3.1 Following any homelessness decision, applicants are advised of their legal right to request a review of the decision and agencies that can assist them in the review process including the CAB and Shelter.
- 3.2 Legislation requires that a request for a review of a homelessness decision should be made within 21 days of the notification of the original decision. If appellants request a review outside of the deadline, the Council may offer additional time depending upon the circumstances.

- 3.3 Some reviews are carried out by an officer senior to the person who took the original decision and had not been involved in the original decision. The Code of Guidance is observed with all reviews.
- 3.4 However, many decisions on non-homeless and intentionality are considered by the Housing Appeals and Reviews Panel which comprises five District Councillors. Applicants are able to put their case both in writing and in person at Panel meetings. If they prefer, they can appoint a third party to represent them, for instance, a solicitor, friend, Ward Member or a representative from Shelter or the CAB.
- 3.5 All statutory reviews are completed within the statutory 56 days, unless otherwise agreed with the applicant. Ample time is given to applicants to provide documentary evidence prior to any decision being made.
- 3.6 If a homeless applicant is dissatisfied with a decision made at a statutory review, provided their application is made within 21 days of the statutory review decision, they have the right to pursue a further review on a point of law through the County Court. This is explained to applicants in decision letters.
- 3.7 Where a homeless applicant is in priority need and not intentionally homeless but has no local connection with the District, they may be referred to another local authority where they do have a connection. Although there is a national Local Authority Agreement on which council is responsible for taking homelessness responsibility. Should there be any dispute between local authorities on who owes the duty; an accredited arbitrator may be appointed by mutual agreement to resolve the matter. The Council has only appointed an arbitrator on one occasion when the case was found in the Council's favour.

Accommodating Homeless Households

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Where a local housing authority has reason to believe that a homeless applicant has a priority need for accommodation, it has a statutory duty to arrange interim accommodation for the applicant, pending completion of enquiries into the case. This duty arises under Section 188 of the Housing Act 1996 Part VII as amended. If, on completion of enquiries, it is decided that a full housing duty is owed to the applicant, temporary accommodation must be arranged until the full housing duty is discharged. This duty arises under Section 193.
- 1.2 The Council uses a variety of interim and temporary accommodation including its Norway House hostel, and a small block of self contained flats at Hemnall House, Epping where tenants receive out-reach support from hostel staff. Over recent years, the numbers of homeless applicants placed in the Council's own housing stock has substantially reduced due to other options being available. The Council nominates homeless applicants to its Domestic Violence Scheme and often, for management reasons, provides Bed and Breakfast accommodation to single people.
- 1.3 The table below shows the distribution of households between the different types of temporary accommodation for the past 4 years.

Year	Norway House	Hemnall House	Fresh Start	Non-secure tenancies	Brook Haven	Women's Refuges	B&B	Total
2008/09	22	7	13	4	4	0	10	60
2009/10	19	8	8	0	5	0	7	47
2010/11	27	8	1	0	5	0	5	46
2011/12	33	8	1	3	5	1	8	59

2. Homeless Persons' Hostel Norway House, North Weald

- 2.1 The Council's hostel, Norway House, North Weald (a Grade II listed building) underwent a major refurbishment and improvement scheme in 2004/05.

- 2.2 The hostel has a number of facilities including an enclosed garden which provides a play area for children under 5 and a play area for older children equipped by a group of volunteers, raising funds mainly through grants from Essex County Council Community Partnership and Essex Youth Development and Child-Care Partnership. The Council works with the Norway House Stakeholder Partnership which comprises representatives from local schools, Churches and Health Service staff. The group aims to generally improve the quality of life for residents.
- 2.3 Norway House has ample parking facilities and a large secure store for residents' furniture, should they be unable to accommodate all their possessions in their rooms. Homeless households in other accommodation can also benefit from the storage.
- 2.4 There are 32 rooms on the ground and first floors which are let individually or as suites, as necessary. Four attic rooms have been refurbished, with their own private facilities. Two additional rooms are reserved for night and week-end emergencies, with beds made-up ready for use. Residents have use of communal kitchens, common rooms and laundry facilities. Over the last three years, the majority of rooms have been provided with their own bathroom facilities with the remainder being converted within the next year. A previously unused area outside of the communal kitchen has recently been converted into a meeting room.
- 2.5 The former Caretaker's accommodation has been converted to provide three separate rooms for 16-17 year olds in order to meet the Government's requirement to stop the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for this younger age group. Residents provide their own furniture, but where necessary basic items of equipment such as beds can be supplied from hostel stores.
- 2.6 In 1992, in response to an increase in homelessness at that time, five chalets providing accommodation for 10 families were built in the grounds to the rear of the main hostel, and continue to provide a valuable contribution to the assistance Norway House can provide.
- 2.7 The hostel has 5 staff supervised by the Assistant Housing Options Manager (Homelessness). The hostel team includes the Manager, two Deputy Managers, a Caretaker and a part-time Cleaner. Hostel Management staff have a small office near to the entrance of the main building with a service reception area for residents' enquiries.
- 2.8 The hostel has a door-entry system for the main building and closed circuit television cameras cover external doors, parking areas and some communal areas internally. These systems are controlled from the Manager's office.
- 2.9 Office opening hours are 9 am to 5 pm weekdays. A service is also provided on Saturday mornings for between 2 and 4 hours. In addition, some cover is offered on Bank Holidays. The Manager and Deputy Managers are on call on a 24 hour, 365 day basis to deal with emergencies.
- 2.10 On admission to the hostel, residents are given a 'welcome' pack, which includes information about local schools, health services etc. They are helped to apply for housing benefit, if necessary, and a Supporting People Tenant Support Plan is maintained.
- 2.11 Residents have a licence agreement which sets out the conditions by which they live at the hostel.
- 2.12 A newsletter is published on a two-monthly basis to keep hostel residents informed on matters of general interest.

3. Hemnall House, Epping

- 3.1 Hemnall House comprises 10 units of accommodation on two floors, mainly small studio flats with shared facilities, although there are some larger self-contained units.
- 3.2 The flats are occupied on a non-secure tenancy with the accommodation being carpeted and the kitchens equipped with refrigerators and cookers. Residents have use of a communal laundry room.
- 3.3 Staff offer support to tenants on an out-reach basis and visit the scheme each week. The flats are let to families with no more than 2 children (because of the limited size of the flats) who are able to live more independently than those at the hostel.
- 3.4 Some residents may be referred to Family Mosaic where additional support is needed.

4. Bed and Breakfast Accommodation

- 4.1 Following a competitive tendering exercise, the Council has appointed a number of hotels both within and outside of the District to provide bed and breakfast accommodation. All hotels used have been inspected to ensure that they provide adequate living conditions and meet all health and safety requirements. Fire Safety Risk Assessments are monitored on a six-monthly basis.
- 4.2 EFDC has on average 5 single people living in bed and breakfast accommodation at any one time who are generally housed there as a last resort for management reasons. The vast majority of occupants receive housing benefit.

5 Women's Refuges

- 5.1 The Council, in partnership with East Living provided the first Women's Refuge in the District, which opened in April 2005. It has a wide range of facilities and is supervised by a Scheme Manager and a part-time assistant.
- 5.2 It comprises 3 x 1 bedroom and 2 x 2 bedroom self-contained flats with their own kitchens and bathrooms. A Health Visitor attends regularly and the Scheme Manager ensures that all the tenants have access to a G.P. Legal advice is provided by a visiting solicitor. The Scheme Manager helps with training residents and assisting with issues such as returning to work with good links with local schools and nurseries being established.
- 5.3 Residents have assured short-hold Tenancies that can be renewed if they are not ready to move on. In order to be accepted on the scheme, residents must have been accepted for either the interim or full homelessness duty by the Council.
- 5.4 Safer Places is an independent domestic abuse charity dedicated to supporting adults and children affected by domestic abuse. They have refuges in Harlow, Broxbourne and Southend providing supported accommodation for up to 273 women. They also offer an outreach and floating support service in five Hertfordshire and Essex areas including the Epping Forest District. The outreach service is for women who either cannot or will not go into a refuge. The Homelessness Prevention Team would refer households fleeing domestic violence for a refuge space. In addition, referrals are also made to Women's Aid a national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children. They support a network of a range of domestic and sexual violence services across the UK.

6 Localism Act 2011

- 6.5 Under the Localism Act, although a Government Commencement Order is yet to be issued, it is proposed that councils will be given powers to discharge their Homelessness Duty by offering suitable accommodation in the private rented sector with or without the consent of the applicant. The accommodation must be provided for a minimum term of 12 months in order to end the Council's duty. If the accommodation is lost by the applicant within a period of 2 years of the offer then they can re-apply, regardless of priority need and if appropriate referred back to the host authority. When the Government Commencement Order is received, the Council will be considering whether it wishes to use these powers and agree a policy on when private sector offers will be made.

Consultation

1. A consultation exercise on the Strategy has been undertaken with all partner agencies, the Communities and Local Government's Special Advisor on Homelessness, the Housing Scrutiny Member Panel and Town and Parish Councils. The Strategy was approved by the Housing Portfolio Holder in September 2012.
2. The Council undertakes periodic consultations with its customers including customer interview exit surveys. The homelessness service forms part of the three yearly tenant's satisfaction survey with all Housing Services.
3. The Housing Scrutiny Panel will review the Action Plan on a regular basis.

3. Action Plans

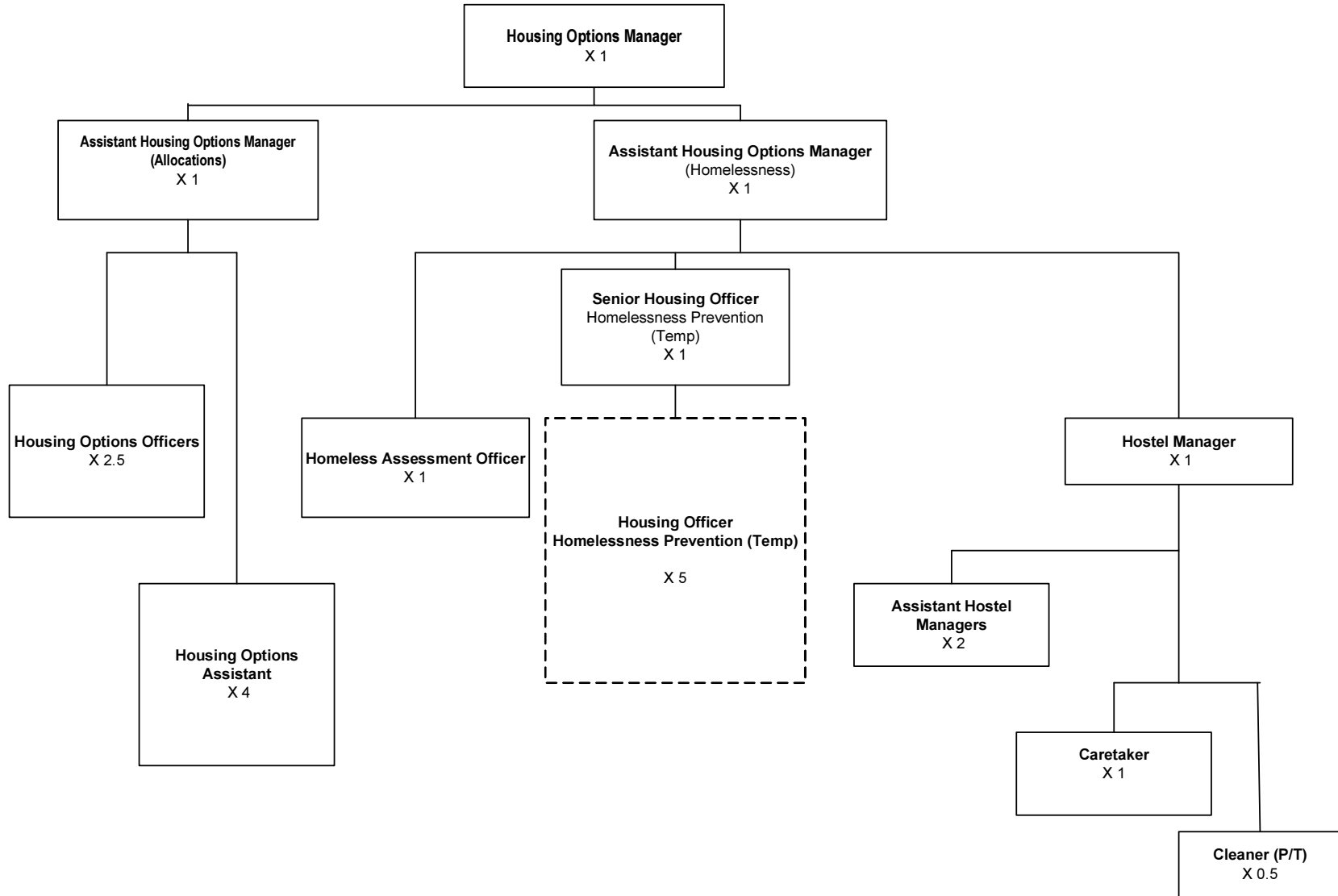
APPENDIX ONE

Action	Priority	Target Date	Comments	Responsibility
Continue to keep the number of households in temporary accommodation to a minimum and within the Council's Key Performance Indicator target of 60 households	High	On-going	In 2011/12 the target was achieved. However, due to the current financial climate at the cost of private rented and owner-occupied accommodation and the proposed Welfare Reforms the numbers in temporary accommodation is expected to rise	Housing Options Manager
Continue to keep the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for the single homeless to a minimum	High	On-going	Bed and Breakfast accommodation will only be used for the single homeless where there are severe management difficulties	Asst Housing Options Manager (Homelessness)
Continue to ensure 40% affordable housing on large development sites	High	On-going	This will be achieved through local plan	Director of Housing
Continuously Review the financial and underwriting support given to the Epping Forest Housing Aid Scheme	High	On-going	This is essential in tackling homelessness	Housing Options Manager
Expand the "Sanctuary" Scheme for victims of domestic violence and hate crime	Medium	On-going	5 schemes currently in place	Housing Options Manager
Review the budget for Rental Loan Scheme	Medium	On-going	This is essential in tackling homelessness`	Housing Options Manager

Action	Priority	Target Date	Comments	Responsibility
Increase the number of properties the provided by the Housing Association Leasing Schemes (HALD) with both Omega and Genesis Housing Associations	High	On-going	A key initiative in preventing homelessness	Housing Options Manager
Consider the findings and recommendations of the CIH's Study into the effects of the Welfare Reforms on homelessness in the District and formulate appropriate action plans	High	September 2012	The CIH has been commissioned to undertake a Study into the effects of the Welfare Reforms on the Council, its tenants, private tenants and homelessness	Director of Housing
Work with the Essex Consortia to agree the allocation of addition funding to Essex Authorities that has been received from the CLG to assist single homeless people and rough sleepers	High	December 2012	When the Council receives its allocation, consideration will be given to how the additional resource can be best used to assist this client group	Housing Options Manager
Complete the conversion works to provide designated bathroom facilities for each room at Norway House	Medium	December 2012	More than 90% of all rooms already have their own designated bathroom	Housing Options Manager
Introduce a policy on whether the Council will discharge its homelessness duty in the private rented sector with or without the applicant's agreement and in which circumstances	Medium	January 2013	A policy will be considered when Government Guidance has been received	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)

Action	Priority	Target Date	Comments	Responsibility
Undertake a review of the Housing Allocations Scheme	High	April 2013	Government Guidance received July 2012	Assistant Director of Housing (Operations)
Consider installing separate bathroom facilities in the chalets at Norway House under future Housing Improvements and Enhancements	Medium	April 2013	Currently, two households living in adjacent chalets share a bathroom	Housing Options Manager
Keep under review the possibility of additional chalets at Norway House	Low	March 2014	This no longer a priority on account of fewer numbers of households in temporary accommodation	Director of Housing

Epping Forest District Council
Housing Options Section



Establishment:
Officers (Full time) = 18
Officers (Part time) = 6

Staff Total = 21



Epping Forest District Council

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Housing Directorate

August 2012



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