

West Suffolk Homelessness Strategy 2015-2018

Foreword:

In recent years, housing in our area has become less and less affordable. For some people, it has meant staying put in an unsuitable home, or passing up a job opportunity because a house move is simply out of the question. For others, the consequences have been more extreme, with more and more people facing homelessness.

As the Councillors responsible for leading West Suffolk's housing agenda, we are fully committed to seeing the actions in this strategy taken forward. Together, we will work across our councils and with our partners to make sure those who are affected by homelessness receive timely advice and assistance.

Cllr Rona Burt, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Housing and Transport,
Forest Heath District Council.

Cllr Anne Gower, Portfolio Holder for Housing, St Edmundsbury Borough
Council

1. Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires all councils to produce a Homelessness Strategy at least every five years. Councils are required to carry out a homelessness review of their area and produce a strategy to:

1. Address the causes of homelessness in the area.
2. Introduce initiatives to prevent homelessness wherever possible.
3. Provide sufficient temporary accommodation for those households that are or may become homeless.
4. Ensure that appropriate support is available for people who have previously experienced homelessness in order to prevent it happening again.

This is the first joint West Suffolk Homelessness Strategy. Previously Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council have had their own. References to "West Suffolk" in this document refer to both councils, working together.

This Strategy will support priorities set out in West Suffolk's Strategic Plan (2013-15). In particular:

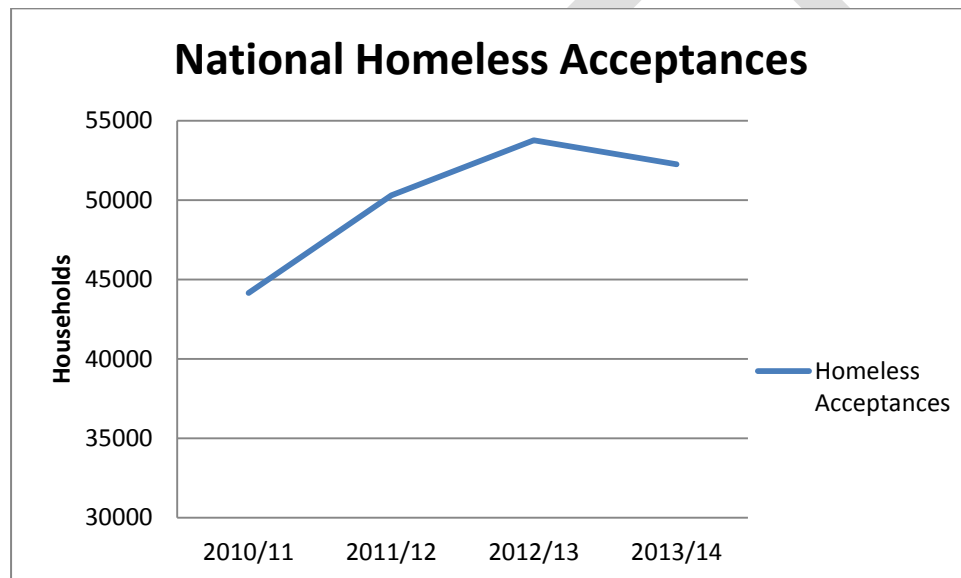
- Priority 2: Resilient families and communities that are healthy and active
- Priority 3: Homes for our communities

Both councils have recently adopted a West Suffolk Housing Strategy 2015–2018, the priorities set out in the strategy which specifically relate to homelessness are expanded upon within this document.

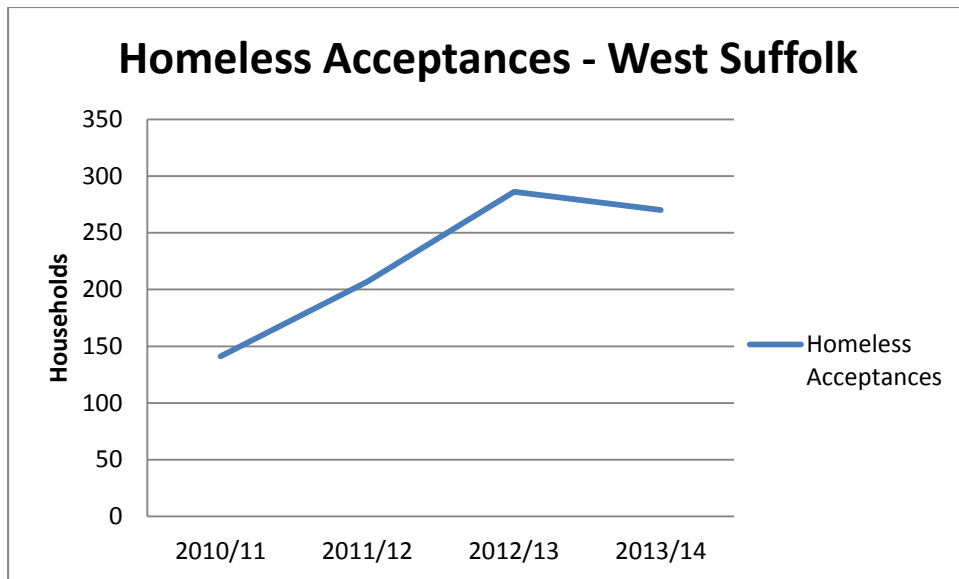
2. Homelessness Context

2.1 Level of Homelessness

Nationally the rate of homeless acceptances, where a local authority has a duty to find accommodation for a household, has increased overall in the last four years, a trend which is reflected in West Suffolk.



Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics



Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

Unless action is taken, the number of cases where West Suffolk has a duty to provide accommodation for homeless households is anticipated to remain at between 250 and 300 households per year.

2.2 Age profile of homeless households

Analysis of homelessness acceptances show that younger and middle aged people are affected more by homelessness than older people. The table below shows the breakdown by age group of homeless households housed by West Suffolk from April 2010 – March 2014.

Age	Number	Percentage
16-24	321	36%
25-44	457	51%
45-59	84	9%
60+	33	4%

Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

2.3 Stakeholder and Partner Survey

As part of the review of homelessness across West Suffolk, questionnaires were sent to over 40 individuals at 22 stakeholder and partner organisations in July 2014 (attached at Appendix 1). A response rate of 32% was achieved.

The questionnaire asked what issues partners had identified regarding homelessness and what they and others, including West Suffolk, could do to prevent homelessness and support homeless households.

Several themes emerged, including barriers to accessing suitable housing, which included:

1. Lack of affordable properties,
2. The need for earlier interventions, partnership working, information sharing which would identify and enable problems to be resolved before the situation becomes a crisis,
3. The process of moving applicants on through the Housing Register (Home-Link) has become much slower, largely as a result of increased demand for 1 bed properties,
4. Partners generally reported that the causes of homelessness were those relevant to themselves, eg: a Registered Provider (RP) would report that rent arrears was the biggest cause of homelessness. This could demonstrate a lack of awareness of issues affecting other partners (for example change in personal circumstances or change in benefits eligibility),
5. Difficulties in sourcing housing and support for customers with complex/multiple issues and/or a history of not being able to manage their accommodation needs.

Some of these barriers will be directly addressed through this Strategy and the West Suffolk Housing Strategy.

3. Addressing the causes of homelessness in the area.

The main causes of individuals/families being homeless within West Suffolk are in line with national trends. The loss of private rented accommodation is now the biggest cause of homelessness rather than the traditional cause of eviction by parents, other relatives or friends. The other major cause of homelessness is relationship breakdown (violent and non-violent).

Causes of Homelessness in West Suffolk	2010 - 2014
Eviction by family or friends	28%
Non-violent relationship breakdown	9%
Violent relationship breakdown	13%
Mortgage arrears	3%
Loss of private rented accommodation	35%
Other eg: discharge from hospital or prison	12%

Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

West Suffolk has already within two of its key strategies, the Housing Strategy (2015-18) and the Families and Communities Strategy 2013, taken steps to address some of the root causes of homelessness.

The Housing Strategy's main priority areas are:

1. increasing the supply of new homes so as to accommodate our growing population, promote economic growth, improve affordability and reduce homelessness,
2. making the best use of existing housing so as to allocate housing efficiently and improve the quality, sustainability and suitability for an ageing population,
3. support the provision of specialist housing and support for those who need it.

This homelessness strategy will give particular emphasis to increasing the provision of specialist housing i.e.: temporary accommodation for homeless households and providing timely support for those threatened with homelessness.

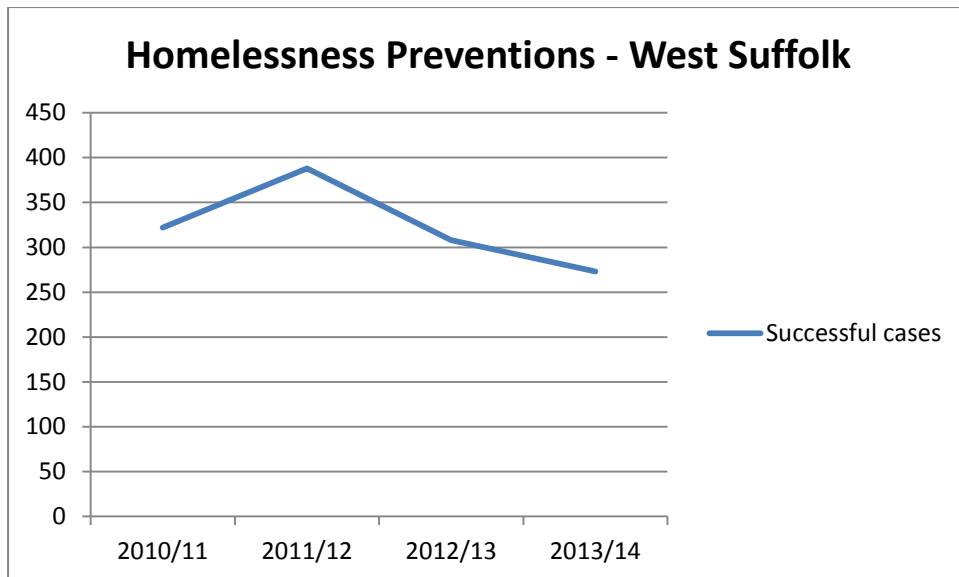
The Families and Communities Strategy emphasises the advantages of early intervention and the empowerment of communities to identify problems early and address situations before they escalate into a crisis. However this, in some circumstances requires intervention by the councils.

Through the actions set out in these strategies we will aim to actively assist and alleviate the pressure on households, who could otherwise become homeless.

Increasing the availability of affordable housing will also help to provide accommodation for those living in overcrowded conditions in the family home, as well as for those struggling to find and afford private rented properties.

4. Introducing initiatives to prevent homelessness wherever possible.

The graph below shows that the number of successful homelessness prevention cases has fallen over the last few years. A prevention case is where the Council has actively worked with a household to prevent their homelessness. In addition to the Housing Options Team there are a wide range of activities across the Council such as benefits advice and addressing anti-social behaviour which contribute to preventing homelessness. This reduction in numbers has occurred despite the fact that the level of resources committed to preventing homelessness has remained constant.



Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

This trend can be seen as a reflection of the difficulties of finding and maintaining affordable accommodation in the private rented sector and the high demand for social housing. A snapshot survey in July 2014 found that only 5% of available private rented properties in St Edmundsbury and 9% in Forest Heath had rental levels that could be fully met by Housing Benefit.

In order to address this trend West Suffolk will need to explore new and innovative ways of improving homelessness prevention, working in partnership with other organisations. We have signed up to the "Housing and Health Charter for Suffolk" demonstrating our commitment for joint working with other agencies, such as the West Suffolk Lettings Partnership to deliver shared agendas and services.

Our Housing Strategy has already identified a number of specific actions that we will be working on to prevent homelessness.

We will:

- Develop good quality, easily accessible housing advice materials, including web-based material which reflect the diversity of applicants' needs and abilities
- Continue to work in partnership with other key agencies to prevent individuals and families from getting into a housing crisis.

In addition we will complete the Government's GOLD Standard Challenge for homelessness. The challenge is a local authority sector led peer review scheme designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. The challenge comprise of 10 points that Local Authorities are required to achieve. These are set out below and the Action Plan at appendix 2 details how we are going to achieve the GOLD Standard.

1. To adopt a corporate commitment to prevent homelessness which has buy in across all local authority services
2. To actively work in partnership with the voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education, employment and training needs
3. To offer a Housing Options prevention service to all clients including written advice
4. To adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative
5. To have housing pathways agreed or in development with each key partner and client group that include appropriate accommodation and support
6. To develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both client and landlord
7. To actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme
8. To have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness, reviewed annually to be responsive to emerging needs
9. To not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in Bed and Breakfast accommodation
10. To not place any families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation unless in an emergency and for no longer than 6 weeks.

The stakeholder and partner survey also identified several specific proposals which could be used to help prevent homelessness and support homeless households. We have incorporated a number of these proposals in the Action Plan (at Appendix 2), which include developing:

1. Improved hospital and prison discharge protocols.
2. Home security scheme for victims of domestic violence.
3. More flexible use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)
4. Expansion of a Private Rented Scheme into West Suffolk for applicants with complex issues

5. Providing sufficient temporary accommodation for those households that are or may become homeless.

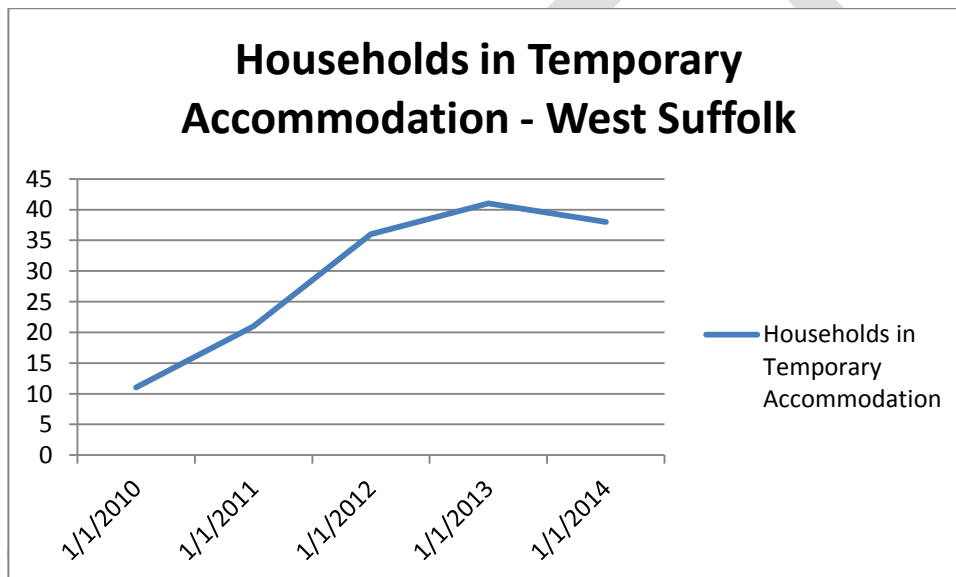
The majority of homeless households that West Suffolk has a duty to source accommodation for are small families, with one or two children, with the next biggest group being single people. This trend points to the growing need for smaller units of accommodation both as temporary accommodation and for permanent housing.

Household Composition of homeless households – West Suffolk	2010-2014
Single person	18%

Couple	7%
Pregnant woman, no other children	13%
Family with 1 child	37%
Family with 2 children	18%
Family with 3 or more children	7%

Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

With the numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation mirroring the trend of homelessness acceptances it is anticipated that West Suffolk will need permanent access to around 45 units of temporary accommodation, at anyone time, in the future.



Source: www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

Currently West Suffolk has access to self-contained temporary accommodation, provided by Registered Providers, but has to supplement this accommodation with the use of bed & breakfast.

The Housing Strategy sets out that West Suffolk should increase:

“the amount of temporary accommodation available for individuals and families in crisis housing need, to reduce the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation.”

Within the lifetime of this Homelessness Strategy we aim to:

- minimise the use of bed & breakfast to the extent it is only used in an emergency and

- ensure that enough suitable temporary accommodation is available and that it is in the right location for homeless households to access support, maintain employment and education.

A breakdown of the last four years homelessness duty accepted cases shows where homeless households have originated from

Area	Homeless Acceptances 2010/2014
Newmarket	22%
Brandon	13%
Mildenhall	10%
Haverhill	19%
Bury	36%
Total	100%

Source: West Suffolk Homeless Database

In order that the location and numbers of available temporary accommodation reflects where homeless households are originating from, we will look to change the profile of our temporary accommodation to that proposed in the table below.

Area	Current units		Proposed units	
Newmarket	10	29%	10	22%
Brandon	8	23%	8	17%
Mildenhall	0	0%	3	7%
Haverhill	10	29%	10	22%
Bury	7	20%	15	33%
Total	35	100%	46	100%

Source: West Suffolk Homeless Database

This would retain the units in Newmarket and Brandon, whilst new temporary accommodation would need to be provided in Mildenhall.

In Haverhill, whilst the numbers of units remain the same, there would have to be new provision of 10 units, due to the expiry of the lease on the current temporary accommodation in 2015.

In Bury an additional eight units would be needed, but the council has recently bought a five bedroom property which will go some way to meeting this need.

Breakdown by size

In order to provide suitable sized temporary accommodation for homeless households it is proposed that the type of temporary accommodation should be as follows.

Area	A room with shared facilities	Studio/1 bed Flat	2 bed Flat	3 bed Flat
Brandon		6	2	
Newmarket			10	
Haverhill		3	7	
Mildenhall	3			
Bury St Edmunds	10		5	
Total	13	9	24	0

To achieve this West Suffolk will work with partners to deliver innovative, cost effective solutions in-line with the Housing Strategy's aim that:

"By April 2015 we will identify and deliver new funding models for delivering open market, private rented and affordable housing."

Details of the specific actions around temporary accommodation are included in the Action Plan at Appendix 2.

6. Ensuring that appropriate support is available for people who have previously experienced homelessness in order to prevent it happening again.

There is a low rate of recurring homelessness where West Suffolk has accepted a duty to house households more than once. Less than 1% of cases approach the councils again for assistance in the 2 years after being housed. However, analysis of the data regarding households who have approached the councils as being potentially homeless, shows that a significant proportion of them (15%), have accessed assistance from the Housing Options Team more than once. Although information is not available to show if the reason they have returned is as a result of lack of support in finding and maintaining accommodation, it would be a natural assumption that this is one of the reasons.

The Housing Strategy has already identified the need for the provision of specialist housing and support, and included these specific actions:

- Continue to engage with partners on specific multi-agency homeless prevention projects to improve the support given to young people across West Suffolk,
- Set up a Task and Finish Group to develop a West Suffolk model for housing chronically excluded adults,
- Continue to lead the county-wide partnership to develop a strategy for "move-on" of marginalised adults.

A key element of supporting those threatened with homelessness is early intervention. As part of this work we will, in conjunction with partners, develop a “Making Every Intervention Count” programme which will feature:

- Multi agency teams and service integration
- Joint commissioning, data sharing and data analysis
- Community resilience being supported by the voluntary sector

Details of the specific actions around the prevention of recurring homelessness are included in the Action Plan at Appendix 2.

7. Conclusion

This strategy identifies the steps needed to achieve the four keys aims of addressing the causes of homeless, preventing homelessness, having suitable temporary accommodation and support for those threatened with homelessness.

The action plan at Appendix 2 details how West Suffolk will build on existing strategies and partnerships and develop new partnerships to achieve these aims.

Appendix 1



West Suffolk Homelessness Review

Completed by:

Position in Organisation:

What is your organisation currently doing, or planning to do to:

- Prevent homelessness
- House homeless households

(please include any policies, action plans, initiatives)

What do you see as the barriers to homelessness prevention (including any council or government policies)?

What would you like to see West Suffolk Councils doing to address homelessness?

How could you work with the Councils and other partners to address homelessness?

From your experience of dealing with homelessness and housing issues, what do you regard as the main causes of homelessness?

What trends and patterns in homelessness have you noticed over the past two years?

Please return to:

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Appendix 2 – ACTION PLAN

No	Action	Priority Area	Funding	By when?	Outcomes & Monitoring	Lead Officer	Key Partners
1	Develop Housing Advice Materials	Homelessness Prevention Initiatives	Existing budget - Homelessness Prevention Fund	Dec 2015	Report Web site hits, Customer Service enquiries.	Team Leaders – Housing Options	Customer Services.
2	Implement Young Persons Housing Protocol	Homelessness Prevention Initiatives	Existing budget - Homelessness Prevention Fund	Jan 2016	Reduced numbers of Homeless young persons, reports to SHOG.	Housing Options Manager	Children & Young People Services
3	Hospital and Prison discharge protocols.	Homelessness Prevention Initiatives	Existing budget - Homelessness Prevention Fund	April 2016	Successful homeless preventions. Report numbers.	Housing Options Manager	Health, Probation, Prison Service
4	Achieve GOLD Standard	Homelessness Prevention Initiatives	Existing budget - Homelessness Prevention Fund	April 2016	Award of Gold Standard	Housing Options Manager	Local Authority Peers
5	Develop flexible use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)	Homelessness Prevention Initiatives	Discretionary Housing Payments Budget	April 2016	Successful homeless preventions. Report numbers.	Housing Business and Partnership Manager	Anglia Revenue Partnership

	Action	Priority Area	Funding	By when?	Monitoring	Lead Officer	Key Partners
6	Home security scheme for victims of domestic violence.	Homelessness Prevention Initiatives	Existing budget - Homelessness Prevention Fund	Sept 2016	Successful homeless preventions. Report numbers.	Housing Options Manager	Police, Registered Providers
7	Replacement for Heron House, Haverhill	Sufficient Temporary Accommodation	Capital Funding/ Housing Company - to be identified.	August 2015	New provision operational	Housing Options Manager	Registered Providers
8	Eliminate use of Bed and Breakfast - provide alternative accommodation.	Sufficient Temporary Accommodation	Capital Funding/ Housing Company - to be identified	August 2016	B&B useage	Housing Options Manager	Registered Providers
9	Develop - Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)	Support to prevent recurring homelessness.	To be determined	Sept 2015	MASH outcomes reporting	Housing Options Manager	Children & Young People Services, Adult Care, Police, Health, Probation

	Action	Priority Area	Funding	By when?	Monitoring	Lead Officer	Key Partners
10	Make Every Intervention Count (MEIC)	Support to prevent recurring homelessness.	To be determined	April 2017	To be determined	Housing Options Manager	Children & Young People Services
11	Develop model for housing chronically excluded adults	Support to prevent recurring homelessness.	To be determined	April 2018	To be determined	Housing Business & Transformation Manager	Supported Housing Providers, Health, Adult Care Services, Suffolk Co-ordination Service