

South Hams & West Devon  
**Joint Homelessness  
Strategy**



**2017 - 2022**

*Working together*





# Foreword

## Cllr Lois Samuel

**Lead Member for Health & Wellbeing, West Devon Borough Council**



I am proud to introduce the first Joint Homelessness Strategy for South Hams and West Devon.

The aims and objectives we have set in this strategy build on the progress we have made in the past five years of preventing homelessness in West Devon for 1060 households.

In a predominantly rural area such as West Devon, homelessness can easily go undetected. However, it is a very real problem for many of our residents, who face the challenge of poor quality housing, lack of affordable housing or problems with their own health, which means general needs housing is not always appropriate.

We recognise the complexities and challenges that many of our most vulnerable people face when dealing with homelessness. The four priorities set out by this strategy will ensure West Devon Borough Council, together with South Hams District Council, can help people overcome these difficulties enabling them to lead lives where they have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

## Cllr Hilary Bastone

**Portfolio Holder for Customer First, South Hams District Council**



This strategy represents a continuation of the partnership working between South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council and sets out our ambition to further tackle homelessness in our areas.

Since 2012, 1169 households have had their homelessness prevented in South Hams due to interventions put in place by the District Council. This strategy further cements our commitment to homeless prevention and sets some ambitious actions as to how we will do this.

Lack of social housing, high costs of the private rented sector and lack of supported accommodation make the South Hams a challenging place for anyone experiencing homelessness. Working in partnership with West Devon has allowed shared learning and opportunity for best practice, which in turn improves the service we are able to offer people.

Homelessness can happen to anyone, at any time and through this strategy we aim to ensure that people are given the access to help when they need it, where they need it and for as long as they need it.

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# Introduction



The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on local authorities to review homelessness, and the influencing factors that cause homelessness, and to develop a strategy which addresses the findings of the review.

The Homelessness Strategy is required to:

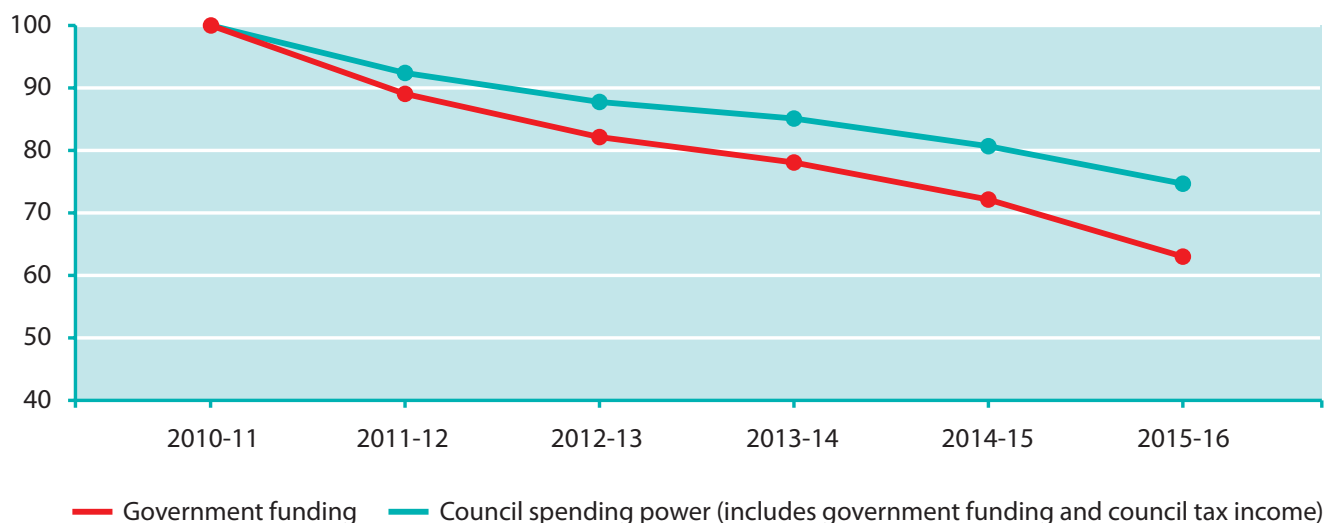
- ◆ Address the levels of homelessness now, and the factors likely to impact on future levels of homelessness, through accurate profiling of the area
- ◆ Ensure that there is sufficient accommodation available for people who are, or may become, homeless
- ◆ Provide services that help to prevent people from becoming homeless. This will include a review of their effectiveness and the identification of new opportunities to support prevention of homelessness
- ◆ Ensure that through effective partnership, working support services can be accessed for those people who are, or who may become, homeless – or who need support to prevent them from becoming homeless again
- ◆ Promote a cultural change so that homelessness is viewed in a wider context than just lack of accommodation

This Homelessness Strategy sets out the strategic aims for South Hams District Council and the Borough of West Devon. Central to this strategy is the belief that people should have settled homes, which will enable them to build settled lives. The overarching aim of this strategy is to prevent homelessness. It is hoped that this will be achieved by building on our already successful prevention focussed model, and by increasing our focus on the single homeless and housing for the under 35's.

The 2017-2022 strategy has been designed to address the changes in national policy; reductions in public spending; changing demography in the area; the impact of the government's 2013 Welfare Reform Bill and the Localism Bill 2012 on local people.

## Decline in council spending power since 2010

### Percentage change at 2012/13 prices



Source: National Audit Office. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014

With Council spending power continuing to decline, South Hams and West Devon have radicalised their approach to service delivery across both Councils. It is central to the success of this strategy that the opportunities presented to us, as part of our new ways of working, are maximised, and that high quality processes are put in place. This will ensure that every contact made will count, in our drive to improve the quality of lives and homes within our communities.

This strategy details our commitment to provide straightforward and effective advice and assistance to those affected by homelessness. The varying factors which contribute to homelessness and to housing instability are complex and interlinked. People facing homelessness are often vulnerable; they may be experiencing, for example, poor health, loss of income and/or relationship breakdown. The importance of effective partnerships, with both statutory and voluntary sector organisations, is recognised as essential in ensuring a holistic approach toward homelessness, with the aim of achieving the best possible outcome for those affected.

The previous South Hams Homeless Strategy covered the period 2008 -2013, whilst in West Devon this was incorporated within a wider housing strategy series which ceased in 2010. Latterly objectives relating to tackling homelessness have formed part of the South Hams and West Devon joint Council-wide Connect strategy 2011-15.

We will continue to review progress around these previous strategies but, as we face the challenges of the future, we will primarily be looking ahead to the opportunities that joint working can offer. A full review of this strategy can be expected in 2022, complemented by an annual refresh of the action plan and progress made to date.

In the last five years, over a thousand households have been prevented from becoming homeless in both West Devon and South Hams. We are keen to continue this good work and believe this strategy sets out our plan to achieve this, while seeking to address the reduction in resources and the impact of welfare reforms.



# Progress to Date

The last adopted document setting out the Councils' commitment to tackling homelessness formed part of the Joint Connect Strategy 2011-2015.

The priorities were to:

- ◆ Improve housing options and choices for vulnerable people
- ◆ Ensure Devon Home Choice is able to meet local housing needs within the new policy framework
- ◆ Prevent homelessness
- ◆ Raise awareness of housing options

These four priority areas were complemented each year with a delivery plan as to how these would be achieved.



## Improving Housing Options and choice for vulnerable people

- ◆ Our Money Advice Project assisted 241 people in 2015 across South Hams and West Devon and brought an additional £121,743.65 in previously unclaimed benefits and other entitlements. This enabled people who had struggled to pay their rent and day-to-day bills with the means by which to do so.
- ◆ No Second Night Out has seen 75 people accommodated in South Hams and 33 in West Devon, since we launched this initiative in 2013. This has enabled us to minimise rough sleeping in our area and prevented people, new to the streets, becoming entrenched in the street lifestyle.
- ◆ We have assisted Revival Life in the provision of an emergency cold weather rest centre in Totnes. This ensures that on the coldest and most inclement nights of the winter, no-one needs to sleep on the streets.
- ◆ We have increased our in-house letting agency to 47 properties in South Hams and have been able to prevent homelessness, while increasing the supply of good quality, affordable, private rented accommodation.
- ◆ We have completed sanctuary scheme security upgrades to 20 properties in South Hams and 9 properties in West Devon, to ensure survivors of domestic violence could remain in their own home.
- ◆ Jointly with Devon County Council and other Devon Districts, we have developed a young person's homeless protocol to ensure that the needs of young people are best met. By focusing on early intervention work, this has contributed to low numbers of youth homelessness and young people being taken into care.

## Ensuring Devon Home Choice is able to meet the local housing needs within the new policy framework

- ◆ In 2015/16 207 general needs properties were let through Devon Home Choice in South Hams. An additional 36 were let to people requiring sheltered accommodation. In West Devon, there were 136 general needs homes and 31 sheltered properties.
- ◆ Of this figure, 7 new tenants had been previously homeless or threatened with homelessness in South Hams and 37 in West Devon
- ◆ Both Councils further underpinned the need to address local needs, in rural areas with less than 100 units of affordable housing, by prioritising people with a local connection through our allocations policy.

## Preventing Homelessness

- ◆ Since 2012/13, 1169 households have avoided homelessness in South Hams and 1060 in West Devon.
- ◆ Since 2011, no families have been placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation for longer than 6 weeks in either West Devon or South Hams
- ◆ By working proactively with the County Council, we have been able to offer bespoke advice on options for young people. Until recently, this was delivered by a dedicated, in-house, Young Person's worker.

## Raising Awareness of Housing Options

- ◆ We have established a multi-agency Health and Wellbeing Panel to discuss individual cases, and to ensure the best solution to their housing crisis.
- ◆ A successful advertising campaign, with detailed information, was targeted to people affected by welfare reform. Everyone affected by the spare room subsidy rate was offered an appointment with a Housing Advisor.
- ◆ Trained Housing Advisors have been in regular attendance at Council Connect events, to raise awareness of options and the importance of early intervention.





# The Strategic Context

## The Legal Framework

### The Housing Act 1996

Part 7 of the 1996 Housing Act is still the overarching piece of legislation used by councils in determining the way in which they respond to homelessness. The Act has since been amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, which has included notable changes in the way Councils use temporary accommodation, with greater emphasis on the role of prevention. The 2002 Act is also where the requirement to publish a Homelessness Strategy was introduced.

### The Localism Act 2011

This Act, in effect, brought an end to the automatic entitlement of a homeless household to be offered a social housing tenancy following the acceptance of a full homeless duty under the 1996 Housing Act.

### The Care Act 2014

The Care Act set a strong expectation that agencies would work together to protect children, young adults and people with care and support needs, who were at risk of abuse and neglect, and who, due to those care and support needs, were unable to protect themselves from the risk or experience of abuse and neglect.

### Housing and Communities Bill

This new Act of Parliament makes widespread changes to housing policy.

#### It introduces legislation to allow:

- ◆ The building of 200,000 starter homes which will be available to first time buyers, between the ages of 23 and 40, for sale at 20% below market prices.
- ◆ The extension of the right to buy, to include housing association properties.
- ◆ The Act also includes a package of measures to help tackle rogue landlords in the private rented sector.

This includes:

- Allowing local authorities to apply for a banning order to prevent a particular landlord / letting agent from continuing to operate when they have committed certain housing offences
- Creating a national database of rogue landlords/letting agents, which will be maintained by local authorities
- Allowing tenants or local authorities to apply for a rent repayment order, where a landlord has committed certain offences (for example ignoring an improvement notice). If successful, the tenant or the authority may be repaid up to a maximum of 12 month's rent.

## National Policy

In 2011 The Government produced a report 'Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England' that identified homelessness as a key priority. Two reports were produced by a Ministerial Working Group on homelessness in 2011 and 2012. Eight government departments including Health, Work and Training, as well as Housing, were brought together with local authority and voluntary sector partners, to consider ways to end rough sleeping (No Second Night Out 2011). In 2012, the second report built on the progress of the first and focused on ways in which services could jointly prevent, wherever possible, a household reaching a homelessness crisis point. (Making Every Contact Count 2012.)

### **No Second Night Out – A vision to end Rough Sleeping July 2011**

Piloted in London, No Second Night Out was rolled out nationally to assist in helping homeless people, through the creation of a 'single service offer'. Its purpose was to ensure that everyone would have access to some form of help.

This, in some cases, involved a reconnection to a place where a person had a local connection, or working with other providers to find a solution to rough sleeping. It was designed to address the needs of deep-rooted rough sleepers, often the hardest to engage with. It was also intended to stem the flow of new rough sleepers, by offering a safety net before they themselves became rooted in a street lifestyle.

Funding was available for a short period of time and there were some local successes. However, this initiative has had little impact on our rough sleeper figures locally, although it was successful in achieving steady numbers rather than an increase.

### **Making Every Contact Count – A joint approach to preventing homelessness August 2012**

The aim of Making Every Contact Count was to ensure, wherever possible, that any contact with any local agency, by vulnerable families and individuals, was seen as effective and meaningful.

The report posed 10 Local Challenges to Local Authorities and both South Hams and West Devon pledged their commitment to these. While acknowledging there is, already, good progress under these challenges, the Joint Homelessness Strategy will build on this and ensure that they remain key to our continuing commitment to prevent homelessness.

#### **The 10 Local Challenges are to:**

- ◆ Adopt a Corporate Commitment to prevent homelessness, which has buy-in across all local authority services
- ◆ Actively work in partnership with the voluntary sector and other local partners to address support, education, employment and training needs
- ◆ Offer a Housing Option Prevention Service, including written advice, to all clients
- ◆ Adopt a No Second Night Out model or an effective local alternative
- ◆ Have Housing Pathways agreed, or in development, with each key partner and client group that includes appropriate accommodation and support

- ◆ Develop a suitable private rented sector offer for all client groups, including advice and support to both clients and landlords
- ◆ Actively engage in preventing mortgage repossessions including through the Mortgage Rescue Scheme
- ◆ Have a homelessness strategy, which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness that is reviewed annually, so that it is responsive to emerging needs
- ◆ Not place any young person aged 16 or 17 in bed and breakfast accommodation
- ◆ Not place any families in bed and breakfast accommodation, unless in an emergency, and then for no longer than 6 weeks

## Regional Picture

### Devon County Council

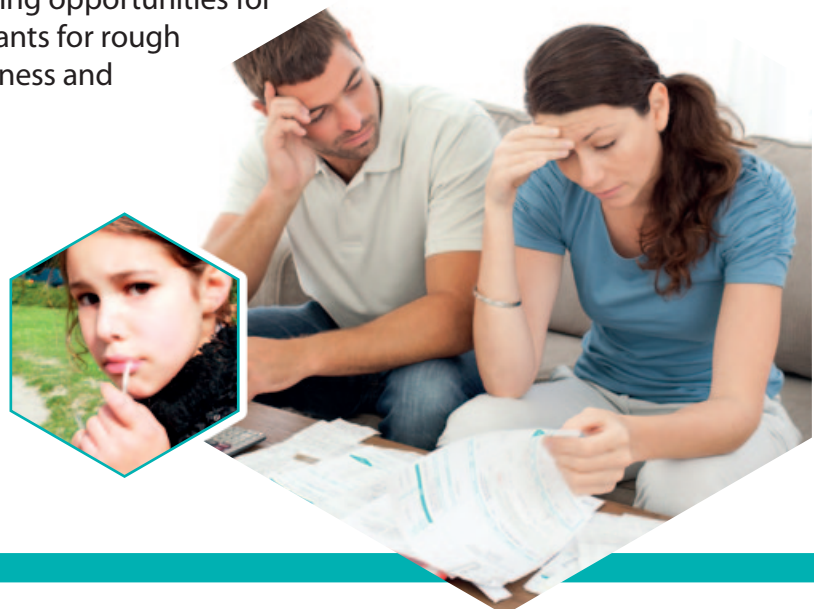
Devon County Council has invested £2.5 million in countywide homeless prevention contracts. These provide a total of 3,300 support hours per week, through ten independent support providers to, on average, 450 people,.

South Hams and West Devon have been placed in a locality based 'Southern Hub' together with Teignbridge District Council. The Southern Hub receives 15% of the total support hours for Devon.

Due to a lack of supported accommodation in both South Hams and West Devon, assistance is provided through 'floating support' rather than linked to where an individual is living. While this has its benefits, some high needs groups, such as those experiencing problems relating to substance misuse, mental health, offending behaviour or deep-rooted rough sleeping, remain challenging to accommodate in general needs accommodation.

### Devon and Cornwall Housing Options Partnership

All ten Devon and Cornwall Authorities are committed to working together to improve the consistency and quality of housing options and advice services across the two counties. Held up nationally as an example of good partnership working, the partnership has enabled shared policy and practice development, while also yielding opportunities for Government funding in the form of grants for rough sleeping, debt advice, youth homelessness and working with the private sector.



## Local Policy

### Tenancy Strategy South Hams and West Devon

The Localism Act 2011 places a duty on all local authorities to produce a Tenancy Strategy that sits alongside its Housing Strategy and Allocations Policy. The strategy is required to set out what Registered Providers of Social Housing should take into consideration when making decisions about their individual tenancy policies. As the Council no longer has any housing stock, this strategy outlines how we expect Registered Providers, with affordable housing in the area, to respond to the relevant changes introduced by the Act.

#### In accordance with the Localism Act, this strategy sets out:

- ◆ The kind of tenancies Providers should offer
- ◆ The circumstances in which Providers should grant a tenancy of a particular kind
- ◆ Where the tenancy is for a fixed term, the recommended length of the term
- ◆ Circumstances in which the Provider should grant a further tenancy, on the ending of the existing tenancy

### Our Plan

Our Plan identifies the corporate priorities of the Councils, and is reflected in the emerging spatial policies within the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan (JLP).

The challenges of ensuring equitable access to good quality housing are well known in rural areas. The JLP will include policies that seek to deliver an appropriate mix and type of new housing, in locations that are well connected to established services and facilities, and at prices that cater for all incomes. The JLP will have strategic objectives that seek to: improve access to housing; reduce the affordability gap; reduce health inequalities related to housing; reduce fuel poverty and positively responding to identified housing needs.

### South Hams and West Devon Joint Asset Strategy

The Council's adopted asset strategy identifies the delivery of a limited number of residential properties in the medium term, as determined by the following actions and data:

- ◆ Gather intelligence on housing need using; members, parishes and communities, supported by official data, in order to prioritise residential development by the Council
- ◆ To commence a limited programme of housing development on existing council land, that is appropriate to the site, (i.e. both open market and affordable) using a strategy of re-investment based on a mixture of rental and disposal.

# The Review

## The Local Picture

- As of 30 September 2016, there were 43,239 dwellings in South Hams and 25,403 in West Devon. Of the number in South Hams, 3,878 are second homes, 470 are empty, with an additional 54 empty for 2 years or more, and 127 are uninhabitable. In West Devon there are 534 second homes, 295 empty properties, a further 37 empty for 2 years, and 52 properties that are uninhabitable. (Source - Council Tax Base, 14th October 2016)
- In the year 2015/16, the number of affordable homes in South Hams was 4659, and in West Devon this was 2350 (this includes 50 units of extra care accommodation). In this same year, 60 affordable homes were built in South Hams and 32 in West Devon.
- The proportion of minority ethnic groups living in South Hams equates to 1.7% of the population and 1.6% in West Devon (Source 2011 Census). With regard to homeless applications, as a percentage 5.3% were made in SH by minority groups and 1.6% in WD. Average house price in South Hams is £331,625 – land registry and the average house price in West Devon is £239,160 (Source - Land Registry)
- Of the 204 households who had their homelessness prevented by South Hams District Council in 2015/16, 68 related to rent arrears or reasons of unaffordability. In West Devon, of the 282 cases of homelessness the Council was able to prevent, 65 of those households also approached for reasons of rent arrears or unaffordability. This has followed the same trend in South Hams since 2012/13, while in West Devon there has been less consistency, with relationship breakdown, parental/family eviction and private sector tenancies ending with notice, all being in high proportions.
- In 2015/16, 26 households approached South Hams as homeless, of which 11 had the full homeless duty accepted, while in West Devon, 58 applications were made and 17 of these were accepted.
- Of those accepted as homeless in South Hams, 82% were households with children or expectant mothers and 18% were single vulnerable adults. In West Devon, 53% of accepted households had dependent children or an expectant mother, with 47% single vulnerable adults.
- As of 31 March 2016, there were 7 households in temporary accommodation in South Hams and 11 in West Devon. This was a slight increase on the same date in 2015.
- The number of properties let through Devon Home Choice in 2015/16 was 243 in South Hams and 167 in West Devon. Of this, seven were allocated to people to prevent them becoming homeless, or where the Council had accepted a homelessness duty, to rehouse them in South Hams, while in West Devon this figure was 37.
- In South Hams the rough sleeper estimate for 2015 was nine - an increase of one on the previous year and in West Devon this figure was zero, a reduction of two on the previous year's figure.



# How the Strategy was developed



Homelessness is a key issue within three of our identified corporate priorities – Homes, Communities and Wellbeing.

This strategy has been developed through a Joint Member Task and Finish Group, who have worked together to consider the progress we have made in tackling homelessness, within our areas, and the key challenges we have to come. The Group have been instrumental in setting the priorities for this Strategy and the formulation of the Year One Action Plan, informed by the evidence base.

Throughout the process of the review, we have looked carefully at the people who currently access our services. This strategy does not seek to create a specific service plan to address the needs of each vulnerable group. We have

successful existing services developed in partnership that we will continue to improve. However, the Strategy and Action Plan reflects gaps in services or additional services we wish to offer which will improve how we tackle homelessness in our area.

The original Task and Finish group was made up of the following members. Membership of any future group will be reviewed once the Strategy is adopted.

Member	Council
Cllr Brown	South Hams
Cllr Cuthbert	South Hams
Cllr Green	South Hams
Cllr Hawkins	South Hams
Cllr Leech	West Devon
Cllr Samuel	West Devon
Cllr Yelland	West Devon

The organisations also involved during informal consultation included the following:

- ◆ Citizens Advice
- ◆ Devon and Cornwall Police
- ◆ DCH
- ◆ Revival Life Ministries
- ◆ Westward Housing
- ◆ Young Devon

A period of formal consultation will follow.

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# The Key Priorities for the Homelessness Strategy

The review of homelessness in South Hams and West Devon has identified four key priorities to reduce and prevent homelessness. These form the basis of this strategy and the annual Action Plan. These are:



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There is overlap and a proven relationship between these areas. However, in order to continue to build on the solid track record of preventing homelessness in South Hams and West Devon, it is necessary to start to tackle some of the root causes of homelessness, in order to make meaningful differences not only to a person's homeless situation, but the reasons why they arrived there in the first place. By continuing to be pro-active and work alongside our partners, we stand the best chance of reducing homelessness and improving people's chances in life.

This strategy comes at a very challenging time for all local authorities, as continuing budget pressures mean some tough choices on how best to target reduced resources in the most meaningful way. With this in mind, we have formulated an action plan which, we consider, is both realistic and achievable while recognising our changing position.



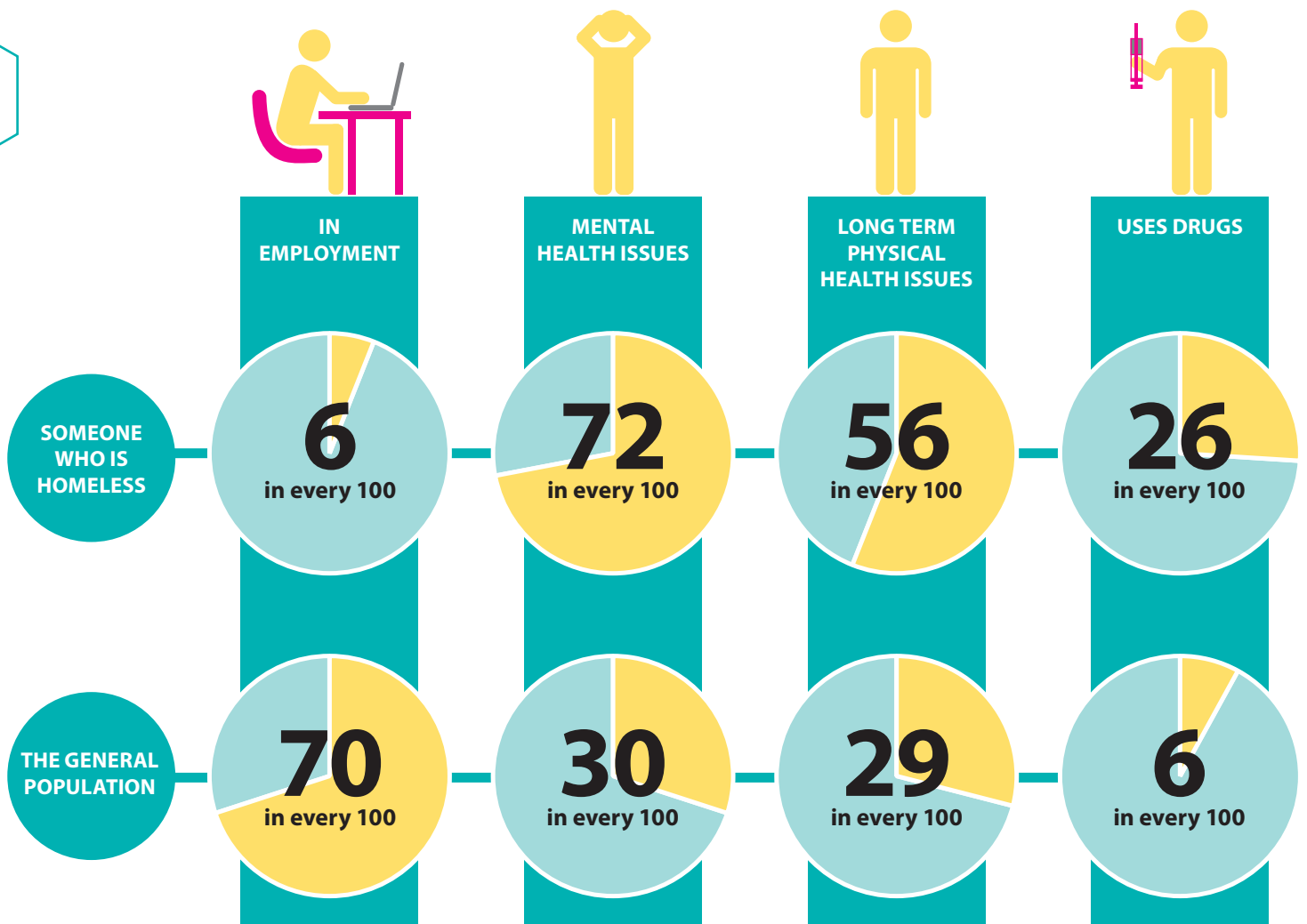
## Priority 1: Understanding the true cost of homelessness

*Not having a home can make it harder for individuals to find a job, stay healthy and maintain relationships. (Homeless Link)*

The review highlighted a need to create a solid evidence base, about the true cost of homelessness and how its long term impact can be measured more fully. Our findings were informed by data from all statutory and voluntary agencies and localised to South Hams and West Devon.

### To meet this priority we will:

- Ensure we establish a solid evidence base which informs practice across all sectors and clearly illustrates the true cost of homelessness in South Hams and West Devon.
- Monitor the impact of welfare reform, and ensure that this informs future strategic priorities
- Recognise the continuing pressures on the Councils' budgets and how best to target resources in the most meaningful way
- Ensure partnerships with other agencies demonstrate value for money
- Ensure access to good quality financial advice to help tackle poverty, poor quality housing and homelessness



## Priority 2 Access to Services

While we recognise the importance of face-to-face interaction in building rapport, trust and confidence, we also recognise that, increasingly, people who are able to resolve their own housing issues would like to access services in a different way. We would like to ensure that people who are able to resolve their own situation are given access to good quality advice, so that they have every opportunity to remedy their situation, independently.

Of course, the very nature of homelessness means a large proportion of the people requiring housing advice and homeless services will be vulnerable. Disclosures they may need to make to staff are often upsetting and traumatic and some, as a result, choose not to make contact, or do so, too late. Through improving partnership working, we have a real opportunity to make a difference to the lives of people who have struggled to engage with the Council in the past.

In addition to external partnership working, the Council has been through a significant service transformation project, which has been successful in breaking down artificial departmental barriers and restraints. It is because of this, that we are in a position to design a multi-service approach, based on the needs of the customer. This will strip out duplication and inefficiencies, while at the same time collectively offering people the services they need, at a time and place they need them most, without the need to repeat the details of, what is often, a distressing course of events.

### To meet this priority we will:

- Offer advice and assistance in a range of formats, so the customer can choose how they communicate with their Council
- Ensure our most vulnerable customers are able to access advice services effectively
- Work with partners to ensure that we are able to offer services at the time and place our customers need them most
- Readily and regularly consult with our customers and stakeholders to make sure we get our services right



## Priority 3 – Access to Housing

The review highlighted the need to improve the supply and quality of affordable accommodation, with the largest number of people needing assistance with homelessness and housing advice, doing so for reasons of unaffordability. Changes to the benefit system, brought about by welfare reform, have had a significant effect on the lives of homeless people in South Hams and West Devon. To ensure we tackle these challenges, it is important to look at wider housing solutions in order to continue to meet needs, while also looking to the future in order to prepare for the further challenges which welfare reform will bring.

The need to 'do things differently' can be compounded in the South Hams by our rough sleeper count. Although a very small proportion of the people requiring assistance because of homelessness become rough sleepers, there is a small population in Totnes where we recognise that access to traditional housing is a step too far. There needs to be an acceptance of offering help in a new way to maximise opportunities for people who have disengaged from traditional society.

The review also highlighted how successful the South Hams in-house social letting agent had been at preventing homelessness, in an area of high demand and high costs. As of the 30 September 2016, there were 47 properties managed by the Council. This has prevented scores of families from requiring temporary accommodation and we are keen to expand the model in South Hams to take on single person's accommodation and extend the scope of the scheme into West Devon.

### To meet this priority we will:

- Increase the supply, standard and options for people who face homelessness within our area
- Develop innovative options for our Rough Sleeper Community
- Continue the downward use of temporary accommodation for homeless households

## Health and Wellbeing

South Hams and West Devon both recognise the importance of wellbeing for people living in our communities, and as a result, it is one of our key corporate priorities. Tackling homelessness takes more than just the provision of a house, if we are to maximise the opportunities for our most vulnerable residents.

The health inequalities of homeless people can be evidenced in a national health audit undertaken in 2014 by Homeless Link and The Department of Health. This showed that 41% of homeless people reported a long-term physical health problem (compared to just 28% of the general population) and 45% had been diagnosed with a mental health problem (compared with 25% of the general population) (Source – The Unhealthy State of Homelessness: Health Audit Results 2014)

Often, poor health, addictions and unhealthy lifestyles mean that people are unable to secure, and maintain, accommodation for themselves or their families. We recognise our supporting role as a protector of public health and the importance of working, in partnership, to effectively meet and support the needs of vulnerable people in South Hams and West Devon.

### To meet this priority we will:

- Work in partnership with our voluntary and statutory sectors to holistically address people's needs as fully as possible.
- Ensure we adequately protect and safeguard the most vulnerable members of our community
- Enable early help, to avoid crisis and tackle homelessness at its root cause.



# How the Homeless strategy and Delivery Plan will be monitored

The life of this homeless strategy is intended to be five years.

Annually we will publish our progress to date and a refreshed Action Plan.

The delivery of the Action Plan will rely on the resources of both Councils and their partners, working together to achieve positive outcomes, for people in South Hams and West Devon.

It is proposed that the established Task and Finish Group, will continue as a Homelessness Steering Group to monitor progress against the priorities and the formulation of Years 2-5 of the Action Plan for this strategy. This will ensure an ongoing conversation, to keep the strategy relevant and ensuring that local people continue to have a voice through their elected representative.





*Working together*



**South Hams**  
District Council



**West Devon**  
Borough  
Council