

# **Swindon's Homeless Prevention and Reduction Strategy 2020 - 2024**

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## **Introduction & National Context**

Homelessness is not just a housing problem, it is the result of multiple disadvantages and can describe a range of circumstances from vulnerable housing to rough sleeping. It has a deep impact on health, employment opportunities, and educational achievement. For most people who become homeless their lack of accommodation is a symptom rather than a cause of their social exclusion.

In many cases, homelessness will be a phase in a person's life. However for some people repeat homelessness becomes a cycle particularly for those who struggle to maintain a home due to substance misuse problems, mental health issues or learning disability. Ex- offenders, those recently released from prison, older people, younger people (at risk, leaving care or teenage parents), migrants, refugees or asylum seekers and those experiencing or having experienced domestic violence are also more likely to become homeless.

Nationally, incidents of homelessness have been increasing for a number of years and the increased use of temporary accommodation is a direct consequence.

Homelessness acceptance rates and use of temporary accommodation have gone up nationally in recent years. At over 56,000, annual homelessness acceptances were over 16,000 higher across England in 2017/18 than in 2009/10.

Addressing the immediate and long-term costs of homelessness, can be significant. Putting in place services which prevent homelessness in the first place, and which help people quickly if they find themselves needing support, can help stop these costs escalating.

## **Foreward from Lead Member for Housing and Public Safety**

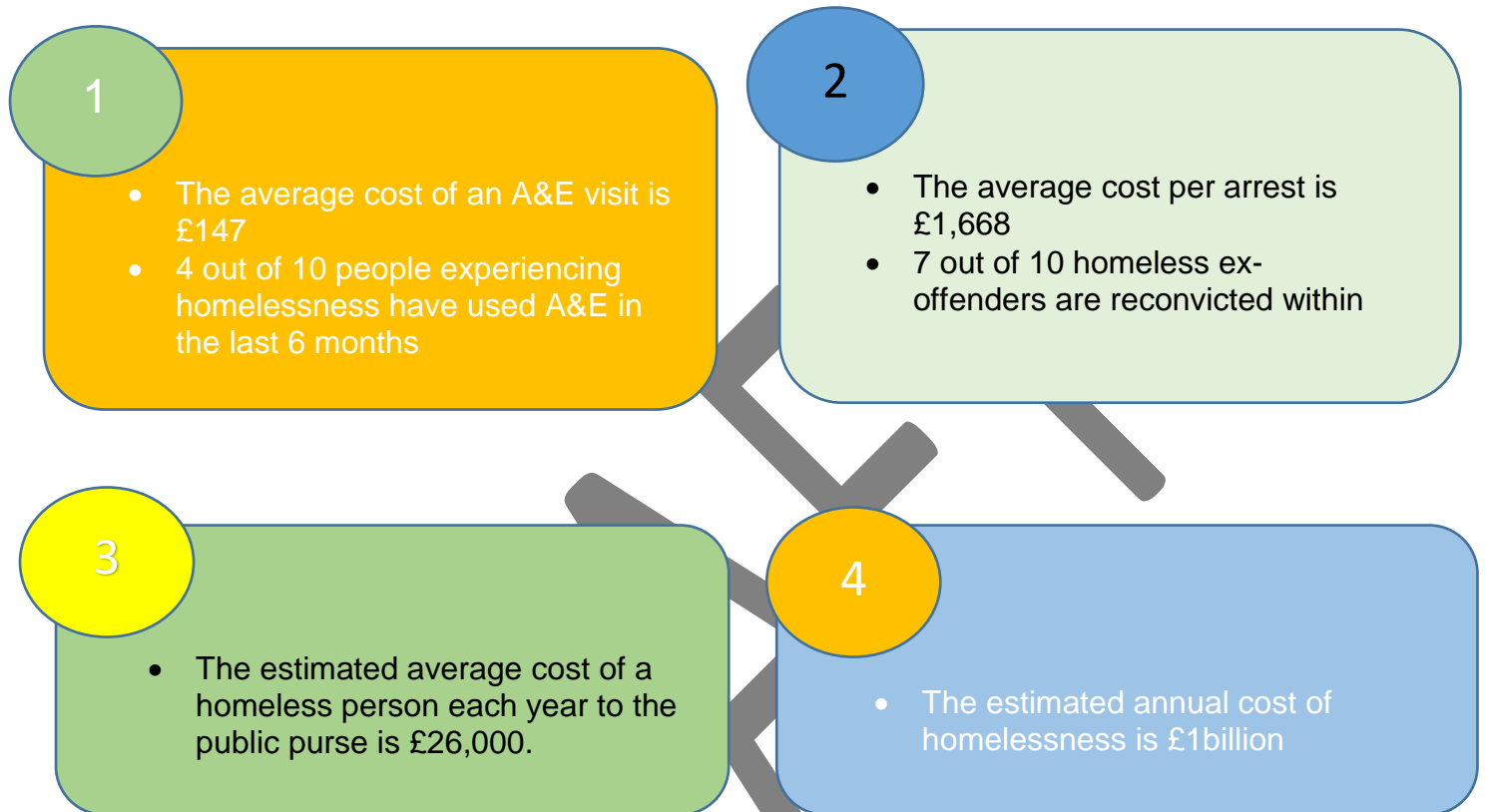
I'm pleased to introduce Swindon's Homeless Prevention and Reduction Strategy, the first we have developed under the framework of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. In Swindon, we have delivered the principles of homelessness prevention and relief for a number of years and have continually endeavoured to support more people and offer interventions at an earlier point than the previous legislation said we were required to. Therefore, I wholeheartedly welcome the ethos of the new legislation in enabling us to do more of what we know we are very good at.

I do not underestimate the challenge that the current housing market presents, but I believe Swindon Borough Council are well placed and determined to provide our residents with the best possible solutions to prevent homelessness wherever possible. Everyone deserves to live in a safe and decent home and to be treated fairly. We recognise the need to find ways to make private rented housing financially more accessible to people in need of a home and better ways of resolving disputes between tenants and landlords.

This new Homeless Prevention and Reduction Strategy seeks to build on the strong partnerships and dedication shown across the public, voluntary, faith and private

sectors and in doing so, coordinate a comprehensive approach to homeless prevention that delivers sustainable outcomes for people in Swindon.

Research from Homeless Link indicates:



The primary homelessness legislation – that is, Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 - provides the statutory under-pinning for action to prevent homelessness and provide assistance to people threatened with or actually homeless.

In 2002, the government amended the homelessness legislation through the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 to ensure a more strategic approach to tackling and preventing homelessness, in particular by requiring a homelessness strategy for every housing authority district.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 significantly reformed England's homelessness legislation by placing duties on local authorities to intervene at earlier stages to prevent homelessness in their areas. The Act changed the way homeless advice and assistance is delivered by Councils. It requires housing authorities to provide homelessness services to all those affected, not just those who have 'priority need' and most likely to have a positive impact for single persons or couples with no children

We aim to address the challenges housing teams face through this document, but we cannot work in isolation so we will have a special focus on partnerships to ensure a fully rounded and holistic approach is taken.

Our strategy sets out our vision for those facing homelessness, who may be rough sleeping, across the Borough from 2020 to 2025. That progress of the strategy will be monitored by the Council and reviewed on an Annual Basis...

## **Homelessness in Swindon**

The Homeless Code of Guidance for Local Authorities makes clear the need for collaboration between housing and other partners within, and external to, the local authority (MHCLG, 2018).

In the past 12 months, Swindon Borough Council has introduced the: Reducing Rough Sleeping Strategy and commissioned Swindon Night Shelter to run The Haven, a day centre for people who are homeless, which now offers a range of support services with a strong emphasis on welfare and emotional wellbeing.

Swindon Borough Council has secured over £425,000 of grant funding which has seen the council and partners develop different forms of support to try to match an individual's needs.

These include Housing First and wrap-around support services for people when they move into accommodation, outreach support which is delivered on the streets, encouraging entrenched rough sleepers off the streets and into safe accommodation.

Housing First is a relatively new approach to solving rough sleeping, it focuses on housing people first and wrapping services around them as the relationship with the individual develops. Through the Temporary Winter Housing Provision and through designated accommodation leased in the private rented sector, we are able to house people who are in desperate need of accommodation and tailor services to meet their needs.

We have formed a new team of Housing Officers specifically to focus on prevention, these officers are working across statutory and non-statutory services, such as Great Western Hospital, Children Services, Drug & Alcohol Support Services and with private landlords.

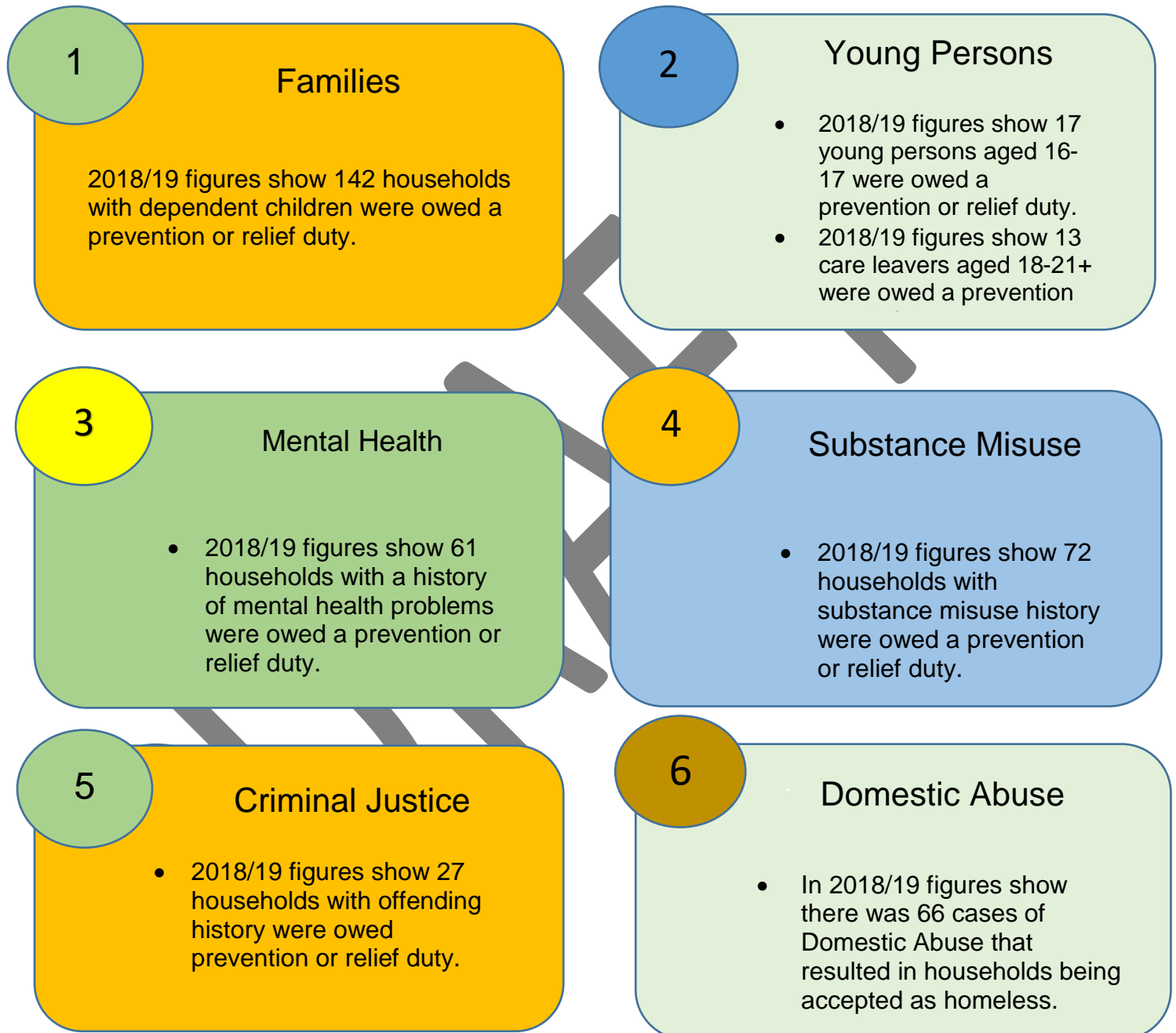
As well as providing comprehensive housing advice and support for anyone who approaches us about homelessness, we also operate a prevention fund to enable people to remain in their own homes or find new homes quickly.

## Local Trends and Pressures

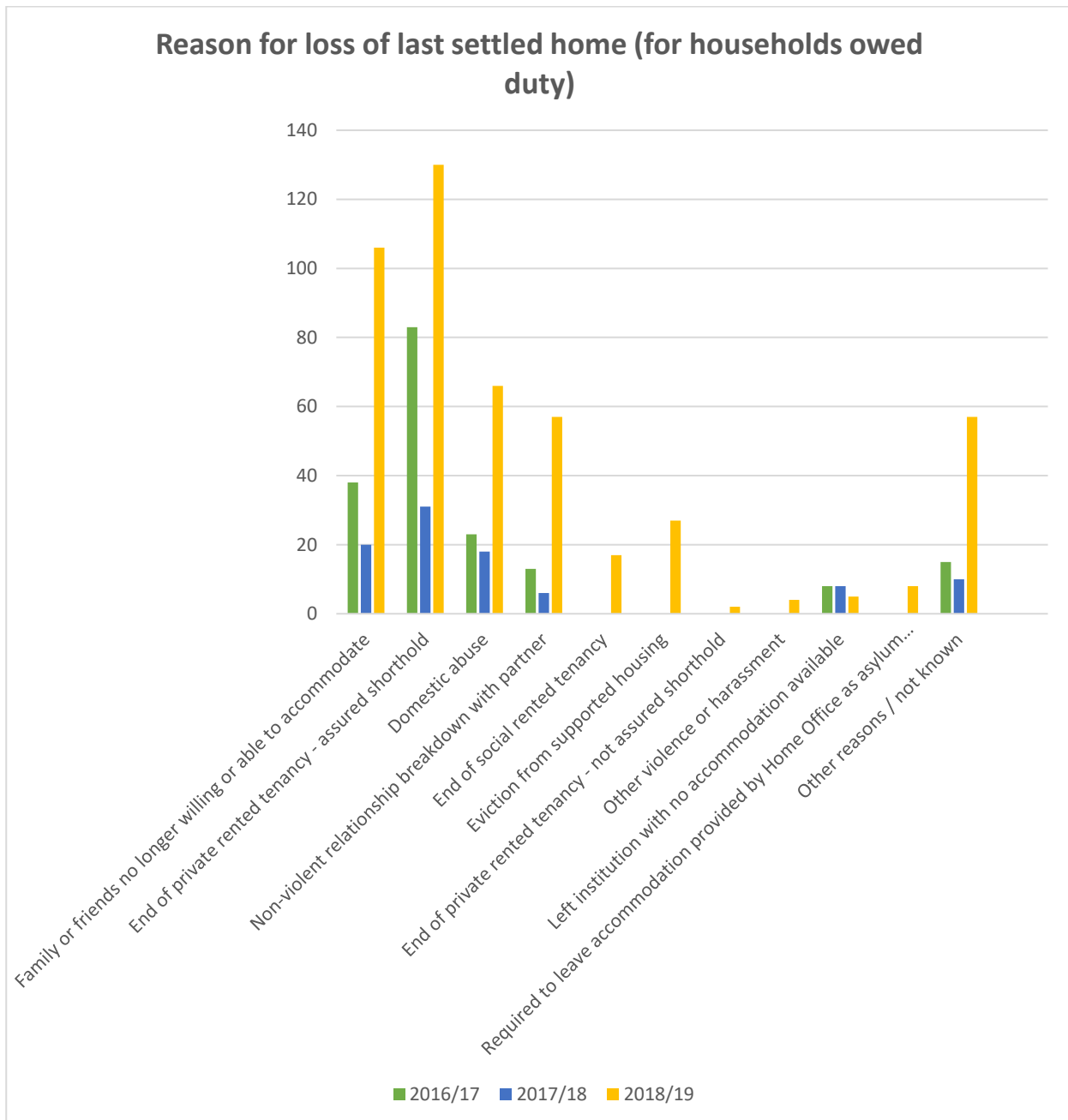
The following table contains some of the proposed Housing key issues locally that are considered relevant to the Homelessness Strategy.

Title	Elements
Rough Sleeping	Rough sleeping is dangerous and isolating. Long periods spent sleeping rough leads to health problems.
Mental Health	The proportion of homeless clients with mental health issues is significantly high.
Domestic Abuse	There is a restricted number of safe spaces for victims, and the limited government funding for supported accommodation is a massive challenge.
Complex needs	Homeless clients with mental health and drug or alcohol issues are often refused help by both mental health and substance misuse services until they have addressed either issue.
16/17 year olds	An effective joint-working protocol between Housing, Adult Social Care and Children's Services is required, to prevent young people being passed from pillar to post.
Care Leavers	Care leavers are a highly transient population, and some will experience the breakdown of placements, which can cause interruption to services they are receiving. These issues may shape their help-seeking behaviours. Although their physical health has not been found to be substantially different to the general population, their mental health needs are higher and some lifestyle choices affect their health needs (such as higher usage of substances).
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)	Additionally, former unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) have particular physical and mental health needs.
Substance misuse	Levels of drug and alcohol misuse are relatively high amongst the homeless population.
Ex-Offenders, recently, or being, released from prison	Early identification of prisoners due for release, who will be homeless.
Single homeless persons	Single homeless people face a range of barriers which make it particularly difficult for them to find a home of any tenure. Restricted entitlement to Universal Credit and insecurity of tenure in the private rented sector are key drivers for homelessness in this group.

Locally within the Borough of Swindon there are trends across the services that collectively impact on homelessness and the ability of the Housing Options Team to assist in preventing and relieving homelessness.

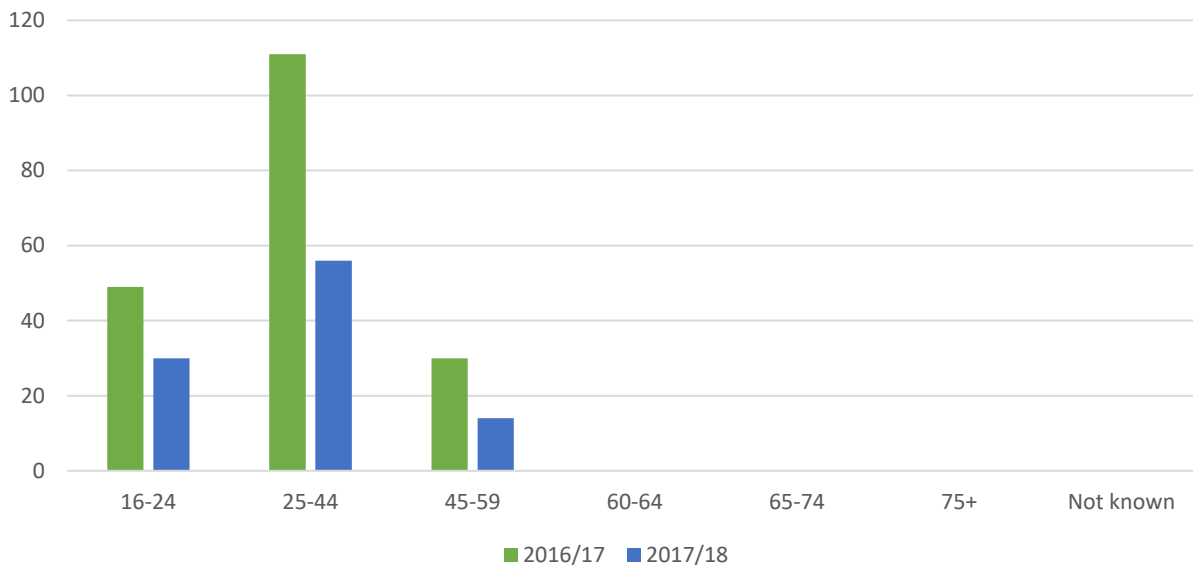


The main reason for homelessness was loss of rented accommodation in the private rented sector, mainly because of the termination of an assured shorthold tenancy. This cause of homelessness increased significantly since 2018/19. Parents, relatives or friends no longer willing to accommodate being the second highest cause of homelessness.

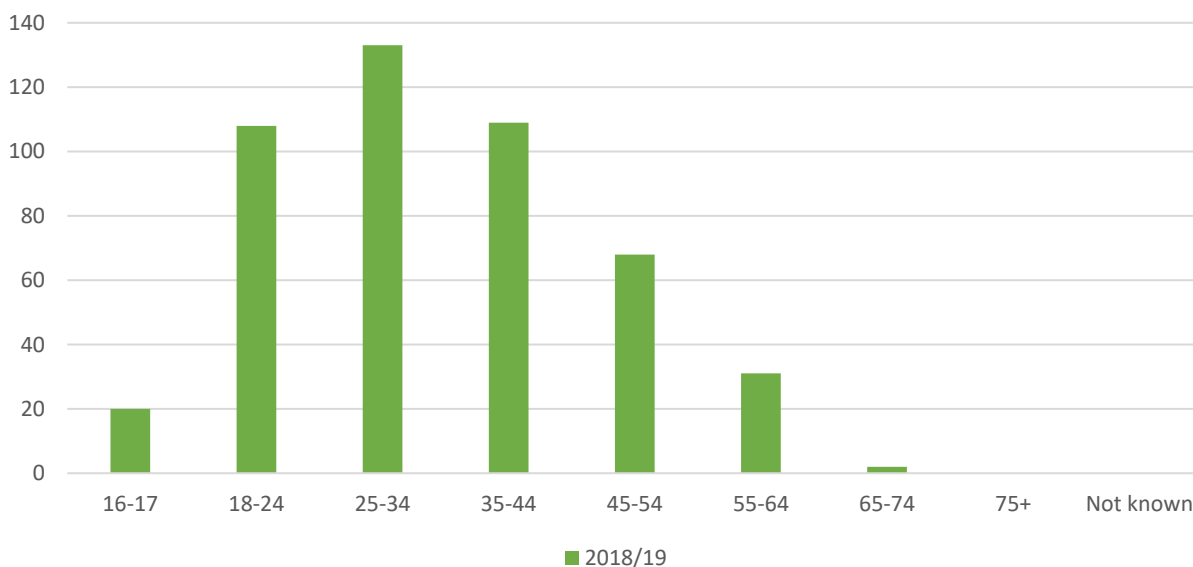


In 2016/17 & 2017/18, the majority of people presenting as homeless or in need of assistance were aged between 25-44 years old. In 2018-19, the age brackets for data collection changed, and the majority of people presenting as homeless or in need of assistance were aged between 25-34 years old, with ages 35-44 and 18-24 years old a close second and third respectively.

Age of main applicants owed a duty (2016 - 2018)



Age of main applicants owed a duty (2018 - 2019)\*

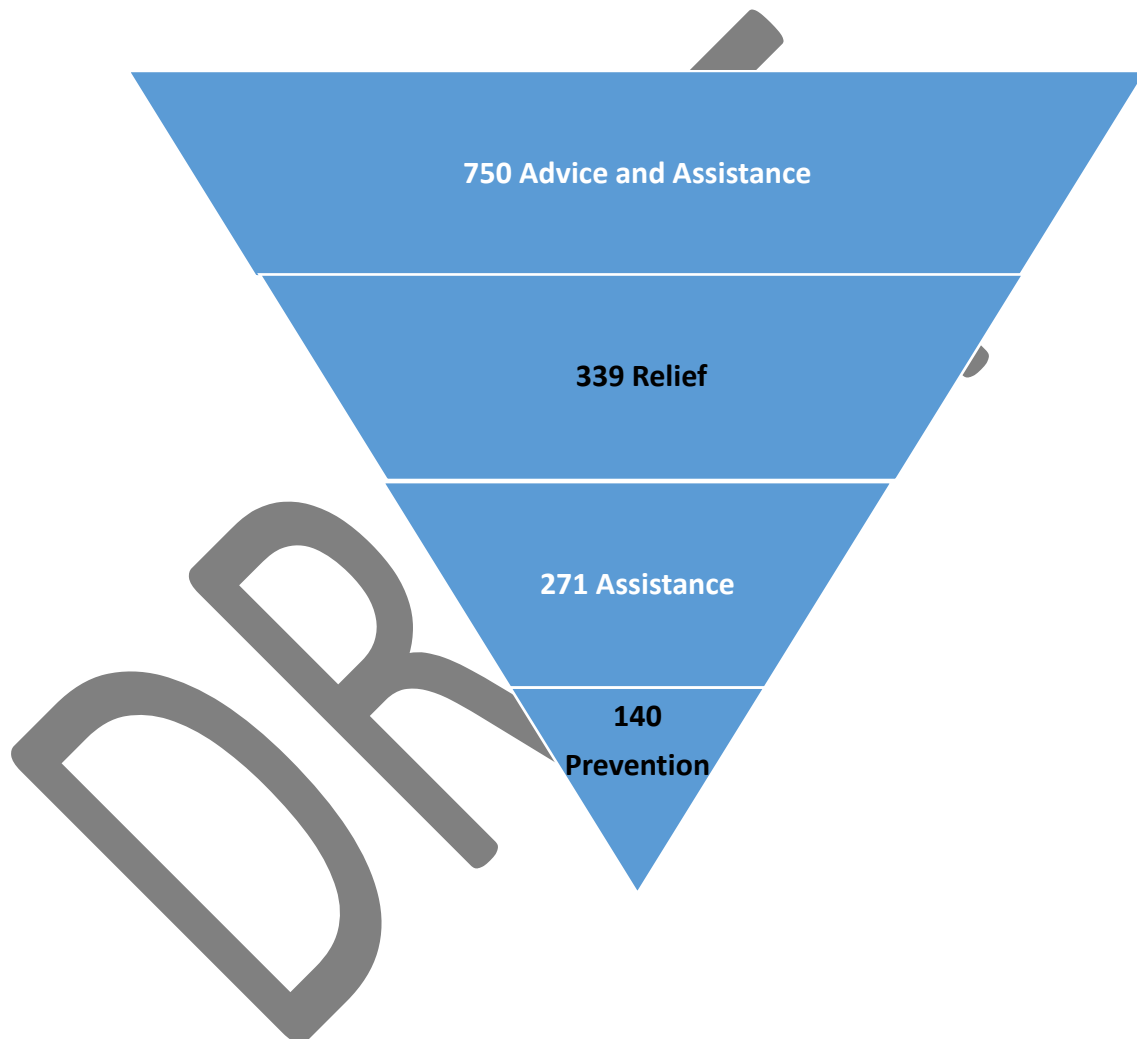


\* The age brackets for data collection changed in 2018



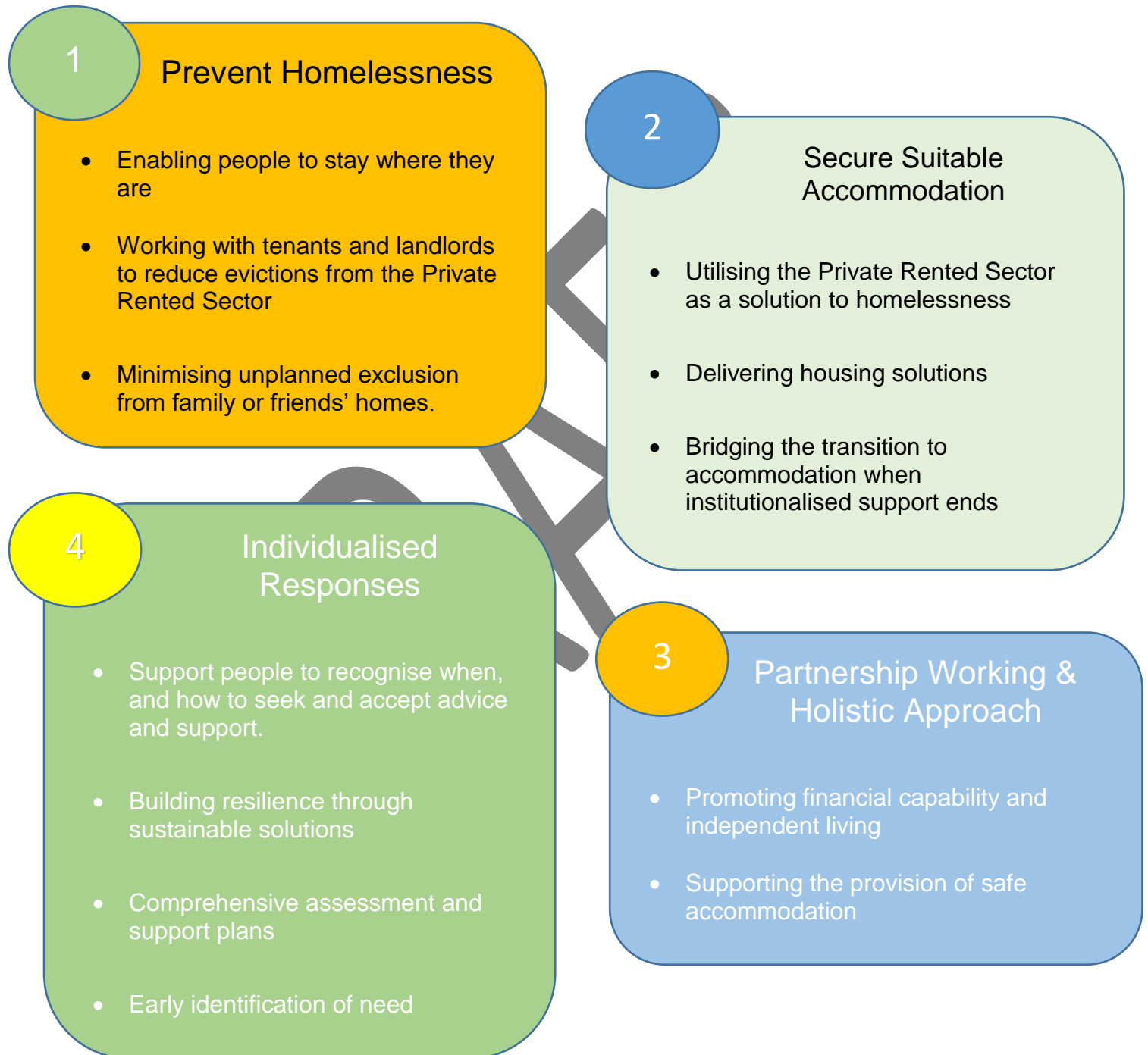
## Post HRA Performance

We have looked at our data for 2018-19 to assess the impact of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017. The numbers that the Council is dealing with have increased, but early indications show that we are achieving success with the number of Prevention and Relief cases in a relatively short period of time. We recognise the need to intervene early to help households and increase the number of preventions to avoid anyone becoming homeless and will work closely with our partners to achieve this.



# Priority Areas of focus

Informed by Swindon's 2019 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and data analysis, this strategy contains a number of priority areas, which are categorised into four core themes as set below



## Priority One – Prevent Homelessness

### Enabling people to stay where they are

#### 1.1 Working with tenants and landlords to reduce evictions from the Private Rented Sector

In Swindon the most common reason for homelessness is the ending of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy in the Private Rented Sector. In 2018/19, almost half of all households who approached the council for assistance due to homelessness came from the sector. Two recent research projects with local landlords reveal a mix of reasons landlords choose to evict including for personal or financial reasons (impacted by housing policy such as tax changes and licensing). However, the evidence tells us that the majority of the time, eviction is because of rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, property damage or a combination of all these issues. This shows a clear requirement for more advice and support to be made available for both landlords and tenants in the Private Rented Sector in order to prevent homelessness from the sector.

Review the level of resource required to sufficiently address homelessness prevention from the Private Rented Sector	
What we want to achieve	Recommended key areas of activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Increased tenancy sustainment</li><li>Landlords &amp; tenants seeking support at an earlier stage to maximise the opportunity to resolve issues and prevent homelessness</li><li>Landlords to inform Swindon Borough Council when they intend to issue s21s, maximising time for the council to support households</li><li>Build and sustain positive relationships between landlords, support services and the council, facilitated through improved</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Expand landlord liaison functions and build relationships with landlords to understand their needs &amp; concerns</li><li>Broaden communications channels between the landlords, the Borough council and its partner advice &amp; support services, including online information</li><li>Enable/encourage tenants to access support and advice/training for life skills and budgeting to achieve income maximisation</li><li>Further develop, promote and delivery of a new landlords forum</li><li>Consider a standardised notification process for landlords to inform the council when they are issuing s21s</li><li>Further develop services to assist customers to resolve rent arrears and maximize income to make the property affordable</li></ol>

communication, support & advice	
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## 1.2 Minimising unplanned exclusion from family homes

Parental exclusion or not being able to stay any longer with relatives or friends remains one of the primary reasons for homelessness in Swindon. Particularly amongst young people or single people with multiple and complex needs who may have been homeless before. This is also the most common reason for homelessness crisis: where a household is made homeless immediately, thus requiring emergency accommodation.

<b>Managing expectations and enabling people to secure their own housing. Review the Care Leavers Protocol to ensure planned and timely moves for young people leaving care and consider the use of/need for young persons supported accommodation for care leavers</b>	
<b>What we want to achieve</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A reduction in the number of people becoming homeless from family and friends' accommodation in an emergency through an increase in planned moves</li> </ul>	<b>Recommended key areas of activity</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review previous delivery of mediation services and explore possibility of reintroducing an independent service.</li> <li>Ensure young people's access to life skills and tenancy training in the Private Rented Sector has parity with those living in social housing.</li> <li>Revisit options for closer working links with education facilities to raise awareness and understanding of homelessness</li> <li>Raise awareness of options and self-help services through information provision and communications, including within families</li> </ol>

## Priority Two – Secure Suitable Accommodation

### 2.1 Utilising the Private Rented Sector as a solution to homelessness

Tenure profile in Swindon has changed significantly over the last two decades resulting in an ever-increasing reliance on the Private Rented Sector as a solution to homelessness. A third of all households in Swindon live in the sector (compared to less than a sixth in 2001). The change can be attributed to low house prices appealing to buy-to-let investors and steady market rents delivering a good yield for circumstantial or investment landlords.

The Private Rented Sector is a flexible tenure offering a wide range of accommodation in all areas of the town. However, it can be seen as less appealing than social housing because rent levels are often higher and there is generally less stability as tenants can be asked to move on without notice within two months at any time after their initial six or twelve month tenancy has expired. The Private Rented Sector is not always accessible to people who are dependent or reliant on welfare benefits as landlords can be selective about the 'market' they choose to target their accommodation.

The Private Rented Sector in Swindon is fundamental as a housing solution to households at risk of homelessness. The contribution of many local landlords is significant and it is increasingly important that more landlords are provided with the information and support they require to unlock more property in the sector for people who need to move from their existing accommodation arrangements.

<b>Swindon Council and partners must work with landlords to progress leasing/letting schemes to offer as an available PRS accommodation option. There is a need to ensure sufficient resource to identify and engage landlords and for the efficient facilitation of new tenancies.</b>	
<b>What we want to achieve</b>	<b>Recommended key areas of activity</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Access to more quality properties in the PRS that are affordable to sustain</b></li><li>• <b>Households move seamlessly between properties with minimal disruption and without the need for emergency / temporary accommodation</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use landlord forums to research landlord requirements and incentives necessary to make properties accessible to low income households</li><li>• Inform landlords on how they can support tenants and address issues and share positive examples of successful tenancies to reduce letting reticence</li><li>• Swindon Borough Council to explore feasibility for introducing early stage issue identification and leveraging of support.</li></ul>

## 2.2 Delivering housing solutions

Tenure profile in Swindon has changed significantly over the past decade. The Right to Buy (RTB) social housing policy has been popular, incentivised by low house prices and large discounts. Since the scheme was reinvigorated in 2012, the council lost 454 homes and has not received equivalent reparation from government to replace them on a one-for-one basis. This creates a greater dependence upon the growing Private Rented Sector for those who cannot or choose not to purchase their own homes.

This strategy promotes the continued development of proactive work with private sector landlords to further utilise the sector for people in housing need. As there is a growing shortage of housing that is accessible and affordable to low income households it is also necessary to explore other ways of bringing more social and affordable property forward.

<b>Increased supply of affordable home, including a property acquisition plan using available funding to buy properties for either temporary or long term use.</b>	
<b>What we want to achieve</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Increased delivery of a range of affordable housing options in Swindon that are accessible for people with lower income levels.</b></li></ul>	<b>Recommended key areas of activity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maximise utilisation of Right to Buy receipts for acquisition of new property and fully explore opportunities arising from the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap</li><li>• Advance a coordinated and regular approach to discussions with developers and providers about new supply and utilise any available government funding to ensure development is optimised according to need</li><li>• A single person housing need analysis exploring shared social housing options</li><li>• Consider potential empty commercial and residential property conversions</li></ul>

## 2.3 Bridging the transition to accommodation when institutionalised support ends

Many people experiencing sudden or a significant change in circumstance including discharge from hospital, prison release, leaving local authority care or withdrawal of Home Office support become homeless due to a lack of accommodation options.

The risk of homelessness for these groups should be one of the easiest to prevent as they involve people already known to services. However issues arise when: people are already homeless at hospital admission stage and their hospital stay is short (or only A&E treatment is provided); short custodial sentences are given, limiting time in which to arrange accommodation upon release; and, when new refugees lose the

accommodation provided by the Home Office before accessing benefits, employment and other support due to poor coordination between government agencies.

Ensure local systems and processes are established and work with partners to establish local systems to improve and use the Duty to Refer	
<p><b>What we want to achieve</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase homelessness prevention from hospital (including mental health sections), local authority care, prison and youth offender institutions &amp; when Home Office support is withdrawn</li> <li>• Reduce the number of people becoming homeless after being supported by any of these institutions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Recommended key areas of activity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through our partnerships we will support 'through the gate' services that work with prisoners, meeting them on release and accompanying them to pre-arranged meetings to facilitate access to benefits, housing and other support</li> <li>• Understand the challenges around A&amp;E attendances and work together to find solutions</li> <li>• Embed the hospital discharge protocol within the Discharge Policy for Swindon</li> <li>• Cross-sector work to ensure appropriate provision of support for maximising accommodation sustainment and reducing risk of repeat hospital admission, detention under the Mental Health Act or reoffending</li> <li>• Engage the Home Office and at a local level, seeking commitment a policy of seamless and timely transition from NASS support to employment, welfare and housing for people granted refugee status.</li> <li>• Encourage NASS to participate in local Duty to Refer processes</li> <li>• Swindon Multi-Agency Forum on Asylum Seekers and Refugees to develop a process plan for supporting failed asylum seekers in appealing decisions and submitting new evidence or claims</li> <li>• Review the Care Leavers protocol to ensure sufficiency and variety of accommodation options, including supported accommodation and accommodation with support,. A refreshed protocol will details the mechanisms to plan ending of placements.</li> </ul>

### **Priority Three – Effective Partnership Working & Holistic Approach to reducing homelessness**

The Council will improve the strategic focus of tackling homelessness in Swindon by establishing a Homelessness Forum. This Forum will be set up by the Council and have representation from all key partners, ensuring that a multi-agency approach is being taken to prevent homelessness in the borough. A Multi-agency partnership working is critical to the success of the Swindon Homelessness Strategy and there are a number of different sectors who have a role in the coordinated implementation of this strategy.

Services working together to respond to individualised support needs through coordinated interventions are key to preventing first time or reoccurring homelessness. By helping to avoid negative consequences of homelessness such as poor health, affected child development and unemployment, future demand for services across the wider public sector is reduced.

#### **3.1 Promoting financial capability and independent living**

A primary societal reason for homelessness is financial vulnerability caused by a low income level, which can impact on a household's ability to secure or sustain its accommodation. Over the last decade the limited availability of affordable housing options, has led to additional difficulties in finding alternative accommodation. Welfare system changes in recent years have resulted in reduced benefit levels for many households. A decrease in availability of affordable social rented housing has led to a reliance upon Private Rented Sector (PRS) housing, where higher rents often cannot be covered by Local Housing Allowance (LHA) benefit levels. Additionally, there are many households with the financial means to pay for their housing but who lack the ability to manage their income, increasing their susceptibility to homelessness.

The introduction of Universal Credit places new responsibilities on households for budgeting over a monthly period; an additional pressure to households unaccustomed to this kind of money management.

<b>Ensure Swindon is delivering a co-ordinated plan that supports local people through the transition to Universal Credit Full Service, minimising the risk of rent arrears and subsequent threat of homelessness.</b>	
<b>What we want to achieve</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Support Swindon households with financial independency and income maximization.</li></ul>	<b>Recommended key areas of activity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A planned approach to supporting PRS tenants onto Universal Credit</li><li>• Consider options for specialist employment support workers for households at risk of homelessness</li></ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimise the number of households becoming homeless due to Universal Credit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore the possibility of co-locating local DWP and Housing Options staff.</li> <li>• Monitor trends in numbers of households presenting to services at risk of homelessness due to unaffordable rents</li> </ul>
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### 3.2 Supporting the provision of safe accommodation

The Private Rented Sector in Swindon has grown rapidly; now accounting for around one third of all housing in Swindon compared to around one fifth 15 years ago. The sector has become the only option for many households unable to buy their own property or access social housing. Currently the sector is less regulated than social housing and as a result, standards in accommodation and property management are variable. Many good landlords operate in Swindon providing a valuable source of accessible housing at a decent standard. However, there are other PRS landlords who do not adhere to their rights and responsibilities in appropriately supporting their tenants and providing a decent standard of accommodation. Such landlords put people's health, wellbeing and safety at risk while exposing them to an increased risk of homelessness.

<b>Support both tenants and landlords to understand and meet their responsibilities</b>	
<b>What we want to achieve</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements in the quality and safety of privately rented accommodation across Swindon</li> </ul>	<b>Recommended key areas of activity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure partners and advice agencies actively engage in processes to report instances of poor conditions, harassment or unlawful eviction.</li> <li>• Ensure availability of resources for landlords to help them support tenants and improve tenancy management across the sector.</li> <li>• Provide advice for landlords or owners of empty properties wishing to sell or reduce management of their property.</li> <li>• Support and encourage landlords to improve property management through accreditation and licensing.</li> </ul>

## Priority 4 - An Individualised response

**Evidence tells us there are groups of people at greater risk of homelessness including**

- People with Mental Health Issues
- Unemployment or low / irregular income households
- Private Rented Sector tenants

- People with substance misuse or alcohol issues
- People with multiple and complex needs
- Domestic abuse victims and survivors
- Young people without education, employment or training
- Care Leavers
- Failed Asylum Seekers or those with no recourse to public funds
- Prison leavers and people with offending backgrounds

The list is long yet it is by no means inclusive of all 'types' or 'cohorts' of people who become homeless. This is because homelessness does not discriminate and therefore neither does Swindon in our response.

<b>Homelessness prevention in Swindon builds a response around the unique circumstances, needs, wants and ambitions of the individual or household. To effectively support individuals and families</b>	
<b>What we want to achieve</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support people to recognise when, and how to seek advice and support</li> <li>• Take the household's views, assets and ambitions into account when determining a course of action and incorporating 'I statements' in personalised support plans</li> </ul>	<b>Recommended key areas of activity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure there is no wrong front door in accessing pathways to advice and support.</li> <li>• Train and upskill workers to identify risk and connect people with advice and support.</li> <li>• Building resilience through sustainable solutions</li> <li>• Avoid or minimise repeat assessments by linking assessments and support plans.</li> <li>• Deliver services within Psychologically Informed Environments (PIEs), designed and delivered in a way that takes into account the emotional and psychological needs of the individuals using them and working in them.</li> <li>• Investigate the development of single records or use of a 'passport' that allows for sharing of personal information between services</li> </ul>

## **Monitoring & Governance**

This strategy will cover the five-year period 2020 to 2025.

It is important that this Homelessness Strategy is regularly reviewed and kept up to date, to respond to changes in guidance and legislation, and any changes in trends relating to need and demand for housing and services. A check will be carried out on an annual basis, or in the event of major new legislation or guidance or a major change in services, to determine if a wider review of the Strategy is required.

The Action Plan will be a live document, to be updated when necessary as actions are completed and new actions arise, but in any case will be reviewed at least on an annual basis.

The Council will be responsible for the delivery of the strategy and the action plan and ensuring that these are kept up to date as described above.

A Homelessness Forum will be formed, which will include partners will act as a critical friend on the delivery of the strategy, as well as facilitating partnership working and a joined up approach to services.

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