

VICKY FORD MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Nick Eveleigh
Chief Executive
Chelmsford City Council
Civic Centre
Duke St
Chelmsford, CM1 1JE

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jean Nick".

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of Chelmsford City Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy and Homelessness Review and asking for my comments.

Reducing homelessness and ending rough sleeping in Chelmsford is a matter of great concern to me and my constituents. Through the Homelessness Reduction Act, the Government is committed to ending rough sleeping and tackling homelessness. I fully support this.

A crucial part of ending homelessness and reducing rough sleeping in Chelmsford and across the country is increasing the number of homes available. This means building more homes over a wide range of price brackets, with homes both for sale and for rent. The contribution that Chelmsford has made to delivering more homes has been considerable and this should be commended. As should the high proportion of Affordable Homes that have been delivered. Approving a Local Plan is a core part of this. I am pleased by the progress that has been made on the Local Plan, which has been achieved despite the fact that when in opposition Councillors representing the Liberal Democrat Party voted consistently against the Local Plan. Nevertheless, it is welcome that they now support this Local Plan, albeit with the exclusion of one specific area of land.

It is also important that improved infrastructure comes hand in hand with the increase in population. The recent success of the Housing Infrastructure Fund bid is a very positive achievement for Chelmsford. This is the largest successful bid in the country. I continue to press for further investment in Chelmsford's infrastructure, especially to deliver a long-term solution to the Army and Navy as well as other projects.

Housing

As Member of Parliament for Chelmsford, I am frequently contacted by constituents with housing concerns. The majority of people who contact me with housing cases are families.

Member of Parliament for Chelmsford

Tel: 020 7219 0138

Email: vicky.ford.mp@parliament.uk

[vicky4chelmsford](https://www.facebook.com/vicky4chelmsford) [@vickyford](https://twitter.com/vickyford)



Some have issues with their current housing, and some are asking for help to find social housing. There are a wide range of different issues for those concerned about their current housing, from unsuitable housing, neighbour-related issues, overcrowding concerns, and issues with private landlords, developers, Registered Providers or the City Council. As the Member of Parliament, I always treat each of these concerns seriously. I regularly raise concerns directly with landlords. If the issue is related to anti-social behaviour, I will also often contact the police or other relevant services, depending on the case. My objective when dealing with housing cases is always the safety and wellbeing of my constituents.

Preventing Homelessness is a priority. On the occasions I have been contacted by constituents who may face becoming homeless, I direct them towards Chelmsford City Council or other local organisations for advice, I will also frequently contact their landlord. I have noticed that some Registered Providers are much more helpful than others, providing quick and thorough responses and carefully managing the situation, thus avoiding the residents becoming homeless.

In my experience, there are some differences between the Registered Providers in providing early intervention in preventing homelessness. I have raised this with Chelmsford City Council officers before. With the growing number of large Registered Providers, through amalgamations or takeovers, the service provided to tenants can be affected. Where Registered Providers are remote from Chelmsford, despite increasing numbers of properties and tenants in Chelmsford, tenancy issues can be more difficult to resolve. I would encourage the City Council to work closely with Registered Providers in this regard and look into actions that can be taken to ensure sharing of good practice. A standing forum of Registered Providers, hosted by Chelmsford City Council, might provide better protections to tenants.

Mutual Exchange: Often, one of the solutions suggested is a mutual exchange. However, I have found that it can often be challenging for tenants to find suitable properties on the mutual exchange schemes. I would recommend that the City Council establishes a standing forum of Registered Providers, hosted by Chelmsford City Council, to better protect and serve tenants. It would also be helpful if such a forum could consider how mutual exchange applications could be more readily accessible.

Termination of Tenancy: There are a broad range of reasons why people find themselves homeless. Sometimes this is related to domestic abuse or relationship breakdown, or often the landlord has issued notice of the termination of a shorthold tenancy. With the latter, I have found that this is often related to a rental increase. The Government has been working on measures to make renting fairer and more affordable for tenants. The Tenant Fees Act abolishes letting agent fees for renters, it also caps tenancy deposits at five weeks' rent. This will ease the financial pressures renters face when moving and will make the lettings market more competitive and transparent. Further work by central government to protect tenants, such as abolishing Section 21 no fault evictions, is underway.



Lettings to Residents of Other Areas: It has been brought to my attention that some Registered Providers may be using their housing stock in Chelmsford to house a large number of people on the social housing register in London. I understand that London Boroughs have also been placing homeless families in temporary accommodation in Chelmsford. I am extremely concerned by the impact that this has on availability of homes for local people. I would encourage Chelmsford City Council to work with other similar locations to identify whether this is an issue unique to Chelmsford or is a more systemic matter. I would be extremely interested to hear recommendations on what actions could be taken to address this.

Change of Circumstances: Often when constituents write to me about their housing case, they include details of a change in circumstance with their current situation and feel the current system is inflexible. I will always pass this information on directly to the Council or relevant Registered Provider. In my experience, it is therefore important that people feel they can adapt their Personal Housing Plans where there is a change in circumstances.

Universal Credit: Chelmsford City Council for many years have taken the issue of homelessness seriously and looked at ways to prevent and reduce homelessness, whether through local or national policies. I was grateful for questions Chelmsford City Council raised with me regarding paying rent through Universal Credit. This played a significant role in ensuring Universal Credit recipients can still have their housing paid directly through their benefits and has helped protect many vulnerable tenants. If there are other areas of national policy the City Council would like to discuss adjusting, please do let me know.

Young People: I note that the Chelmsford City Council's Homelessness Review shows that the proportion of young people facing homelessness has dropped significantly in 2018-19 and would like to thank all the work Essex County Council and Chelmsford City Council have done to increase support for young people in this area.

Temporary Accommodation: I would also like to congratulate the City Council on the reduction in the of number of households in temporary accommodation in the year-end 2018-2019. This is a great achievement. This was in large part thanks to the Government's Homeless Reduction Act, which I fully support, and the re-organisation of the City Council's Housing Services Department. I am pleased that the City Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy aims to continue with this reduction. I also support Chelmsford City Council's aim to ensure a good standard of temporary accommodation, building on the standards set by the Homes2Lease scheme. The modular units which were recently built in Chelmsford are a good example of high quality temporary accommodation.

Rough Sleeping

The Government's 2018 Rough Sleeping Strategy is a major step forward. It sets out the Government's vision for halving rough sleeping by 2022 and ending it by 2027. I fully support this work.



Rough Sleeping Initiative: In the past year, Chelmsford City Council has made bids to central government via the Rough Sleeping Initiative and I have supported these bids. I was very pleased that one of these was successful. I am aware that Chelmsford City Council are working on another bid for continued funding for the Winter Project. I would encourage the Council to continue to bid for central government funding. In order for me to press the case in Westminster for Chelmsford City Council bids for funding, it is helpful for me to be kept informed on these.

Partnership Organisations: There is a strong network of voluntary organisations that help support homeless people across Chelmsford. These include CHESSE, Open Road, Helping Hands, Sanctus, Chelmsford City Council and Essex County Council. I have met with a number of these local organisations.

- Last year I supported Helping Hands Essex in their lottery grant application. I was very impressed by a recent visit to their premises, it was clear to me that many people receiving support from Helping Hands would otherwise have become homeless.
- I recently met with a representative from Sanctus, which provides help and support on a number of different issues, including directing them to other organisations. I do think it would be helpful to make sure this network is used as effectively as possible.
- I am aware that CHESSE wishes to provide a day centre and have supported them in this. I have also recently supported CHESSE in a move to acquire a lease on an additional property which would enable them to expand their services.

We have a very valuable network of individual organisations in Chelmsford that are all working to support rough sleepers. They each have unique expertise. The overall service to rough sleepers across Chelmsford could be improved if individual organisations were enabled to better share data and cross refer individual cases to each other's specialist services.

Winter Project: The Winter Project has been successful in ensuring individuals do not have to sleep on the streets in the cold winter months. I would encourage the Council to continue supporting this project and making sure there is a degree of flexibility on how long it remains open, so that if there is an extended period of cold weather this project can remain open. The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy mentions the need to explore opportunities to increase capacity. While there may be a need for increased capacity, I have been told that the Winter Project does make capacity available when necessary. I would support an increase in capacity if necessary, however, I believe the day / night shelter suggested by CHESSE should be a priority.

Move-on Housing: A number of local organisations have said that additional move-on housing and supported housing is also beneficial. Chelmsford City Council should look at how other councils have helped deliver this.

Streetlink: One of the recommendations in the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy is to promote Streetlink. I agree that Streetlink can be a valuable resource, however it is important to look into at how effective it is locally.



Liaison with Prison: I understand that there are sometimes individuals leaving prison who may not have accommodation in place. This can lead to the threat of homelessness. Action has been taken by the Government to ensure that delays to accessing benefits for prisoners have been reduced. This is a result of additional coordination between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice. Please do let me know any concerns in this area, and I can press for further information.

Aggressive Begging

Members of the public contact me regularly with concerns about aggressive begging and anti-social behaviour. A number of residents have told me how this makes them feel unsafe. Chelmsford is an affluent urban area compared to some other local towns and city centres and it has been targeted in the past by organised begging networks. Therefore, many of the local organisations that work to support rough sleepers in Chelmsford have advised me to encourage members of the public to think twice before they give cash on the streets.

Not all rough sleepers beg, and many of those sleeping rough in Chelmsford are highly vulnerable. I recognise that it can be challenging for the local authorities and other organisations to engage with vulnerable rough sleepers, but aggressive begging can also have a significant negative impact on other vulnerable people. The approach taken by the City Council and the police to dealing with aggressive begging does need to be robust in order to dissuade organised begging activity in Chelmsford.

Community Protection Notices and Warnings are an important tool in tackling aggressive begging. I am very concerned by the email I have received recently from Cllr Chloe Tron informing me that there has been a significant reduction in the number of people receiving Community Protection Notices and Warnings since April this year. This is a great concern, especially as constituents regularly inform me that they have been experiencing an increase in aggressive begging over recent months. I therefore can only assume that there has been a change in the strategy towards issuing such notices.

I strongly recommend that Chelmsford City Council should look again to see whether it is using all its available powers in this area.

With kind regards

Vicky Ford MP
Member of Parliament for Chelmsford