

Homelessness Strategy 2008 - 13



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Gravesham Borough Council's Customer Service Team on 01474 33 70 00**

Gravesham's homelessness strategy 2008-13

District Profile

Gravesham Borough Council is one of 12 borough and districts within the county of Kent. The borough is predominantly urban to the north, whereas to the south, the borough is more rural. It comprises the towns of Gravesend, Northfleet, together with the villages of Cobham, Higham, Luddesdown, Meopham, Shorne and Vigo.

The population of the borough is approximately 97,000, made up of approximately 38,000 households. The largest town is Gravesend which has a population of approximately 56,000. A census carried out in 2001 reported that 87% of the population class themselves as white British. The second largest ethnic group was British Indian or Indian which accounted for 7% of the population. The population of the borough is projected to increase by 4.3% between 2001 and 2016; a total of 4,100 people. Current migration within the housing market has an impact on population levels with 41.6% (3,272) of households who had moved in the last three years being in-migrants from outside the Borough.

The borough has good access to road links, in particular the A2 and M25. Direct trains run from Gravesend station into London. In November 2007, Eurostar services began from Ebbsfleet International Station providing direct trains to Paris, Brussels and Lille. In 2009 high speed trains will run from Ebbsfleet to London St Pancras with an expected journey time of under twenty minutes.

Gravesham Borough council is a key player in the implementation of the Government's priority area for growth in the Thames Gateway and is demonstrating a commitment to making sure that existing communities can share in the benefits that development will bring.

The Thames Gateway is the largest of the four government backed Growth Areas, as identified by the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) in the 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan.

Running from Canary Wharf to Southend in Essex and Sheerness in Kent the Thames Gateway represents the largest regeneration project in Europe. The Thames Gateway Interim Plan (DCLG 2006) identifies the opportunity to deliver 180,000 jobs across the Gateway alongside 160,000 new homes, significant green space enhancements and major transport infrastructure improvements.

Thames Gateway Kent covers the 4 local authority areas of Dartford, Gravesham, Medway and Swale and is an area with great potential given its location on strategic transport routes, access to domestic and European markets and large brownfield development sites.

Kent Thameside covers the urban areas of Dartford and Gravesham located between the A2 and the River Thames, encapsulating the towns of Dartford, Swanscombe, Northfleet and Gravesend. Kent Thameside has been identified as one of the key development nodes within the Thames Gateway and over the next two decades will bring about the creation of 30,000 new homes, 50,000 new jobs, and 11 million square feet of commercial floor space.

Tenure and Dwellings

The private rented sector in Gravesham accounts for around 9% of the housing stock. This is lower than the national average. Re-let supply is therefore also low. The 2006 Housing Needs Survey suggests that around 278 units a year will become available annually. The survey reported that approximately 456 households a year require private rented accommodation.

The council's own stock makes up 15% (6,029) of the housing stock with RSL stock accounting for 2% (879) of properties (as per the Housing Needs Survey 2006). The combined figure of 17% for both types of social housing is lower than the national average of 19.3%. The Housing Needs Survey 2006 identified an annual need for 1,019 properties. Existing stock re-lets account for 350 properties, leaving a shortfall of 669 units.

Owner occupation accounts for around 74% of the borough's housing stock. In 2006, average house prices were 14.4% lower than the national average, however access to owner occupation is still restricted by rising house prices, with these increases outstripping increases in local income levels.

Affordability

Average house prices in Gravesham have increased in recent years. In 2001 the average house price was £115,176 and this increased by 61.2% to the year 2006 when the average price was £185,665. Rapid house price inflation continues in the city and prices increased by an additional 13% in 2007.

Flat / maisonette properties are assessed to be the main entry level for first time buyers in view of their lower cost and high volume of sales. However, the ability of households to access this market is very limited. The table over page shows the annual household income needed to buy entry level properties in the borough, based on a 95% mortgage and a three times gross income to lending ratio, the 2000 Good Practice Guidance recommended levels.

Area	Income Thresholds (£)		
	1 Bed Flat	2 Bed Flat	2 Bed Terraced
Gravesend Central	29,800	41,200	45,900
Gravesend Outer East	28,500	36,400	38,800
Gravesend Outer West	32,300	39,600	42,800
Northfleet South	32,700	38,000	41,200
Northfleet North	29,800	32,600	42,700
Rural	50,700	57,000	52,300

Housing Needs Survey 2006

The council's Housing Needs Survey 2006 found that 76% of new households formed in the past year are earning below the level required to purchase a property in the area.

Affordable Housing Delivery

During the period 2004/05 to 2007/08, 430 affordable homes were developed in the borough, which while welcome, does not meet current and predicted future demand. In 2007/08 270 affordable homes were delivered. Whilst this has added to the total social housing lettings for the year (431) it is still considerably short of the demand outlined in the Housing Requirements Study for 1700 such dwellings per year.

Strategic Context

National

In 2002 the Government amended the homelessness legislation through the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation)(England) Order 2002 which required a more strategic approach to tackling homelessness and extended the priority needs categories. Under the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities are required to produce a homelessness strategy. The deadline for the first strategies to be published was July 2003, with a requirement to review these strategies every five years.

The Government has outlined its strategy for tackling homelessness in “Sustainable Communities: Homes for All”(2005). The summary document, “Settled Homes; Changing Lives” sets out the main priorities and actions. These include increasing funding, providing more settled homes, and helping more people out of rough sleeping.

Specific targets have been set for local authorities which include:

- To reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation to zero
- To reduce the number of households living in temporary accommodation by 50%, by 2010
- To keep levels of rough sleeping as close to zero as possible
- A year on year increase in the number of households whose homelessness has been prevented

Other non-specific targets include:

- All local authorities to offer a wider range of options at an early stage, before homelessness actually occurs.
- Introduction of Sanctuary Schemes for victims of domestic violence

Regional

Kent County council have developed a new Local Area Agreement, the Kent Agreement 2, developed with the wider Kent Partnership and agreed with the Government.

It aims to build on Kent's existing agreement and continue the aim of providing improving services while maintaining a focus on value for money. Kent Agreement 2 will be the way overarching priorities for action across all Kent's public services are brought together and delivered in the most effective way possible.

As part of the Kent Area Agreement 2 the Kent Housing Group has introduced a number of housing related performance indicators.

1. Number of households in temporary accommodation (NII 156)
2. Number of homeless households per 1000 households in the area for whom housing advice casework resolved the situation (former BVPI 213)
3. Number of homeless applications accepted
4. Number of homeless applications received
5. Number of rural affordable homes delivered
6. Number of homes achieving Decent Homes Standard as a result of action by the local authority
7. Number of HMO properties brought up to standard as a direct result of action by the local authority as a percentage of all HMO properties in the local authority area
8. Number of HMO dwelling units brought up to standard as a direct result of action by the local authority as a percentage of HMO dwellings in the local authority area
9. Number of Disabled Facilities Grants completed to enable people to stay in their own homes
10. Number of long-term private sector vacant dwellings returned to occupation/demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority as a percentage of all dwellings in the local authority area

Local

The council's Corporate Plan, Gravesham 2012: The Place of Choice sets out six key priority themes :

- Environment – to achieve a safe, clean and green Place of Choice
- Communities – to foster vibrant and cohesive communities with affirmative action to promote meaningful engagement, diversity and social inclusion, health and well-being, leisure and culture
- Housing – to secure the housing needs of the borough
- Business – to create and sustain a buoyant economy within the borough, particularly in the town centre and Ebbsfleet, with attractive investment opportunities and a developing tourism market
- Regeneration – to maximise the regeneration opportunities for the benefit of existing and new communities
- Transformation – to turn the council into an economically-sound organisation delivering excellent accessible services that provide value-for-money

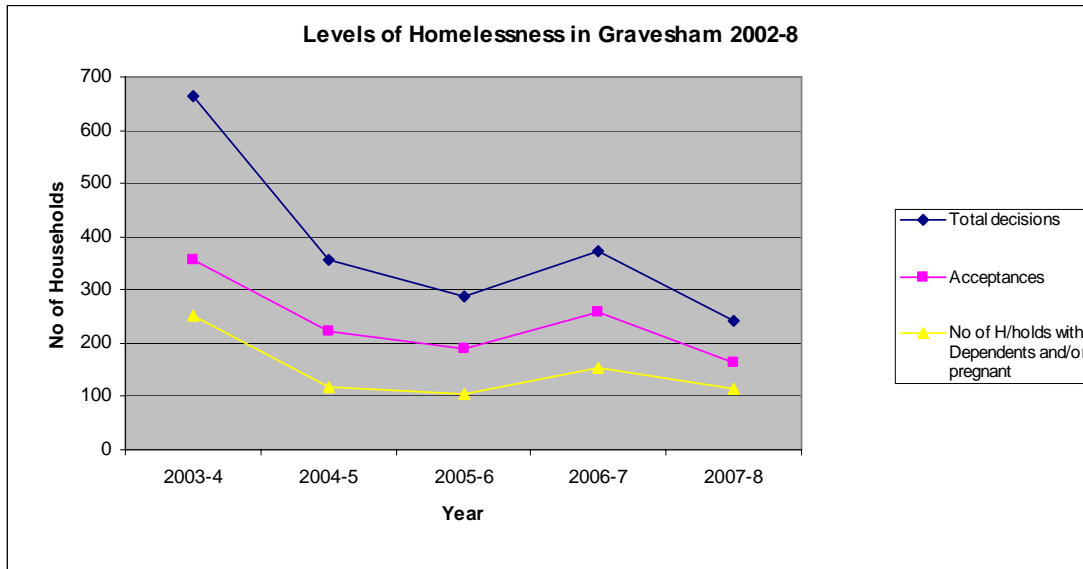
These priorities are carried forward through a number of strategies, including the Homelessness Strategy. Other strategies of particular relevance to the Homelessness Strategy include :

The Housing Strategy 2005-2009
Comprehensive Equalities Policy 2005-2006
Crime and Disorder Strategy 2005-2008
Comprehensive Equalities Policy 2005-2006
and the forthcoming Empty Property Strategy 2008

Review of Homelessness

Homelessness Levels

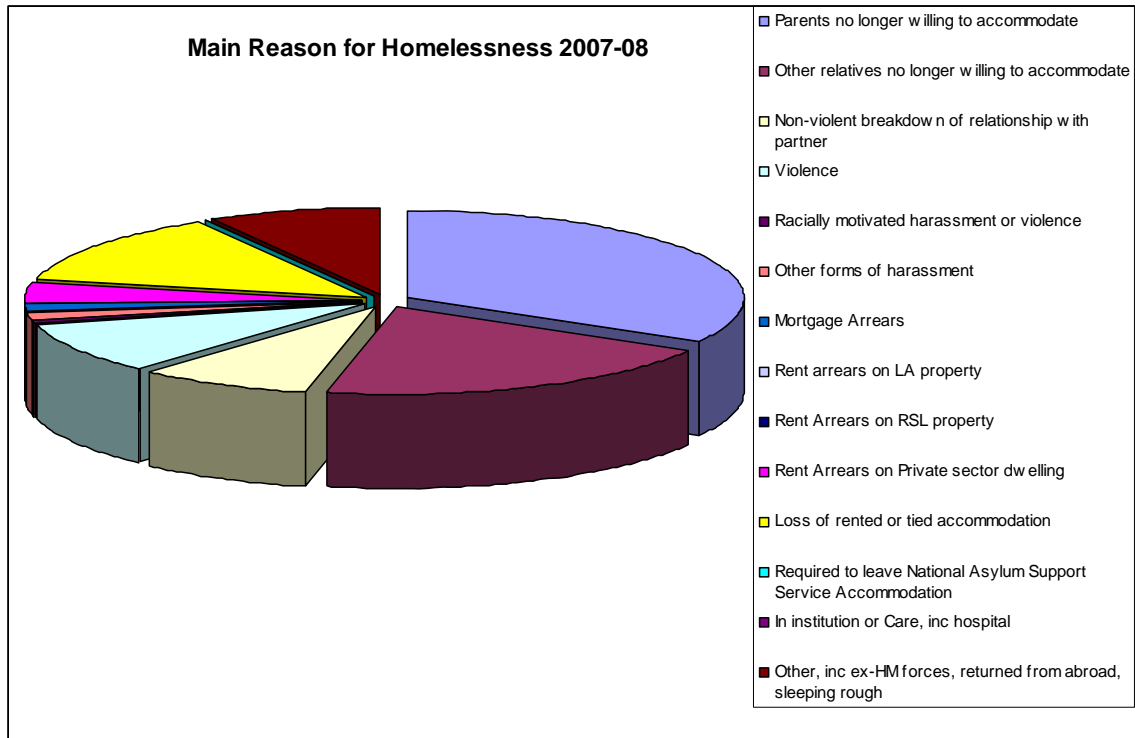
Homeless Applications and Homelessness Acceptances



Since the last homelessness strategy was introduced in July 2003 there has been an overall decline in the number of both homeless applications and homeless acceptances. In the period 2003-04 a total of 664 applications were made, 356 of which the council accepted a homeless duty to. The period 2007-08 showed a dramatic drop to 242 applications (a 64% reduction), 163 of which the council accepted to duty to accommodate (a 54% reduction).

Whilst these figures demonstrate the positive work that the Housing Needs team have been carrying out over the past five years, in the period 2006-07, Gravesham had the highest number of acceptances per 1000 households in the South East at 6.6 households. 2007/08 shows a reduction on homelessness acceptances to 3.3 households. At this time there is no comparative data with other South East authorities. If, when the comparative data is made available, Gravesham's figures still show higher levels of acceptances, the council will carry out work to identify the reasons why and address these.

Reasons for Homelessness in Gravesham



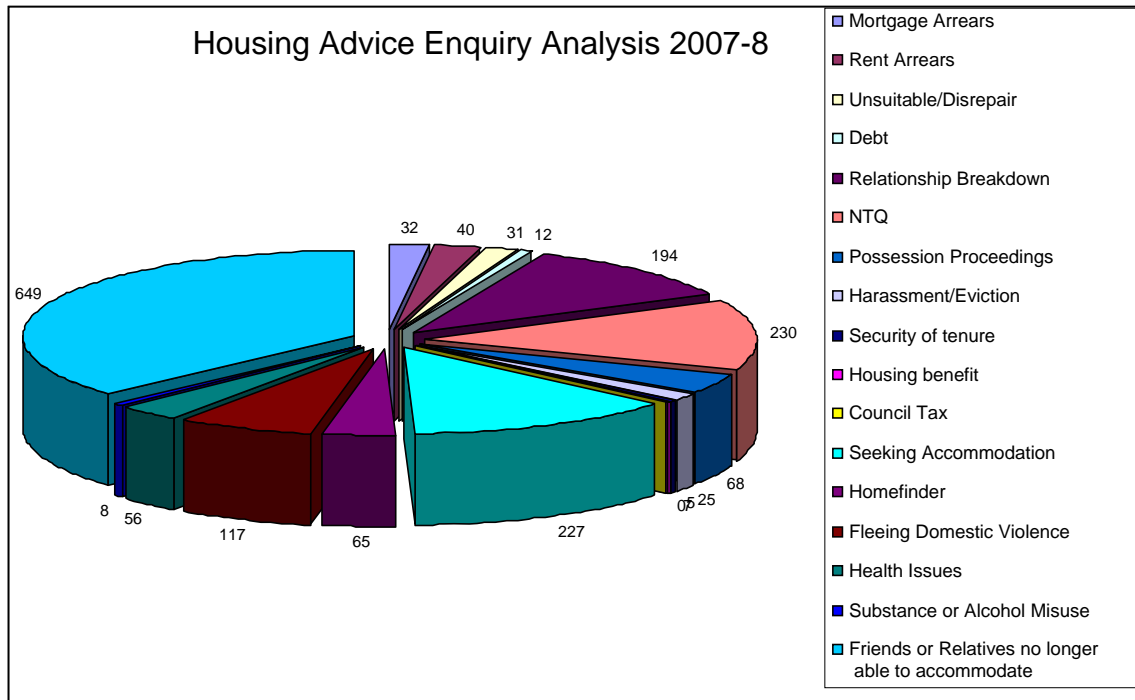
The chart above provides a breakdown of the reasons for households approaching the council as homeless in 2007/08. The main reason for homelessness in this period was friends or family asking a household to leave which accounted for 53% of applications. This main reason reflects the national picture, however the national average is lower at 35%.

The second largest cause of households approaching as homeless during 2007/08 was the loss of rented or tied accommodation which accounted for 13% of applications. This compares with a national figure of 16%.

The third main cause during the same period was due to a violent breakdown of a relationship which accounted for 10% of application. The nationally reported figure for the period was 12%.

This document will identify specific strategies to address three main causes specifically. However, the strategy will also identify actions that will have a positive impact on all reasons for becoming homeless.

Housing Advice Analysis



The chart above provides a breakdown of the 1766 housing advice cases that were dealt with in 2007/08. The advice cases seen reflects the three main reasons for households approaching as homeless as mentioned previously and also the national picture. In 2004/05 962 housing advice cases were dealt with.

The reduction in homeless application and increase in housing advice prevention work has seen the Housing Needs team develop to meet this changing service. Of the six housing needs officer, four (66%) are responsible for providing housing advice and assistance. Two officers are responsible for processing homeless applications.

Temporary Accommodation

The Government has introduced a target for all local authorities to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010. The reduction in temporary accommodation is calculated from the end of December 2004 when 48 households were accommodated in temporary accommodation. Therefore, the council must reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation to 24 by 1 April 2010. In September 2006 the number of households in temporary accommodation peaked at 160. The reduction to 27 as at the beginning of June 2008 demonstrates the huge efforts already by the council and its officers. The team is well focused in achieving the 2010 target and sustaining this level for the longer term.

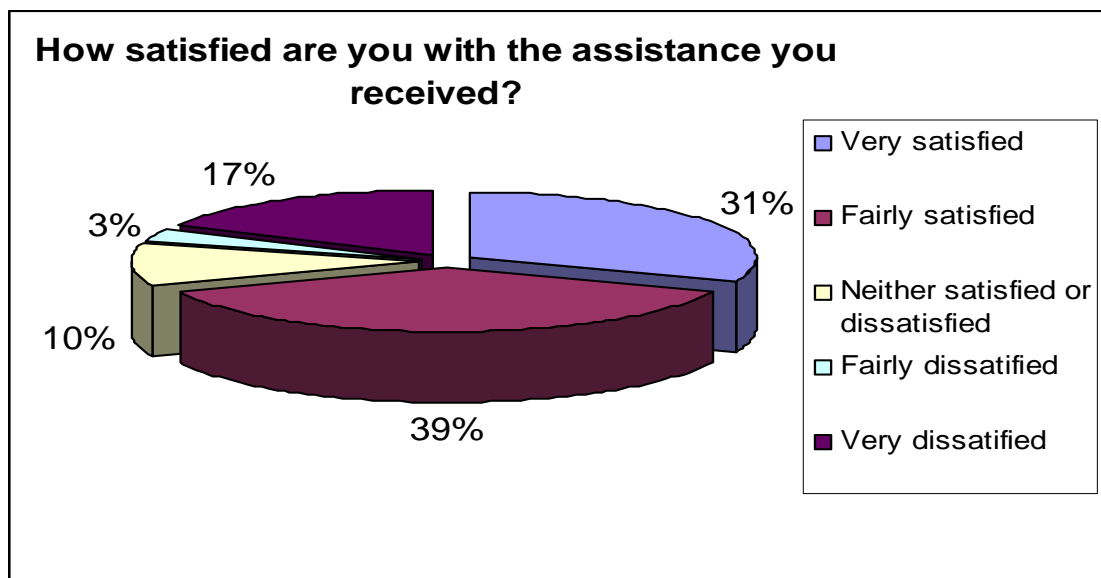
In April 2004, the Government introduced legislation that prevents local authorities from accommodating households with children in bed and breakfast accommodation for more than six weeks. Recognising that this type of accommodation is unsuitable for families,

in addition to complying with this statutory instrument, the council has not used bed and breakfast accommodation for any period since October 2006. The council, except in an emergency, will aim to avoid the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for the duration of this strategy.

Customer Feedback

The council sent a questionnaire to 150 service users. These services user included households who had been accepted as homeless and provided with temporary accommodation and households who had been provided with housing advice only. Thirty questionnaires were returned.

Service users were asked how satisfied they were the assistance they received, the results of which are shown below.



Users were predominately satisfied with the service they received with 70% stating that they were very satisfied or fairly satisfied. 17% of the service users who returned their questionnaires indicated that they were very dissatisfied with the service. Looking at the questionnaires for each of the service users who stated that they were very dissatisfied, specific complaints included problems with housing benefit, the quality of the temporary accommodation and the type of permanent housing offered. Whilst the council accepts the basis for these comments, it has very restricted resources to discharge its homeless and housing advice functions and this can lead to complaints or disputes when a households expectations cannot be met.

Service users were also asked what their overall impression of the housing advice service was, specifically any good or bad points.

With regard to good points, service users generally considered the service to be efficient and that officers were polite and friendly. Service users who had been accommodated in temporary accommodation also considered that they did not have to wait long to be housed permanently.

Bad points which were mentioned included some dissatisfaction with the type of permanent accommodation offered, the lack of awareness as to what stage the council's homeless enquiries were, and the quality and location of some of the council's temporary accommodation units.

In response to these comments, both good and bad the council will be introducing a customer feedback card that all households in temporary accommodation will be given to complete at the point that they move out. In addition, on an annual basis, questionnaires will be sent out to a random list of customers who received housing advice in the last year. Alternatively, or in addition to, depending on staff resources, an exit survey will be carried out periodically to ensure that our services reflect the needs of our customers.

Stakeholder Comments

In May 2008 the council held a Stakeholder Event. The event was attended by 36 people from a variety of agencies and council departments (see Appendix 2). A summary of the progress made since the 2003-08 Homelessness Strategy was implemented was provided and stakeholders were given an opportunity to give the council their suggestions as to how the council could achieve its new objectives. There were many excellent ideas which the council has tried to include into this strategy.

In addition, questionnaire were sent out to 166 stakeholder, agencies and relevant council officers asking for their views as to what additional services the council could offer to prevent homelessness. A summary of these responses is below.

- Need for supported housing scheme for young people 16-25
- Ensure that existing referral protocols are used
- Provide an up to date list of landlords willing to take tenants in receipt of housing benefit
- Carry out preventative work in schools to address youth homelessness
- Provide specialist training for housing needs officer in specific housing advice areas eg: relationship breakdown, mental health
- Introduce rent deposit schemes that can assist single person households
- Provision of emergency placements for 1-3 nights for young people in volunteer homes who can offer support and guidance.

The strategy action plan has encompassed many of these ideas. Additionally, however, depending on future increases in funding, more of these ideas may be implemented.

Strategic Objectives for Gravesham's Homelessness Strategy

In deciding its homelessness strategy objectives for the next five years, the council has reviewed the previous strategy 2003-2008 and where still relevant have brought the any outstanding actions forward to the 2008-13 strategy. Additionally, it has carried out a review of the existing strategy and services using the CLG self-assessment health check document. Certain areas identified by the self-assessment tool have been included within the action plan.

The council has also reviewed the existing homelessness and housing advice provision in the borough in relation to the levels of homelessness experienced in the borough and taken into consideration the targets set by the Government, seven key strategic objectives have been set. The council will aim to complete these objectives between 2008 and 2013.

Objective 1 – Improve access to the private rented sector

Experience has informed the council that one of the main barriers to accessing the private rented sector are negative perceptions from landlord about tenants in receipt of welfare benefits or housing benefit. The council aims to carry out research to identify the barriers preventing landlords from working with tenants in receipt of benefits and to address the issues raised.

In order to publicise the council's rent deposit schemes and other the benefits of working with the council, we aim to introduce a landlord forum. This forum will give landlords an opportunity to ask questions but also allow the council to provide training and guidance on areas such illegal evictions, HMO regulations, and grant availability for updating properties.

The council's existing rent deposit schemes are able to assist priority need households eg: households with dependant children. Currently there is no financial assistance to help non-priority households or single people. Responses from stakeholders and comments at the Stakeholder Event suggest that this is an area the needs investigating. Therefore, the council will carry out a feasibility study to look at the possibility of providing a deposit scheme for these non-priority households. The likely barrier to this scheme will be funding, however the council, recognises that it is an important issue that needs to be addressed.

With landlords competing against other landlords for tenants for their vacant properties, the council will look at introducing a landlord accreditation scheme. Accreditation may include such checks as property inspections by environmental health, taking reference from existing and previous tenants, and criminal records bureau checks. These landlords could then have prospective tenants referred to them through the council's rent deposit schemes.

Objective 2 – Prevent homelessness and address the main causes

Many of the targets set by both central and local government focus on outcomes such as the number of households in temporary accommodation or number of households accepted. In 2005 the Government introduced a new Best Value Performance Indicator that measures the level of housing advice where an action by the local authority has

prevented a households homelessness. This indicator, along with guidance from Communities and Local Government has shifted councils away from a homeless duty role to a more preventative model. The first homelessness strategies drove this initial direction change and Gravesham has succeeded in increasing the level of prevention work being carried out with a consequent reduction in the number of homeless application and households in temporary accommodation. The 2008-13 strategy will identify new actions to address the three main reasons for homelessness in the borough.

In 2007/08, friends or family asking a household to leave accounted for 53% (83) of the homeless applications taken.

In order to tackle this cause of homelessness, the council's existing procedures for dealing with family or friend eviction will be reviewed and implement reviewed procedure if required. In addition, officers will attend mediation training in order to attempt to resolve family difficulties. Professional mediation services will also be used as and when required. In all cases of where parents are excluding a household from the family home a home visit will be carried out and mediation will be discussed.

All households threatened with exclusion will be asked to attend an options interview where they will be given advice and any unrealistic expectations will be dispelled.

The second biggest reason for homeless applications in 2007/08 was loss of private rented or tied accommodation which accounted for 13% (27) of homeless applications. Tenant can be asked to leave for a number of reasons. These might include the landlord selling the property or needing to move back into the property themselves. Other reasons which may affect the advice and assistance that the council gives might include rent arrears, damage to the property, or anti-social behaviour.

For households at risk of losing their accommodation due to rent arrears, early intervention is key. The council, in partnership with the support providers and agencies will try to identify the households at risk and offer assistance to the householder to resolve the problem. This might be through assistance with claiming housing benefit, making a referral to floating support, or liaison with the landlord to negotiate an arrears repayment plan.

In the same period the third main reason for homeless applications was violent breakdown of a relationship with accounted for 10% of application (15). The council has developed a Sanctuary Scheme, whereby, with the agreement of the victim of domestic abuse, physical works are carried out to a property with the purpose of making the property more secure, thereby ensuring greater protection from the perpetrator where safe and appropriate. These adaptations might include security lighting, stronger door locks, spy holes, window locks, or panic alarms. These physical changes may be used in conjunction with an injunction against the perpetrator to protect the applicant.

In addition, leaflets providing guidance as to the options available to households experiencing domestic violence will be produced and circulated around the borough. This literature will include information on legal options such as injunctions, and rights to transfer a property through the Children Act 1989 or Family Law Act 1996. Contact details of domestic abuse support agencies and refuges will also be provided.

Objective 3 – Reduce the use of temporary accommodation

In its paper “Settled Homes; Changing Lives” (2005) the Government sets out its strategy to reduce homelessness further and halve the number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010. The 50% reduction is calculated from 31 December 2004 when the council had 48 households in temporary accommodation. The council has already made excellent progress in reaching this target and as at the beginning of June 2008 had 27 households in temporary accommodation. The average length of time that a household spends in temporary accommodation is currently 19 weeks. This has increased from 11 weeks in 2004/05. The reason for this is the lack of suitable permanent council or housing association accommodation becoming available.

In order to try to limit the length of time a household spends in temporary accommodation the council will ensure the rent accounts are closely monitored to ensure that when an offer of permanent accommodation is made that there is no reason for the landlord to refuse the household.

A proportion of the households accommodated in the council’s temporary accommodation have learning disabilities or mental health problems. In addition, many of the households accommodated have not managed a tenancy before, and these disabilities and lack of experience can lead to difficulties either in managing a rent account, abiding by their license conditions, or causing a nuisance to their neighbours. If the households rent arrears becoming too high or their unacceptable behavior is not addressed, then notice may be served and they will be required to leave the accommodation. In these circumstances the council is unlikely to have a duty to provide the household with other accommodation. In order to reduce the likelihood of problems occurring and number of households evicted from temporary accommodation, all households will be referred for floating support through Kent Supporting People.

Objective 4 – Support people to access and maintain accommodation by providing housing advice and assistance

Unfortunately, many households who have settled accommodation or have obtained housing through their own means or with assistance from the local authority risk becoming homeless again through their failure to manage their tenancy. They may become threatened with homelessness for a number of reasons, including poor budgeting skills leading to rent arrears, or a mental health problem which has led to breaches of their tenancy conditions. When becoming aware of a household experiencing difficulties.

The introduction of a homelessness forum as set out in objective 6.1 of the action plan will facilitate this goal by identifying the services available to the council and also that of attending service providers.

Objective 5 – Address the problem of youth homelessness

The main reason for single households approaching the council as homeless is friends or family asking them to leave. In 2007/08, of the 61 households were asked to leave, 36 (59%) were aged 16/17 and 25 (41%) were aged between 18 and 24.

Early engagement with young people and their families is a key method of tackling youth homelessness. Mediation, either provided by the council's housing needs officers or specialist providers, can assist 16 and 17 year olds to remain at or return to the family home. The Depaul Trust has recently developed their mediation services, Reconnect, in Gravesham, after much success in the London boroughs.

The council will also look at setting up a Joint Assessment protocol with Social Services, whereby the young person and their parents will meet with a social worker and Housing Needs Officer to look for a planned move away from the parental home so as to avoid young people becoming homeless.

A key action in preventing youth homelessness was identified in the replies to the stakeholders questionnaire. Many of the young people approaching the council are homeless as a result of being asked to leave the same day after having an argument with their parents. The feasibility of a respite scheme which offer short (one to three nights) emergency stays in the homes of trained, checked and supported volunteers. This time away, with support, can help young people return home and mediation can look at resolving the longer term issues.

Objective 6 – Ensure effective partnership working

Partnerships are formal or informal arrangements to work together to some joint purpose with shared aims and objectives. From the perspective of the statutory sector, working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector may offer fresh perspectives and alternative sources of expertise, enables more accurate targeting of local need, and enhances the chance of sustainability, because the aims and objectives are decided as a result of input from other sectors. Successful partnership working will also be more efficient leading to effective targeting and use of available resources.

For a partnership to be successful, it must be:

- **Accessible:** addressing barriers and obstacles, which prevent the equality of opportunity and inclusivity, including clear communication.
- **Flexible:** as the partnership develops and grows, and needs / or priorities change.
- **Transparent:** accountable and open with shared agendas and common goals.
- **Respectful:** of the rights, roles and contributions of all partners.
- **Share Power:** particularly large organisations relinquishing and sharing power with smaller, less established groups.
- **Commitment to the key objectives:** including time, shared agendas, collaboration.
- **Honest:** in dealings and decisions, with publicised structures and clearly defined roles.
- **Self-reviewing:** through reviewing, monitoring and self-evaluation to ensure that the relevance, purpose and efficiency of the partnership are developed and maintained. This is also important to ensure that the partnership continues to be necessary and effective.

Partnerships will fail if the following elements are not addressed:

- **History of conflict** and / or ongoing unresolved conflict amongst key interests and partners.

- **Lack of direction** and unachievable aims and objectives. This will happen if the aims and objectives of the partnership contradict or compromise the aims and objectives, legal or statutory requirements of any individual partners.
- **Lack of communication** between partners and the organisations that they represent. This can lead to conflict and disputes if different information is circulated.
- **The wrong representation**, for example: if partners do not have the knowledge or expertise to undertake the work required by the partners. This includes missing key interest groups from the partnership.
- **Dominance by one partner**, including hidden agendas. And different ways of working.
- **Unequal / inappropriate balance of power** between partners.

In order to ensure effective partnership working, a Homelessness Forum will be introduced which will meet twice yearly. At this forum information can be passed between agencies and referral procedures can be identified and developed. It will also provide an opportunity to provide training and guidance for other agencies and professionals to encourage early referrals to the council housing advice services can be provided.

In addition, the existing protocols and will be reviewed and revised if necessary. In the drafting of new partnership agreements the council will adhere to the points raised previously to ensure that they are effective.

Objective 7 – Improve the range and choice of affordable accommodation available

Key to preventing homelessness is the availability of affordable housing in the borough. Affordable housing can include social housing at an affordable rent, interim rents, and shared ownership.

In addition to funding from the Housing Corporation, local authorities can assist Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) financially. The key source of this funding is from commuted sums. Commuted sums are incomes received from landlord or building that have been sold to either private or social developers.

As well as homes provided by RSLs, private developers are also sources of affordable housing through section 106 agreements of the Town & Country Planning Act 1990. Section 106 agreements are specific to each local authority and presently Gravesham planning policy requires that a private developer developing a site of over fifteen provide 30% as affordable housing. This could include both homes to rent and shared ownership.

The council will also look to make better use of its existing housing stock by carry out a stock appraisal of some of its difficult to let sheltered housing units. If a change of use is approved it will make accommodation available for younger singles or couples.

Delivery of the Strategy

Resources available

The main source of funding available to implement the homelessness strategy is the Homelessness Grant provided by Communities and Local Government. For 2008/09 this is £70,000. An addition, in 2004, the Communities and Local Government, provided funding of £24,000 for a supported housing officer post until 2010.

In addition to the funding available, much of the delivery of this Strategy is dependent upon working in partnership – eg multi-agency working with housing associations and Social Services.

Review of the strategy

Whilst this strategy and action plan sets out the council's direction for the next five years, it is possible that the issues affecting the residents of Gravesham may change over the forthcoming years. Therefore, it is important that the council directs its resources to address these issues. With this in mind the council will carry out an annual review of the strategy and either shift existing resources to address new identified needs or source alternative solutions to the issues facing households.

Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013 Action Plan

Glossary of performance indicators

KAA2 – Kent Area Agreement 2 performance indicator
 LI – Local indicator
 NI – National indicator

Strategic Objective 1 : Improve access to the private rented sector

Performance Indicators

LI - Private sector vacant dwellings returned to occupation
 BVPI 213 – number of homeless households per 1000 for whom housing advice resolved the situation
 NI 156 - Number of households living in temporary accommodation
 KAA2 1 – No. of households in temporary accommodation
 KAA2 2– No. of homeless applications accepted
 KAA2 3 – No. of homeless applications received
 KAA 7 and KAA 8 – No. of HMO properties/dwellings brought up to standard as a direct result of action taken by the local authority
 KAA 10 – No. of long term private sector dwellings returned to occupation/demolished as a result of direct action taken by the local authority

Action	Target date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
1.1 Carry out research to identify the barriers preventing landlords from working with tenants in receipt of welfare benefits	April 2009 and annually thereafter	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in number of landlords approaching the council with properties to rent. • Increase in take up of council's rent deposit schemes • Decrease in number of households accepted as homeless • Reduction in use of temporary accommodation 	Empty Property Strategy 2005-2008 / Housing Strategy 2005-2009

05Action	Target date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
1.2 Introduce a landlord forum	April 2009	Unit Manager / Private Sector Housing Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in number of landlords approaching the council with properties to rent • Increased take up of council's rent deposit schemes 	Empty Property Strategy 2005-2008 / Housing Strategy 2005-2009
1.3 Carry out a feasibility study to look at the provision of a rent deposit scheme for non-priority households	July 2009	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-priority deposit scheme introduced • Decrease in number of rough sleepers and "sofa-surfers" 	
1.4 Introduce a landlord accreditation scheme	April 2010	Unit Manager / Private Sector Housing Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landlords signed up to scheme 	Empty Property Strategy 2005-2008
<p>Strategic Objective 2 : Prevent homelessness and address the main causes</p> <p>Performance Indicators</p> <p>BVPI 213 – number of homeless households per 1000 for whom housing advice resolved the situation</p> <p>NI 156 - Number of households living in temporary accommodation</p> <p>KAA2 1 – No. of households in temporary accommodation</p> <p>KAA2 3 – No. of homeless applications accepted</p> <p>KAA2 4 – No. of homeless applications received</p>				
2.1 Evaluate current procedures for dealing with homeless cases arising from parental eviction and implement revised procedures if required to reduce homelessness	February 2009	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 households or less in temporary accommodation • Reduction in number of households approaching the council after being asked to leave 	

Action	Target date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
2.2 Ensure all people threatened with exclusion receive an options interview to encourage a realistic perception of their housing options	September 2008	Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 households or less in temporary accommodation • Reduction in number of households approaching the council as homeless after being asked to leave 	
2.3 Maximise the use of home visits and mediation to achieve a reduction in the number of homeless applications due to exclusion from the parental home where temporary accommodation has to be provided	July 2008	Unit Manager/Housing Needs Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 households or less in temporary accommodation • Reduction in number of households asked to leave by friends or family 	
2.4 Staff to attend mediation training with the purpose of resolving problems in the short or long term whilst other housing options are looked at	December 2008	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in number of homeless applications and acceptances • Reduction in number of households in temporary accommodation 	
2.5 Publicise the services and measures available to tackle domestic violence	April 2009	Unit Manager / Community Safety Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce information leaflets with details of support and legal agencies, and refuges 	Crime and Disorder Strategy 2005-08

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	• Success Measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaflets distributed at points around the Borough 	
2.7 Introduce a court desk advice service at Gravesend Court to help owners/tenants defend possession action	September 2009	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court desk introduced by July 2009 • Reduction in number of households approaching as homeless due to possession proceedings 	
2.8 Review existing procedures between the Housing Benefit Service and advice agencies, fast tracking cases where eviction is threatened	April 2009 and annually thereafter	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction number of evictions by liaison with private landlords and the Housing Benefit Service and payment of grants to clear rent arrears • Continue to fund post of housing benefit "Fast Track" officer 	
2.9 Explore options and funding to provide welfare rights and debt counselling services in conjunction with housing advice	April 2010	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Debt Advisor in post 	

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
2.10 Investigate feasibility of a Housing Needs Officer Prevention Payment allowing officers to spend up to £500 to prevent a households homelessness	September 2009	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of homeless applications and number of households in temporary accommodation 	
2.11 Investigate, in partnership with RSL's the feasibility of offering a mortgage rescue scheme to assist home owners at risk of losing their homes.	September 2009 (priority to be reviewed if number of repossession cases approaching the council increases significantly)	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of households homeless as a result of repossession 	Housing Strategy 2005-2009
<p>Strategic Objective 3 : Reduce the use of temporary accommodation Success in achieving strategic objective 3 will be also be met if the actions outlined in objective in 1,2,4,5,6, and 7 are successful</p> <p>Performance Indicators NI156 – No. of households in temporary accommodation BVPI 213 – number of homeless households per 1000 for whom housing advice resolved the situation KAA2 1 – No. of households in temporary accommodation KAA2 2 – No. of homeless applications accepted KAA2 3 - No. of homeless applications received</p>				
Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
3.1 Meet Government target to reduce number of households in temporary accommodation by 50% by 2010	1 st April 2010	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 24 households or less in temporary accommodation by the 1st April 2010 	

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
3.2 Carry out research into the feasibility of offering homeless households qualifying offers of accommodation in the private rented sector	September 2009	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homeless households accepting qualifying offers Households satisfied with qualifying offers 	
3.3 Ensure that households in temporary accommodation have well managed rent accounts to ensure that they can be offered permanent accommodation as quickly as possible	September 2008	Unit Manager / Temporary Accommodation Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal levels of rent arrears Reduction in number of households evicted for rent arrears 	
3.4 Ensure that all households in temporary accommodation are referred for floating support to help sustain their licences	August 2008	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of households evicted due to rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, and other tenancy breaches. 	Crime and Disorder Strategy 2005-08
3.5 Ensure the temporary accommodation audits are carried regularly	September 2008 and monthly thereafter	Unit Manager / Temporary Accommodation Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular monthly visits by temporary accommodation officer Minimal level of repairs required when property voided 	

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-occupancy of temporary accommodation addressed 	
3.6 Ensure the bed and breakfast accommodation is not used for young people or households with children	August 2008	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No households place in bed and breakfast accommodation except in an emergency 	
Strategic Objective 4 : Support people to access and maintain accommodation by providing housing advice and assistance Performance Indicators NI141 - Number of vulnerable people achieving independent living NI156 – No. of households in temporary accommodation BVPI 66c Percentage of local authority tenants in arrears who have had Notices Seeking Possession served. BVPI 213 – number of homeless households per 1000 for whom housing advice resolved the situation				
Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
4.1 Improve links between housing options team and support agencies	September 2009	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings held with relevant agencies Housing Needs service made aware of contact details for all agencies 	
4.2 Refer all households placed in temporary accommodation to floating support provider	August 2008	Housing Needs Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of households evicted from temporary accommodation due to rent arrears/other licence breaches 	Crime and Disorder Strategy 2005-08

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
4.3 Refer households in need of support who are threatened or likely to be threatened with homelessness to relevant support provider	April 2009	Housing Needs Officers / Estates Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of repeat homeless cases Reduction in number of evictions for rent arrears and anti-social behaviour 	
4.4 Introduce a referral protocol for RSL's to inform the council of tenants that they are evicting at a suitable stage of the possession proceedings	April 2009	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of households approaching as homeless due to eviction from RSL accommodation 	
Strategic Objective 5 : Address the problem of youth homelessness				
Performance Indicators				
NI156 – No. of households in temporary accommodation				
BVPI 202 - The number of people sleeping rough on a single night within the area of the authority.				
BVPI 213 – number of homeless households per 1000 for whom housing advice resolved the situation				
Strategic Housing PI's for Kent :				
PI1 – No. of households in temporary accommodation				
PI2 – No. of homeless applications accepted				
PI3 – No. of homeless applications received				
Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
5.1 Review procedures in cases of parental exclusion eg: home visits, mediation, and providing information on waiting times and housing options	April 2009	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of 16-25 year olds approaching the council as homeless Reduction in number of rough sleepers 	

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
5.2 Identify and act on homelessness trigger points and raise awareness amongst young people at risk of becoming homeless	2009 and annually thereafter	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager / Senior Housing Needs Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of 16-25 year olds approaching the council as homeless 	
5.3 In conjunction with Supporting People and suitable accommodation provider, carry out feasibility study into setting up support accommodation for 16-25 year olds	April 2010	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depending on securing funding and accommodation provider to have a supported housing scheme in place by 2010. 	
5.4 Ensure that the council meets the Government's target to not place 16 and 17 year old in bed and breakfast by 2010	1 st April 2010	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No 16-17 year old placed in bed and breakfast accommodation accept in an emergency 	
5.5 In partnership with appropriate agencies, develop effective education programmes with schools and colleges on the issues to be considered when planning to leave home.	April 2010	Unit Manager / Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programme introduced by council or in partnership with appropriate agency 	

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
5.6 Develop a Joint Assessment protocol with Social Services which purpose is to meet with both the young person and parents to agree a planned move out of the family home	September 2009	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in number of young people approaching as homeless Reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation 	
Strategic Objective 6 : Ensure effective partnership working Performance Indicators NI 145 – Adults with learning disabilities in settled accommodation NI 147 - Care leavers in settled accommodation				
Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
6.1 Establish a Homelessness Forum at which information can be passed between agencies, referral procedures can be identified & developed, and training & guidance offered to other agencies to encourage early intervention	September 2009	Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forum set up by September 2009 Good attendance by stakeholders Improvement in housing advice and homelessness performance 	
6.2 Review existing protocols and ensure contact details are correct	April 2009	Unit Manager/Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing protocol reviewed by April 2009 	

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in no. of households approaching the council who are threatened with homelessness 	
6.3 Identify areas where referral protocols are required and introduce protocols	April 2009 and annually thereafter	Unit Manager/Deputy Unit Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New protocols produced Evidence of protocols working 	
Strategic Objective 7 : Improve the range and choice of affordable accommodation available Performance Indicators NI155 – Total number of affordable homes delivered PI5 – No. of rural affordable homes delivered				
Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
7.1 Conduct an options appraisal of existing low demand sheltered housing to consider alternative uses for other households including vulnerable people and single people needing to move on from hostels	April 2010	Housing Operations Manager / Housing Operations Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in number of general needs vacancies available in the borough 	Housing Strategy 2005-09
7.2 Investigate increasing the cash incentive to council tenants who are down sizing. Additional	September 2009	Housing Operations Manager / Tenancy Services Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cash incentive increased from current level of £250 per bedroom 	Housing Strategy 2005-09

Action	Target Date	Responsibility	Success measures and monitoring	Links to other strategies / priorities
funding to be identified through existing resources or from new sources eg : CLG				
7.3 Ensure that target to develop 110 affordable homes a year between 2008 and 2011 is achieved	31 March 2009 and annually thereafter	Housing Strategy Manager	At least 110 properties developed each year	Housing Strategy 2005-09

Appendix 1

Review of Strategic Objectives set in 2003-08 Homelessness Strategy

Objective	Target	Successes	Future work needed
<p>Make better use of the existing council housing stock</p> <p>OBJECTIVE MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate a third (33%) of available units to homeless households 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target has been met or exceeded in all years <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2003/04 = 51.4% 2004/05 = 33.1% 2005/06 = 37.1% 2006/07 = 47.2% 2007/08 = 42.9% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that future housing development in the borough reflects the needs of both homeless household, homeseekers, and transfer tenants. See 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 of 2008-13 action plan
<p>Raise the standard of temporary accommodation</p> <p>OBJECTIVE MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To remove the need to use bed and breakfast accommodation To source new family sized temporary accommodation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bed and breakfast has not be used since October 2006 As at the 31st April 2008 the council had access to 32 self-contained units including 1,2,3 and 4 bedroom properties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to avoid the use of bed and breakfast accommodation except in an emergency. See With the redevelopment of the Christianfields underway, ensure that a supply of temporary accommodation remains accessible.
<p>Provide an Outreach service</p> <p>OBJECTIVE PARTLY MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer periodic housing advice surgeries at suitable locations around the district Liaise with the Ethnic Health and Social Care Forum, CAB, Asian Womens' Refuge and the Sikh Temple to determine how to reach members of the minority ethnic community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home visits are carried out in all cases of friend/family eviction to ascertain whether mediation is appropriate In addition, if a customer has a disability that prevents them from accessing advice from the Civic Centre a visit will be offered and made. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further work is required to look at whether advice surgeries are still required in the district taking into account existing provision in the borough

Objective	Target	Successes	Future work needed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home visits will be carried out in exceptional circumstances 		
Provision of clear, relevant and in depth housing advice OBJECTIVE MET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow individual housing needs officers to gain specialist knowledge in specific areas of housing advice Review existing information leaflets and ensure they give advice in plain English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing advice fact sheets produced giving information on variety of areas including renting in the private sector, housing benefit and the housing register 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review current provision of advice leaflets and look to produce a greater range of leaflets covering all areas of homelessness prevention and housing advice eg: relationship breakdown, young persons, supported housing
Address the problem of housing benefit delays OBJECTIVE MET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce a Fast Track housing benefit system for homeless or potentially homeless households 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Officer appointed in July 2006 Service level agreement to assess new claims within 28 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess the Fast Track service provided by housing benefit using the 4 C's of Best Value
Offer support to sustain tenancies OBJECTIVE MET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moving Forward Young Single People project extended to 15 supported tenancies Supported housing officer to assist households in supported accommodation to move on to independent living when ready to do so 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing Needs team can refer customers to specialised support providers who offer housing related support in setting up a home, sustaining a tenancy, managing a budget, and maximise income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is important that referrals continue to be made when appropriate in order prevent homelessness wherever possible

Objective	Target	Successes	Future work needed
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centralised referral system to refer households through Kent Supporting People ensuring households receive the support required 	
<p>Offer longer term options</p> <p>OBJECTIVE MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce a rent deposit scheme in order to assist homeless households and households threatened with homelessness into the private rented sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gravesham Partnership Lettings scheme introduced in January 2007 Gravesham Family Lettings scheme introduced in November 2007 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The take up of these schemes by both landlords and tenants is gaining momentum. However, further work to target and identify prospective landlords is required.
<p>A speedy decision making process</p> <p>OBJECTIVE PARTLY MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process 97% of homeless applications with 33 days. In addition, 50% of homeless applications to be processed within 20 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the period 01/04/2004 to 31/03/2008, 90% of application processed with in 33 days. Of the above figure, 79% of applications were processed within 20 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The complexities of the enquiries that local authorities are required to make may mean that some applications take longer than 33 days to process. Assessment officers to ensure wherever possible that decisions are made as quickly as possible.
<p>An improved appeals procedure</p> <p>OBJECTIVE MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce an appeals panel to review homelessness decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appeals panel introduced, made up of officers from housing fields To ensure a consistent and speedy review process the responsibility for carrying out reviews was passed to the Deputy Unit Manager in 2007 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the reviewing officer keeps abreast of legislative changes and case law through access to training. Look at introducing a peer review process with neighbouring authorities to ensure decisions are correct and fair

Objective	Target	Successes	Future work needed
<p>Improved multi-agency working and partnership</p> <p>OBJECTIVE NOT MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In association with Dartford Borough council set up a Homelessness Forum to discuss good practice and work with stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excellent links have been made with supported housing providers which enables GBC to refer customers to relevant support provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The establishment of a Homelessness Forum is still outstanding. At the Stakeholder event held in May 2008 the need for a forum was also highlighted. Further work is required as part of this 2008-13 strategy. See 6.1 to 6.3 of the 2008-13 action plan
<p>Supported Housing Officer</p> <p>OBJECTIVE MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appoint a dedicated housing support officer to co-ordinate the supported housing stock and provide housing related support to households in temporary accommodation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding secured from Government's Homelessness Directorate to appoint a Supported Housing Officer Supported Housing Officer appointed in 2005 Post re-designated to Housing Needs Officer in 2006 due to changing demands of service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding for post from the Homelessness Directorate has been agreed to 2010. Requirement to look at continued funding for this post past this date.
<p>Improved Service access through the provision of a one stop shop</p> <p>OBJECTIVE MET</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relocate the Housing Needs team to dedicated accommodation at the Arc, Windmill Street. Accommodation will be shared by CAB, Relate, and the Race Equality council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing Needs Team relocated to the Arc in January 2005 Relocated back to the Civic Centre in October 2007 as part of the council Accommodating Excellence programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review current service provision yearly to ensure that existing accommodation meets the needs of our customers

Appendix 2 - Stakeholder questionnaire: List of respondents

We would like to thank those who assisted in the development of this strategy by responding to our questionnaires and/or attending our stakeholder event.

Dartford and Gravesham Women's Aid
Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley Mind
Depaul Trust
East Kent Cyrenians
Gravesham Churches Housing Association
Hope
Hyde Housing Association
Intouch Support
Job Centre Plus
Kent Community Housing Trust
Kent County council – Mental Health Team
Kent County council – Social Services
Kent Probation
Kenward Trust
North Kent Police
The Kent council on Alcohol

In addition we would like to thank the internal members of staff in the Housing Needs team and other council departments including building services, allocations, estate management, and community safety and enabling.

Your thoughts

Please send your comments or suggestions to the Unit Manager – Homelessness, Simon Beasley, in one of the following ways.

Write - The Housing Services Department, Civic Centre, Windmill Street, Gravesend, Kent DA12 1AU

Email - simon.beasley@gravesham.gov.uk
Fax - 01474 33 76 17

All communications will be acknowledged, and any proposals or suggestions considered.

