



2026-31

Homelessness and rough sleeping housing strategy

Narrative and evidence



What homelessness means

Homelessness doesn't just mean someone sleeping on the streets.

It can look very different for different people. Some may be staying outside because they have absolutely nowhere else to go. Others might be in emergency rooms or hostels for a short time while they wait for somewhere more stable. Sometimes people stay with friends or family, even when it's crowded or uncomfortable, because they have run out of options. And for some, home becomes unsafe due to violence or other serious dangers, meaning they have no choice but to leave.

At its heart, homelessness means not having a safe and secure place to call home. It can happen to anyone, especially when several difficulties like money worries, health problems, or relationship breakdowns; happen at once.

What is homelessness?

Rough sleeping —————

Sofa surfing —————

Temporary accomodation —————

Living in poor conditions —————

Living in overcrowding —————

Living in an unsuitable house due to sickness/disability —————

Homelessness across England

Homelessness in England has steadily increased over the past four years, with pressures building year on year.

In 2021/22, councils completed 291,620 assessments, rising sharply to 324,650 in 2022/23 and peaking at 361,160 in 2023/24. Although assessments fell slightly to 360,050 in 2024/25, the number remains significantly higher than earlier years, highlighting a sustained national rise in housing instability.

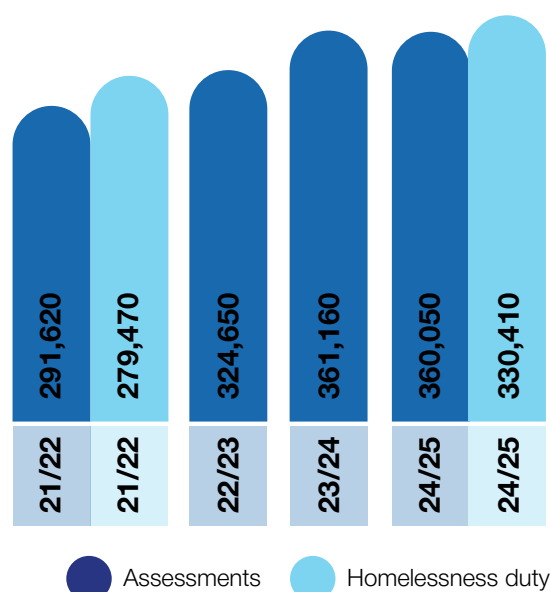
Across the same period, the number of households owed a homelessness duty also increased consistently from 279,470 in 2021/22 to 330,410 by 2024/25, demonstrating that more people are not only approaching councils but are meeting the threshold for statutory assistance.

These increases reflect wider national challenges. Private rents have risen faster than household incomes, the cost of living crisis has placed many at greater financial risk, and families face mounting pressures linked to mental health, domestic abuse, disability, and the continued instability associated with insecure private tenancies. Together, these factors have made homelessness both more common and more complex.

Temporary accommodation use has also continued to rise. By early 2025, England recorded 131,140 households living in temporary accommodation, the highest figure on record after more than two years of uninterrupted quarterly growth.

Rough sleeping shows a similar pattern. Numbers fell considerably during the pandemic due to the “Everyone In” programme, but began rising again from 2022 onwards, culminating in a 20 percent national increase by 2024. There is currently no evidence that this trend has stabilised.

Overall, the past four years show an England wide pattern of growing demand and increasingly stretched housing systems, affecting communities of all sizes.



Homelessness in the South West

The South West mirrors the national picture.

Assessments have risen from 28,890 in 2021/22 to 32,110 in 2023/24, before easing slightly to 30,580 in 2024/25. The number of households owed a homelessness duty followed a similar pattern, increasing from 28,010 in 2021/22 to 29,060 in 2023/24, and then settling at 28,280 in 2024/25.

Despite the slight reduction in the most recent year, demand remains far higher than at the start of the period. This reflects sustained pressures within the region, particularly in coastal, rural, and high tourism areas where rising rents, second home ownership, and short term lets have further reduced the supply of long term housing.

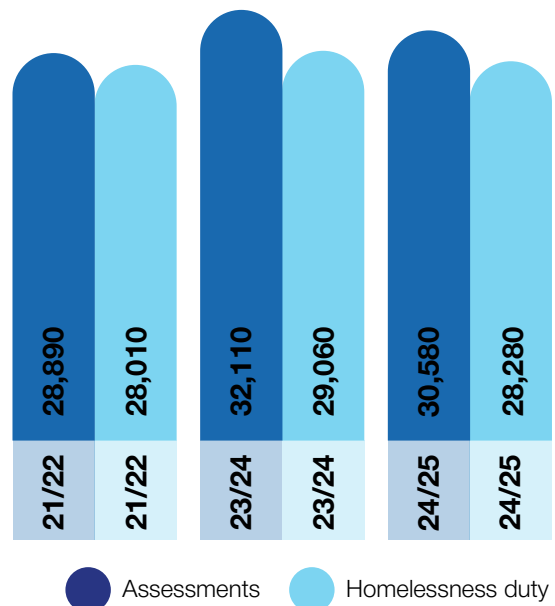
Affordability has become a persistent challenge, with local incomes failing to keep pace with private sector rents or the cost of borrowing for home ownership. As a result, more households are approaching councils because they are threatened with homelessness or already homeless.

Temporary accommodation capacity remains strained across many South West authorities, with limited move on options and increasing numbers of households remaining in temporary placements for longer periods.

The region continues to face several long standing pressures linked to its housing market:

- High housing costs in coastal and tourist driven locations
- Private rented homes that are increasingly unaffordable for low income households
- A limited supply of social and lower cost rented homes

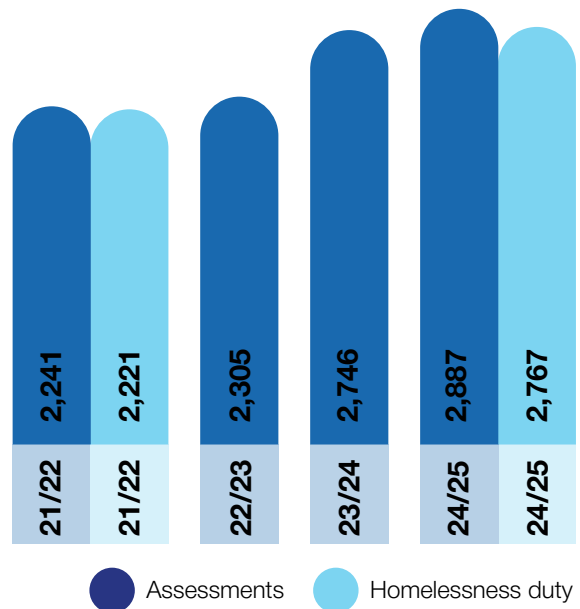
At the same time, councils are supporting more people with complex needs, including mental health issues, chronic health conditions, repeat homelessness, and other intersecting vulnerabilities.



Homelessness in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP)

Homelessness in BCP has risen sharply over the past four years, reflecting both national pressures and distinct local challenges.

In 2021/22, the council completed 2,241 assessments, rising steadily to 2,305 in 2022/23, then significantly to 2,746 in 2023/24, and reaching 2,887 assessments by 2024/25. Across the same period, the number of households owed a homelessness duty increased from 2,221 in 2021/22 to 2,767 in 2024/25, representing a substantial rise in demand for statutory support.



Much of this increase is driven by a fast moving and highly competitive private rented sector. High rents, low availability, and frequent changes in property use or ownership have led more households to lose their accommodation or struggle to secure new tenancies. At the same time, the supply of social housing has not kept pace with local housing need, limiting the availability of affordable long term solutions.

Health related vulnerabilities including mental ill health, chronic conditions, and disability are also contributing to rising complexity, with more people presenting with overlapping needs. Income instability, particularly among younger adults and those in insecure or lower paid work, continues to increase the risk of homelessness for many households.

Who is most affected?

Young adults aged 18 to 34 consistently make up a large proportion of applicants, driven by limited affordability, unstable incomes, and limited access to family support.

Over time, there has been growing recognition of the disproportionate impact on ethnic minority groups and LGBTQ+ individuals, who may face additional barriers or discrimination when seeking housing.

Women remain more likely to experience hidden homelessness, staying with friends or family, relying on informal arrangements, or remaining in unsafe situations due to a lack of alternatives. Approximately 22 percent of open homelessness cases involve someone with a learning disability, highlighting the increasingly complex nature of local housing need.

Temporary accommodation and use of bed and breakfast

Demand for temporary accommodation in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole has continued to increase over recent years, driven by rising homelessness approaches, pressures within the private rented sector and the limited availability of settled move-on options.

Social housing supply has not grown in line with need, leading to longer stays in temporary accommodation, particularly for larger families and households with higher or more complex support needs.

Despite these pressures, significant progress has been made in reducing the use of unsuitable temporary accommodation for families. Strengthened placement processes, earlier prevention activity, improved case coordination and increased access to interim and supported accommodation have enabled the Council to sustain a position of no families placed in bed and

breakfast accommodation for longer than six weeks for an extended period. This reflects a sustained operational focus on safeguarding, minimising disruption to children’s education and wellbeing, and improving the overall quality and appropriateness of temporary accommodation provision.

However, temporary accommodation as a whole remains under strain. Lengths of stay have increased for many households due to constrained move-on options, slow turnover within supported housing and limited availability of genuinely affordable accommodation. These pressures are most acute for households requiring adapted properties, larger homes, or multi-agency support, creating bottlenecks across the system.

The evidence highlights the dual challenge facing the local system: maintaining and protecting the progress achieved on suitability and standards, while addressing structural constraints that continue to drive demand and limit move-on. The Strategy therefore focuses on sustaining compliance with temporary accommodation standards alongside longer-term system change to improve flow, expand appropriate housing options and reduce repeat and prolonged stays in temporary accommodation.

Rough sleeping in BCP

Rough sleeping in the area has fluctuated over the last four years, with particularly sharp increases linked to wider economic pressures and the shortage of affordable accommodation.

In mid 2024, rough sleeping reached its highest level, with 193 people seen in a single month. While some individuals were encountered only briefly, often people passing through, the majority around 50 to 60 percent were long term rough sleepers facing severe and persistent challenges.

Since that peak, more recent data shows a sustained reduction in rough sleeping following targeted intervention. Expanded supported accommodation, enhanced multi-agency outreach and strengthened case management have contributed to a clear downward trend, including a significant reduction in long-term rough sleeping. These improvements mirror wider system changes, including stronger prevention activity and improved system flow, and demonstrate that coordinated, housing-led and health-informed responses are beginning to reverse previously rising trends.

While pressures remain, the current direction of travel illustrates the impact of focused partnership working and the importance of sustaining and scaling approaches that have already begun to deliver improved outcomes. The focus of the new Strategy is therefore on consolidating this progress, preventing re-escalation, and ensuring that reductions in rough sleeping are sustained over the longer term.

Why homelessness happens

Homelessness is usually the result of several connected pressures. Financial strain, loss of accommodation, and personal or health-related crises.

Common national and local causes include:

- Loss of a private tenancy (including Section 21 evictions).
- Family or friends no longer able or willing to accommodate.
- Domestic abuse.
- Eviction from supported housing.
- Homes becoming unsafe or unsuitable.

In BCP, the most common reasons for homelessness align with the national picture, with private rented sector instability, domestic abuse, unsuitable housing, and relationship breakdown featuring prominently in 2024/25 data.

The private rented sector continues to play a dual role in the local homelessness picture. The loss of a private tenancy remains one of the most common reasons for households approaching the Council for assistance, driven by affordability pressures, rising rents, Section 21 notices and increased competition for available homes. At the same time, the sector provides the largest number of opportunities for homelessness prevention and relief. Many households are able to sustain or secure accommodation through landlord negotiation, rent-related support and targeted intervention, making the private rented sector a critical component of both preventing homelessness and enabling move-on from temporary accommodation.





Support available in BCP

BCP has a wide network of services that work together to prevent and reduce homelessness.

Council Housing Options staff aim to help people understand their options early on, while outreach teams find and support people who are experiencing rough sleeping. There are services offering mental health support, help with substance use, and guidance for young people and families. Specialist teams also work together to make sure people leaving hospitals, prisons or the asylum system are not left without somewhere safe to go.

A significant part of the local support offer is delivered through the BCP Homelessness Partnership, which brings together more than forty five organisations across the public, private, community and faith sectors. The partnership is driven by people with lived experience of homelessness, ensuring that insight from those who use services helps shape local approaches. Members include BCP Council, Dorset Police, Probation, NHS Dorset, local universities, housing providers and a wide range of charities, making the partnership central to how the area responds to homelessness.

Support is available across many different pathways in BCP. St Mungo's leads street outreach, responding to concerns about individuals sleeping rough and helping people access safe accommodation and ongoing support. Community organisations such as Faithworks provide practical help including food, clothing, community meals and tailored one to one support, while also linking people into statutory services.

Preventing homelessness is a major focus. The Let's Talk Renting service offers advice for private tenants struggling with rent arrears, poor property conditions, notices, disputes with landlords or wider cost of living pressures. Housing Options also provides early advice for families, single people and young adults who may be at risk of losing their home. These prevention pathways are increasingly important as assessments and duties in BCP have risen significantly in recent years and the end of a private rented tenancy continues to be the leading cause of homelessness locally.

Demand has grown not only in volume but also in complexity. Our recent review shows that many households present with multiple overlapping support needs, including mental health difficulties, substance use, domestic abuse, chronic health conditions and learning disabilities. Young adults aged 18 to 34 make up more than half of those owed a homelessness duty, and family homelessness has increased in line with regional and national trends.

Recent operational improvements have resulted in a reduction in the number of families placed in unsuitable bed and breakfast accommodation. Strengthened placement processes, earlier prevention activity and increased access to interim and supported accommodation have contributed to fewer family households requiring B&B, and where it is used, the duration of stay has reduced. This reflects a sustained focus on minimising disruption to children, safeguarding family wellbeing and improving the overall quality of temporary accommodation.

Partnership working allows services to respond to these needs in a coordinated way. Multi agency casework, shared planning and joint outreach ensure that people receive the right support at the right time. Alongside emergency and temporary accommodation, organisations across BCP offer skills training, budgeting support, employment help and community activities that support recovery, wellbeing and long term stability.

Community involvement is also an important part of the local response. Public events and awareness campaigns help connect people with services while encouraging residents to support homelessness prevention. The Change for Good initiative provides a safe way for people to donate to a central fund used by partner organisations to help individuals rebuild their lives.

“ I don't want to have to say the same thing over and over, nobody ever asked me what I want or what I like”

“ I just want somewhere I can walk in, lock the door and sit quietly with a cup of tea”

Health bus interviews with people currently/recently rough sleeping

Development of this strategy

This strategy has been developed through a comprehensive review of homelessness and housing related evidence across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

The review brought together detailed analysis of local homelessness data, population trends, service performance and pressures across key pathways. This included five year trends in assessments, prevention and relief duties, main duty decisions, temporary accommodation use and rough sleeping levels. The evidence showed significant increases in homelessness approaches, a rise in early prevention activity, changes in statutory decisions, increased use of temporary accommodation and a peak in rough sleeping levels in 2024, with more recent reductions linked to targeted interventions.

The review also examined wider system activity including the operation of the private rented sector, the provision and suitability of supported and specialist accommodation, youth homelessness patterns, the impact of the cost of living and sustained pressures arising from the ending of Assured Shorthold Tenancies. This analysis highlighted the continued contraction of the private rented market, increasing length of stay in temporary accommodation and the growing impact of people being required to leave Home Office accommodation.

Alongside the analytical review, the strategy has been shaped by an extensive programme of engagement. Between June and November 2025, 549 people participated in 36 engagement activities, including workshops, group sessions, away days and thematic discussions. This included frontline housing staff, voluntary and community sector partners, health and social care services, community safety partners, Probation, education professionals, councillors and senior leaders, private landlords and a broad range of community and specialist groups.

Central to the engagement was the contribution of people with lived experience of homelessness. They shared insights on the importance of safe, decent and stable housing, the emotional impact of homelessness, the effect of stigma, challenges within temporary accommodation, difficulties accessing consistent support and the need for services to be more trauma informed, responsive and person centred.

Frontline staff and partners identified the need for clearer coordination across services, stronger communication, improved pathways between housing, health and social care, earlier identification of risk and greater consistency in how support is delivered. They also highlighted challenges such as short-term funding, staffing pressures, gaps in specialist provision, variation in the quality of temporary accommodation, pressures within the private rented sector and the need to further strengthen prevention and tenancy sustainment.

Young people, including those engaged through the Youth Forum and SPACE Youth Project, raised concerns about stigma, disruption to education and wellbeing, experiences of discrimination, barriers in accessing health and housing services and the need for better

early prevention and support within schools and youth settings. Private landlords contributed perspectives on affordability, perceptions of risk, the impact of legislative change and the value of early engagement to help sustain tenancies.

Together, the review evidence and engagement feedback created a clear and shared understanding of local needs, pressures and opportunities. This has ensured the strategy reflects the realities of homelessness across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, is grounded in the insights of people who use and deliver services, and is shaped by the collective ambition of partners and communities to achieve meaningful and sustainable change.

In developing this strategy, careful consideration was given to the wider legislative and policy landscape that shapes both local demand and the way homelessness services must operate. This includes major reforms to the private rented sector through the Renters Reform Act 2025, changes to welfare policy affecting affordability and household stability, and new regulatory requirements for supported and temporary accommodation. These national changes are expected to influence how easily people can keep their homes, how quickly accommodation becomes available, and the level and nature of support that councils and partners need to provide.

Homelessness is also increasingly recognised as a key driver of child poverty and poor outcomes for children and young people, with impacts on health, wellbeing, education and longer-term life chances. In developing the Strategy, regard was therefore given to wider national and local priorities on children's wellbeing, including the Council's Child Poverty Strategy and the direction of travel set out through the Children's Wellbeing Act. This has informed the Strategy's emphasis on prevention, early intervention and stability for families, and on reducing the disruption and harm associated with housing insecurity.

The Strategy has been shaped by the need to ensure that safeguarding considerations are embedded within the local homelessness system. Where children experience homelessness, including placements in temporary accommodation, agreed arrangements support safe and suitable placements. This includes close working between housing services, children's services and partner agencies, clear escalation where concerns arise, and a continued focus on suitability, stability and timely intervention.

The quality of temporary accommodation was a further consideration in shaping the Strategy. Evidence highlights the importance of maintaining appropriate standards and oversight to reduce harm and support recovery, particularly for families and households with additional needs. Recent strengthening of assurance and compliance arrangements has informed this approach, reinforcing expectations around safety, suitability and dignity within temporary accommodation provision.



Temporary Accommodation likely to be very disruptive practically and emotionally including to education, friendships, belonging and wellbeing”

BCP Youth Panel

The strategy has also been aligned with key local frameworks that shape how services work together across housing, health and wellbeing. These include:

- The BCP Housing Strategy
- The Domestic Abuse and Safe Accommodation Strategy
- The NHS Dorset Integrated Care Board Joint Forward Plan
- The Dorset Integrated Care Partnership Strategy
- The BCP Health and Wellbeing Board priorities
- Emerging Specialist Housing Strategy

Together, these plans set the direction for prevention, early help, integrated health and housing responses and the development of new and appropriate accommodation pathways. Aligning this strategy with these wider plans ensures a consistent, whole-system approach to reducing homelessness and rough sleeping.

In addition, the strategy reflects the Government's most recent national homelessness strategy, which sets out expectations around prevention, rapid response, and reducing rough sleeping. The approach has been shaped by the latest national funding settlement for homelessness and rough sleeping services, which determines the resources available locally and the areas where councils and partners are expected to prioritise improvement and system change over the coming years.



How engagement shaped this strategy

This Strategy has been shaped by comprehensive engagement with 549 participants across residents, people with lived experience, partners, frontline staff, senior leaders and community organisations. Consultation feedback has resulted in a number of significant changes to the final Strategy.

These include:

- Stronger emphasis on partnership working, reflecting feedback from O&S, the Homelessness Delivery Board and consultation participants who felt the partnership role needed clearer definition.
- Clearer articulation of cross-sector responsibilities, particularly around health, following feedback from NHS and voluntary sector partners.
- Expanded focus on lived experience, with Experts by Experience shaping language, priorities and the emphasis on trauma-informed practice.
- Plain English refinements, reducing jargon and increasing readability based on feedback from service users and frontline staff.
- A stronger narrative on rapid response, pathways and integration, reflecting comments from providers and caseworkers.
- Commitment to halving rough sleeping, strengthening our ambition in line with national expectations and partner feedback.
- Additional clarity on alignment with the national Strategy, responding to questions raised at the HDB.

The Strategy therefore reflects not only the evidence base but also the voices of the people and organisations who use, deliver and oversee homelessness services across BCP.



It is important to understand and hear stories and keep it real”

BCP Youth Panel

What the new strategy will do

The strategy has clear aims: to make homelessness rare, brief, and unrepeatable.

To change the narrative around homelessness and to work alongside those who've experienced it.

This means preventing homelessness before it happens where possible, acting quickly and kindly when people need help, and supporting people so they don't become homeless again.

The strategy focuses on five key areas. First, it aims to identify risks earlier, especially for young people and families. Second, it wants to make sure people get fast, compassionate help when they reach out. Third, it commits to helping people stay housed by offering ongoing support for health, wellbeing, and money. Fourth, it encourages everyone to use respectful language and work to reduce stigma. Finally, it centres the voices of people with lived experience, involving them in shaping and improving services.



What success looks like

If this strategy is successful, fewer people across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole will face the risk of homelessness.

When people do need help, they will receive timely and effective support so that any experience of homelessness is brief, safe and does not repeat. People will spend less time in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough, and more will be supported into stable, long-term homes where they can rebuild their lives. Over time, this will contribute to better health, wellbeing and financial security for individuals, families and communities.

Success will also be reflected in how well different services work together. When housing, health, social care, voluntary and community partners coordinate around the needs of the person, homelessness becomes both less likely to occur and easier to resolve. Stronger joint working, clearer pathways, and earlier intervention will be key indicators of progress.

In defining success, this strategy is aligned with the Government's Local Outcomes Framework for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping. This means tracking improvements not only in reduced homelessness and rough sleeping, but also in the quality and stability of accommodation, the effectiveness of prevention, the wellbeing and safety of those we support, and the strength of local partnership working. These outcomes will be used to guide our activity and measure the impact of this strategy over time.



Summary

Homelessness affects many people across England, the South West, and here in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

It has many causes and often affects people already facing difficult circumstances. Rising housing costs, personal crises, health challenges and limited availability of affordable homes all contribute to growing demand for support.

The BCP Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy sets out a clear and hopeful vision: to make homelessness rare, brief and unrepeated. It focuses on early help, responding quickly and compassionately when people need support, and ensuring that people can move into stable homes where they can rebuild their lives. Central to this approach is the involvement of people with lived experience and strong partnership working across housing, health, social care, the voluntary and community sector and wider public services.

The strategy also recognises the importance of the wider national context. It aligns with the Government's Local Outcomes Framework for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping and will track progress in areas such as reduced homelessness, improved housing stability, better health and wellbeing, and more coordinated support across services.

By working together, using evidence, and listening to those most affected, BCP aims to build a future in which homelessness is less likely to happen and when it does, people receive the right help at the right time.



