



SERVICE REVIEW



BRIDGES
OUTCOMES
PARTNERSHIPS

Uttlesford Supported Accommodation Services

NOVEMBER 2025



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review was commissioned by Uttlesford District Council to assess the performance, relevance, and future direction of accommodation-based and housing-related support services across the district. These services are central to preventing homelessness, enabling vulnerable residents to live independently, and to reducing reliance on crisis responses across housing, health, and social care.

The review finds that while existing services deliver valuable support – particularly for people experiencing homelessness, women fleeing domestic abuse, and rough sleepers – there are several systemic challenges that limit overall effectiveness. These include a shortage of suitable move-on accommodation, fragmented referral pathways, inconsistent partnership coordination, and limited data sharing across agencies.

Service users and stakeholders highlighted strong commitment among frontline staff and the voluntary sector, but also significant barriers arising from rural isolation, limited local capacity, and complex client needs. A growing ageing population, rising private rents, and hidden homelessness are intensifying local pressures.

The report presents a clear roadmap for improvement, structured around four priorities:

- 1. Increasing housing supply and move-on options** through PRS access schemes and young-person pathways.
- 2. Strengthening prevention and early intervention**, embedding housing support within community and health settings.
- 3. Improving integration and data systems** to enable joint working and real-time performance oversight.
- 4. Planning for future demand**, particularly for older residents and those with multiple support needs.

Aligning future commissioning with Uttlesford's demographic trends and community strengths will enable the council and partners to deliver more integrated, person-centred, and sustainable support across the district.

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Introduction, Context and Methodology

A mixed-method approach to reviewing services in a rural district

Uttlesford District, in north-west Essex, is a largely rural area characterised by market towns, villages, and dispersed rural communities. While the district is often associated with relative affluence, it faces increasing pressures in housing affordability and accessibility, particularly for single people and low-income households.

High private rents, limited social housing turnover, and poor public transport infrastructure contribute to hidden homelessness and barriers to independence. Delivering housing-related support across such a rural geography requires innovative, flexible models that can reach residents in isolated locations.

The district also faces a growing demand from an ageing population, domestic abuse survivors, and people with mental health or multiple needs. However, Uttlesford benefits from strong community networks, an active voluntary sector, and opportunities to strengthen collaboration between housing, health, and support services to deliver more integrated, outcome-focused provision.

This review also considers the national policy context, including the Government's drive to end rough sleeping, improve integration between housing, health, and employment support, and strengthen prevention-focused commissioning.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of local needs and service performance:

- **Desktop Review:** Analysis of contracts, service specifications, and monitoring reports to assess alignment between intended outcomes and delivery realities.
- **Stakeholder Interviews:** Semi-structured discussions with commissioners, providers, frontline staff, and voluntary sector partners to capture qualitative insights.
- **Service User Engagement:** Lived experience perspectives gathered through interviews and feedback to ensure user voices are embedded in findings.
- **Data Analysis:** Examination of referrals, outcomes, capacity, and demographic data to identify trends and inequities.
- **Benchmarking:** Comparative analysis with similar districts to identify innovative or efficient approaches and national best practice in homelessness prevention.

Needs Analysis

Uttlesford: A rural district with hidden needs

Uttlesford encompasses the market towns of Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow, and Thaxted, along with over 80 villages and hamlets. The district has a population of approximately 97,500, representing a population increase of 14.6% since 2011 – one of the fastest growth rates in Essex. This expansion has largely been driven by families and older adults relocating from London and neighbouring urban centres in search of a higher quality of life, good schools, and access to the countryside. While this migration has contributed to population growth and local economic activity, it has also intensified pressures on the housing market, particularly for lower-income and single-person households.

The district's demographic profile reflects an ageing population, with 21% of residents aged 65 and over – significantly higher than the national average. This ageing trend is increasing demand for accessible, age-appropriate housing, home adaptations, and integrated health and care support. The working-age population, comprising around 58% of residents, includes a high proportion of long-distance commuters travelling to employment hubs in London, Cambridge, and at Stansted Airport. However, despite relatively low unemployment levels of around 3%, local employment opportunities remain limited, especially for younger residents and those without access to private transport. This dynamic reinforces both income disparities and the need for targeted local employment and housing support.

Housing affordability is a defining challenge within Uttlesford. House prices are among the highest in Essex, and the private rented sector is both limited in scale and prohibitively expensive for many households. The average private rent reached £1,283 per month in September 2025, representing an annual increase of 5.2% from the previous year. Although this rise is slightly lower than the East of England average, the lack of affordable

alternatives means that many residents – particularly single people and families on modest incomes – struggle to secure or sustain tenancies. Social housing turnover is low, and opportunities for single people remain particularly constrained, creating bottlenecks in both temporary and supported accommodation.

Hidden homelessness is an increasing concern in the district. Rural isolation, a shortage of temporary accommodation, and the stigma associated with homelessness mean that many individuals rely on informal arrangements such as sofa surfing, which often go unrecorded in official statistics. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis has compounded financial vulnerability, placing additional pressure on discretionary housing payments and increasing demand for housing-related support services.

While Uttlesford is generally considered an affluent district, pockets of deprivation exist within its main towns – Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow – and in some smaller villages. These areas often experience barriers linked to limited public transport, digital exclusion, and restricted access to health and support services. For those without reliable transport, reaching essential services or support appointments can be particularly difficult, resulting in poorer outcomes and higher risk of crisis escalation.

At the same time, Uttlesford's rural character provides a strong foundation for community-based approaches. The district benefits from well-established community networks, active voluntary groups, and a collaborative local culture that can be leveraged to strengthen prevention and early intervention. However, the dispersed geography and limited infrastructure require flexible, mobile, and partnership-led service delivery models to ensure that residents – especially those who are isolated or at risk – can access timely and appropriate help.

Current Provision ⁷

Looking at service, integration, workforce capacity, co-production, and specialist services

Access to housing and support in Uttlesford is highly constrained. Services are small in scale, with eligibility criteria that exclude some in need.

PROVIDER	COMMISSIONING LEAD	SERVICE OVERVIEW
Bromfield House (Sanctuary Housing)	Uttlesford District Council	18-bed hostel for single adults with low-medium needs; on-site support 9am–8pm; 3-month post-move support; social housing move-on; limited weekend cover; increasing refugee placements.
The Next Chapter. Domestic Abuse	Essex County Council	Trauma-informed support for all genders; 3–6 month interventions; 7% of referrals from Uttlesford; no local refuge.
Chess. Rough Sleeper support	SRI-funded Bed Space	Outreach and accommodation for rough sleepers (8-bed night shelter + 24-bed supported housing pathway in Chelmsford); low numbers in Uttlesford but complex cases; limited rural reach.
Railway Meadows	Epping Council	13 flats for families/single parents; 12-month average stay; one bed available to Uttlesford via vacancy basis.
Peabody Floating Support	Essex County Council	Community-based support; 6 months (general) to 2 years (high needs); prevention-focused.



Current Provision

Looking at service, integration, workforce capacity, co-production, and specialist services

System Navigation and Integration

Multiple services operate across Uttlesford and surrounding boroughs; however coordination remains inconsistent. Frontline, developed by Citizens Advice Bureau, provides a secure, single referral route. However, most referrals still occur via informal signposting, highlighting the need for increased professional awareness and consistent use of the platform.

Local hubs improve multi-agency engagement, yet rural geography, limited outreach, and restricted evening services create barriers for residents. Strengthening proactive community-based support and embedding Frontline as the standard referral route would improve access, reduce duplication, and enhance outcomes. Past successes, such as dedicated link roles across housing, domestic abuse, and mental health services, demonstrate the benefits of improved coordination and shared pathways.

Workforce Capacity and Quality

- **High demand and turnover** in Housing Options have increased pressure on staff.
- **Complex caseloads:** case workers report increasing complexity in case loads. Rising mental health, debt, and multiple needs among single-person households.
- **Voluntary sector strengths:** Person-centred practice and trust with clients, but small-scale coverage.
- **Rural logistics:** Travel time and geographic spread reduce worker efficiency and reach.

Digital and Data Infrastructure

There is no shared data system tracking referrals, outcomes, or repeat homelessness. KPI monitoring is limited to the council's directly commissioned service. The lack of shared intelligence restricts performance oversight, strategic planning, and early intervention evaluation.

Co-production and Service User Voice

Service user engagement is mainly ad hoc. While individual feedback is collected by providers, there is no formal mechanism for co-production in service design or commissioning. Establishing lived experience panels and structured feedback loops could strengthen insight and accountability.

Specialist Services with Targeted Access

Uttlesford residents with higher support needs can access specialist services such as The Next Chapter, supporting domestic abuse survivors, and Western House, a mental health service. The Next Chapter accepts referrals from across Essex. Western House supports a range of mental health needs, however see a higher proportion of people seeking psychological support which can take time to achieve outcomes. Access can be challenging due to the districts rural geography, potentially affecting engagement and continuity of support.

Current Provision

Supporting progression, not just placement

Accommodation-based services in Uttlesford are designed to provide safe, short-term housing alongside tailored support to help residents move forward in their lives. In practice, however, many individuals remain in these settings longer than necessary, often due to limited move-on options or unclear pathways to the next stage of support.

Bromfield House provides low-to-medium level weekly support for residents with mental health needs, low-level substance use, and support requirements around employment or education. The service has seen an increase in refugee residents, which requires additional time and access to interpreter support. Bromfield holds six-weekly meetings with the local authority to review cases ready to move on. Move-on is typically via social housing and can take up to three months.

The Next Chapter covers North and Mid Essex, including Uttlesford. They operate an open referral process, with 7% of referrals between April–June 2025 coming from Uttlesford. The service focuses on crisis housing and safety for those escaping domestic abuse, with housing remaining a priority for local housing teams.

Chess provides outreach and accommodation support across eight districts, including Uttlesford. Based in Chelmsford, Chess operates a high-support shelter with eight beds (three RSI-funded) and a supported housing pathway of 24 beds for people with a history of rough sleeping. The assessment hub allows for four weeks of accommodation, followed by semi-supported housing and eventual move-on into HMOs or independent tenancies. Although Uttlesford has very few rough sleepers, the rural nature of the district makes identification and engagement time-consuming, contributing to hidden homelessness.

Peabody delivers flexible, community-based floating support across a range of housing settings. This model promotes independence, is not tied to a specific building, and helps residents sustain tenancies while avoiding repeat homelessness.

Service User & Stakeholder Feedback

Supporting progression, not just placement

Feedback from service users and frontline staff highlights both the value and the gaps in Uttlesford's support landscape. Services are appreciated where accessible, but challenges remain in provision, coordination, and specialist support.

Service User Experiences

*Ryan's Story**

Ryan (49) became homeless after a no-fault eviction. As a self-employed individual, he struggled to find private rented accommodation amid rising rents, sleeping in his car with limited facilities. Compounding his situation, he faced PTSD from a past trauma and dyslexia, which made navigating paperwork difficult. Bromfield House provided him with essential support.

"Without this support, I would have remained street homeless, had a severe mental health crisis, and lost my job."

Ryan's experience highlights hidden homelessness in Uttlesford and the importance of early intervention to prevent prolonged vulnerability.

*Troy's Story**

Troy (24) experienced homelessness and instability following relationship breakdowns, caring responsibilities, and financial hardship. Initially, he was deemed too high-needs for the local hostel and placed in emergency accommodation without support for six months. Poor communication during this time left him struggling to access services.

"When I was in emergency accommodation, there was blackout communication for three months."

Uttlesford introduced an additional Temporary Accommodation Officer to visit households in accommodation regularly. Troy was moved to supported accommodation which was pivotal in his recovery, demonstrating the impact of safe, flexible, and person-centred support.

Stakeholder Feedback

Frontline staff identified key issues:

- **Limited accommodation options:** Only one hostel exists for single adults with low to medium support needs, with no provision for young people or higher-needs individuals.
- **Restrictive referral pathways:** Eligibility thresholds often result in periods of unsupported homelessness.
- **Gaps in support for complex needs:** Minimal targeted provision exists for those with overlapping mental health, trauma, or substance use challenges.
- **Positive impact of tailored approaches:** Where support is flexible and person-centred, service users show measurable improvements in mental health, confidence, employment, and independent living.

**Not their real name*

Recommendations

Recommendations for a more effective, more efficient service

Priority 1

Housing Supply & Pathways

- Expand single-person accommodation: Develop additional one-bed or shared units to meet the needs of single adults, aiming to reduce bottlenecks in temporary and supported accommodation.
- Develop a clear PRS pathway: Establish structured processes for accessing the private rented sector, including dedicated support for tenants to navigate tenancy agreements, deposits, and sustaining tenancies.
- Establish a young-person housing pathway: Develop supported lodgings, mediation services, and targeted referrals to ensure young people at risk of homelessness can access safe and suitable accommodation.

Priority 2

Prevention & Early Intervention

- Embed housing support in community settings: Deliver services in hubs, schools, and health settings to identify at-risk individuals early and reduce hidden homelessness.
- Reinstate specialist linking roles: Reintroduce dedicated roles connecting housing, domestic abuse, and complex needs to provide coordinated, timely interventions.
- Upskill frontline staff: Provide training in safeguarding, referral pathways, mediation, and trauma-informed practice to enhance early support and reduce escalation to crisis services.
- Strengthen community signposting: Provide food banks, churches, and local community organisations with clear, up-to-date information on housing options and referral pathways, enabling them to support residents and connect them to services earlier.

Priority 3

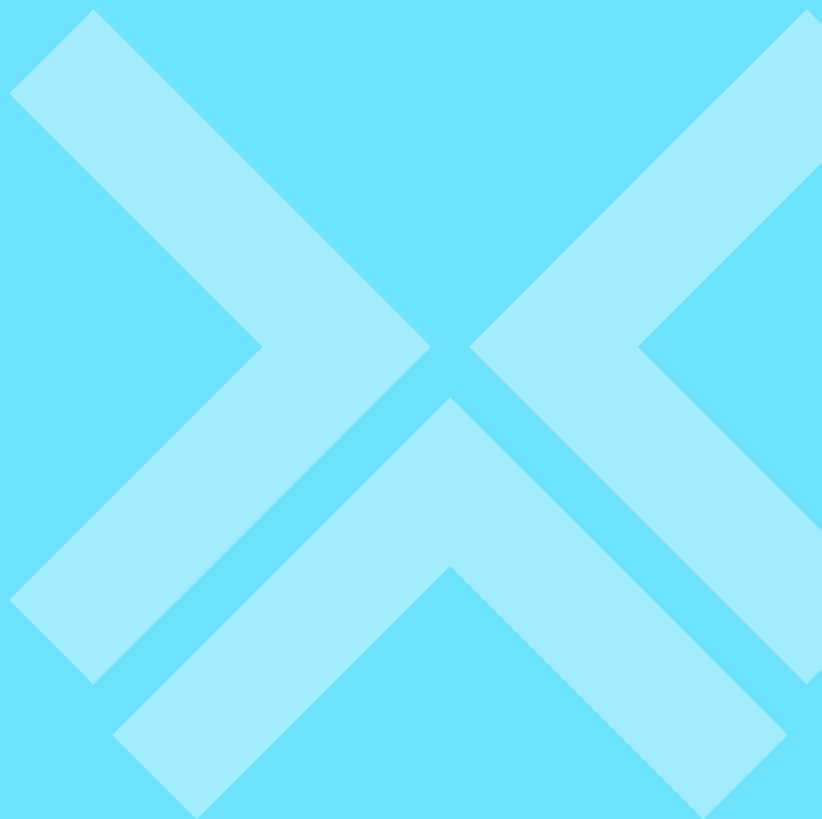
Integration & Data

- Strengthen multi-agency leadership: Establish quarterly forums for cross-sector collaboration, problem-solving, and coordinated service delivery.
- Promote consistent use of Frontline as the standard referral route: Ensure all professionals and partner agencies are trained to submit referrals via this secure, centralised system, reducing reliance on informal signposting and improving oversight of at-risk residents.
- Embed lived experience and feedback loops: Introduce structured service-user panels and feedback mechanisms to inform service design and improve person-centred outcomes.

Priority 4

Planning for Future Demand

- Target older-person housing and accessibility: Plan supported housing and adapted properties in line with demographic growth and demand for accessible homes.
- Align housing with health and social care pathways: Ensure accommodation options support health, social care, and tenancy sustainment outcomes, reducing crisis presentations.
- Adapt existing housing stock: Incorporate M4(3) accessibility standards and other adaptations to support residents with physical or sensory impairments.



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