

Maidstone Borough Council

Housing Strategy 2023 - 2028

Foreword – Simon Webb Cabinet Member Housing and Health

Good housing remains one of the fundamental requirements for our residents that enables our communities to flourish and succeed. With a growing population comes the requirement to ensure we have an adequate supply of housing in the right places. This includes homes that provides a range of sizes and type to meet the wide spectrum of need across our community. From home ownership to affordable rented, the Housing Strategy will compliment the Local Plan to help deliver the housing for our residents and their families as they grow. Affordability remains a key issue, with the cost of housing rising each year. Rather than solely relying on our partners, we have taken the bold decision to return to developing and managing our own Council housing stock. Our ambition to provide 1,000 new affordable homes is a statement of intent to tackle the difficulties linked to affordability and provide the opportunity for the Council to deliver high quality, energy efficient homes for our community in addition to those being provided by our partners.

Priority will also be given to the existing homes in our district. The tragic death of a child in the Northwest, linked to the condition of their home, has reinvigorated our determination that housing must meet good standards. We will be focusing our attention to this area of activity to ensure we have the capacity and policies in place to not only react when issues are brought to our attention but also to take an active role in helping landlords to maintain their properties to at least the decent homes standard. We will work with the Department of Levelling Up, Homes & Communities to address fire safety concerns and property conditions. This will include exploring ways of working with Health Colleagues to promote healthy homes and healthy communities.

Homelessness is housing need at its most acute, which is why we have invested in our ability to prevent homelessness. This means that our homeless prevention outcomes are in the best top quartile performance across the country. Despite the excellent work, the homeless pressures continue to increase, particularly in London and the Southeast. The use of temporary accommodation becomes unavoidable but our experience in providing our own accommodation for this use has meant we can provide good quality, self-contained homes within our locality for a fraction of the cost. The opening of Trinity marks a particular milestone in our ability to end rough sleeping, moving from an outreach provision to a supported approach that helps sustain those who were once street homeless in a stable home. Trinity has been developed to provide an excellent facility that is used by community groups and health services alike, right in the centre of our Town.

We understand the challenges ahead and our Housing Strategy sets out how, together with our partners, we will tackle these through innovation and determination.

Our Visions and Priorities

The Council's vision is for Maidstone Borough to be a vibrant, prosperous, urban and rural community at the heart of Kent where everyone can realise their potential. Our Strategic Plan, published in 2019, clearly sets out our ambitions for Maidstone through to 2045 and how we can achieve this.

One of our four key priorities is 'Homes and Communities', which emphasises the importance of providing a wide variety of housing types to meet the needs of our residents. This includes the provision of affordable homes, homes that promote health and wellbeing, as well as addressing homelessness and rough sleeping. Our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, published in 2019 clearly supports our Strategic Plan, as it sets out our plans to try and tackle homelessness, reduce rough sleeping and our reliance on temporary accommodation in Maidstone through to 2024. Our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will also play a significant role in informing our visions put forward in this Housing Strategy.



Our vision for this Housing Strategy is to ensure that all Maidstone residents have access to high quality, sustainable and affordable homes which meets each of their needs. This will be achieved across our three key priority areas:

Priority 1 - To deliver a mixture of housing types and tenures, including 1,000 new affordable homes, that meet the needs of everyone in the borough.

Priority 2: To ensure existing homes meet the decent homes standard, are energy efficient, comply with building fire safety standards - to enable healthy, independent living.

Priority 3: To secure the best support and housing outcomes for Maidstone's most vulnerable groups.

Priority 1: To deliver a mixture of housing types and tenures, including 1,000 new affordable homes, that meet the needs of everyone in the borough.

Why is this important?

Housing Needs

In our Strategic Plan, we have set an ambitious target of meeting all housing needs within the borough by 2045, including affordable housing needs. We have a duty to ensure that we set out our goals for the future development of an area through local plans, including policies on new housing developments. Currently, we are in the process of updating our Local Plan, which will translate our housing priorities into a statutory planning policy framework and to maintain a five-year land supply.

The government has set out an aim to increase the number of houses being built towards a target of 300, 000 homes per year by the mid- 2020s.

In 2021 we commissioned a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to inform the review of the Local Plan. The SHMA identified a need for an additional 1,157 homes per year. 422 of which are to be rented affordable housing, 137 affordable home ownership and 598 market housing.

The latest data on Maidstone Borough's stock profile reveals that 68% is owner occupied, 19% is part of the privately rented stock and 13% is part of affordable housing stock.

Heathlands – a public sector led garden community

Maidstone Borough Council and Homes England are working in partnership to deliver a unique, attractive, and desirable new rural Kentish town located between Maidstone and Ashford. Heathlands will provide around 5,000 new homes, of which 40% will be affordable for local people. The new community will also provide 5,000 new jobs, and 50% of the site will be green space, and the new community will be designed sensitively to respond to its natural and distinctive setting. This public sector led initiative now features as a draft allocation in the Maidstone Local Plan Review, that is scheduled to be adopted towards the end of 2023. Heathlands is a longer-term project that is scheduled to commence in around 2027 and will have a 25-year plus delivery period.

1,000 New Affordable Homes

The main challenge facing Maidstone is the demands on the overall housing stock, and within this stock, the percentage that is available for affordable housing. The Council has put in place means to increase the overall supply of housing through the Local Plan Review process.

In a significant move, the Council recognises that if it is to meet housing need then it must intervene itself. The Council has approved plans to build 1,000 new affordable homes and grow our Private Rented Sector portfolio with Maidstone Property Holdings Ltd by a further 250 homes. Returning to delivering, owning and managing its own housing stock represents a bold move forward and a statement of intent on the part of the Council.

The new accommodation will be delivered in parallel with the existing social housing sector. It is not the Council's intention to compete with housing associations for development opportunity. Instead, the Council will focus on the smaller sites and more difficult development opportunities in order to provide additional affordable housing. Once the Council has reached the delivery figure of 200 units, it will be obliged to seek the agreement of the relevant Secretary of State to reopen its Housing Revenue Account (HRA). This was closed in 2004 following the transfer of the housing stock. Planning will begin now in order to prepare for, and be compliant with, the regulatory requirements of the HRA.

Rented accommodation, let at a genuinely affordable rent remains a priority to meet the demands identified in the SHMA. A lack of family sized affordable housing is exacerbating the length of time that a significant proportion of our residents are having to wait to acquire homes through the Housing Register or having to spend in temporary accommodation. An emphasis on the delivery of larger family homes through the planning system and let at a genuinely affordable rent will be a priority for the council to achieve.

Our new 1,000 new affordable homes will be let on a 12 month introductory tenancy before transitioning into a periodic (lifetime) secure tenancy once the new tenant has fulfilled their probationary period. The new homes will be advertised, allocated and let in accordance with the Council's Allocation Scheme.

We will seek to develop our housing management policies that reflect the emerging themes captured in the Government's White Paper that seeks to embrace a Charter for Social Housing Residents. The charter sets out seven commitments that residents should expect from their landlord:

1. To be safe in your home.
2. To know how your landlord is performing, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money.
3. To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong Ombudsman.
4. To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.
5. To have your voice heard by your landlord.

- 6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
- 7. The government will ensure social housing can support people to take their first step to ownership.

First Homes

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires at least 10% of homes on major development sites to be for affordable home ownership.

The Government recently announced that its future preferred affordable home ownership product is First Homes. These are homes for first time buyers, which are discounted by a minimum 30% against the market value. The first set of First Homes properties went on the market in June 2021. A programme of 1,500 First Homes is being delivered over the next 2 years in over 100 locations across England. We will support bids for the delivery of First Homes in the Borough that meet our eligibility criteria.

The affordable and local needs housing SPD (July 2020) sets out indicative relative proportions of property sizes for affordable housing provision within new developments as:

Table 60: Indicative requirements for different dwelling sizes (2011-31)

	1-bed	2-bed	3-bed	4+ bed
Market	5-10%	30-35%	40-45%	15-20%
Affordable	30-35%	30-35%	25-30%	5-10%

Requirements will be revised as part of the process to update the Local Plan and will reflect the recent national policy changes around First Homes.

Private Rented Sector

The Council recognises that not all Maidstone residents will want or be able to buy a home. Homes available to rent privately are an important part of a balanced housing market. Over the last 10 years there has been a marked increase in the number of households living in the private rented sector.

In response to heightened demands for private rented properties, we have set up Maidstone Property Holdings Limited (MPH) to become a significant residential landlord in the private rented sector. Maidstone Property Holdings aims to set new standards in terms of the quality of private rented stock offered and service delivered to residents. This will provide an alternative solution to solving housing needs and will also ensure that there is a balanced housing market within Maidstone. MPH has delivered on a number of new housing developments, providing over 100 new homes and the ambition is to grow on this success to provide more high-quality new homes for the private rented market.

Temporary Accommodation:

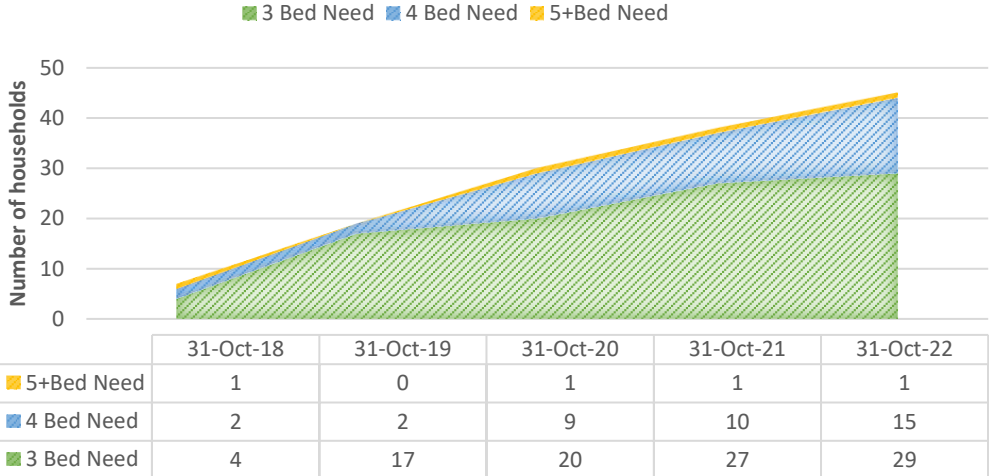
We also have the duty to meet housing needs of those who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless by providing temporary accommodation. We must provide interim accommodation whilst we look into a homeless application for those who have priority need and are eligible for assistance.

The borough is facing increasing demands for temporary accommodation, as a result of Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the COVID- 19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the Council had approximately 100-125 households in temporary accommodation at any one time. However, as of September 2022, the number in temporary accommodation was 192.

This rise in demand also seems to relate to the end of the moratorium on landlord evictions (established in the pandemic) as well as emerging inflation and cost of living crisis. Further demands have also stemmed from the recent Domestic Abuse Act, as well as increases in the number of refugees and out of area placements.

We are also facing challenges for the increased demand for larger families owed the main housing duty, who are currently living in temporary accommodation.

MAIN HOUSING DUTY ACCEPTED HOUSEHOLDS



The average waiting time to be successful in bidding for a 3 or 4 bed home for homeless applicants where the full housing duty has been accepted has increased over the past 3 years.

Our goal is to seek other suitable and innovative ways of finding accommodation for those households for which we have a statutory duty for and those who have a local connection to our district.

What have we done already?

- ✓ During 2020/21, Maidstone delivered the highest number and proportion of additional affordable dwellings in Kent. 408 affordable homes (24.1% of the Kent total).
- ✓ To date, Maidstone Property Holdings has delivered and now manages over 100 homes with an ambition to provide more well managed, quality homes over the lifetime of this Strategy.
- ✓ We recently purchased the former Springfield library site on Sandling Road that will contribute to providing more new homes for Maidstone residents.
- ✓ We have delivered on our ambition to bring empty buildings back into use. Trinity is a focal point in the Town Centre and we recently refurbished the building into a multi- use communal space, which also provides accommodation and support for people who are homeless.
- ✓ The purchase of our own temporary accommodation helps provide good quality accommodation and reduces the amount we use nightly temporary accommodation providers. The council has a temporary accommodation portfolio of around 70 properties as well as around 30 additional bed sits.
- ✓ We have reviewed and updated our excellent offer to landlords in the private rented sector to help households who are homeless or threatened with homelessness gain access to the private rented sector, where this would have otherwise been unaffordable.

Areas of Focus 2023 to 2026:

- ✓ We will deliver 1,000 new affordable homes to be retained by the Council and let on secure tenancies once the probationary period is completed.
- ✓ We will develop our readiness to reopen the Housing Revenue Account.
- ✓ A suite of housing management policy and practice documents will be developed to comply with the Regulator of Social Housing's guidance to ensure we provide the highest levels of service to our tenants.
- ✓ Reduce the time households spend in temporary accommodation by providing a range of options that will include the council's ambition to build and manage its own affordable housing stock.
- ✓ Working with our housing association partners in the borough to explore how we can make more use of their stock available for those affected by homelessness.

- ✓ Make use of our Homefinders, landlord incentive scheme, by reviewing and strengthening our offer to landlords in the private rented sector.
- ✓ Purchase more temporary accommodation stock to reduce its reliance on nightly paid temporary accommodation and provide a better quality of home within our own locality.
- ✓ Maidstone Borough Council and Homes England are working in partnership to deliver a unique, attractive, and desirable new rural Kentish town located between Maidstone and Ashford. Heathlands will provide around 5,000 new homes, of which 40% will be affordable for local people. The new community will be designed sensitively to respond to its natural and distinctive setting.

Priority 2: To ensure existing homes meet the decent homes standard, are energy efficient and safe, to enable healthy, independent living.

Why is this important?

Standard of homes:

81.21% of respondents to our recent 2022 Resident Survey, claimed that they were satisfied with their current housing, whilst 7.90% claimed they were dissatisfied. Our Housing Standards Enforcement Policy sets out Maidstone’s commitment to assist tenants living in poor conditions. This means we take action to help tenants who are living in unsafe, damp, and cold homes and see that improvements are made.

During 2020/21, the Council undertook over 340 interventions in relation to housing conditions. The Housing Act 2004 sets out the current statutory framework under which we are able to intervene on resident’s behalf. We ensure that landlords meet the Electrical Safety Standards, the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard, and the Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm Regulations and take action where required. We also ensure that Letting Agents in the Borough are signed up to a Letting Agent Redress Scheme.

In June 2022, the government introduced a White Paper for Fairer Private Rented Sector Homes. This details the government's long-term goals for improving standards of private rented housing. Local councils will be provided with guidance to implement any new legislation.

In late 2022, following the tragic death of a two year old child in Rochdale attributed to the mould and damp at his home, the Secretary of State for the Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities made a number of announcements in relation to tackling poor housing conditions. This follows on from decision by the Housing Ombudsman, criticising a number of social landlords for failing their residents in taking this issue seriously. The council will strive to use its powers under the Housing Act 2004 to ensure that no similar untimely death occurs in Maidstone as a result of poor housing conditions.

Activity by the Council’s Housing & Health Team related to damp and mould is listed in the table below:

Year	Total inspections carried out under Housing Act 2004	Damp & mould related	Damp & mould inspections required	Improvement Notice required	Category 1 Hazards identified	Category 2 Hazards identified
2019/20	346	22	20	3	0	18
2020/21	88	25	13	2	0	14
2021/22	256	40	29	1	0	14
2022/23 (Qtr3)*	161	50	24	4	0	20

* For the period April – December 2022 Qtrs 1-3.

Houses in Multiple Occupation:

A House in Multiple Occupation is a property rented out by at least three people who are not from one 'household' but share facilities such as a kitchen and a bathroom. This type of accommodation provides a necessary form of housing, particularly for those who are unable to afford self-contained housing and people under the age of 35 who may only be eligible to the shared-room rate of housing benefit.

Certain types of HMOs are required to be licensed by the Council's Housing Service. This includes renting out a large HMO in England. A property is defined as a large HMO if all of the following apply:

- it is rented to 5 or more people who form more than 1 household
- some or all tenants share toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities
- at least 1 tenant pays rent (or their employer pays it for them)

There has been an increase in the number of HMOs in the borough. The latest estimate of HMOs in the borough is 690, whilst the number of licensed HMOs is 199.

It is important that we make sure that all HMOs in the borough are kept to a good standard and are well managed so that all tenants can live in a clean and safe environment. The council is active in ensuring those HMOs that fall within the statutory licensing scheme meet the requirements of the regulations.

Energy Efficient Homes:

The council recognises the challenge to adapt the housing stock to the impacts of the changing climate: for higher average temperatures, increased flooding, and water scarcity to keep us safe and comfortable as climate change risks grow.' *Climate Change Committee (CCC) report: UK housing: Fit for the future? – key relevant findings*

Building new homes. New homes should be built to be low-carbon, energy and water efficient, and climate resilient. The need for energy efficient homes is essential in helping prevent climate change and reducing fuel poverty in households. Heating bills for households could be reduced by 20% if the energy efficiency of homes were improved.

In terms of retrofitting existing homes, we acknowledge that the Council has a role in ensuring existing homes are low-carbon and resilient to the changing climate as a major UK infrastructure priority. The majority of private rented homes in Maidstone Borough have an Energy Performance Rating of D; approximately 2790 have this rating. We enforce the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard contained within the Energy Efficiency (Private Rented Property) (England and Wales) Regulations 2015.

The government is proposing that private rented properties (new tenancies) will need have an EPC rating of C by 2025 and all tenancies will need to have an EPC rating of C by 2028. We have recently entered into agreement with the Southeast Consortium to deliver the Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2. This approach compliments the Inter Authority Agreement that MBC is signatory to, that sets out how partnerships in local government between local health, housing and energy teams can lead to bespoke partnerships to tackle fuel poverty and deliver the Sustainable Warmth services.

Fire Safety:

The Fire Safety Act 2021 places responsibility upon responsible persons for multi- occupied residential buildings to oversee and reduce the risk of fire for the external structure of the building. This includes walls, cladding, balconies, windows, and doors.

The new Fire Safety (England) Regulations aim to improve the fire safety of blocks of flats. This will be fully implemented on 23 January 2023. The council recently adopted a Fire Building Safety Policy to guide the Housing Service in the delivery of its duties.

Supporting people to live independently

It is vital that a variety of homes and support options are available for people to live independently and as safely as possible in their own homes.

Maidstone is predicted to have an 54% increase in the number of residents aged 65 and over by 2037, with a large majority of these being over 75 years of age.

The Council will work with Kent County Council, developers, care providers and registered providers, to identify suitable sites for the development of specialised housing for older people.

Disability Grants

The number of people in Maidstone expected to be living with a long-term health condition or disability (including mobility issues), is expected to rise by 39% by 2037. Maidstone Borough Council have identified a need for 923 homes suitable for wheelchair uses between 2019- 2037.

The Disabled Facilities Grant, in collaboration with Occupational Therapy Service and the Home Improvement Agency, gives residents finance and support to make changes to their homes so that they can live more independently. In 2022, we have so far provided 55 grants and in 2021, we provided 83.

It is important that we assist our residents apply for disabled facilities grants to ensure their homes can provide them with proper support. To this end, the council recently commissioned Foundations to carry out a review of how we deliver this service. Their recommendations will form the basis of reconfiguring our service and approach to provide a better and more effective experience for our residents.

What have we done already?

- ✓ We have made use of the Better Care Fund to provide for a range of services to be delivered.
- ✓ Our Helping You Home Scheme assists those who are ready to be discharged from hospital by preparing their homes in advance to ensure they are safe and have necessary support in place.
- ✓ To ensure our approach to housing adaptations remains effective and as efficient as possible, we have engaged the services of Foundations (the government sponsored body for Home Improvement Agencies) to help us to review our policy and practice.
- ✓ We have taken action against landlords who had failed to provide safe homes. In 2021 we served 44 notices on landlords requiring them to improve their rented properties.
- ✓ We have updated our Housing Standards Enforcement Policy.
- ✓ We are reviewing our Housing Assistance Policy with the expectation that this will contain new ways of providing a more efficient and effective service.
- ✓ We have supported Kent County Council and visited homes to make sure they are safe and suitable for Ukrainian guests under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme by visiting 206 dwellings hosting 456 guests.
- ✓ We are currently helping 50 individuals, not only with securing housing, but also with returning to employment. This will support our residents with living independently.
- ✓ We provided 83 grants and spent over £670,000 on disabled facilities grants in 2021. And so far in 2022, we have provided 65 grants and spent £580,000.

Areas of Focus 2023 to 2026:

- ✓ The Council will continue to work with private landlords where hazards have been identified.
- ✓ We will continue to support residents access national funding programmes to ensure homes are energy efficient.
- ✓ We will work in partnership with suitable providers and the Greater South-eastern Energy Hub to promote and support the delivery of government funding schemes to homeowners, tenants, and landlords
- ✓ Introduce as part of our Housing Renewal Policy a more effective mechanism to prioritise the completion of discretionary and statutory grants for those residents experiencing a repaid onset illness and end of life condition.
- ✓ We will work with Registered Providers, private landlords, freeholders and Kent Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that all residential buildings, including those that are managed by ourselves abide by the relevant fire safety legislation.
- ✓ We will make sure that landlords follow guidelines and abide by their legal responsibilities to ensure their properties do not put their tenant's health and safety at risk. Particular emphasise will be given to ensuring that people's homes meet the government's Decent Homes Standard and we will intervene where we find a failing on the part of the landlord.

Priority 3: To secure the very best support and housing outcomes for Maidstone's most vulnerable groups.

Why is this important?

Domestic Abuse

Recognising the impact of domestic abuse, the Government enacted the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act, which changed the duty on the council for those who have been made homeless as a result of domestic abuse. This means that local authorities must provide accommodation and support for victims of domestic abuse and their children. Currently, 15% of homeless applicants approaching the council for support are those escaping domestic abuse, which is in line with national figures. The majority of which are females, between the ages of 21- 39 years of age.

Maidstone is working closely with colleagues from Kent County Council as part of the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board. A variety of schemes are currently offered by the council to support all victims of domestic abuse and further work is being undertaken on prevention and developing a housing pathway for survivors.

Out of Area Placements

Out of Area placements occur when residents from one area are placed by a statutory body into another borough. These organisations often place their residents into Maidstone with no plan in place, which means they have difficulty accessing GP services, educational services, and a support network, which can often result in increases in anti-social behaviour.

This can also reduce the availability of accommodation as well as increasing the prices in the local area, both of which can be challenging for residents. This is becoming more difficult due to the rises in the number of individuals being placed into the area; between 2018 and 2021, there was a total of 975 out of area placements.

It is therefore important that we try and prioritise the needs of our residents, whilst also ensuring that those placed from another area are well supported.

Financial exclusion

Financial exclusion occurs when individuals have a lack of access to mainstream financial services, which can lead to social exclusion, poverty and may have a negative impact on a person's mental and physical health. It also means that households do not have the requisite savings to obtain a mortgaged property or place a deposit on private rented accommodation. This is becoming more difficult with the recent cost of living crisis, which has seen a rise in housing costs, energy bills and rent prices.

In Maidstone, there has been an increase in the housing benefit and council tax support administered by the council; between April 2018 to July 2022, there were 3, 823 households on benefits generally, and 2,267 were receiving housing benefits and universal credit.

It is important that we support households through the cost-of-living crisis and intervene as early as possible to prevent eviction from properties, which could then lead to homelessness.

Ex- Offenders

Between April 2018 to July 2022, there were 927 ex-offenders, who needed housing support in Maidstone. In addition, the only Probation approved premises for the whole of Kent is located in Maidstone.

Individuals leaving prison are at an increased risk of becoming homeless as result of losing their accommodation, struggling with accessing universal credit and other necessary support to access appropriate housing. Studies have shown that the lack of housing or insecure housing is often a contributor to offending or habitual offending. Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, we have a duty to provide assistance 56 days before a prisoner at risk of becoming homeless is due for release. Maidstone Borough Council works closely with those organisations with primary responsibility towards offenders to help reduce this risk.

The importance of a joint approach captured in the Kent, Surrey & Sussex Reducing Reoffending Plan 2021-2024 and cited in the Safer Maidstone Partnership's Strategic Plan, which highlights the innovative partnership work being undertaken in Maidstone.

Refugees

The number of refugees entering the UK, needing help with finding accommodation is increasing. We have committed to supporting the government's schemes for refugees from Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan.

Maidstone's residents have been particularly generous in offering homes to Ukrainian households with over 450 people having been helped. Between February 2022 until the end of July 2022, 10 Ukrainian households were owed a prevention or relief duty in Maidstone. This does, however, place a particular burden on the council should the hosts be unable to continue to sponsor these families after the initial 6 months.

We have also supported the government's Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy since it opened in 2021, as well as the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme (ACRS) since January 2022. We have housed two extended families from Afghanistan in Maidstone properties and assisted a third into the private rented sector.

Under the government's Vulnerable Person Resettlement Schemes for Syrian refugees, we have managed to provide housing support for one large Syrian family in Maidstone.

Since April 2022, we have engaged with the Home Office and Local Government Association in their consultation on the latest initiative called the Asylum Dispersal Scheme. As a national scheme, we are likely to see people being accommodated by the Home Office being placed into private rented accommodation. The Council has responded to the Home Office where the proposed accommodation is unsuitable or does not meet the necessary standards. The Council is also minded that such proposals should not displace residents currently accommodated, as this would lead to an increase in homelessness locally. Where such suggestions are made, the Council will vigorously engage with the Home Office to avoid a homelessness situation occurring.

Gypsy and Travellers

The national and local shortage of caravan and other mobile housing sites puts the gypsy and traveller community at risk of becoming homeless. Between April 2018 and July 2022, there were 75 gypsy and travellers in Maidstone who needed support finding accommodation.

We work closely with our Spatial Planning Team, who carry out the housing assessment needs for gypsy and travellers. An assessment was completed in January 2012, which revealed a need for 157 pitches between October 2011 and March 2026. These figures were extended until 2031, resulting in a need for 187 pitches. A new Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment is being undertaken as part of the Council's ongoing Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan Document (G&T DPD). The G&T DPD will contain a suite of policies specifically addressing matters of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation and future need. Previous experience has shown that the greatest challenge is identifying a suitable piece of land which can provide a sustainable site at an affordable cost.

Maidstone Borough Council recognised that the sites in our ownership had suffered from a lack of investment over a number of years. In response, the Council invested significantly in our two publicly owned sites to bring the sites up to a modern standard. This has included replacing the amenity blocks with new facilities on both sites, updating the water and mains electricity supplies to enable individual metering to be provided, the replacement of the communal lighting to provide more efficient and effective lighting on site. Bringing the sites back into the direct management of the Council will ensure that the sites will experience better asset management. The Council is committed to maintaining the sites and developing our management approach to ensure that they remain fit for purpose moving forward.

Mental Health

Those that struggle with their mental health often find it difficult to sustain living conditions and keep up with their rent payments. Without early intervention and support, this could lead to eviction and potentially leave the individual homeless. Our OneView Data analytics system has been able to identify low-income households and has found increases in cases of mental health issues in relation to housing and the threat of becoming homeless. Those who are homeless and rough sleeping are at an increased risk of developing severe mental health issues.

Between April 2018 to July 2022, the number of applicants needing housing support in Maidstone who had a diagnosed mental health problem was 2389. We have a duty to provide social care to support people experiencing mental health problems. We are required to provide after care services and also assist those moving out of hospitals.

Veterans

Maidstone recognises the significant service and contribution from members of our armed forces. Sadly, individuals leaving the armed forces are at an increased risk of experiencing difficulties finding appropriate housing and accommodation. Between April 2018 to July 2022, there were 79 veterans who needed housing support in Maidstone, 49 of which suffered with mental health problems.

We have a duty to investigate a veteran's situation if they have approached the council and Maidstone is committed through our Armed Forces Covenant to support our serving personnel and veterans as they transition back into civilian life.

Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

There has been an increase in homelessness and rough sleeping both nationally and locally. As of October 2022, 34% of applicants on the housing register had a housing need under the homeless legislation. Of these, 34% are aged between 30 and 39 years old, and 24% are aged between 18 and 29. This has

increased by 6% since January 2022. Additionally, there was a total of 832 rough sleepers in Maidstone between April 2018 and July 2022, and a further 112 individuals were rough sleeping at time of approach.

The main reason that people become homeless is because family and friends are no longer willing or able to accommodate them, with the second largest reason being due to eviction by a landlord. Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, we have a duty to support an applicant that is threatened with homelessness, by providing accommodation.

The implementation of initiatives like the use of data analytics to prevent homelessness at an early stage has been proven to help the council and residents to retain their homes without the need to go through the trauma and disruption of becoming homeless.

What have we done already?

- ✓ We have provided a flexible approach to supporting those who are vulnerable, by acknowledging that each individual has their own unique experience with their own personal barriers.
- ✓ In 2021, we received the Local Government Chronicle Awards for our successful OneView Data Analytics system. It alerts frontline staff three to six months before a house is at risk of financial crisis or threatened with homelessness, so support can be offered early on. Our performance in preventing homelessness is with the top quartile nationally with over 70% of cases being successfully prevented from becoming homeless.
- ✓ The council has successfully converted Trinity into a multi-use communal space, which provides accommodation and a range of support for homeless and vulnerable people.
- ✓ Through our Rough Sleeper Initiative, we have been able to tackle entrenched rough sleeping and sustain the position where no one needs to be rough sleeping. As a result, our Outreach Service will be able to transition to a Homeless Support Service over the period of this Strategy supported by the further government funding between 2022 to 2025.
- ✓ We have introduced new coordinator roles for domestic abuse and safeguarding who provide day to day advice and guidance and facilitate trauma awareness training. Co-ordinators oversee the response to domestic abuse and safeguarding across the district in partnership with key stakeholders.

- ✓ We also have a number of initiatives in place to support victims of domestic abuse, including our sanctuary scheme, as well the operation of One Stop Shops at Trinity, which offers free advice and support for victims of domestic abuse.
- ✓ A multitask force has been established in five housing blocks, which have been identified as high risk. This has been successful in reducing incidents of violence.
- ✓ We have worked collaboratively with Surrey & Sussex in producing a Reducing Reoffending Plan 2021-2024, which highlights the innovative partnership work being undertaken in Maidstone.
- ✓ Our Helping You Home Scheme assists those who are ready to be discharged from hospital by preparing their homes in advance to ensure they are safe and have necessary support in place. During 2020/21, 496 referrals were successfully dealt with under our Helping You Home Scheme, despite the challenge that the pandemic brought.
- ✓ Our mental health service works together with our homeless support team to ensure that those that are struggling with their mental health have the help they need.
- ✓ Since August 2021, we have worked with private rented landlords to help accommodate Afghan refugees. We have also collaborated with partners such as Kent Resilience Forum to supply immediate assistance to Ukrainians arriving in Maidstone.

Areas of Focus 2023-2026

- ✓ A main priority is to place a trauma aware approach within housing to build resilience. This includes providing more training opportunities for all staff, about the impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences and how best to achieve positive outcomes.
- ✓ The council is also working on a number of new initiatives to support victims of domestic abuse. This includes working with private landlords, providing digital mapping of the nearest support and future plans to coordinate a programme for male victims of domestic abuse, as well as

medium to low-risk domestic abuse victims. We are also developing our initiative with Xantura and Kent Police, to use data to intervene as early as possible.

- ✓ The Council is developing a multi-agency approach to financial inclusion and will monitor these trends to be able to deliver what assistance and grant schemes are available.
- ✓ We will work with the Home Office to ensure those placed here from other areas are properly supported and their longer-term needs are met.
- ✓ We will continue assisting Ukrainian refugees who wish to remain in the UK after the Homes for Ukraine scheme ends through various routes including rematching with new hosts and the private rented sector.
- ✓ The Housing Service will work in partnership with Planning colleagues to develop the policies that will be adopted in response to the need for more gypsy and traveller sites.