

Progress Report 2023

Colchester's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy was adopted in April 2020.

The strategy was produced in line with the Council's legal duty under the Homelessness Act 2002, which required all local authorities to carry out a homelessness review, develop a Homelessness Strategy for their area to prevent homelessness, and provide accommodation and/or support for people who are or may become homeless, including rough sleepers.

Background and Legislation Change Since the Last Strategy.

The Homelessness Code of Guidance published in February 2018 stated that local authorities with rough sleepers ought to consider provision for rough sleepers within their homelessness strategy. In line with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy and to satisfy the requirements for the Rough Sleeping Initiative funding, it was agreed that rough sleeping would form part of Colchester's strategy with an Action Plan set out to specifically reduce rough sleeping.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 fundamentally changed the way local authorities work to support homeless people in their areas, giving them new duties to prevent homelessness for more people. Colchester City Council worked collaboratively with its partners to build on this approach to produce the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for Colchester.

Colchester's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25

The overarching vision for the Strategy is:

To build collaborative partnerships to increase early intervention and prevention of homelessness in Colchester.

To achieve this vision 4 key aims were agreed:

- Increasing access to accommodation and providing settled homes.
- Helping people to sustain their accommodation.
- Improving the health and wellbeing of people that experience homelessness.
- Improving communication and challenging the perception and culture of homelessness.

In addition, a Rough Sleeping Action Plan was agreed.

The Strategy will achieve its aims and objectives through the implementation of a 5-year Delivery Plan that will tackle homelessness in the city, by working closely with partner organisations and focusing on early interventions that prevent homelessness.

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Progress Report 2023 contains some highlights of the actions in the Strategy that have been achieved or progressed during 2022-2023.

The Delivery Plan which sets out the actions to deliver the aims of the Strategy has also been updated.

Aim 1: Increasing access to accommodation and providing settled homes.

Challenge

Increase homelessness prevention for people suffering domestic abuse.

Action

Work with providers of DA services to ensure that the model commissioned does not create a barrier to settled accommodation and a move on pathway is identified.

Progress

A Project Worker for Domestic Abuse has commenced work (as proposed in the previous Delivery Plan Update) and the post has been extended to March 2025.

CBH are currently members of the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) and are undertaking the associated accreditation process.

Challenge

Evaluate how well the Homelessness Reduction Act is working and what difference it is making to preventing homelessness in Colchester.

Action

Set up a monitoring system to measure the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act

Progress

For the year 2022-23:

Colchester City Council (CCC) accepted a full homeless duty for 90 households and helped them into accommodation.

Action was taken to prevent homelessness for 209 households and relieved homelessness for 77 households.

Challenge

The current demand for supported accommodation outweighs the supply.

Action

Influence the future commissioning of services to ensure that the need for this type of accommodation is met.

Progress

CCC and CBH represent CCC at the quarterly Supported Housing Partnership Board. This was set up by ECC to improve partnership working across Essex and to provide a more joined up approach to supported accommodation solutions. A task and finish sub-group has been created to identify supported accommodation solutions specifically for clients with complex needs.

CBH continue to work in partnership with the supported housing providers through the Joint Referral Panel (JRP). Organisations refer clients to the panel to be considered for supported housing that is suited to their needs in Colchester. Clients must have a local connection to the city to be considered.

Aim 2: Helping people to sustain their accommodation.

Challenge

Ensure tenants in the social rented sector at risk of homelessness are provided with more intensive tenancy support including that provided by floating support.

Action

Encourage the take up of tenancy support including floating support to vulnerable tenants moving into accommodation including temporary accommodation

Progress

During 2022/2023:

- 5 tenants have been evicted for rent arrears and 4 for ASB (same as preceding year).
- Inequalities Funding has once again been used to support additional tenancy sustainment hours.
- CBH continued to utilise partial closure orders to help 4 tenants to sustain their tenancies and change behaviour successfully.
- CBH continued to fund Catch 22 project and Open Road to fast track CCC tenants for additional support.
- Continued to work in partnership with Citizen's Advice Bureau, Christians Against Poverty and Colchester Credit Union to offer further financial support to tenants struggling to pay their rent.
- New partnership with Pheonix Futures providing tenancy support for prison leavers funded by ECC.

Challenge

Ensure the provision of debt and welfare rights advice is targeted at those at risk of losing their accommodation.

Action

Provide support & advice to tenants on managing debt and welfare benefits including organisations working with single homeless

Increase the take up of debt advice in the City and promote existing services.

Work with private rented sector and social landlords to establish new approaches to reduce evictions.

Progress

During 2022/2023 CBH's Financial Inclusion Team (FIT):

- Supported 15 tenants to open bank accounts.
- Reduced benefit cap cases to 1 (record low).
- Supported 128 tenants to receive Discretionary Housing payments (DHP) totalling £69,914.
- Reduced Under Occupation cases to 159 (a record low and 14% down from last year).
- Made 1,260 personal contacts.
- Managed 2100 Universal Credit (UC) cases.
- Managed 103 Welfare Rights cases (total value awarded to tenants £166,780)
- Assessed 181 Housing Benefit claims.
- Processed £25,269 Housing Benefit overlaps.

Aim 3: Improving the Health and Wellbeing of people that experience homelessness.

Challenge

Statutory services need to be more joined up when commissioning Mental Health services to make better use of the options available including personal budgets. This would provide a more efficient and cost-effective service.

Action

Proactively encourage joint working and shared budgets as part of the recommissioning process - to be considered as part of the new contract.
Help to provide a better understanding between organisations of mental health services.

Progress

CCC and CBH continue to work with ECC to encourage better joined up working, especially around a planned approach to move on when mental health schemes are due to close. Early notification is essential to provide better outcomes for the tenants at these schemes.
The Mental Health Nurse secondment has ceased, with the nurse returning to her previous role. An “expression of interest” process was issued to identify a replacement but the role so far remains unfilled.

Challenge

Drug use has increased and drug dealers are more organized. Specific areas where there are vulnerable clients are being targeted.

Action

Continue to work with the Police to identify and support clients that are being targeted.

Progress

Partial Closure Orders have continued to be a success in keeping perpetrators away from vulnerable tenants and enabling victims of cuckooing to remain in their homes. This reporting period saw 8 orders applied to properties.
CBH’s ASB Forum also offer a platform for all housing providers and police to share relevant information and deal with incidents of ASB much earlier.

Challenge

Households and individuals that are eligible but not in priority need or are in temporary accommodation can have greater public health needs than the rest of the population.

Action

Promote the integration between health and housing to meet the indicator around homelessness in the Public Health Outcomes Framework: Improving the wider determinants of Health for homeless acceptances and households in temporary accommodation.

Progress

CCC and CBH continue to work in partnership with Health colleagues through the North East Essex Homelessness Alliance Group which meets bi-monthly and was set up to help address some of the health inequalities for people that are homeless.
CCC and CBH are also working with ECC Public Health Team to ensure the best outcomes for people that are homeless and in temporary/supported accommodation

Aim 4: Improving communication and challenging the perception and culture of homelessness.

Challenge

Provide advice and information to support people to access services that could prevent them becoming homeless.
Raising awareness about realistic housing options and homelessness in Colchester.

Action

Improve communication of services provided by the Council to statutory and voluntary sector organisations through Information days.

Progress

In November 2023, CCC's Housing Strategy Team hosted a meeting of the Homelessness Strategy Project Group. Representatives from 15 partner organisations attended to discuss their achievements against the Strategy's key aims for 2022-2023, and to consider the challenges and opportunities for 2024.

Previously, CBH had created and agreed Service Level Agreements with some voluntary sector partners. Upon review, these were found on the whole not to have been successful and there is an intention to reconsider in the coming year how CBH can best engage with their partners.

Challenge

Develop early intervention and prevention options for Young People at risk of becoming homeless in the Borough.

Action

Provide basic strategies and signposting to support families to resolve conflict.
Continue to work in partnership with Schools in the Borough to educate young people and their parents of the risks of leaving home in an unplanned way.

Progress

Funding for the Family Mediator, employed by the Youth Enquiry Service (YES), ceased during 2022-23 (December 2022).

YES continue to contact parents/carers (where appropriate) to try and prevent homelessness for young people and are looking for further funding sources that could allow the recommencement of family mediation sessions (which are recognised as beneficial as parental eviction remains one of the main reasons for youth homelessness).

Challenge

Promote a person-centred approach to people that are homeless by creating structures which encourage voluntary sector services to work better together and share good practice.

Action

Multi agency working group.
Community of Practice – Homeless link

Progress

Throughout 2022-23, two multi agency partnership events occurred. These provided opportunities for networking and group learning (from a variety of keynote speakers such as Unlock, a national independent advocacy charity and the Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority) and were well attended. Monthly Colchester Homeless Action Panel (CHAP) meetings continue to occur with 7-10 organisations in attendance.

Rough Sleeping Action Plan

Challenge

Accommodation with wraparound support needed for entrenched rough sleepers to help them move from the streets into settled accommodation.

Action

Funding awarded by MHCLG Rough sleeper initiative funding to provide an opportunity to pilot a 'Housing First' Registered Provider that provides supported housing (delivered by Sanctuary Housing).

Progress

The Housing Led scheme (provided by Sanctuary Housing) continues to be funded through the government's Rough Sleeper Initiative funding secured by CCC. Throughout 2022-23, Sanctuary focused on building connections with those who may need their service before they apply or are referred for support. This has been done by joining up with the CBH RS team and visiting current sleeping spots, offering support to attend health appointments, pre-tenancy meetings and inclusion into client involvement activities (such as visiting the current winter project where support staff have helped with cooking and getting clear goals in place before the individual moves in). Sanctuary have found that this has promoted engagement between the individual and their keyworker and increased successful outcomes. During 2022-2023, there were:

- 8 referrals to the Housing Led scheme (provided by Sanctuary Housing) via the Rough Sleeper Team.
- 6 individuals accommodated with a variety of support needs (inc. living skills, self-care, emotional and mental health, managing accommodation, drugs and finances).
- 3 individuals supported to move on to alternative accommodation.

With each individual currently or previously in the scheme Sanctuary explore a number of accommodation Pathways (see Delivery Plan Update for full list).

Challenge

During severe weather such as high wind, heavy rain, snow and heatwaves, emergency accommodation with support is needed to ensure that rough sleepers have somewhere to stay

Action

Funding awarded by MHCLG Rough sleeper initiative funding to provide proper continuous Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) from October - mid March.

Progress

SWEP continues to operate. Hotels are still utilised where appropriate, however the Rough Sleeper Team have also sourced a 7 bedroom house for their core cohort of Rough Sleepers to provide medium term accommodation through winter.