



# Introduction

Councillor Louwella Prenter - Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness

Homelessness is an issue affecting too many people in Medway, reflecting a broader national challenge but with deeply local consequences. Successive governments have sought to address the issues of homelessness and rough sleeping, and there have been significant funding inputs, though often this has happened after the issues have reached a point of crisis.

It is increasingly clear that homelessness and rough sleeping cannot be considered as an independent issue, but as a symptom of combined entrenched inequalities, mismatching priorities across a range of services and systemic shortages of resource. It is inevitable that with well over a decade of reduction in funding across a wide spectrum of services; statutory, voluntary and from the third sector, exacerbated by a reduction in household incomes, that local areas are now looking at a once in a generation levels of homelessness, with potential to become even worse.

Addressing this challenge needs the full efforts of national and local government, alongside local authorities, wider statutory services, the voluntary and community and faith sectors, commissioned services, and wider societal partners. There is no room for delay, it must be recognised that

homelessness is a shared problem which demands a collective response. Numbers of people sleeping rough have rebounded to the levels seen after austerity and cuts to services created a peak in 2017. The work done by authorities and partners since that time has helped many hundreds of people find long term and secure accommodation. This work alone cannot address the combination of factors which have now returned those previously high numbers. The wider cost of living impacts have been far reaching and have increased significantly in the last couple of years to the point where existing approaches are no longer able to meet the level of demand.

Stable accommodation is fundamental to life chances, influencing health, longevity, and educational achievement for children. The importance of providing appropriate, linked, support also must be recognised. The reality is that support services have been eroded, and as a result the risk of homelessness has increased while accommodation opportunities for those who are rough sleeping or otherwise homeless have been reduced.

This strategy isn't just a push for upstream prevention practice and innovation in alleviating need by Medway Council Housing

Services, but also a call to action for all agencies to recognise their role in addressing the issue. To drive meaningful change, we must work together and ensure that homelessness is recognised as everyone's problem.



During Medway Fun Palace in October 2024, which took place at the Pentagon Shopping Centre, visitors of all ages were invited by the Medway Arts and Homelessness Forum to respond creatively to the questions 'What represents homelessness to you?' and 'What could prevent homelessness?' three canvases were created at the event and some of this work has been included in the Medway Homelessness Prevention Strategy'

# FINDINGS

## from Medway's Homelessness Review 2024

**Medway's Homelessness Review was published September 2024. The review was completed by interviewing managers from the Rough Sleeper Initiative, Housing Options and Rehousing. Data was also obtained from our internal systems across all teams within Housing Services, as well as data available within the public domain.**

You can read the full version of the homelessness review here: <https://democracy.medway.gov.uk/mgconvert2pdf.aspx?id=75943>

The review highlighted a number of challenges faced by Medway Council Housing Services, which this strategy aims to tackle.

### Challenges:

- On average £190 per month difference between private rent rate and Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate. The shortfall of rent is expected to be made up by a person's other income.
- There was a decline in the number of affordable housing units delivered between 2020/21 and 2022/23, this was mainly due to the pandemic and the impact it had on the housing development sector.

Overall increase in people seeking housing help from Medway Council, on the social housing register, those making homeless applications, those sleeping rough and those seeking help because of disrepair in their home. To illustrate this, for the year 2019/20, 2,499 households approached for assistance, but for the year 2023/24 there were 4,760. This represents an increase of 90%.

- There is a change in why tenants are being evicted from the private sector. Previously, it was more common to see landlords evicting due to rent arrears or as they are increasing the rent and are seeking new tenants. In recent months, the more likely reason for eviction from the private sector is landlords wanting to sell their property. This has resulted in fewer prevention options as the Council's ability to negotiate a tenant remaining in their property is reduced, and there are a smaller number of properties available to help move applicants into.
- In 2023/24, the housing options team have been approached by approximately 290 people who are fleeing domestic abuse. This is almost double the total number of approaches due to fleeing domestic abuse made in 2022/23.

- The pressure from other Local Authorities using Medway as a cheaper location than their own for temporary accommodation. We are aware of at least 474 placements in the area from other LAs in 2023/24.
- The number of people accommodated by Medway Council in Temporary Accommodation has increased. In 2022/23 the monthly average was 353 in 2023/24 this had risen to 455.
- Move on options for homeless households, or for those in supported accommodation are reduced, due to the lack of availability of private rented accommodation and social housing. For example, our private rented team managed to find 398 placements for people in 2019/20. This decreased to 192 sign ups in 2023/24. Social housing lettings decreased from 748 in 22/23 to 623 in 2022/23.



# Pre-drafting CONSULTATION



Before drafting this strategy, Medway Council Housing Services recognised the importance of obtaining as much input as possible from both our internal and external partners. The following events have contributed to the direction and targets set out within this strategy.

In February 2024, Medway Council Housing Services in partnership with Medway Culture Team, hosted a pioneering participatory democracy event produced by renowned creative organisation Arts and Homelessness International with expert facilitator Katy Rubin.

The event saw a team of people with lived experience of homelessness and Medway Council frontline staff co-produce a powerful and interactive play reflecting their experiences and challenges in homelessness, housing, and rough sleeping in Medway. The play was performed to an audience of 120 people made up of Medway residents who were interested in developing housing and homelessness policy, Medway Council staff, service providers and a panel of policy makers.

**Through a process of direct audience intervention, participation and voting, the audience identified the following key priorities:**

### **1 Rough Sleeper Verification and Channels of Communication.**

Medway Council Housing Services committed to work with policy makers from the voluntary and community sector to discuss verification and how other services can be involved in this process.

### **2 Landlord Regulation, advocacy for tenants and increased social housing.**

Medway Council Housing Services commits to continue to develop the plan to take forward a council run letting service.

### **3 Multi-service hub in Medway**

Medway Council Housing Services have a specific commitment to look into whether a multi-agency hub can be created, in addition the Medway Homeless Forum and ongoing partnership working will supplement this work.

Once the priorities had been identified, the panel of policy makers agreed to actions and commitments during the event and have been held accountable via a regularly meeting scrutiny group.

A full report of this event can be found on the Arts and Homelessness International Website: <https://artshomelessint.com/what-we-do/advocacy/legislative-theatre/>

Throughout this document, and to ensure Medway Council Housing Services continue to work toward the commitments made at the event, we have marked our strategy commitments with a  to highlight where our work over the next five years will contribute to these commitments.



# Stakeholder Event 2024

In July 2024, Medway Council Housing Services ran a stakeholder workshop event which was attended by the following partners and internal teams:

- Rough Sleepers Initiative
- Supported Housing Improvement Programme
- Rehousing
- Housing Options
- Making Every Adult Matter
- Floating Support
- Public Health
- Domestic Abuse Teams
- Children's Health Children's Services
- Sustainable Warmth
- Arts and Homelessness International
- One Big Family
- AMAT
- Pathways SIG
- Population Health (KMICB)
- Clarion
- Riverside

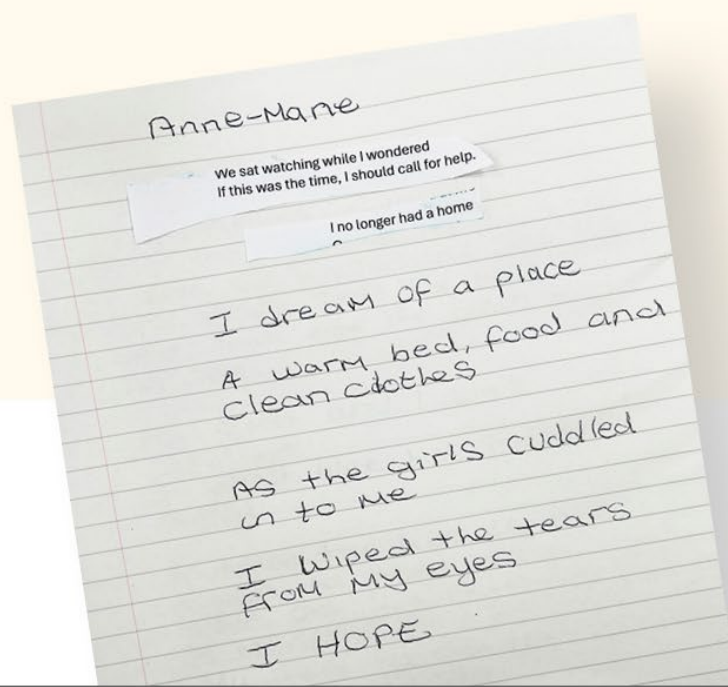
The afternoon consisted of three workshops to help Medway Council Housing Services understand what our priorities and actions should be within this strategy, and what success looks like to the group. Largely, the conversations held indicated that there should be an overarching theme within the strategy of Upstream Prevention - how can we stop people becoming at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping?

## Upstream Prevention

When we talk about upstream prevention of homelessness, we mean identifying, working with and giving advice to people before they reach crisis point.

For example, this could be working with families in rent arrears to address any financial issues, before they receive a notice of eviction. It could also be identifying at risk groups of people to provide additional housing support, such as care leavers or people experiencing domestic abuse.

Medway Council Housing Services have been carrying out several upstream prevention tasks and projects since the Homeless Reduction Act was introduced in 2017.



From the feedback gathered at both the above events, as well as the homelessness review, we have developed the following priorities:

- **Using information to prevent homelessness** - what do we know, what do we need to know and how can we use this information to help reduce the risk of homelessness?
- **One Medway Approach** - working across partners, sharing expertise and resources
- **Solution focused support** - intervening quickly and effectively
- **The right accommodation** - people have safe, secure and appropriate accommodation options
- **Informing everyone about homelessness and housing rights** - making knowledge about homelessness prevention mainstream



# Using information to prevent HOMELESSNESS

What do we know, what do we need to know and how can we use this information to help reduce the risk of homelessness?

## What does this mean?

When a person or a household become homeless, there are often several factors that have led to this outcome. Medway Council Housing Services aim to have a good understanding of who and why people in the Medway area end up experiencing homelessness. It is also important to understand any current barriers that are stopping someone from resolving their housing problems.

Medway Council Housing Services can use the information we collect about people to identify ways to improve the service that is delivered to our customers.

## Data Collection

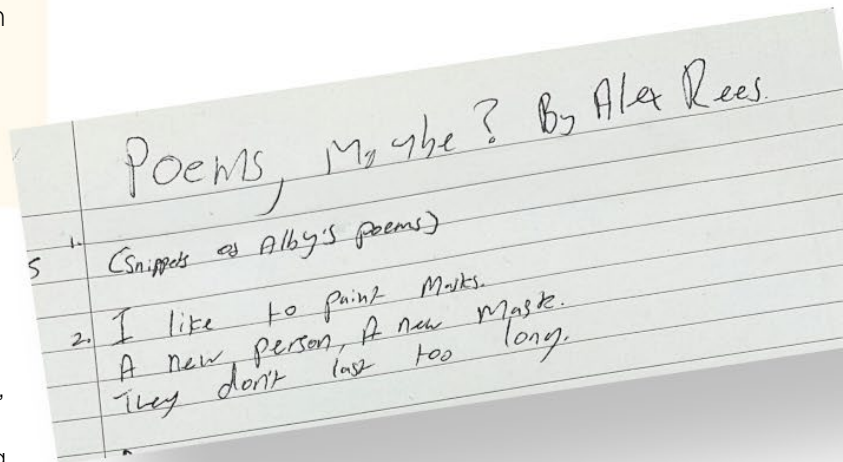
When someone makes a homeless application, the local authority is required to collect and provide data about the household and the outcome of their homeless application to central government. All information is anonymised. This is called an HCLIC return. Those who make a homeless application are provided an opportunity to opt out of this data collection and can do so at any point.

Medway Council Housing Services use HCLIC data to inform service development.

Quality of life is more than having a roof over your head. By identifying the inequalities that people in Medway who are homeless are experiencing or that might eventually lead to homelessness, we may be able to help improve quality of life overall and ensure people are getting the right kind of support, from the right services.

## Why is this important?

Understanding the root cause of homelessness can not only stop someone from becoming homeless in the first place, but also help someone who is currently experiencing homelessness to avoid falling into crisis again in the future.



## Our Commitments

To reduce the risk of homelessness by using data to understand its causes in Medway, so we can provide or advocate for the most appropriate support and accommodation.

To find and implement best practice from elsewhere – what has been proven to work?

To work with communities and wider statutory bodies and stakeholders to identify those at risk of homelessness, before they get to the point of tenancy failure.

## How will Medway do this?

Building on what we already know, Medway will complete an in-depth analysis of Medway's own housing, complaints, homelessness and rough sleeping data.

Review best practice from other parts of the UK and national models and assess how we can implement this inhouse.

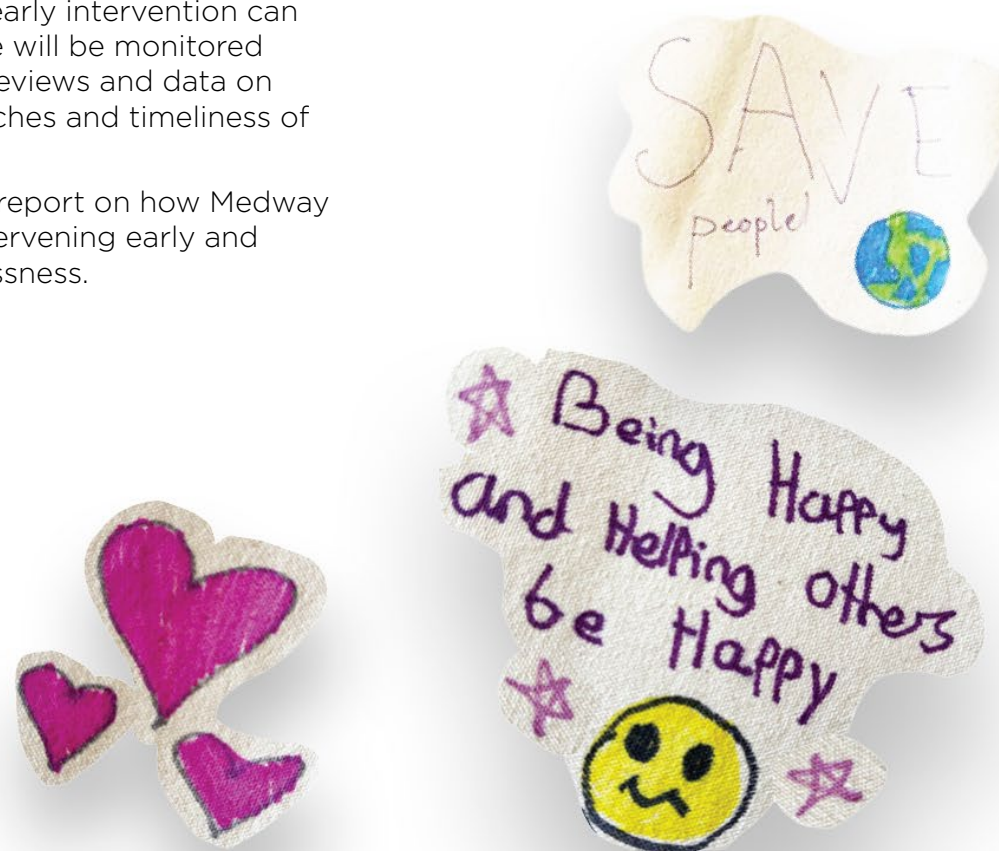
Invite large scale providers and bodies such as the NHS, schools and the wider Local Authority workforce to jointly analyse any inequalities that could have resulted in homelessness, or a potential risk of homelessness.

## How will success be measured?

- Medway Council Housing Services will have identified all accessible sources of data showing indicators of households at risk of homelessness, to facilitate the embedding of early intervention and effective upstream prevention action within our service delivery.
- This will maximise opportunities to prevent homelessness within Medway. Progress in identifying how early intervention can be put into practice will be monitored through quarterly reviews and data on changes to approaches and timeliness of interventions.
- Compile an annual report on how Medway is performing in intervening early and preventing homelessness.

### Related Documents:

- Medway Council Plan
- Medway Council Local Plan and associated assessments
- Medway Housing Needs Assessment
- Medway People Strategy
- Medway Homelessness Review



# One Medway **APPROACH**

## Working across partners, sharing expertise and resources

### What does this mean?

Medway Council Housing Services already have strong partnerships across many external and internal partners, however there is still more work to do.

Medway Council Housing Services will continue to build strong partnerships with those who work with Medway residents, to ensure we are all working toward a common goal, ensuring that opportunities to assist people are not missed and collaborating on opportunities to learn from each other.

### Why is this important?

There is no one service who can deliver everything that someone needs, alone. When someone is experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping, they may need the help of multiple services.

Medway Council Housing Services understand the importance of having strong relationships with the services that can deliver the appropriate support to those who need it.

Sharing our expertise and resources enables all services to make a positive difference for those who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness.

### Current partnership networks

Medway Council Housing Services currently contribute to the following partnership networks and panels:

Medway Multi Disadvantage Network (MMDN)

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

Complex needs meeting

Medway's Legislative Theatre Scrutiny Group

Medway Homeless Forum

Medway Arts and Homeless Forum

Kent Homeless Forum

Local Partnership Board

Vulnerability panel

Social Care Corporate Finance Panel

Supported Housing Young Person's Panel

Ministry of justice - Pre-Release panel

Safe in Medway (SIM) domestic abuse case review meetings.

Care Leavers Panel

Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement (MAPPA) Panel

### Our commitments

To maximise the impact of joint work, minimise duplication of effort and deliver the best outcome possible for residents.


To make sure the voices of the experts by experience are heard across Medway.

To continue to develop partnership networks and share what we know.

To work toward a 'tell us once' approach so people don't have to repeat their story.




## How will Medway do this?

Review all current information sharing agreements and identify any improvements to information sharing across internal teams and partnered services. 

Medway Council Housing Services to have a presence on relevant task and finish groups created by Housing led forums (E.g. Homeless Forum, Supported Housing Provider Forum, landlord focus group).

Medway Council Housing Services to have a continuous presence at the networks and panels mentioned above, and any learning taken from these panels to be shared across the service.

Improve how we share information about our services, including any learning and key development points.

Medway Council Housing Services will seek feedback from other services and those with lived experience when looking to develop our services. 

## How will success be measured?

Medway Council Housing Services will have completed a review of all current partnership working, considering the effectiveness of such arrangements and how this might be improved, identifying opportunities for new avenues and networks, as well as the efficacy and fitness for purpose of our information sharing agreements. Feedback from partners and service users will form part of this review. This will be ratified by Medway's Homelessness Forum.

This will inform individual team strategies for rationalising and improving partnership working, both internally and externally.

### Related Documents:

- Medway Council Plan
- Medway Housing Needs Assessment
- Medway People Strategy
- The Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023
- Medway Homelessness Review



# Solution focused SUPPORT



## Intervening quickly and effectively

### What does this mean?

Medway Council Housing Services recognises that a 'one size approach' does not fit all. Support should be person centred and accessible when people ask for it, but also there is a need to ensure that services are aware that identifying the need for support can often be an important preventative function, as people often have barriers to asking for help. Learning from people with lived experience can help Medway and its providers and partners ask the right questions and proactively offer services.

### Why is this important?

Getting the right kind of support, quickly can go a long way in resolving someone's housing issues. Where there are gaps in support, those who need it may endure further inequalities and it could take longer to help them into secure and appropriate accommodation.

### Our Commitments

All Medway Council Housing Services will continue to develop a needs led approach to homelessness and rough sleeping.

To ensure homelessness prevention and rough sleeping services are delivered in a compassionate and respectful way.

To use creative approaches to working with people with complex needs.

To ensure that support will follow the person when it is needed.

To ensure our approach is tailored to Medway resident's needs.

### How will Medway do this?

Review the training our staff receive to identify improvements and gaps in training, and then seek to fill those gaps.

Ensure knowledge of support providers and their functions is clear to all Medway staff and partners.

Gather feedback from those with lived experience and those who support them to identify what else can be done to make sure that support works for all Medway residents.

Ensuring that resources are used effectively and are responsive to changes in policy and funding e.g. Rough Sleeping Initiative Grants, Supported Housing Act.

### How will success be measured?

Ongoing review of the Housing team's in-depth knowledge of support providers and their functions, including identifying, remedying, and improving any gaps through staff training.

Monitoring the effectiveness of day-to-day service delivery to ensure that, alongside statutory functions, all service users are assisted to access support and other services as appropriate to their needs, including:

- Improving partnership working to seek to improve housing outcomes for individuals with complex needs, with measurable reduction in evictions for this group.
- Scaling up or down and mobilising grant funded services in line with changes in policy and funding.

#### Related Documents:

- Medway Council Plan
- Medway Housing Needs Assessment
- Medway People Strategy
- The Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023
- Medway Homelessness Review
- Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Disabled Facilities Grant and Financial Assistance Policy



# The **RIGHT** accommodation

People have safe, secure and appropriate accommodation options

## What does this mean?

Working to maximise opportunities for residents in Medway to live in accommodation that meets the needs of their household. When someone is experiencing homelessness or is at risk of becoming homeless, Medway Council Housing Services want to ensure that they can help residents to seek to secure accommodation that is right for them, or where practicable and achievable, to help them to stay where they currently live if the property is suitable.



## What are we already doing?

Medway Council Housing Services currently commission:

- Five supported housing schemes, catering for different needs.
- Dispersed accommodation for those fleeing domestic abuse.
- A refuge for those fleeing domestic abuse.
- Medway Assessment Centre – emergency crash beds for those rough sleeping and in crisis.
- Medway Council Housing Services also support the local voluntary sector in their provision of night shelter and independent supported housing.
- Medway Council Housing Services will be purchasing properties for use as Temporary Accommodation, that is fit for purpose.
- We also make good use of our Private Rented Sector Scheme, which offers financial support to help people access properties in the private rented sector. This funding also comes with additional support later down the line, if the person becomes at risk of homelessness.

## Why is this important?

Having the right kind of property gives a household a positive foundation in all sorts of ways. When a person feels secure and safe, it can improve their health and wellbeing. When a property is fit for purpose and meets the needs of a household, this reduces the risk of becoming homeless if things start to go wrong in other areas of their life.

This links in with the priorities already outlined in our Housing Strategy to 2030 Increase Affordable Housing Supply – making sure that we access as much suitable affordable accommodation as possible, through the procurement of additional properties and working with existing providers of accommodation in Medway.

The Private Sector Housing Team at Medway Council Housing Services plays a crucial role in raising standards in rental accommodation. They enable and promote the provision of good quality, well-managed, and safe accommodation, creating safe, decent, and prosperous communities. This aligns with our Housing Strategy to 2030 priority of Driving Up Housing Standards. Additionally, the use of suitable aids and adaptations through the Disabled Facilities

Grant increases the number of people who can receive assistance with their accommodation, supporting another of our Housing Strategy to 2030 priorities: Helping People to Stay Living in Their Own Homes.

## Our Commitments

To understand the needs of Medway residents and seek to provide accommodation options that match these needs.

To maximise use of government funding to increase the quality and provision of supported housing to meet the needs of Medway residents.

To maximise use of government funding and the central budget to increase opportunities for people to stay in their current homes.

To explore the use of Medway's existing stock, and other social housing stock, to see how a better level of suitable accommodation can be delivered.

To work with Medway landlords to improve standards where required and provide information to tenants to help them understand their responsibilities.


To explore and enhance move-on options for those in temporary accommodation and supported accommodation.

To write and publish a Supported Housing Strategy, to outline the Council's plan for supported accommodation over a five-year period.

## How will Medway do this?

Rollout a Medway lettings agency, to increase affordable good quality provision in the private sector. 

Work with housing association partners to make use of grant funding opportunities to develop sustainable supported housing.

Build relationships with local private landlords to ensure security of tenure and lower the risk of evictions. 

Use existing data and feedback from partners and services to understand the gaps in the type of accommodation in Medway.

Explore the viability of local authority hostel provision.

## How will success be measured?

Demonstrable lowering of numbers of evictions and successful sustainment of tenancies. As part of Housing's Private Rented Sector and Prevention activities, continuing to build and sustain relationships with local private landlords, working with them and those applicants threatened with homelessness to provide advice and support so as to ensure security of tenure.

Increased numbers of alternative accommodation offers and review and expansion of existing provision, e.g. supported housing, where applicable.

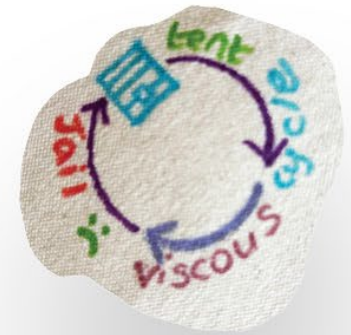
### Related Documents:

- Medway Council Plan
- Medway Housing Needs Assessment
- Medway Housing Strategy to 2030
- Medway People Strategy
- The Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023
- Medway Homelessness Review 2024
- Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Disabled Facilities Grant and Financial Assistance Policy
- Enforcement and Licensing Policy



# INFORMING

# everyone about homelessness and housing rights



## Making knowledge about homelessness prevention mainstream

### What does this mean?

Working with as many people as possible to make sure professionals and residents in Medway know their housing rights, when to ask for help and from who.

### Why is this important?

Homelessness is everybody's problem. Much like our first priority 'Using Information to Prevent Homelessness', assisting all appropriate services, and the wider public, to recognise the red flags that lead to homelessness could mean that help can be provided earlier, and homelessness avoided altogether.

By improving education around housing rights and homelessness, we are giving both professionals and Medway residents the opportunity and tools to act sooner and get the right kind of help when they need it.



### Our Commitments

To provide resources to help Medway residents understand the issues around homelessness.

To educate, in the broadest sense, on key issues and how homelessness can be prevented.

To get in early, the more children and young people are aware of the issues and get to have a say about them, the better.

To increase accessibility of information for Medway residents, ensuring people know what to expect and when.

### How will Medway do this?


Enable peer mentors to provide expert advice to colleagues and people in at-risk groups.

Engage with community groups and forums and have a housing presence at events to outline what can be done to prevent homelessness. e.g. the Medway Mile, Medway Pride, etc

Develop e-learning and training about housing and homelessness that can be accessed by all Medway staff who deal with Medway residents, not just housing staff.

Offer the opportunity to increase understanding and upskill people who work within the local community.

Develop bespoke educational resources that can be used in schools and other settings, in conjunction with people with lived experience.

Review what information is currently available to the public and assess how we can make this easier to access and understand. 

### How will success be measured?

By surveying stakeholders and look to conduct focus groups with the wider Medway community to see where there is evidence of increased understanding of issues around homelessness.

By measuring the effectiveness of the campaigns and educational activity in the reduction of homelessness approaches overall and/or earlier prevention action taken by residents and groups who support them.

#### Related Documents:

- Medway Council Plan
- Medway Housing Needs Assessment
- Medway People Strategy
- Medway Homelessness Review

# HOW DO WE KNOW

## that Strategies make a difference?

Medway Council Housing Services monitors all the progress towards commitments four times a year and these are included in reports to the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council.

Some examples of what was achieved during the life of the previous strategy are highlighted below:

### Housing Options:

- In 2023/24, the Council successfully prevented or relieved homelessness for 1001 households, which represents 63% of all those applicants owed some form of homeless duty.
- Created a “Call before you serve” initiative for private landlords.
- Re-assessed the Homebond scheme (now known as PRS scheme) to make it more flexible and accessible to those who need the help.

### Rough Sleepers Initiative:

- Increased the capacity of rooms and flats within the Medway Assessment Centre, Housing First and Enhanced Hostel accommodation to 32.
- Gained funding for seven permanent flats for people formerly sleeping rough.
- Actively work with 100 people sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough at any one time, over 300 people supported into accommodation since 2019.

### Domestic Abuse

- Commissioned ‘Safe in Medway’ to provide safe, suitable dispersed accommodation in the Medway area for those fleeing domestic abuse for 20 households.
- Started working toward Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) accreditation to improve knowledge and understanding of issues across Housing Services.

