

BURY HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY
2015-18

Opening Doors, Building Lives

Foreword

Housing is a basic need. Having your own place provides security, a sense of belonging and access to services, employment and other amenities. However, too many of our residents find it hard to obtain and then keep a property. Statistically the numbers are low. Only 1% of the local population is affected each year but this says nothing about the devastating effect that losing a home has on families, the economy and the public purse.

And the situation is deteriorating. A lack of affordable housing, financial worries and relationship breakdowns are creating gaps in society and some individuals risk being left behind. It is against this background that we look to this Strategy to provide some hope. We cannot change the economy or solve the housing crisis but we can support individuals to be more resilient to the changes happening around them. With this in mind, our five key priorities are:

1. Understanding needs
2. Focusing on prevention
3. Good quality
4. Strong leadership and management
5. Building an effective and sustainable approach to provision

Delivering improvement is a challenge at a time of shrinking resources. But we start from a strong base. Bury does not use bed and breakfast accommodation, we prevent two cases of homelessness for every one we take on and strong partnerships have supported thousands of people into accommodation over the years. These successes are not an excuse for complacency. We need to explore what more we can do to stop people going through the tragedy that is homelessness – and minimise the impact on those that do.



Cllr Rishi Shori
Bury Council, Cabinet
Member for Housing
and Finance

Basing our priorities on evidence, self assessment and the views of customers enables us to target activity for maximum return. However, not everything is quantifiable. It is difficult to put a price on the increased confidence, reassurance and sense of well being that our support brings to people suffering homelessness through no fault of their own. The fact that Bury not only delivers its statutory duties but actively works to prevent homelessness despite the severity of budget cuts makes me proud.

Maintaining this approach will take us in the right direction, make best use of resources and promote the dignity of families and individuals who are going through a tough time. Helping residents to build, or regain, an ordinary life is one of the things we need to continue doing. Bury is a great place to live and I want to keep it that way.

I believe this Strategy supports that level of ambition. It sets out clearly where we want to be and provides an excellent guide to how we get there.

Introduction and context

Homelessness is a national issue that affects hundreds of households in Bury each year. The Council has a statutory duty to identify people who are homeless, investigate their claims and provide services to people in housing need. We do this through:

- Face to face conversations with people presenting as homeless
- Formal assessments conducted in line with legislative, statutory guidance and case law requirements
- Information, support and advice on housing options
- Providing temporary accommodation in emergencies (and helping those households to find permanent homes)
- Monitoring homelessness using demographic trends, rough sleeper/street needs audits, etc to predict demand and manage risks
- Commissioning new projects and services to meet changing needs

46% of homeless cases are due to arrangements with family or friends coming to an end. Relationship breakdowns account for a further 21% of cases (two thirds of these involving violence) with financial problems at the centre of the problem in 13% of cases. The level of disruption this causes cannot be underestimated. Apart from affecting people's confidence and often their health, homelessness damages the economy. Homeless people have less income and often make extra demands on public services.

The statistics however challenge several common preconceptions of homelessness. Although 40% of decisions relate to people under 30 (some of whom have been caught by changes in welfare reform), over half of homeless cases fall into the 30-49 age range; the gender split is broadly even; and only 45% of homeless households have one or more children. Although national policy and legislation favours families and vulnerable adults, it is clear that anyone can become a victim of homelessness. Given this position, it is difficult to adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. People's needs are different. This is reflected in the legislation and statutory guidance where, despite the highly prescribed nature of the process, room for discretion still exists. Achieving the right balance between consistency of practice, meeting individual needs and recognising the interests of the wider community will be fundamental to improving outcomes for local people.

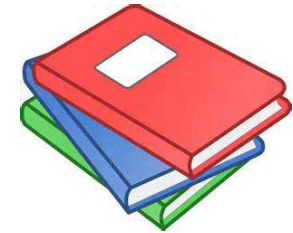
The legislation also recognises the need to look beyond the statutory process. Emphasis is placed on prevention – tackling housing issues at a early stage to divert more people away from high cost, statutory interventions. Understanding the issues, offering advice and information and finding solutions to help people gain or retain settled accommodation will enable homeless people with lower level needs to be supported before they become priority cases.

Understanding needs

Acquiring a better appreciation of the issues to improve services to homeless people.

Following the story

Statistics only tell you so much. Listening to individuals' experiences of homelessness says a lot more about the process and what matters to people. Based on feedback, we have changed services. For example, a former hostel has been replaced by community based properties that help people feel part of the community; a project for single homeless is now successfully providing training and support to help people into work; and the 'front door' to the service has been redesigned to make it easier to access information and advice. We need to continue listening and developing services in response to needs – rather than just seeing homelessness as a process to follow.



Breaking cycles of homelessness

Around 3% of cases come back through the system within two years. Accordingly, whilst the vast majority of households are successful in moving on, it is clear that in a small number of cases the original efforts to resolve the situation didn't work. Further research is required to determine why this is happening. Evidence from rough sleepers shows that some of the most entrenched homeless persons have been able to sustain settled accommodation so there maybe other factors influencing repeat cases that services should be taking into account.

Making every contact count

Homelessness seldom comes alone. Many homeless households also struggle with unemployment, debt and poor health putting additional strains on relationships and day to day living. Tackling this level of complexity is beyond individual agencies. We must work together if we are to make a real difference to people's lives.

Communication



We will:

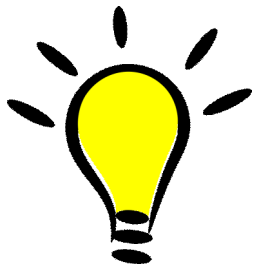
- Expand provision and opportunities for younger people and the single homeless.
- Rigorously assess performance and measure the impact of interventions to inform future service design.
- Reduce the number of repeat homeless cases.
- Work with partners to address the underlying causes of homelessness and identify those households at risk.

Focus on prevention

Getting in early to minimise problems and reduce demand on services.

Matching supply and demand

There is a fundamental issue of housing supply – the Borough has too few houses at prices most people can afford. Despite our success in bringing empty properties back into use and attracting investment to support our Affordable Housing Programme, more work is needed if we are to extend housing options to local people. Rising costs mean more younger (and elderly) relatives are having to live with their families which can lead to increased tensions.

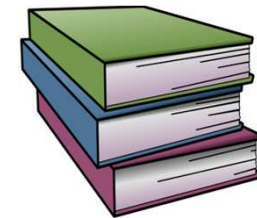


Knowing what works

Homelessness is costly. Apart from creating personal tragedies, independent research suggests that each case costs local authorities over £9,000 to process. Prevention therefore makes sense. We are heading in the right direction as over 900 cases were prevented in 2014/15. Maintaining this level of activity and developing viable alternatives to homelessness will be critical to success in terms of sustaining families and reducing demand on services.

Making proper enquiries

Decision making has improved significantly in recent years as information gathering and assessment has become more systematic and comprehensive. Although case law allows room for discretion and interpretation, only 2% of decisions are overturned on appeal. Our next step is to track the impact of our decisions on individual life chances and use this intelligence to raise standards, improve outcomes and target resources to maximum effect.



We will:

- Work to grow the housing market and increase housing opportunities for local people.
- Utilise 'Preventing Homelessness' funding from Government to develop innovative projects that avoid people becoming homeless – and get them back on track quickly when they do.
- Support corporate activity on welfare reform so that benefit changes do not become a source of homelessness.
- Provide information and advice to individuals and families which enable them to take ownership of their situation and manage expectations around housing options.

Good quality

Services are accessible, valued and efficient in improving outcomes for homeless people.

High standards

Reported outcomes, feedback and self assessment indicate that the service is good and meeting its objectives. Building on a track record of self awareness, the service has a culture of continuous improvement and this approach will continue as we look for more effective and efficient ways to implement our statutory duties. Maintaining standards however takes sustained effort; the service must respond to the needs of individuals, Government guidance and current thinking as outlined in case law. To achieve this we will continue to benchmark performance, develop the workforce and implement innovative projects to meet the needs of homeless people.



Quality of services

Homelessness is all about people. Everybody is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. This means not using bed and breakfast accommodation; ensuring all homeless people (especially rough sleepers) have access to health screening and medical facilities; and agreeing any support packages with the individuals concerned based around individual/family outcomes. The private and voluntary sector have a key role to play in developing products that meet the needs of homeless people and we will work with all providers to ensure that these are suitable, of sufficient standard and are geared to helping homeless people move on with their lives.

We will:

- Deliver our statutory duties.
- Continue to work with partners to monitor and refresh procedures to ensure people are safeguarded.
- Not place any homeless person in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Keep all provision under review to ensure that it is meeting needs and making a real difference to people's lives.
- Support households to attain an ordinary life again, reducing the time spent in temporary accommodation.
- Work with landlords to get more properties meeting quality thresholds, at a rent that most people can afford.
- Invest in training to ensure the necessary skills and standards are evident and applied in all aspects of the service.

Strong leadership and management

Achieving outcomes in line with the Council's policy objectives – at reduced cost.

Making Bury a great place to live, work, study, and visit

It has always been a feature of Inclusion Services that national guidance and local ambitions are embedded into service priorities. This is still the case. Homelessness is frequently linked to other household circumstances and by addressing housing needs, the pathway to employment, training and personal development becomes easier.

This strategy therefore includes actions that not only improves the way we handle presenting needs but also looks to wider economic and social well being issues. We will encourage people to take ownership of their situation and where necessary work with them to change behaviours to avoid homelessness in the future.



Resources

With Council resources reducing during the period of this strategy, we will seek to cut costs and attract new income to fund services. Whilst valuing the Council contribution, diversifying income sources is necessary to protect services, fund innovation and change behaviours. Simple things such as households paying for accommodation reduces Council expenditure and also gets people used to budgeting as they prepare to regain their independence.

We will:

- Actively contribute to national and local priorities.
- View homelessness in the context of the household's wider economic and social well being.
- Strengthen and diversify provision to develop a strong independence culture in the Borough.
- Maximise the resources available to improve outcomes for local people.
- Recover accommodation costs from individuals at a level that reflects the cost of provision without being an undue deterrent or creating financial hardship.

Sustainable communities

Creating an environment where people are well informed, empowered and confident in their own abilities.

Bringing people along

Confidence is an issue for many homeless people – some of whom have had difficult experiences in the past. We will make it as easy as possible for individuals to understand the housing options open to them, access the information, advice and guidance relevant to their situation and offer further support where needed to help them achieve ordinary lives. Aspirations are important. The function is all about moving people on so that they reach their potential, live independently and integrate well within the community.



Reducing inequalities

Whilst proud of what the Borough has achieved, we are aware of geographical differences and other inequalities that exist. More effort is required to resolve these issues and minimise the risk of some people being left behind. In particular we need to divert households away from chaotic lifestyles, increase housing options for all and work with partners to improve our offer to those furthest away from the housing market.

House prices, living patterns and other factors such as technological developments are changing traditional ways of living. Our services need to adapt to this environment and ensure that issues such as welfare reform, access to quality housing and social isolation do not add to the pressures of modern living.

We will:

- Identify and develop community assets and local networks to support individuals in their time of need.
- Tailor support to the needs of vulnerable groups (rough sleepers, younger people, domestic violence victims).
- Make provision for rough sleepers during cold weather
- Promote the integration of homeless people into society by discouraging arrangements which label or stigmatise individuals and damage community cohesion.
- Help harder to engage groups (rough sleepers, refugees, care leavers) into housing and employment.