

Homelessness in Plymouth

Statutory homelessness¹:

Homelessness is a significant challenge in Plymouth. Despite having achieved year on year reductions since 2002, there was a marked turning point in 2010 when homelessness again began to rise, and it is likely to rise further in an exceptionally challenging economic and housing market environment.

- Last year (2013/14) 14,737 customers approached the Housing Options service, asking for support in relation to their housing (a 40% increase on the previous year – approximately 56 households every day).
- 1,252 of these households were case-worked by a specialist housing advisor, and 529 (42%) went on to make statutory homeless approaches.
- Plymouth City Council accepted a statutory duty to house 278 of these households.
- This year so far homelessness approaches are up 14% and homelessness acceptances up 33%

The reasons why people approach the Housing Options Team for support:

Over 2/3rds of all contacts made concern requests for support to access/achieve priority for social housing. In December the housing register (Devon Home Choice) waiting list reached 11,026, with only approximately 25 lets available every week – competition for this scarce resource is fierce, with multiple contacts resulting. In addition, high numbers of single people approach the service – either for advice

¹ 'Statutory homelessness', is where local authorities have defined a household as homeless within the terms of the homelessness legislation. Where they are found to be in priority need and not intentionally homeless then local authorities will have a duty to offer accommodation. This can include families with dependent children, pregnant women and adults who are assessed as vulnerable.

or financial support to access the private rented sector, or because they have a history of tenancy failure and are having difficulties securing alternative accommodation.

Homelessness prevention work that mitigates financial risk to Plymouth City Council:

Last year homelessness prevention work meant that 892 households were prevented from becoming homeless, with a massive contribution made by commissioned services targeting homeless households. This year a target of 1000 households has been set, with 505 achieved in the first 6 months.

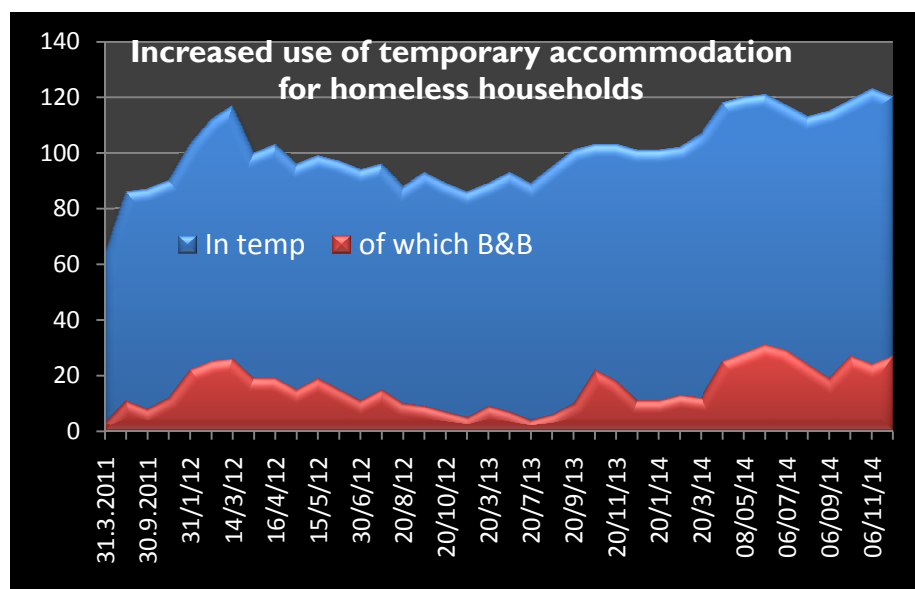
Prevention work means that an increased proportion of households are supported to stay put. Prevention activity includes providing mediation and support to 16/17 year olds and their families where relationships are at breakdown; affordability/debt work to address rent arrears and hardship; and casework to address tenant/landlord issues and support development of life skills.

Where households need alternative accommodation, approximately equal numbers are supported to access social housing (by being allocated priority band 'B') and private rented (supported by a commissioned rent deposit scheme). Relatively few preventions are achieved by supporting access to supported accommodation, reflecting intense pressure on these resources that makes them difficult to access. With budgetary pressures on the local authority increasing, capacity is unlikely to be increased to any large extent.

Temporary Accommodation:

The rising number of households in temporary accommodation (though the figure fluctuates – see the monthly 'temp tracker' below) continues to be a cause for concern, and there is significant overspend in relation to the B&B/emergency accommodation budget:-

- At the end of last year there were 109 households in temporary accommodation – at the end of the last quarter (September) there were 126.
- B&B is only used in an emergency, and the 93 families with children who were briefly accommodated in B&B at some point during 2013/14 were moved into leased houses within 3 weeks.
- In the first 6 months of this year 80 families have been accommodated in B&B at some point.
- However the most significant rise relates to single people with vulnerabilities – 28 in B&B at the end of the quarter, a 155% rise on the previous year. They tend to stay in B&B longer (a reflection on the lack of supported accommodation available).



Significantly higher levels of demand, combined with difficulties in accessing affordable settled accommodation for homeless households mean that people have to remain longer in temporary accommodation, hence the numbers are rising.

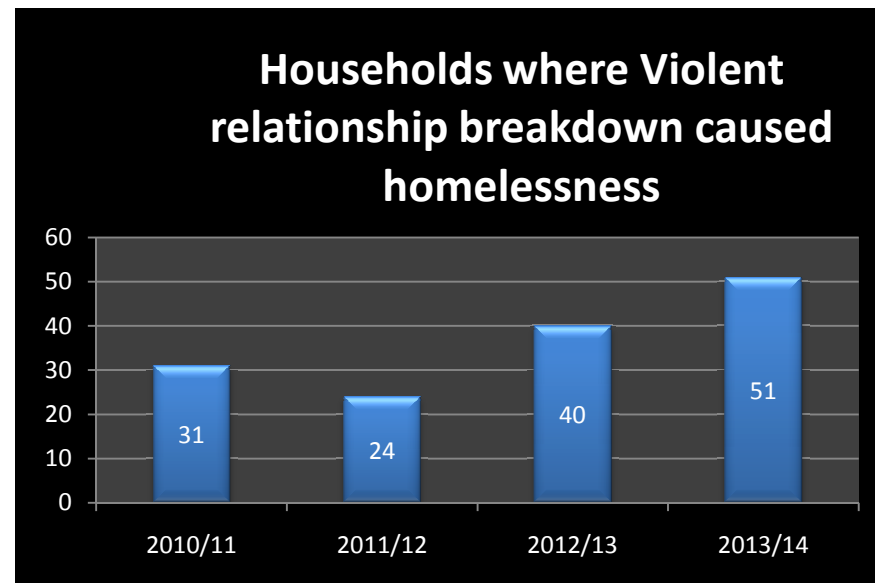
Causes of homelessness locally:

Loss of private rented tenancy is the biggest factor leading to statutory homelessness, with the most common trigger being family conflict. However this is often driven by underlying vulnerabilities and issues including drug and alcohol misuse, poor physical and mental health, behavioural problems, a lack of education and skills, and offending behaviour.

There are 3 critical environmental factors that make these common triggers more likely to result in homelessness:

1. The economic downturn leading to higher levels of unemployment and lower household income.
2. Housing supply struggling to keep pace with demand.
3. Major welfare and social policy reforms affecting accessibility and affordability of housing.

The high and rising levels of domestic violence among households who become homeless is a cause of concern:



Homeless hostels and rough sleeping in the city:

There are 346 hostel/supported accommodation units available to support non-statutory homeless² people with support needs, occupied for an average of 96.5% of the time (some void time is inevitable to allow for turnover) – therefore enabling us to estimate that there are an average of 334 homeless people occupying hostels/supported housing accommodation at any one time.

The city has a rough sleeper outreach team who contact people who are street homeless to support/encourage them to access hostels. Following impressive work to achieve reductions in rough sleeping, numbers in Plymouth are beginning to rise. This very much reflects the national picture – with much written about the squeeze on Local Authority budgets causing reductions in support for homeless people. Rises in rough sleeping are not as high in Plymouth as those seen in some local authorities where budgets have been more heavily cut.

Last year's official estimate (a robust measure based on 'hot spot' counts, reports of rough sleeping, and local knowledge of the rough sleeper team) was 9. The figure submitted last week was 13.

Repossession claims through Plymouth Combined Court:

With one quarter remaining of 2014/15 (compared in the graph below with previous full year totals), mortgage repossessions remain low (low interest rates and proactive 'forbearance' policies by lenders); the majority of possession claims are made by social landlords – but levels overall are falling, despite the fact that there are over 2000 people subject to the bedroom tax in the city - suggesting high input to address rent arrears prior to court action; of more concern is the increase in claims by private landlords – accelerated claims are already in excess of last year's total.

