

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

Uncovered

Homelessness

Shining a spotlight on our county of contrast



Foreword

Everyone deserves a warm and safe home. However, not everyone currently has equal opportunity and access to suitable and affordable housing in Buckinghamshire.

Inability to access housing that is truly affordable leads to homelessness and rough sleeping numbers increasing to pre-pandemic levels.

- ♡ In 2023, Rightmove reported High Wycombe as having the largest annual increase in rental costs (22.4%) in the UK.
- ♡ The Office for National Statistics reported that 18 homeless people died in Buckinghamshire between 2013-2021, which is double the total recorded for the neighbouring local authority area in Luton during the same period.
- ♡ The average monthly shortfall between housing benefit and rent for the constituency of Aylesbury in February 2023 was £222.16.

Despite the current housing crisis, there is hope for Buckinghamshire. We must continue to act collaboratively to tackle the root causes of homelessness, now and in the future.



Introduction

At Heart of Bucks we are dedicated to understanding and addressing societal challenges. This report seeks to highlight the complexities surrounding homelessness and uncover the growing crisis that often remains unseen within Buckinghamshire. Despite the county being known for its economic vibrancy and cultural heritage, homelessness persists and continues to affect our communities.

This report aims to identify systemic challenges which contribute to homelessness in Buckinghamshire while painting a detailed picture of key statistics and trends. We endeavour to humanise the issue by sharing stories and experiences in the hope this will shed a light on the personal struggles and resilience of those experiencing homelessness. While the issue of homelessness may seem overwhelming, this report highlights existing initiatives, successful interventions, and potential pathways for change.

What is homelessness?

There are many types of homelessness. The national homeless charity Crisis uses the terms 'rough sleeping', 'hidden homelessness', those in 'temporary accommodation', and those who are 'statutorily homeless' (see below for more detailed explanations of these terms). This means that some people experiencing this broader definition of homelessness, who do not fit the commonly held assumptions of what homelessness looks like, will not show up on national statistics and the true scale of the problem is not always accurately depicted.

Understanding the types of homelessness will lead to a better overview, deeper understanding and enable more informed decision making.



Homelessness can be invisible or look dissimilar to the commonly held assumptions of what homelessness looks like.

Definitions of homelessness

Rough sleeping: The most visible and unsafe form of homelessness. Rough sleeping includes sleeping outside or in places that aren't designed for people to live in, including cars, doorways and abandoned buildings.

Hidden homelessness: This includes people who may be considered homeless but whose housing situation is not visible on the streets or captured in official statistics. This means staying with family and friends, sofa surfing or living in unsuitable housing.

Temporary accommodation: Although individuals are technically 'off the streets', temporary accommodation is still a form of homelessness. This short-term solution provides a safe place to stay while individuals and families wait for longer term housing. However, each type of accommodation will have regulations and rules regarding length of stay and access and may not always be appropriate for the occupier.

Statutory homelessness: To be legally defined as homeless you must either lack a secure place in which you are entitled to live or not reasonably be able to stay. However, in order to receive assistance under the main homelessness duty, there are further strict criteria that you have to meet.



Causes and Contributors

Alongside systemic issues relating to the economy and housing supply, homelessness is often caused by a variety of deeply personalised factors such as loss of employment, debt, and substance abuse.

According to Buckinghamshire Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2022-25, the other main factors contributing to homelessness included: domestic abuse, relationship breakdowns, friends and family who can no longer accommodate, and leaving an institution.

Current causes of homelessness relate to inflation, the rising cost of living, and the subsequent increase in poverty and debt. Alongside these are rising private rental costs and the decline of the full range of Affordable Housing products, such as Social Rent lettings.

Affordable Housing is defined by the National Planning Policy Framework as a series of housing products including homes for rent at a cost at least 20% below those in the private market, and those for sale, either in whole or in part, at a discount to meet the needs of those whose needs are not met by the general housing market.





In an area like Buckinghamshire, where private rent and sale prices are considerably higher than in other areas, affordable housing may not always be truly affordable and accessible for those on low incomes.

A lack of truly affordable housing is a key contributing factor for the current housing crisis and routes to homelessness. Unfortunately, the lack of low-cost housing is not only a contributing factor to homelessness, but it is also a key barrier to people moving out of housing insecurity more generally, trapping households in what may seem to be a continuous cycle.

Another major contributing factor to the issue of homelessness is no-fault evictions. This means that private tenants could be evicted with minimal notice and little justification at any time. Conversations to overturn this practice with legislation have been happening since 2019, but delays to action have left thousands of households still at risk of being made homeless, until the 'Renters Reform Bill' is passed through Parliament. While there is uncertainty about the future of no-fault evictions, there is the risk that evictions of this type will increase as landlords are incentivised to act while they are still permissible. However, if enacted, the Renters Reform Bill is a significant step towards increasing the rights of tenants, removing no fault evictions, and preventing some cases of homelessness.

A photograph of a man in a grey beanie and brown jacket holding a silver thermos. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In the foreground, the back of a person wearing a bright blue jacket is visible. The background shows a brick building with several windows. The entire image has a blue tint.

What is the homelessness picture
for Buckinghamshire?

Insights

National statistics show that requests for help with homelessness from local authorities have increased significantly, and this trend is highly likely to continue. In 2021/22, councils reported an 88% increase in support requests for evictions, specifically from the private rented sector and a further 93% stated they anticipated additional increases during the following 12 months.

4,975

Households in Buckinghamshire reported to have approached the local council for advice related to homelessness in 2022/23.



2.9 people per 100,000

Sleeping rough in Buckinghamshire

5.1 people per 100,000

Average number sleeping rough in England

On the surface the situation with street homelessness appears positive according to the statistics above. However, there are pockets of high deprivation in Buckinghamshire where rough sleeping is most prevalent, such as central High Wycombe and central Aylesbury. For example, in Autumn 2022 a snapshot of rough sleeping was conducted for Buckinghamshire and 16 rough sleepers were counted on a single night in these areas. As rough sleeping is concentrated in urban areas in Buckinghamshire, this is relatively high when compared to neighbouring urban areas such as Luton, which had a total of 11 rough sleepers in the Autumn 2022 snapshot. Although the number of people sleeping rough are not at pre-pandemic levels, numbers are slowly increasing again.



5,804

Households in Buckinghamshire on the waiting list for social housing in 2023.

This figure ranks Buckinghamshire as the local authority with the second highest housing waiting list within the South-East region. This demonstrates the significant demand for lower cost housing in Buckinghamshire and indicates that large numbers of households are living in housing insecurity and may therefore be at greater risk of homelessness.



The extent of homelessness in statutory data is echoed in the insight provided by local charities such as, Aylesbury Homeless Action Group (AHAG) and Wycombe Homeless Connection (WHC).

AHAG and WHC collaborated on a homelessness prevention project for residents of Buckinghamshire and predicted they would support 120 individuals (60 households).

This project ended up supporting almost double the predicted outcome; 238 individuals (65 households). This evidences the need for these services and the increasing struggles which communities are facing in Buckinghamshire.

The immediate crisis work done by charities like AHAG and WHC is extremely important, but we must also consider why so many people are still ending up in these situations and focus on implementing prevention strategies to compliment this.



Due to the uncertain and complex conditions of living without a secure home, there are considerable physical and mental health implications for homeless individuals which leads to a devastatingly low average life expectancy.

National life expectancy

	Homeless	Average
Males	45.9	78.7
Females	41.6	82.7

According to the ONS, between 2013 and 2021 there were a total of **18 identified deaths** in Buckinghamshire linked to homelessness. This is double the total of recorded deaths for the neighbouring area of Luton. This demonstrates that, despite the affluence in Buckinghamshire, the area is not immune to the challenges of more deprived urban areas.



Photo: Connection Support - David gets his own home

Key Stats: Housing and Homelessness in Buckinghamshire



5,804 households on the housing waiting list in December 2023



4,975 approaches for homelessness assistance to Buckinghamshire Council in 2022/23



£1,400 average monthly rent for a three-bed property in Buckinghamshire in 2022/23



£480,130 average house price in Buckinghamshire, August 2023



396 households in temporary accommodation in October 2023



16 rough sleepers in the county counted in central High Wycombe and Aylesbury on one night in 2022

“Rough sleeping is traumatic and very dangerous, and we know that people who have to experience it die much younger. The entrenched rough sleepers I have worked with often had undiagnosed or untreated issues that were very difficult for them to start to work on without very basic life necessities. Along with complex trauma, undiagnosed neurodivergence (like autism and ADHD) is increasingly understood to be one of the many unmet needs that can lead to a person struggling through life feeling different and not knowing why. We are learning more about the link between undiagnosed ADHD and substance misuse, one of the known drivers of rough sleeping.

The best sustained outcomes are achieved when services help address the problems that cause and perpetuate rough sleeping, work together with the person at the centre and their challenges and adopt a trauma informed approach. Substance misuse, mental health, offending, physical health etc. The bricks and mortar part are (almost) the easy bit.

The Oasis Partnership is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year and is going back to its roots as a Buckinghamshire social justice organisation. They are forming some really exciting new projects focussed on the link between unsupported ADHD and the big drivers for homelessness, including building the evidence base for what really works for people.”



“The entrenched rough sleepers I have worked with often had undiagnosed or untreated issues that were very difficult for them to start to work on without very basic life necessities.”

Liz Barter

Heart of Bucks Ambassador for
Isolation, Disadvantage & Poverty

A hand holding a pen over a document, with a house model, calculator, and keys in the background.

The Housing Crisis and Homelessness

The cost of monthly rent, the historic 'freezing' of Local Housing Allowance (LHA), the huge shortfall of affordable housing, and the considerable amount of empty dwellings have exacerbated the homelessness crisis. In Buckinghamshire, the demand for affordable housing overtakes the annual delivery of new homes and lettings by a ratio of 3:1. More housing that is affordable will help, but personal circumstances will continue and we cannot 'solve' homelessness through a single pathway or solution.



Six out of ten 'Opportunity Bucks' wards are in High Wycombe, which has recently suffered from the largest annual increase in average rent (22.4%) in the UK. This has led to an unsustainable average monthly increase from £1,071 to £1,311. The rental market is highly populated with low-income groups in receipt of welfare benefits. This means the rising costs of private rent is likely to have a proportionately larger impact on those who are in lower socio-economic groups. On average, tenants renting privately spend a higher proportion of their income on housing compared with those who live in their own properties. This will prohibit movement to home ownership and intensify the probability of homelessness.

According to national charity Shelter, '52% of landlords have admitted that they would not, or prefer not to, rent to people in receipt of housing benefits.'



As of August 2023, the average house price in Buckinghamshire was **£480,130**, which was well above the national average of **£292,049**. With both the rental and sales market above the national average in Buckinghamshire, it is likely that the amount of people at risk of homelessness will continue to rise.

To tackle homelessness and reduce the number of people at risk of homelessness, the housing needs of residents, how these needs are changing, and how they may be different across the county, must be understood.

The population of Buckinghamshire has seen a 23.1% increase in the number of people over the age of 65 living in the county. The changing demographic increases the demand for suitable and adapted housing. When attempting to tackle the homelessness crisis, we must not only consider financial factors but also the conditions and suitability of the homes within the county and whether these meet the underlying needs of the population. We support Buckinghamshire Council's vision of providing suitable housing for all life stages across our county.



According to the ONS, 4.5% of homes in Buckinghamshire were unoccupied as of March 2021. This is an increase from 3.6% in the previous census results.

Further insight from Buckinghamshire Council's Housing Strategy 2024-2029 states that, as of October 2022, 5,581 homes were classified as empty, of which 1,986 were deemed long term empty (unoccupied for 6 months).

Empty dwellings can occur for several reasons, and it is not as simple as rehousing people in these homes to overcome the housing crisis. There are challenges, in particular relating to property ownership and condition. Despite this, long-term empty properties do represent a potential market for bringing more housing that is affordable for local people into the market.

The Cost of Homelessness

Reducing homelessness is in the public's interest, for a safe and thriving community, but also for our economy.

A homelessness prevention project conducted locally by AHAG and WHC estimated savings to the local economy could be between £1,105,000 and £2,322,000.

By preventing and reducing homelessness, not only are there improvements to the quality of life of local residents who are immediately affected, but it also improves our local economy and can alleviate pressures on the wider Public Sector.

Homelessness has an estimated cost to the UK economy ranging from £20,000 to over £38,000 per person, per year.



A young person with dark hair is lying on their side on a bed with a white quilted blanket. They are wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and blue pants. Their hand is resting under their chin, and they have a thoughtful or weary expression. The background is a blurred dormitory room with other beds and a person sitting in the distance. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

Youth Homelessness

Hannah Asquith, CEO, Youth Concern



“In December 2021 Youth Concern reported that Aylesbury Vale has 22% more young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness than the national average.”

Photo: Youth Concern: The Next Step Project



Local charity Youth Concern has supported Aylesbury Vale’s 13-25 year olds since 1979 through its Drop-in Centre on Whitehill Lane, its counselling and homelessness prevention projects.

When we think about homelessness, we usually picture someone sleeping rough, in an underpass or at a train station. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. We don’t know the true extent of hidden homelessness, people living in temporary and precarious accommodation. And we don’t often think about teenagers and young adults without a safe bed.



Why is it hidden? Because young people just aren't safe sleeping rough. 'Sofa surfing' at friends or with family members is the most common form of youth homelessness.

Our survey of homeless young people found that:

100% had sofa surfed

30% had slept rough

20% had slept in strangers' homes

10% had slept in cars, bus stations and one in a drug dealer's house.



Photo: Youth Concern: Drop-in Centre



Youth Concern's two homelessness prevention projects for 18-25 year olds, Nightstop and the Next Step Project address a very real and often hidden problem in Aylesbury Vale. Last year, Youth Concern housed 12 young people at the Next Step Project, 17 young people were referred to Nightstop and on 170 occasions young people were supported with housing issues. Demand is increasing.

25% more young people turned to Youth Concern in 2022-23 than in the previous year. Of the average 66 young people per month who came to Youth Concern, 16 required housing advice or advocacy to help them sustain tenancies, or support to help them build better relationships at home – evidence that sadly, the need for youth homelessness prevention projects in Aylesbury Vale are all too needed.



"I spent my first homeless night in a car. It was so cold – it was just before Christmas. I spent another night behind an abandoned building. And I slept on friends' sofas... until they got tired of me being there. Nightstop was amazing. I stayed with a really nice lady. She asked me if I had any pyjamas. I said I only had the clothes I was wearing. She gave me so much ... When I got a job interview I had clothes that looked professional. I knew I was homeless but I didn't want to look homeless. Now I have a job, and somewhere good to live. My mental health is better and I'm managing it. I owe so much to Youth Concern."

Nightstop Guest

Final thoughts

James Boulton, Aylesbury Homeless Action Group
and Wycombe Homeless Connection, CEO

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Buckinghamshire is an affluent county with generous people giving their time, talents and money to tackle homelessness locally. But the acute shortage of housing, coupled with lack of affordability, has made the county and the south east more broadly, the epicentre of the growing homelessness crisis in Britain.

The number of local people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness has risen to devastating levels in the last decade and a half. We believe, with an ambitious strategy, bringing together local expertise and those who want to see it happen, Buckinghamshire could be the first county in the UK to end the homelessness crisis.

Wycombe Homeless Connection, serving south Bucks, and Aylesbury Homeless Action group, serving the north, deliver front-line homelessness work in the county. They save lives and prevent the trauma that homelessness does to individuals and families and they have saved the local authority millions of pounds in support for people who are homeless. The shared strategy of our charities is to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

Final thoughts

James Boulton, CEO, Aylesbury Homeless Action Group
and Wycombe Homeless Connection

Making it rare means when someone is in a personal crisis, such as fleeing domestic violence or developing a debilitating mental health condition, they won't see that situation lead to street homelessness and destitution because they will have options, know their rights and have appropriate support.

Making it brief means action will be taken swiftly to ensure people are prevented from spending a single night on the street, and/or are given suitable accommodation as fast as possible rather than spending weeks, months and even years on the street before they are housed.

Making it non-recurring prevents the damage that repeated bouts of homelessness does by making sure people who have experienced a homelessness crisis in the past get the support they need to stop it from happening on repeat. Working together, all those who want to see an end to homelessness in Buckinghamshire, will see an end to this crisis. We hope you will join us in this mission.

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Our future considerations

Housing Suitability

There needs to be further understanding of local needs to be able to respond effectively and appropriately to the housing crisis. Buckinghamshire has an ageing population which must be considered when assessing the suitability of housing. The inclusion of residents' needs in housing development strategies will ensure Buckinghamshire homes are accessible and affordable to all.

Empty Dwellings

The rise in unoccupied homes in Buckinghamshire is a cause for concern but also a potential pathway for adding existing properties to the housing market. We need to work towards making the best use of existing empty homes while building new affordable housing.

Root Causes

There are many complex and intricate causes of homelessness, both personal and systemic. Collectively, society must adopt an effective and proactive approach to address these root causes which will prevent homelessness and ensure relief of homelessness is sustainable. Homelessness should be viewed as a symptom of other, often interrelated, issues. This mindset will require collaboration and cross-sector working so that these root causes can be better understood and dealt with together with homelessness, rather than separately. Co-locating services for homelessness with services for other issues, such as domestic violence, debt advice, and relationship counselling should be considered and piloted where appropriate.



Global Issues

Local residents on the housing waiting list in Buckinghamshire are among the highest in the South-East region. Like many areas in the UK, there are currently additional pressures on local housing stock due to international conflict and global upheaval. The pressures to find additional housing is likely to increase the strain on local authority housing teams and adds further complexity to a stretched local housing market in Buckinghamshire.



Temporary Accommodation

More financial support from central government for the provision of temporary accommodation, particularly in areas of high-cost housing like Buckinghamshire, is needed. Greater local access to low-cost, high-quality temporary accommodation will help ensure families and individuals can remain close to work and education during the unsettling eviction process. Temporary accommodation costs are one of the growing pressures on local authority budgets, and increased central government support could help to mitigate these difficulties.



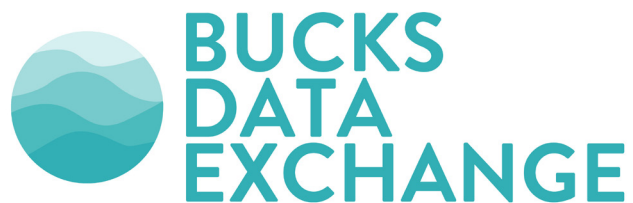
Raising the bar

Local authorities, Housing Associations, and private developers should continue to work together to provide an increasing number of 'Social Rent' properties (let at 60% of market value) to cater for households in more acute financial difficulty. While there has been a recent increase in Social Rent properties developed in Buckinghamshire, more properties of this type are still needed. This is particularly acute in areas with high private rental prices like Buckinghamshire, where high private market rents skew the LHA rate, and home ownership is beyond the reach of low-income households. In addition, a greater range of Affordable Housing products should be encouraged locally, catering to the diverse needs of local people who are struggling to get on the housing ladder, for example 'Rent to Buy' and 'Shared Equity' alongside the traditional 'Shared Ownership'.

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[Youth Concern Aylesbury](#)

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