Introduction

Under the Homelessness Act 2002 it is a requirement to formulate a Homelessness Strategy by carrying out a homelessness review for the borough. The review should consider a wide population of households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, not just those who are unintentionally homeless and have a priority need. The review informs the Homelessness Strategy and should establish the extent of homelessness in the borough, assess its likely extent in the future, identify what is being done and by whom and what resources are available to prevent and tackle homelessness.

Having undertaken the review it can then be determined if current activities are adequate and appropriate to meet aims of preventing and reducing homelessness and whether any changes or additional provision are necessary.

This review uses statistical data and consultation outcomes to assess current and emerging homeless needs and trends. The review process has been guided using information from the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS)’ developing homelessness strategies toolkit. Engagement with a range of partners has increased understanding around local pressures and how services could work together to prevent and reduce homelessness.

The ministerial statement ‘Making Every Contact Count: A Joint Approach to the Prevention of Homelessness’ set out the 10 local challenges and these have been used as the basis for consultation and the subsequent development of the Homelessness Strategy action plan.

The 10 local challenges are:

1. Adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services.
2. Actively work in partnership with voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education and training needs.
3. Offer a housing options prevention service, including written advice, to all clients.
4. Adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative.
5. Have housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support.
6. Develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both clients and landlords.
7. Actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme.
8. Have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually so that it is responsive to emerging needs.
9. Not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in bed and breakfast accommodation.
10. Not place any families in bed and breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and then for no longer than six weeks.

1 www.practitionersupport.org
Consultation
A stakeholder consultation event was held in November 2014. A range of agencies and organisations attended and a summary of the event is included from page 40. This included considering the relevance of the ten local challenges to local circumstances and any amendments needed to reflect specific local pressures.

Eleven telephone interviews were undertaken in May 2015 with service users. A summary of the key points are included from page 44.

General information
The borough covers an area of over 58,000 hectares with a population of 117,956 living in 47,787 households (Census 2011). There are two urban areas; Ashford and Tenterden, each surrounded by a large rural hinterland. As a ‘growth area’ the borough has planned expansion for housing, retail and commercial uses. The urban extensions of Cheesemans Green and Chilmington Green will deliver in the region of 7,000 homes over the next 20 years.

Figure 1: Map of Ashford borough
Housing costs

To buy

Approximately 68% of households in the borough own their property, either with or without a mortgage. The table below from the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA)\textsuperscript{3} 2012 gives the mean house price for areas of the borough.

**Figure 2: Mean House Prices by Sub Area and Type (2012)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub Area</th>
<th>Detached</th>
<th>Semi-detached</th>
<th>Terraced</th>
<th>Flats</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashford Rural North</td>
<td>£431,500</td>
<td>£280,600</td>
<td>£264,300</td>
<td>£130,500</td>
<td>£350,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford Rural West</td>
<td>£424,400</td>
<td>£233,500</td>
<td>£160,200</td>
<td>£171,400</td>
<td>£331,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford Rural South</td>
<td>£426,800</td>
<td>£209,900</td>
<td>£241,200</td>
<td>£229,800</td>
<td>£332,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford Rural East</td>
<td>£380,200</td>
<td>£262,700</td>
<td>£192,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>£317,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford town</td>
<td>£252,700</td>
<td>£185,400</td>
<td>£156,300</td>
<td>£103,900</td>
<td>£183,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is updated in the table below and shows that the average selling price for each property type increased over the 12 months from December 2014 to December 2015. In the six months to May 2016 the increase in house prices has slowed and fallen for some types of property.

**Figure 3: Mean selling prices by type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property type</th>
<th>December 2014</th>
<th>December 2015</th>
<th>May 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detached</td>
<td>£317,868</td>
<td>£351,957</td>
<td>£352,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi</td>
<td>£208,867</td>
<td>£220,911</td>
<td>£229,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terraced</td>
<td>£173,987</td>
<td>£198,062</td>
<td>£197,151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat</td>
<td>£128,844</td>
<td>£141,577</td>
<td>£131,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>£226,236</td>
<td>£235,985</td>
<td>£221,417</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.home.co.uk

\textsuperscript{3} www.ashford.gov.uk/local-plan-2030-evidence-base
To rent

The private rented market is currently buoyant with prices rising. A search of private rented properties within a one mile radius of Ashford town centre identified 159 self contained properties (one bed to four bed) to rent. Of these only three were below the Ashford local housing allowance rate (LHA) set for April 2015 but all of these state they are not available to people in receipt of benefits or are seeking professional people.

Figure 4: Summary of prices of private property to rent (March 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property size</th>
<th>Average rent pcm (£)</th>
<th>Median rent pcm (£)</th>
<th>LHA rate 2015 (£)</th>
<th>No. under LHA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 bed</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>517.47</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 bed</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>631.93</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 bed</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>730.00</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 bed</td>
<td>1278</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>971.73</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rooms for rent in shared houses varied in cost from £300 to over £500 pcm. None of the 35 rooms advertised on www.houseshare.com were below the LHA 2015 rate for shared rooms of £291.57. Many of the advertisements state ‘available for single professional people’ only.

The following graph highlights that there are fluctuations in the number of private rented sector homes below the local housing allowance rate and indicates a sharp decline during 2014. Since end of 2015 there has been a small increase in the number of rented properties under the LHA rate (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Number of private rented properties with rental under the local housing allowance February 2013 – January 2015

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4 Conducted on 1st March 2016 using www.rightmove.co.uk
Figure 6: Number of private rented properties with rental under the local housing allowance September 2015 – February 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2 bed</th>
<th>3 bed</th>
<th>4 bed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2015</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2015</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2015</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Incomes

The SHMA 2012 compares the incomes of full-time employed Ashford residents with those of people working in jobs located in the borough. At around £23,700 the median income of Ashford “workers” is about £3,500 lower than the median income of Ashford “residents” £27,220. The fact that the earnings of those who live in Ashford are greater than those that work there does however mean that there is some risk of those in local employment (and thus contributing to the local economy) being marginalised from the housing market as they are less able to afford local properties. Higher earnings from those commuting out of the borough are somewhat distorting property prices in relation to local wage levels.

Incomes required to afford different tenures are show in the table below. The calculations are based on three-and-a-half times household income for house purchase and 30% of income to be spent on housing for rented properties. The figures for house purchase are based on a 100% mortgage for the purposes of comparing the different types of housing.

**Figure 7: Indicative Income Required to Purchase/Rent without Additional Subsidy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Lower quartile purchase price</th>
<th>Lower quartile private rent</th>
<th>Affordable rent</th>
<th>Lower quartile social rent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashford Town</td>
<td>£40,900</td>
<td>£25,000</td>
<td>£20,000</td>
<td>£14,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural North</td>
<td>£76,000</td>
<td>£27,800</td>
<td>£22,200</td>
<td>£14,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural West</td>
<td>£82,900</td>
<td>£30,000</td>
<td>£24,000</td>
<td>£14,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural East</td>
<td>£72,000</td>
<td>£29,000</td>
<td>£23,200</td>
<td>£14,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural South</td>
<td>£68,000</td>
<td>£29,000</td>
<td>£23,200</td>
<td>£14,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Employment and earnings

The percentage of economically active people aged 16-64 who are unemployed stood at 5% in September 2015\(^5\), the lowest unemployment rate since mid 2009. In comparison Canterbury and Shepway currently have higher unemployment rates at 5.6% and 5.2% respectively with Maidstone seeing 5.2% unemployment. The unemployment rate for the south east is 4.3% and nationally 5.4%.

Median weekly earnings (gross) for employees living in the borough were £548.60 in 2015. This income has fluctuated over the last five years as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Median weekly earnings (gross) for residents living in the area, all full time workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashford</td>
<td>548.60</td>
<td>506.30</td>
<td>512.50</td>
<td>496.60</td>
<td>507.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury</td>
<td>583.40</td>
<td>574.40</td>
<td>577.50</td>
<td>545.60</td>
<td>559.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maidstone</td>
<td>557.70</td>
<td>515.40</td>
<td>500.90</td>
<td>542.90</td>
<td>538.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepway</td>
<td>543.80</td>
<td>481.40</td>
<td>500.50</td>
<td>474.90</td>
<td>491.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ONS annual survey of hours and earnings - resident analysis; www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/8183/Earnings-in-Kent.pdf

Work place weekly earnings in Ashford for all full time workers were £492.60, in comparison to resident earnings this is £56 per week lower.

\(^5\) www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157311/subreports/ea_time_series/report.aspx?
Affordable housing delivery

The SHMA 2012 concludes that there is a need for 368 affordable homes (i.e. affordable/social rent and shared ownership) to be built each year. Figure 9 below illustrates that affordable housing delivery has consistently fallen below the level needed each year.

Figure 9: Affordable housing built per year

The current Homes and Communities Agency funding programme\(^6\) prioritises the delivery of shared ownership and rent to buy schemes. There is limited allocation of funding for the provision of rented schemes for vulnerable groups.

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Population

The population of the borough is predicted to continue growing from its level of 117,956 recorded by the Census 2011.

Figure 10: Predicted population growth to 2031

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>133,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>149,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2026</td>
<td>165,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2031</td>
<td>170,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KCC District Profile version September 2014

The majority of the population 93.7%, is white with 6.3% of the population formed by black and minority ethnic groups (BME). The BME population of Ashford is lower than that of the south east (13%) or nationally (18%). It is useful to compare homelessness acceptances from BME groups to identify whether homelessness is disproportionally higher or lower than the population profile. The chart below shows the percentage of homeless acceptances (eligible, unintentionally homeless and priority need) from applicants from a black or minority ethnic origin. A further breakdown of acceptances by BME groups is shown in Figure 26.

Figure 11: Percentage of homelessness acceptances by BME groups of total acceptances (Ashford).

Source: opendatacommunities.org/data/homelessness/homelessness-acceptances/ethnicity

7 Census 2011
Deprivation

In the current indices’ of deprivation (2015) Ashford has an average rank of 176 (out of 326). In 2010 Ashford ranked 198. Ashford is now more deprived, in comparison to other local authorities than in 2010. In comparison with other Kent authorities Ashford ranks seven out of 12 (with one being most deprived).

Ashford has three wards which include Lower Super Output Areas within the top 10% of most deprived Lower Super Output Areas in Kent. These are: Stanhope, Victoria and Aylesford Green.

The overall indices of multiple deprivation is made up of seven domains each weighted according to their perceived importance:

- Income (22.5%)
- Employment (22.5%)
- Health deprivation and disability (13.5%)
- Education and skills (13.5%)
- Barriers to housing and services (9.3%)
- Crime (9.3%)
- Living environment (9.3%).

Each domain is scored at Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) and there are on average three to four LSOS per ward. Deprivation data is not available at ward level. The pattern of deprivation can vary considerable within a district. In 2010 KCC recorded the 20 most deprived LS0As in Kent for each domain. Two Ashford LS0As are recorded as falling within the most deprived 20 in Kent for education and skills (fourth and 20th) and four LS0As for barriers to housing and services (fourth, 10th, 14th and 15th). These four LS0As fall with the Wards of Isle of Oxney, Downs North, Saxon Shore and Downs West.

The indicators used to create the domain barriers to housing and services are; household overcrowding, homelessness, housing affordability, distances to GP surgery, food shop, primary school, post office. Housing affordability and distance to services will be of higher significance in rural areas.

Deprivation information can be used to help identify areas which could benefit from targeted interventions to reduce specific issues and inequalities.
Housing Register

Numbers on the housing register vary due to undertaking annual reviews of applicants’ circumstances and the number of people housed, which depends on the amount of affordable housing becoming available. The number of applicants on the Ashford housing register each month is shown in Figure 12.

In March 2016 the greatest numbers of applicants on the housing register were single people (672), couples (187) and families with one child (316), indicating a need for shared housing, one and two-bedroom accommodation. Applicants on the housing register are allocated a band dependent on their assessed housing needs. Band A is for those with the most urgent housing needs. Figure 13 details the number of applicants that fall within each band and of those the number that are homeless.

In March 2016 the greatest numbers of applicants on the housing register were single people (672), couples (187) and families with one child (316), indicating a need for shared housing, one and two-bedroom accommodation. Applicants on the housing register are allocated a band dependent on their assessed housing needs. Band A is for those with the most urgent housing needs. Figure 13 details the number of applicants that fall within each band and of those the number that are homeless.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Band</th>
<th>Total number of applicants</th>
<th>Number registered as homeless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1321</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the applicants on the register, 105 applicants are homeless (6.6%). 40% are families with one child, 17% families with two children and 15% single people. 76 households, are single people, couples or families with one child or two children who could share, reflecting the need for shared accommodation, one and two-bed property. There are 29 larger families and groups requiring homes with three or more bedrooms. The highest number of homeless households are accommodated in private sector leasing property (57), bed and breakfast (17) and in the private rented sector (11), (March 2016).

The council’s Lettings Policy aims to allocate 25% of properties to homeless applicants. The current waiting time for a band C applicant is three years.

**Figure 14: Household composition of housing register applicants, March 2016**

During 2014/15 there were 151 homeless acceptances.

In the 12 months from October 2014 to September 2015 there were 108 homeless households, (eligible unintentionally homeless and in priority need) with one or more dependent children. For the same period there were 20 single households.

The trend of the composition of homeless households over a period of time is shown in Figure 15, confirming that majority of eligible, unintentional and priority need households are families.
Empty Homes

The total number of vacant properties\(^9\) at 5th October 2015 was 1,008, comparable to the previous year of 1,007. This is an increase from 2013 total of 997, but lower than 2012 and 2011 totals of 1,163 and 1,221 vacant properties respectively. Within this total the number of long term empty homes (vacant for more than six months) at October 2015 were 247, a decrease from the previous four years of 250, 307, 449 and 504.

In all social housing 60 properties were vacant at 1st April 2015. With no long term empty property held by a registered provider. There are fluctuations seen in vacant social housing stock due to redevelopment projects. In 2014 there were 34 social housing properties vacant, which was a decrease on the total of vacant social housing in 2013 of 88, where 46 properties were defined as long term vacant. Within the council’s own stock there were 47 vacant properties at 1st April 2015; an increase from 26 in 2014.

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\(^9\) DCLG live tables 615
**Court possessions**

A mortgage or landlord possession action starts when a mortgage lender or landlord completes and submits a ‘claim’ to the courts to repossess a property. The most common reason for repossession is arrears of mortgage or rent.

**Figure 16: Number of claims and possessions over the last three-to-four years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Property</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage claims</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage possessions</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private landlord claims</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private landlord possessions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social landlord claims</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social landlord possessions</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerated landlord claims</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerated landlord possessions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Landlords can sometimes evict tenants using ‘accelerated possession’. This is quicker than a normal eviction and doesn’t usually need a court hearing. The landlord can only do this if the tenants has:

- An assured shorthold tenancy or a statutory periodic tenancy
- A written tenancy agreement
- Been given the required written notice (a minimum of two months) in the right form
- Hasn’t been asked to leave before the end of a fixed-term tenancy

For accepted homeless cases the reasons for the approach have been recorded as given in Figure 17. A private landlord does not always state why the secion 21 notice has been served. There are few homelessness acceptances from social housing as anyone evicted from social tenancies tend to be found intentionally homeless. In addition the eviction panel will work to consider ways of preventing an eviction from council owned housing, whereby before an area manager applies for a warrant of eviction it is considered by the serious arrears officer and the senior housing options officer if there is any additional advice or support that could help the household to prevent their homelessness. Help can only be given where tenants are willing to engage with staff.

**Figure 17: Reasons for approach for accepted homelessness cases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Property</th>
<th>2011/12</th>
<th>2012/13</th>
<th>2013/14</th>
<th>2014/15</th>
<th>2015/16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage arrears</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private landlord arrears</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private landlords termination S21</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social landlord arrears</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Homeless acceptances

Over the last five years the average number of homelessness acceptances has been 164 per year. The number per year is shown in Figure 18 below.

Figure 18: Numbers accepted as homeless and being in priority need

To compare with neighbouring authorities and nationally the number of acceptances per 1,000 households is used (Figure 19). Ashford consistently has a higher number of acceptances per 1,000 households than the national average except for a dip in Quarter 2 of 2014.

Figure 19: Homelessness acceptances per 1000 households

Following an external review of the Housing Options Service in 2014, a range of measures has been implemented to improve the service. This includes a training programme for officers, the appointment of two landlord liaison officers together with conducting more robust investigations, reviewing all of our processes, restructuring the team and being more pro-active. This has resulted in a fall in the number of acceptances being noted. However, landlords selling properties are not considering homelessness prevention; in addition, many landlords will no longer take the Homeless Prevention Bond and with market rents higher than the LHA rate, private rented properties are largely unaffordable to anyone claiming full benefits, especially single people.
Reasons for loss of last settled home

In Ashford there have been reductions in homelessness acceptances where parents or relatives/friends were no longer willing to accommodate and in non-violent relationship breakdown over the last two years. This reduction is attributable to a review of working practices to, wherever possible; keep people at home, especially young people. Home visits are undertaken to every client at risk of homelessness so both the client and the person evicting them can be spoken with to assess the circumstances. With regard to young people there is a lead housing options officer who works closely with Social Services to conduct a joint assessment with them and the young person to decide if the young person should be a looked after child (following the Southwark judgement in 2009).

The recent changes at KCC social services have seen the introduction of an Early Help and Prevention Service. These services are designed to respond early to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and families, who without early help would be at greater risk of developing more serious problems and having poorer outcomes. Adequate housing and prevention of homelessness is a critical factor in providing a stable environment for children and young people.

A rise in homelessness acceptances has been seen in loss of rented or tied accommodation due to a termination of an assured shorthold tenancy, violent relationship breakdown and loss of rented accommodation for other reasons.

Some landlords are now selling their properties and no longer wish to rent them out. To monitor the reasons for loss of private rented accommodation the reasons for serving a S21 notice, where known, will be recorded, although this is not a requirement.

The rise in acceptances due to violent relationships could be due to having a named housing options officer as a point of contact for domestic violence, who attends MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference) and co-ordinates the SAFE referrals, plus there is a one stop shop which is held every week at the Willow Centre, enabling more victims of domestic violence to come forward to seek housing advice.

There were no recorded acceptances for the following reasons

- Racially motivated violence
- Other forms of violence
- Racially motivated harassment
- Rent arrears registered social landlord/other housing association dwellings
- Required to leave National Asylum Support Service accommodation
Using a percentage of homeless acceptances (unintentionally and priority need) to compare local to regional and national figures for 2014/15. This highlights that the loss of rented accommodation due to termination of assured shorthold tenancy is creating higher proportion of numbers of homelessness cases locally.
Figure 21: Local, national and regional comparison for homeless acceptances 2014/15 (by percentage) unintentionally homeless and priority need

Source: P1e via practitioners support statistical compiler home.practitionersupport.org/sc/page.aspx?la=181&p=page5&y=0&q=
Prevention and relief of homelessness

Homelessness prevention involves providing people with the ways and means to address their housing and other needs to avoid homelessness. This is done by either assisting them to obtain alternative accommodation or enabling them to remain in their existing home. Prevention work is often undertaken in conjunction with partner agencies such as CAB, Floating Support etc. Clients can be referred to partner agencies offering a range of support/advice services as many factors can contribute to homelessness. The locata (HELP) system enables referrals to partner agencies. Over 3000 referrals have been made since the inception of the HELP system in 2010.

Homelessness relief occurs when an authority has made a negative homeless decision i.e. that a household is either intentionally homeless or is non priority as defined within part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (amended 2002), but helps someone to secure alternative accommodation, even though it is under no statutory obligation to do so.

Figure 22: Prevention, number of cases where homelessness has been prevented in Ashford

Homelessness prevention is always the preferred outcome and a range of options will be explored to determine if the households can remain in their existing accommodation or assisted to find alternative settled accommodation.

In 2015/16 the rate per 1,000 households of homelessness prevention in Ashford was 30.69. This is significantly higher than the overall rate per 1000 households for England which was 9.72.
Debt advice, resolving rents arrears and housing benefit claims and negotiation are key aspects of preventing homelessness.
The most significant housing option available to relieve homelessness is into the private rented sector where procuring properties is difficult. Since the recruitment of the two landlord liaison officers there has been an increase in the numbers where positive action has been successful in relieving homelessness.

**Figure 24: Number of negative decisions (not homeless, non priority, intentionally homeless)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Not homeless</th>
<th>Non priority</th>
<th>Intentionally homeless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014/15</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015/16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 25: Number of cases where positive action was successful in relieving homelessness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2011/12</th>
<th>2012/13</th>
<th>2013/14</th>
<th>2014/15</th>
<th>2015/16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashford</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acceptances by ethnic origin

The population of Ashford is predominately white making up 93.7% of the total population. The percentage of the Ashford population from BME groups from the 2011 census is:

- Other ethnic origin: 0.4%
- Mixed race: 1.4%
- Asian or Asian British: 3.4%
- Black or Black British: 1.2%
- White: 93.7%

It is important to compare ethnic minority acceptances against the population profile to determine if there is any disproportionate representation of any group.

Figure 26: Ashford: Eligible, unintentionally homeless and priority need by ethnic origin as percentage of total acceptances.

Source: www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness Table 784
Homelessness decisions

The numbers of homeless decisions for Ashford over the last five years are shown in Figure 27.

Figure 27: Homelessness decisions

Source: www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness. Table 784
Figure 28: Comparison to the national averages for homelessness decision for the year 2014/15 and 2015/16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of all decisions Ashford</th>
<th>% of all decisions England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014/15</td>
<td>2015/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible unintentionally homeless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and priority need</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible homeless in priority need</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intentionally so</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible homeless not in priority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible but not homeless</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness. Table 784

Understanding the age range, in addition to the household composition, of homeless applicants will help inform what services need to be provided. As can be seen from Figure 29, the majority of homeless households fall within the age ranges 16-24 and 25-44.

Figure 29: Ashford: eligible, unintentionally homeless and priority need by age of applicant

Applicant households’ accommodation (temporary accommodation)

In Ashford the total number of households in temporary accommodation is over 100 at the end of each quarter as shown in Figure 30. Between 60 and 70 households are accommodated in private sector leased properties at any one time. Other temporary accommodation available includes Christchurch House, bed and breakfast and self contained properties within Ashford Borough council’s own stock.

Figure 30: Number of households in temporary accommodation

The numbers accommodated in temporary accommodation remains stable due to maintaining a constant supply of PSL properties, which provides longer term, better quality temporary accommodation.

The length of time spent in temporary accommodation varies. Moving on to settled accommodation is either into social housing through bidding on Kent HomeChoice or into the private rented sector.

It is very unusual for a household to be placed out of the area. A household would only be offered out of area if there were no vacancies in Ashford and then only to a B&B that has been recommended by another authority.
Bed & Breakfast accommodation use

The use of bed and breakfast accommodation in 2014 and 2015 is illustrated in Figure 31. This shows both the total number of households in B&B and within that total the number of households with children or a pregnant woman.

There can be a variety of reasons for the peaks and troughs in numbers. For instance a rise in the New Year can follow after family disputes over the Christmas holiday, young people leaving school with no work may present as homeless further to the end of the school year and summer holiday.

Figure 31: Households in B&B accommodation

The length of time spent in bed and breakfast accommodation should be as short as is possible. Figures collected at the end of each year show a snapshot of the number of homeless households in bed and breakfast accommodation for longer than the six week legal limit as:

- 2010/11 = 9
- 2011/12 = 3
- 2012/13 = 6
- 2013/14 = 8
- 2014/15 = 1
Rough sleeping

The number of rough sleepers is estimated annually, during November in each local authority area. This is coordinated Kent wide so the estimate takes place on the same night in each local authority area. Figure 32 compares the number of estimated rough sleepers in neighbouring local authorities. Ashford, historically has a low number of rough sleepers.

Figure 32: Number of rough sleepers (estimate)

There was a rise to an estimated five rough sleepers at the count in 2014, which remained constant in 2015. This rise could be due to difficulties in securing accommodation in the private rented sector due to the LHA rates and the cut in housing benefit for under 35s (reduced to shared room rate rather than the one bedroom rate).

Ashford Churches Together, in partnership with Ashford Borough Council and Porchlight, piloted a winter night shelter for six weeks from February 2016. This was initially discussed in November 2015 and partners agreed to go ahead. After training, recruiting, writing policies and procedures the shelter was opened in February 2016. The scheme relied on donations, of which just over £4000 was received. Sainsbury kindly donated food that was just about to go out of date. The aim was for seven churches to be involved so that each one could provide accommodation for one night each at their locations. Six churches agreed to participate and Ashford Baptist Church agreed to do two nights a week. Sleeping bags and camp beds were donated. Although uptake was slow, by the end of the pilot all 12 bed spaces were being used. Porchlight and Ashford Borough Council continued to work with the clients to secure them more settled accommodation.
Demand on Housing Options Service

The Housing Options Service operates a triage system. A member of the public contacts a customer adviser at the council. Basic questions are asked and if it is specific housing advice, or risk of homelessness, the person is booked in the housing options calendar for a triage telephone call. A housing options officer contacts the client to see if the situation can be resolved through advice over the telephone. If not, a home visit is arranged for the following day – wherever possible – to discuss the situation in more detail.

Figure 33: Approaches for housing advice to the housing options triage during 2015 and 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>Aug</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>Sept</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>Oct</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 2015</strong></td>
<td><strong>1831</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 34: Number of applications and outcomes 2015
The above chart demonstrates that whilst numbers approaching the service are high the number of applications and cases accepted shows that the front line triage service is being effective.

Alongside statistical evidence a homelessness review also needs to consider current practice in preventing and dealing with homelessness, existing services and accommodation provision. It also seeks to identify where services may need to be strengthened or developed to have the most positive effect in preventing and reducing homelessness.

An internal audit, (Homelessness: Temporary Accommodation by Mid Kent Audit Partnership) reported in 2016, concluded that homelessness applications are assessed in compliance with the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) and that the council fulfils its obligations to provide interim and temporary accommodation.
Corporate approach

Homelessness is one of five key priorities of the Ashford Health and Wellbeing Board. The Board looks at the way the health and wellbeing of Ashford’s residents is observed and measured and how their health and wellbeing could be improved, through joined up commissioning across the National Health Service, Social Care, Borough Council, Public Health and other services that are directly related to health and wellbeing. Unsuitable housing and homelessness can have a negative impact on a person’s health and wellbeing. Reducing negative housing factors can therefore contribute to easing pressures on health and social care services.

The council’s corporate plan, 2015 - 2020 is committed to providing quality homes across the borough, catering for a range of ages, tenures and need, in well planned and attractive new places.

The Ashford Housing Strategy has a specific priority to:

• Prevent and reduce homelessness and increase access to settled accommodation for homeless households and those at risk of homelessness

With an action to:

• Implement the homelessness strategy with focus on:
  • Preventing homelessness wherever possible
  • Providing quality housing services and suitable accommodation for homeless people.

The council's Tenancy Strategy introduced fixed term tenancies from 1st October 2012. This enables reviews of tenants’ circumstances and facilitates using housing stock in the most appropriate way for those in greatest housing need. The Lettings Policy\(^\text{10}\) was updated in August 2016 and at an operational level the housing register is reviewed every six months. The council’s Lettings Policy aims to allocate 25% of properties to homeless applicants.

The council works collaboratively with other local authorities and agencies, often under the auspices of the Kent Housing Group (KHG) and the Kent Joint Policy and Planning Board (Housing) where greater benefit is derived from a joined up approach and sharing of good practice.

The Kent Housing Group’s primary aim is to encourage discussion around best practice in housing amongst chief housing officers of local authorities and chief executives of housing associations working in Kent. The groups remit includes:

• Providing strategic leadership – shaping and setting the housing agenda
• Building relationships and influence decisions for the benefit of Kent
• Drawing in resources from both traditional and alternative sources
• Working together to improve the supply and quality of affordable homes
• Creating sustainable communities in Kent

Along with being tasked with the delivery of the Kent Forum Housing Strategy\(^\text{11}\). This strategy recognises that each authority will have its own homelessness strategy. The strategy acknowledges the pressures and challenges of the recent economic downturn, welfare reform and increased demand for private rented properties could affect homelessness and this will be monitored.

The Kent Joint Policy and Planning Board for Housing is a strategic partnership between health, housing and social care. The JPPB provides the forum where strategic issues requiring joint working between health, housing and social care can be raised and measures to address them developed.

\(^\text{10}\) www.ashford.gov.uk/applying-for-social-housing
\(^\text{11}\) shareweb.kent.gov.uk/Documents/community-and-living/Regeneration/KFHS%20Refresh%20FINAL.pdf
A policy for the discharge of homelessness duty into the private rented sector is in place having been developed jointly with five other Kent authorities and adopted by Ashford Borough Council. By working jointly it is anticipated that this will ensure a consistent approach to implementing the power across the county. This is one example of joint working across the county that is led by the Kent Housing Options Group, a sub group of KHG.

The Housing Options Team

The structure of the Housing Options Team is shown in Appendix 1. The team was reconfigured in 2013 to provide a more streamlined service after customers were experiencing long waiting times at the Gateway and further delay for follow up appointments if necessary. A telephone triage service now operates between 9am and 4pm and an appointment made for a housing options officer to return the call the same day, for more complex cases a home visit can be made within 72 hours of the initial call. Home visits are arranged to ensure time is available for officers to complete their case work. All services are geared towards prevention of homelessness and to help the household help themselves. This includes clients being advised of all their housing options, an income and expenditure assessment to assess affordability together with a ‘whole needs’ assessment to see what other support maybe needed and can be referred or signposted to.

Outside of normal hours a housing options officer is on call to respond to emergencies that come via the council's monitoring centre.

Each of the four housing options officers work generically with a specific responsibility for a particular client group; mental health, young people, ex-offenders and domestic abuse. This enables close working relationships to be formed with a range of agencies and personnel as well as the wider Housing Options Team to look proactively for suitable options within the private rented sector. The specific officer approach has been well received by agencies as they now have a recognised named contact to liaise with when they are working with a client who needs housing assistance. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of “homeless tonight” cases approaching from these areas.

The Whole Needs Assessment tool enables housing options officers to refer and signpost customers to other organisations that can assist with specific problems. This recognises that difficulty accessing or maintaining housing can be interrelated with other issues, such as debt, benefits, health and support. The tool is currently under review with new partner agencies being added.

Each customer has a named housing options officer to liaise with and once housed an officer relevant to the tenure will continue to offer support to them whether in social housing stock or the private rented sector.

An independent review of the Housing Options Service was undertaken in 2014. This identified a number of strengths and that the team is working effectively.

In November 2015 an internal audit was conducted of the homelessness and temporary accommodation service. It concluded that the service offers strong controls, which is the highest rating in the assurance rankings and indicative of a service that is not only operating effectively but demonstrating good practice.

Most recently, in July 2016 a follow up to the 2014 Housing Options Service review was carried out and identified a number of areas to further improve the service.

- Review the triage service to ensure the housing options officers’ time is used most effectively for case work and home visits
- Introduce telephone interviews, as it may be possible to resolve some cases without the need for a home visit, or provide better information to aid a home visit
• A more structured approach, including a checklist, for prevention work would improve consistency across the team and review current advice sheets

• Ensure housing options officers and landlord liaison officers are clear as to their roles and responsibilities in prevention work

• The part seven homelessness assessment process should include standard letters and checklist to develop a consistent approach

• The landlord liaison work is good and is delivering savings. There is a need to increase the number of suitable Private rented properties available and a range on incentives needs to be considered

Accessing suitable accommodation and helping tenants to maintain tenancies in the private rented sector is imperative to reducing and preventing homelessness. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to welfare reform, specifically the benefit cap where households have had their income reduced. In addition, rental amounts are now significantly higher than the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) meaning many properties in the private rented sector are unaffordable to families with a low income.

The council has landlord liaison officers who can communicate between landlord and tenants, where there have been problems with a tenancy. These problems may include; damage to property, anti-social behaviour, rent arrears, or failure on the part of the landlord to fulfil their obligations. The landlord liaison officers will investigate and negotiate to resolve any issues to the satisfaction of both parties if possible.

Under the private sector leasing scheme, the council leases properties from landlords for a fixed period. This provides suitable temporary accommodation for homeless households. In March 2016 there were 57 households accommodated through the private sector leasing scheme

Also operating is the council’s social lettings agency, A Better Choice Lettings (ABC Lettings) which operates in a similar way to a high street lettings agency to broker tenancies between tenants and landlords, but with a focus to provide access to accommodation for tenants normally seen as a higher risk by high street agencies and landlords. The stark difference is that the main aim is not to make a profit from running such a service but to enable access to accommodation for those who would not normally be able to use a high street lettings agency. This tends to be a large percentage of those who present to the council as homeless.

Protocols are used to ensure good practice is adhered to from all agencies especially when dealing with vulnerable clients. A number of protocols have been developed on a county wide basis under the guidance of the Joint Policy and Planning Board (housing) together with a reconnection policy which aims to promote equal access to supported accommodation but to enable reconnection to an area when the supported service is no longer required. The JPPB (Housing) is currently reviewing the protocols to ensure the restructure at social services is reflected, which may mean changes to existing practices.

To improve homelessness services across Kent, Ashford has with other local authorities signed up to the Gold Standard programme\(^\text{12}\), designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. The challenge follows a ten step continuous improvement approach that starts with a pledge for local authorities aspiring to ‘strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services’ and culminates in an application for the Gold Standard Challenge. This review has been developed with reference to the gold standard programme.
Communications

The stakeholder consultation event (see: Consultation Outcomes, page 40) identified that there are misconceptions around homelessness and lack of knowledge about services that are offered and options available to prevent and relieve homelessness.

The council does not have a communication plan for homelessness and currently raises awareness of the issues through officer contact with a range of organisations and agencies. Individual agencies working with homeless people undertake their own publicity campaigns and awareness raising.

The council’s landlord liaison officers promote the work they do to both high street letting agents and private landlords and emphasise that early intervention is key in preventing homelessness. They hold a Landlord’s Focus Group quarterly, chaired by a local landlord. This is a small group of landlords who meet with the landlord liaison officers to discuss current issues and for officers to update on any new ideas to see if they are supported.

The Landlord Forum is held annually. The purpose of these are to update landlords on current changes on legislation and on what the council is doing. The forums have a variety of guest speakers and at the last forum a workshop to give landlords the opportunity to give feedback on our service was added, which was well received. To engage with more landlords to encourage them to use the social lettings agency a shop front was rented in the high street, which proved successful, with at least 30 new contacts that may lead to procuring additional properties.

Accessing housing options information

There are a number of ways information about housing options can be accessed by the public.

Prior to March 2016, basic housing advice could be accessed face to face with a customer service adviser at Gateways in Ashford and Tenterden. These advisers are now based at the Civic Centre and can be seen by making an appointment. More complex cases are referred to a housing options officer.

For an indication of queries that people were presenting with at the Ashford Gateway, during the 12 months prior to the end of September 2014 Choice Based Lettings was the most common topic with 4,135 enquiries, followed by housing advice (2,659 enquiries) and then enquires relating to council stock such as repairs and maintenance, rent and mutual exchange.

Advice is also available over the telephone and online on the Ashford Borough Council website.

Kiosk self help stations are available at the Civic Centre and four of the local children’s centres. There is also one located within the local Volunteer Centre. Other locations for kiosks are being explored. In the 12 months prior to end of September 2014, housing was the most frequently chosen option from the kiosk. (The others being employment and benefits). Within the housing information, the housing options section is most viewed, with information about private renting and choice based lettings being the most frequent choice.
## Accommodation and services

Supported accommodation in the borough is detailed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation (existing)</th>
<th>Client group</th>
<th>Number of units</th>
<th>Level of support</th>
<th>How funded (support)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Porchlight - Simon Mead House</td>
<td>Single homeless (18-65 yrs)</td>
<td>11 Individual bedrooms, shared facilities</td>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>KCC Supporting People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homegroup - Stonham</td>
<td>Young single people (16-25 yrs)</td>
<td>Individual bedrooms, shared facilities</td>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>KCC Supporting People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homegroup - Emergency Accommodation (based at Stonham)</td>
<td>Young single people (16-18)</td>
<td>3 Individual bedrooms, shared facilities</td>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>Ashford Borough Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMCA - Brookfield Court</td>
<td>Young single People (16-25)</td>
<td>3 x 3 individual rooms, shared facilities</td>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>Ashford Borough Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circa - Womens Refuge</td>
<td>Women fleeing domestic violence</td>
<td>16 self contained units</td>
<td>Medium level</td>
<td>KCC Supporting People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christchurch House</td>
<td>Homeless families</td>
<td>8 Individual rooms, shared facilities</td>
<td>No support but superintendent on site daily</td>
<td>Ashford Borough Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WKHA - Lantern House</td>
<td>Single homeless</td>
<td>11 self contained flats</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Private Finance Initiative (PFI)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation being built</th>
<th>Client group</th>
<th>Number of units</th>
<th>Level of support</th>
<th>How funded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Limes – expected completion November 2016</td>
<td>Young people (16-25 yrs)</td>
<td>8 Self contained flats and communal space</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Supporting People</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the above supported accommodation homeless households can be assisted to access private rented accommodation, either directly with a private landlord, or the Ashford Social Lettings Agency. The Social Lettings Agency in July 2016 had 84 properties on full management option (64 of these are in Ashford and 20 in Shepway). Using the Homeless Prevention Bond scheme is another way to assist households into the private rented sector.
Temporary accommodation

Temporary accommodation has been in transition since 2011 when the government introduced LHA rates into the calculation of housing benefit subsidy for temporary accommodation and capped the amount of subsidy payable in temporary accommodation cases.

Claimants in temporary accommodation are also subject to the benefit cap. The treatment of temporary accommodation in universal credit is a further and final step in the journey of transition for temporary accommodation. The government expects local authorities to provide suitable permanent accommodation for claimants who present as homeless rather than using over-expensive temporary accommodation to house such families.

Services and support

A number of organisations offer a wide range of services to people which will assist with their housing situation. However it is not always known who provides what and any referral criteria. As part of improving communications greater awareness of services and support offered in the borough or can be accessed by residents would be useful.

These services include:

- Debt advice
- Tenancy training
- Benefit advice
- Employment advice
- Support for families and young people
- Support for homeless people
- Support for victims of domestic abuse

A ‘Hub’ has been set up in cooperation with the Department of Work and Pensions to offer wider advice to people seeking to return to work to reduce barriers to employment.

Welfare reform

A snapshot of claimants affected by the benefit cap on 16th September 2014 identified 49 households affected by the benefit cap. All are families with three or more children; 19 households are living in the private rented sector. These households present a higher risk of becoming homeless if they fall into rent arrears than those in council or housing association homes and finding suitable alternative accommodation for larger families is very challenging. Each household was interviewed jointly with the DWP and offered advice and support to assist them with the changes to their benefit.

The roll out of universal credit this means households who previously would have had their rent paid directly to the landlord will now have to budget and be responsible for paying their own housing costs. This will need to be monitored to identify those households who maybe at risk of falling into arrears, particularly when the lower benefit cap level of £20,000 per year (outside London) comes into force.
Case study: Christchurch House

Christchurch House in Ashford was a rundown, empty commercial property. It has been renovated and turned into a short-stay accommodation facility containing eight accommodation units (including a wheelchair-accessible unit and wheelchair-friendly kitchen facilities) along with washing facilities, a communal kitchen area, storage space and a pleasant courtyard. The property will be a temporary home to people whom the council has a homeless duty and whose homelessness cases are under review. Traditionally the majority of homeless applicants the council has a duty to house have been placed in bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation. This project is expected to save the taxpayer around £75,000 per year and reduce the trauma faced by families in a B&B.
Consultation outcomes

Stakeholder consultation November 2014

Key points

The key points identified from the stakeholder consultation were:

- Aligning policies and strategic aims.
- Prevention and early help/intervention are key.
- There are a number of projects/initiatives working in this area although some have specific criteria to be able to access them and concern about those people in housing difficulty who may not meet such criteria and potentially could become homeless.
- Awareness raising of what services are available both to professionals and public.
- Identifying first signs of homelessness to enable preventative work to commence.
- Could a directory/web based information portal help access information?
- Recognised difficulties of keeping information updated. How best to link to existing ‘directories’ such as Live It Well website.
- Helping people to ‘self-help’ through signposting to services.
- Importance of frontline staff giving a consistent message. How could this be better coordinated?
- Are services the right ones to offer. Are people engaging with them, do they know how to access services. More publicity?
- With regard to private rented sector.
  - More needed to be done to improve joint working with private landlords to encourage them to make LA aware when they are looking to evict a tenant so appropriate alternative accommodation can be found.
  - Need to raise awareness of both landlords and tenants of services that can assist, such as tenancy training, landlord liaison officers.
  - Support providers could help families going into PRS, but don’t receive any referrals – possibility of including information about support services in tenants packs.
  - Need to address concerns of those who would rather wait for social housing than consider PRS – ABC lettings agency offers minimum 12 months tenancy to help relieve concerns about security of tenure.
  - If person under notice of eviction they are placed in Band C and housing options officers work with them to find other housing options.
  - Landlord liaison officers to forge closer links with letting agents.
  - To help prevent homelessness, Gravesham BC will give higher banding if household can find alternative accommodation e.g. stay with family.

Agreed that a twice yearly meeting to monitor the progress of the homelessness strategy would be useful.
Common themes emerging were:

- Joint commitment to the prevention of homelessness at a strategic level
- Joint working across all organisations
- Early intervention is key to homelessness prevention
- Improve communication
  - Between partners
  - Increased public awareness of homelessness and causes of homelessness
  - Where to go for help – easy to understand information
- Demand for accommodation for client groups with high support needs and those who do not fit into priority need criteria
- Further develop relations with private landlords to increase availability of suitable accommodation for homeless households
  - Work to breakdown misconceptions of private rented sector with tenants
  - Work with tenants to understand responsibility of renting

Gaps

The stakeholder consultation sought to identify where there are gaps in local service provision or what additional services could make a positive contribution to the prevention and reduction of homelessness.

These were grouped under the ten local challenges set out in making every contact count, although some will be effective across several challenges.

1. Adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services.
   - Joined up interagency approach to staff training in housing options to ensure consistent information/advice is given
   - Aligned priorities needed to prevent conflicting objectives – prevention to be key priority
   - Increase commitment to raising awareness of homelessness

2. Actively work in partnership with voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education, training and employment needs.
   - Need to keep information updated – whole needs assessment tool
   - Some criteria are inflexible restricting help being offered
   - Need to raise public awareness/responsibility
   - Training for partner organisations, managing expectations of what’s available
   - Finding out what services are needed from service users.

3. Offer a housing options prevention service, including written advice, to all clients.
   - Awareness raising for - universal credit, budgeting, anti social behaviour act, providing information to the customers including how to reach those who cannot read or are not computer literate
   - Early years education on realities of homelessness, money management etc.
   - Increase joint working in voluntary sector
• Homelessness options needed for those who are not in priority need
• Private rented sector not affordable to people on benefits
• Develop more ‘must–do’ emphasis on tenants
• Closer liaison with housing providers when they are taking eviction action

4. Adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative.
• Need for more supported accommodation and a hostel in Ashford
• No winter shelter in Ashford for rough sleepers
• Increase street pastor service

5. Have housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support.
• Lack of accommodation for those with high support needs
• Need better links with mental health teams and support for people with low level mental health problems
• Increase landlord contacts and involvement of landlords in the process, knowledge of floating support
• Difficulties contacting resettlement workers
• Avoid missed opportunities through customer/staff contact
• Recognising and dealing with financial issues

6. Develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both clients and landlords.
• Support for vulnerable tenants
• Information sharing to sustain tenancies, awareness of potential issues and knowledge of support services available, early identification of problems and signposting to services
• Tenancy training/packs/accreditation
• Rent guarantee

7. Actively engage in preventing homelessness including loss of private sector accommodation and parental eviction.
• Increase public awareness/understanding of homelessness
• Improve links between private landlords and services and incentives with letting agents
• Financial literacy/information courses
• Mediation service to address parental eviction
• Joint agency working, specifically for hard to reach families
• Use of the housing register banding to encourage self help

8. Have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually so that it is responsive to emerging needs.
• Raising public awareness
• Influencing policy and sharing policy with other authorities
• Sharing of statistics
• Political recognition of issues
9. Not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in bed and breakfast accommodation.
   - Use of early help notification at point of ‘risk’ of homelessness i.e. prevention
   - Affordable /safe offer of accommodation/supported lodging model for 16/17 year olds/
     emergency accommodation for young people with babies
   - Intensive support workers
   - Family mediation services, keeping families together, holistic support, educating parents
     (parental responsibility), conflict resolution, relationship mediations
   - Education through schools, youth groups etc
   - Schools identifying quickly – referring to organisation
   - Problems claiming benefits
   - Impact of statutory school age on family income

10. Not place any families in bed and breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and
    then for no longer than six weeks
    - Maintaining support through from B&B to move–on
    - Annexes to current B&B, self contained
    - Lack of temporary accommodation
Service user consultation outcomes May 2015

Key points

- Accommodation before homelessness and circumstances leading to homelessness

Five respondents were living in private rented or renting from family, four respondents were living with family including family of ex-partners, one respondent was sofa surfing and one respondent was living in the refuge, due to fleeing domestic violence.

The most frequent reason for homelessness was being given notice from private rented or property to be sold (six respondents), family/relationship breakdown was given by three respondents and one respondent had fled domestic violence and another was asked to leave due to overcrowding, from living with ex-partners family.

- Employment and training

Two respondents were in employment/training and have been able to retain that.

- Support and advice

Eight respondents were in contact with services prior to their homelessness, with a mixed response to how helpful they were in regard to housing circumstances. Further to their homelessness the majority of respondents (seven) sought advice from the council or at the Gateway, two used the Citizens Advice Bureau.

With regard to accessing self help through a directory of services, six respondents indicated they would use such a resources, if they knew where and how to access the information.

In terms of future accommodation, of those who specified, seven stated they would prefer council / Housing Association property, and one would prefer the private rented sector. Nine respondents said they have considered looking for private rented accommodation, reason for not pursuing this tenure were given as; not secure, bad experiences with landlords, difficulty using computers to search, spent a long time looking.

Five respondents continued to receive support (mental health services, domestic violence services, and family support services) and there was evidence of some signposting to other services.

There was limited response to what support would be useful but money management and tenancy skills were noted being helpful, along with where to access furniture.

- Public awareness

Four respondents thought that there was some public awareness of why people become homeless and four thought there was no public awareness. There was little idea of how to increase public understanding of homelessness.
Outcomes of the Homelessness Strategy 2012

This section of the Review looks at the achievements of the Homelessness Strategy 2012 and where actions may not been fulfilled. This will highlight areas that need further consideration going forward with the development of the Homelessness Strategy 2016.

The Homelessness Strategy 2012 has three priority headings.

1. Ashford-wide commitment to preventing homelessness wherever possible
2. Quality housing services and suitable accommodation for people for whom homelessness cannot be prevented
3. Settled and sustainable homes, with access to housing support if needed

By reviewing progress towards achieving these will highlight what is working well and where there may need to be changes to address current homelessness needs to inform our action plan. This is set out in the table below.

1. Ashford-wide commitment to preventing homelessness wherever possible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work completed/ongoing</th>
<th>Future work identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An up-to-date understanding of homelessness in Ashford so that we are able to direct our resources appropriately.</td>
<td>Need to continue to reach organisations to increase knowledge of tools available to prevent homelessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Option Officers now have specialist areas to enable closer working relationship with other agencies, helping to foster a come to us early approach to identify causes of homelessness and utilise prevention measures whenever possible.</td>
<td>Continue to contribute to Kent Housing Options Group meetings and develop ideas for performance monitoring and joint working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashford worked with other Kent local authorities to produce a policy for discharging homelessness duty in to the private rented sector.</td>
<td>Make better use of data to monitor trends and develop benchmarking against other Kent local authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data on homelessness is captured through the computer systems and used to inform future work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A commitment from all agencies in Ashford to recognise homelessness triggers and to refer those at risk to appropriate services.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A telephone triage service has been introduced and home visits follow where needed. Housing Option Officers work closely with landlord liaison officers to prevent homelessness.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Further work required to develop early intervention measures particularly for young people, those with mental health problems and private rented sector tenants.</strong></td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular forums with private sector landlords helps identify and address issues around access to accommodation and standards together with impact of welfare reform.</td>
<td>Housing Options Officers find many families they are working with they cannot refer to troubled families project as fail to meet the specific criteria to be accepted to the programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discretionary Housing Payment has been used to help with homelessness prevention and close working with the welfare reform officers who advise those affected by benefit reduction on how to maximise income and access employment.</td>
<td>Given the withdrawal for Mortgage rescue more work needed to promote the Mortgage Repossession Prevention Scheme.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Readily available information and advice so that residents are able to meet their own housing needs as far as possible, and prevent homelessness.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Further work is needed to improve prevention of homelessness amongst young people. Particularly in light of the withdrawal of funding from the Porchlight schools programme.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More information is available online, including housing register application form, change of circumstances and updating contact details. An interview and finance form is being developed to avoid duplicating work both for clients and officers in finance and housing.</td>
<td>Information from the self help kiosks needs to be collected and analysis undertaken to determine who is using the facility and if better use could be made of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole needs assessment approach is being updated to ensure clients are referred to the most appropriate services for their needs, to help them maintain settled accommodation.</td>
<td>Joint working needs to be undertaken to assist people with budgeting, opening bank accounts etc. to enable the receipt of benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the closure of the Shelter office in Ashford, telephone advice continues to be available from them, with the Housing Legal Aid service is provided by Holden &amp; Co.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Quality housing services and suitable accommodation for people for whom homelessness cannot be prevented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality homelessness services and temporary accommodation suitable for people with different needs.</th>
<th>Continued work on developing robust accommodation pathways for all client groups is required.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A supported housing scheme for young people is under construction that will contribute to preventing homelessness and, reducing the use of bed and breakfast.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A further scheme of short term accommodation for homeless families is now operating and providing an alternative to bed and breakfast accommodation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kent Advice Service for Single Homeless is running alongside other prevention measures in Ashford.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due to a cut in funding the Porchlight out-reach service for rough sleepers has been reduced.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear pathways to settled housing, a better quality of life, health and wellbeing.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A regular move–on meeting is held to facilitate planned pathways for clients and to make the best use of the supported accommodation available.</td>
<td>With organisational restructures it is necessary to keep updated with changes to personnel and roles to build relationships with key people to agree proactive, prevention measures are ongoing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is ongoing to improve communication with the hospital discharge team especially for people with mental health and substance misuse problems and offenders, who are particularly vulnerable if discharged with no accommodation arranged.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suitable accommodation and support for people with health, care or support needs who are at risk of homelessness, or homeless.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The council contributed the review of the Supporting People Strategy and the Kent Accommodation Strategy to ensure the commissioning of support is meeting local needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness is one of the key priorities of the Ashford Health and wellbeing Board, linking the impact of homelessness to increased prevalence of ill health and difficulties accessing services.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social and affordable housing is developed and managed effectively to meet housing needs and prevent homelessness.

<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The area managers work closely with welfare reform officers to identify tenants who maybe at risk due to changes in benefit regime to assist them to retain existing accommodation or move to a more affordable home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of affordable housing results in fewer opportunities to develop supported housing options for vulnerable people including those at risk of homelessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With fixed term tenancies a procedure with Registered Providers needs to evolve to ensure timely notification of the ending of a tenancy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Options officers need training to increase understanding of cultural needs of gypsy and traveller communities to offer appropriate housing advice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Improved access to suitable and good quality private rented homes, that are affordable and sustainable in the longer term.

<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A range of initiatives to increase access to the private rented sector are in place:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlords forum, accreditation scheme, social lettings agency, signposting to the Kent no use empty campaign, tenancy training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is needed to provide accommodation for single homeless people, developing a scheme with private sector landlords to provide shared accommodation either with the council or another agency to manage tenancies could assist those only eligible for shared room rate of housing benefit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Case study: Welfare Reform Intervention

The Welfare Reform Officer assisted a lady who was struggling to pay her rent to source further part time work which enabled her to claim working tax credits. By meeting regularly to help understand how to budget, she now is managing three part time jobs and paying her rent and council tax without assistance.

This type of intervention is crucial in preventing homelessness.
Appendix 1: Housing Options Team Structure