

## Local authorities and the strategic housing role – a guide for local councillors

### What is the strategic housing role?

A council's strategic housing role is all the things it can do to help ensure that the housing needs of residents are met, across all tenures. Local authorities play a key role in enabling sufficient good quality, affordable and accessible housing to meet the needs of their residents.

Some strategic duties are statutory, but councils can also do more than the minimum and use their enabling powers to create healthy neighbourhoods and reduce health inequalities. This includes improving the conditions of existing neighbourhoods as well as developing new healthy neighbourhoods.

Even if your council does not own any social or affordable housing you will still have strategic housing duties at the unitary or district level. If you do not have a housing department those functions may sit in a communities or place focused department.

### A safe and secure home is the foundation of good health and wellbeing

A home that provides safety, warmth and a refuge from the outside world is the base which everyone needs to live their lives well. A decent and affordable home enables people to engage with education and employment, look after their health and to connect with their local community.

Housing conditions can fundamentally affect people's health. One in five children are living in overcrowded, unaffordable or unsuitable homes and homelessness is at record levels<sup>i</sup>. Unaffordable or insecure housing can put pressure on mental health and cause significant stress. Too many people are living in overpriced, insecure and poor-quality housing which undermines life chances, holds back economic growth and puts pressure on the NHS.

### Housing need

Local authorities are required to "periodically review the housing needs of its area in relation to housing conditions and the needs of the district with respect to the provision of further housing provision"<sup>ii</sup> The legislation includes a duty to consider the needs of people who need sites on which caravans can be stationed, or places on inland waterways where houseboats can be moored. Councils must also have regard to the special needs of chronically sick or disabled persons<sup>iii</sup> and carry out reviews of the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers residing in or resorting to their district<sup>iv</sup>.

## Enabling the building of new homes

These duties are complimented by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which requires local planning authorities to have a clear understanding of the housing needs in their area and the scale and mix of housing types and tenures that the local population is likely to need over the plan period.

Councils can seek to control the mix of tenures delivered by new development, including the proportion of affordable housing through their planning powers. Depending on local needs, affordable housing may include social rent or affordable rent homes, discounted market sale or shared ownership. Types of housing can include specialised accommodation that cater to specific needs, for example, retirement housing, accessible homes and supported housing for those with learning difficulties or other vulnerabilities.

Councils must determine where these new homes should be located. They need to consider what land is suitable, available and able to be developed within the local area, culminating in the Local Plan that ensures a five-year land supply for all tenures.

Local authorities have wide powers to acquire and develop land for housing to meet needs in the area. They have powers to sell land for housing to private developers at market rates or for less than best consideration in certain circumstances e.g. to housing associations. They can also partner with housing associations and developers in joint vehicles to provide land to develop homes for sale as well as affordable and social rented properties.

Councils can influence the design and quality of new homes to promote good living standards through design codes<sup>v</sup>. These are intended to set out specific design parameters for new development that are tailored to local character and needs. Local plans can also require new developments follow nationally described space standards or apply healthy design principles such as those set out by the TCPA<sup>vi</sup> or defined through accreditation schemes such as building for a healthy life<sup>vii</sup>.

## Improving housing quality in your area

The quality of homes in your area can significantly impact on the health and wellbeing of your residents. Damp and mould, poor maintenance, lack of adaptations and overcrowding all have an impact. Councils have the power to assess and enforce the quality of homes in the area<sup>viii</sup> and are required to review the condition of all housing in the area with a view to identifying any action that may need to be taken<sup>ix</sup>.

If a private rented home has been reported or has come to light in that review as at risk of being unsafe the local authority must arrange for an inspection to be carried out in accordance with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System<sup>x</sup> (HHSRS).

The HHSRS is a list of housing hazards that may affect the health and safety of the occupant of the property. The most serious hazard is Category 1 which could be an

immediate risk to the person's health and safety. If a Category 1 Hazard is found councils have a range of enforcement duties ranging from informal negotiation to prosecution through the courts.

The Renters Rights Act<sup>xi</sup> came into force from 1 May 2026, strengthening local authority investigatory and enforcement powers alongside introducing a new range of civil penalties where landlords or agents fail to comply with the Act's obligations. These new powers should help councils tackle poor quality housing in their areas.

The Local Authority is also responsible for mandatory licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)<sup>xii</sup> and improving accessibility in the housing in their areas through disabled facilities grants<sup>xiii</sup>. It also has a range of powers to bring empty homes back into use. These include Empty Dwelling Management Orders and other measures to secure the improvement of empty properties, compulsory purchase and enforced sales.

## Affordability of housing

Private rents are at record highs and two-thirds of social renters and one-third of private tenants receive help with housing costs through the local housing allowance (LHA), housing benefit (HB) or universal credit (UC). Many tenants receiving help with housing costs are in work but on low wages, or unable to work due to disability or caring responsibilities.

Councils are responsible for the administration of both HB and LHA. HB has mostly been replaced by a housing element within UC but is still paid to eligible people if they are of state pension age or living in supported, sheltered or temporary housing.

LHA sets the amount of financial help with housing that people can claim if they need support but are renting from a private landlord. LHA rates are set according to the age and size of the household and used to cover the bottom 30 per cent of the market and rise each year as rents went up - but for more than a decade that hasn't been the case. The shared accommodation rate is a lower rate of LHA that applies to most single private renters under 35 years old. It covers the cost of renting a single room in shared accommodation, such as a room in a house with shared kitchen and bathroom.

All LHA rates have been frozen at various points in the past and haven't been updated again recently. This means that there are now fewer homes that people on low incomes can afford to rent. Given the pressures on lower income households as well as councils having to provide and pay for temporary accommodation, CIH is asking that the government urgently restores LHA levels so that people can afford the bottom 30 per cent of homes on the rental market. This is the minimum necessary to prevent homelessness and relieve pressure on local authorities.

## Supported housing

Supported housing is a crucial part of the entire housing system, offering a home and essential support for people with a range of needs. Specialist and supported housing give people the chance to recover their health and independence or continue to live independently with support for as long as it is required. But the supported housing sector is facing a loss of services due to funding pressures and there have been significant concerns over the quality and suitability of some supported accommodation within the sector.

The Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023 therefore aims to tackle rogue providers in the sector and to ensure that all residents receive good quality support in good quality accommodation. It is currently being rolled out in stages and sets out:

- New National Supported Housing Standards for the support provided to residents
- A supported housing licensing regime
- A new planning use class for supported housing
- A definition of care, support and supervision in HB regulations
- A requirement for local authorities to develop local supported housing strategies by 27 March 2027.

## Allocations for social and affordable housing

Local authorities have a statutory requirement to maintain an allocations policy and support people seeking social housing, whether they own housing stock or not<sup>xiv</sup>. The policy sets out who is eligible and qualifies for social housing in your area. If people qualify, they will join the council's housing register or "waiting list". There are about 1.34 million households on local authority waiting lists, the highest it has been since 2014<sup>xv</sup>.

Council allocation policies are subject to statutory guidance<sup>xvi</sup> on eligibility and qualifications, with priority given to those with reasonable preference<sup>xvii</sup> (e.g. homelessness, medical needs, overcrowding). Local authorities can also set their own criteria for eligibility, so long as these do not unlawfully discriminate and meet the government guidance. For example, while housing allocations must exclude people who are subject to immigration control with no recourse to public funds, it is not legal to deny access to housing based on ethnicity or nationality.

Allocations to available social housing can then be made via a direct letting to a council home or by nominating them to a local housing association's home. Housing associations are required by law 'to co-operate to such extent as is reasonable' in offering accommodation to people with priority under a local authority allocation scheme<sup>xviii</sup>. They are also required by regulation to "co-operate with local authorities' strategic housing functions and assist local authorities to fulfil their duties to meet identified local housing need<sup>xix</sup>."

## Homelessness

Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness, however being homeless can also mean living in unsafe, unsuitable or unstable accommodation, or 'sofa surfing' between friends' or relatives' house (sometimes called hidden homelessness).

Councils have several statutory duties related to providing advice and assistance to those that are homeless or threatened homelessness<sup>xx</sup>. These duties range from making initial inquiries and advising on available accommodation in the area to action to prevent homelessness or by securing accommodation to discharge the duty. Eligibility is based on an applicant's immigration and residence status in the UK.

Councils must develop and publish a homelessness strategy at least every five years and take it into account in discharging its functions<sup>xxi</sup>. The homelessness strategy must cover prevention of homelessness, ensuring suitable accommodation is available for people in the area who are or are at risk of becoming homeless and providing support for people in the area who are/may become homeless.

The homelessness crisis is a substantial drain on the finances of local authorities, and still most homelessness services are underfunded. Councils spent £2.8 billion on temporary accommodation in 2024/25, an increase of 25 per cent on the previous year and more than double that from five years ago<sup>xxii</sup>.

### **Prevention**

The best way to tackle homelessness is to prevent it happening in the first place. Action to prevent homelessness can include:

- Helping someone to remain in their private sector tenancy by providing legal advocacy and advice, negotiating with landlords or resolving financial issues like benefit entitlement or managing debt
- Helping to secure alternative accommodation in the private rented sector via a bond or rent guarantee scheme
- Helping a victim of domestic abuse to access specialist advice and/or alternative accommodation in a refuge or other safe housing
- Supporting vulnerably housed people to sustain their tenancies.

### **Temporary accommodation**

Temporary accommodation should only be used as a last resort, where there is no alternative. Unfortunately it is having to be used more and more and for longer than before as alternatives in both the social and private rented sector are limited. Bed and breakfast accommodation should only be used for families with children in an emergency and for no longer than six weeks.

Over 176,000 children in England were living in temporary accommodation at the end of 2025<sup>xxiii</sup>. On average each of these children's stays in temporary accommodation were estimated to last between two and five years. These families are increasingly housed in

overcrowded, low-quality B&Bs and budget hotels. The foundations of lifelong physical and mental health are established in the first 1,001 days of life<sup>xxiv</sup>.

## A National Plan to End Homelessness

In December 2025 the government announced its National Plan to End Homelessness which included:

- Plans to change social housing allocation guidance
- A national target for homelessness prevention in this parliament
- A new legal 'Duty to Collaborate' for public services to prevent and address homelessness
- A new requirement for each local council to publish a homelessness action plan alongside their local homelessness strategy.

The CIH has welcomed this plan but is still calling for a clearly identified funding stream for housing-related support, an unfreezing of local housing allowances to help people remain or move into the private rented sector and more investment in Housing First, an approach shown to tackle homelessness effectively.

### About CIH

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the independent voice for housing and the home of professional standards. Our goal is simple - to provide housing professionals and their organisations with the advice, support and knowledge they need. Many local authority housing professionals are members of the CIH. CIH is a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation so the money we make is put back into the organisation and funds the activities we carry out to support the housing sector. We also provide training and professional qualifications for the sector. For more info: [www.cih.org](http://www.cih.org).

- 
- <sup>i</sup> NHF, People in housing need, October 2021 <https://www.housing.org.uk/housingneed>
- <sup>ii</sup> Housing Act 1985 Section 8
- <sup>iii</sup> Chronically Sick and Disabled Person's Act 1970, as amended Section 3
- <sup>iv</sup> Housing Act 2004 Section 224
- <sup>v</sup> The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/healthy-homes-principles/>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.designforhomes.org/project/building-for-a-healthy-life/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, Housing Act 2004, Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 and the most recent Social Housing Regulation Act 2023
- <sup>ix</sup> Housing Act 2004
- <sup>x</sup> Housing Health and Safety Rating System (England) Regulations 2005
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-the-renters-rights-act/guide-to-the-renters-rights-act>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/houses-in-multiple-occupation-and-residential-property-licensing-reform-guidance-for-local-housing-authorities/houses-in-multiple-occupation-and-residential-property-licensing-reform-guidance-for-local-housing-authorities>
- <sup>xiii</sup> Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 SI 2002/1860.
- <sup>xiv</sup> The Housing Act 1996 Parts 6 & 7 (as amended)
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/social-housing-lettings-in-england-april-2024-to-march-2025/social-housing-lettings-in-england-tenants-april-2024-to-march-2025>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/allocation-of-accommodation-guidance-for-local-authorities>
- <sup>xvii</sup> The Housing Act 1996 Section 166
- <sup>xviii</sup> The Housing Act 1996 Section 170
- <sup>xix</sup> RSH Tenancy Standard – Consumer standards 1 April 2024
- <sup>xx</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/52/part/VII>
- <sup>xxi</sup> Homelessness Act 2002
- <sup>xxii</sup> [https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press\\_release/bill\\_for\\_homeless\\_accommodation\\_soars\\_by\\_25\\_hitting\\_28\\_billion#:~:text=Today%20the%20government%20has%20released,just%20as%20cramped%20as%20B&Bs.](https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/bill_for_homeless_accommodation_soars_by_25_hitting_28_billion#:~:text=Today%20the%20government%20has%20released,just%20as%20cramped%20as%20B&Bs.)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-october-to-december-2025?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications-single-page&utm\\_source=5ea351b9-e61d-445f-9b12-8956a43a6a36&utm\\_content=immediately](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-october-to-december-2025?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-single-page&utm_source=5ea351b9-e61d-445f-9b12-8956a43a6a36&utm_content=immediately)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> [The best start for life: A vision for the 1,001 critical days](#)