

Homelessness in Eastbourne

Executive Summary

Summer 2018



Eastbourne

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Some commonly used abbreviations in the report are:

UC—Universal Credit

LHA—Local Housing Allowance

HMO—House of Multiple Occupation

HB—Housing Benefit

DHP—Discretionary Housing Payment

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the individuals concerned and are not attributable to the organisations they represent or Citizens Advice Eastbourne.

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Introduction by Alan Bruzon, CEO, Citizens Advice Eastbourne

Homelessness is one of the single biggest problems which can affect a person's life, second perhaps to a major injury or major illness or death. Losing a home takes away the base around which someone's life is built and it can become difficult or impossible to rebuild a life without a stable home.

In the past few years, street homelessness has become increasingly visible in Eastbourne town centre, with people huddled in shop doorways, wrapped in sleeping bags, sometimes asking for help from passers by but other times seemingly fast asleep. During the winter, when the weather gets colder it is hard to imagine how it would feel to spend your days that way. As an Eastbourne resident, I was used to seeing this in Brighton or London and perhaps the occasional isolated individual on the streets here. This has now changed. In the short walk from my home to the local shops, I am now used to seeing one or more homeless people and I have spoken to many of them as I go by.

I've known a few people who have visited India in the past few years and one thing they have all mentioned is the rampant poverty and prevalence of beggars on the streets. It makes it hard to enjoy a luxurious holiday whilst surrounded by such hardship. They return home and rationalize these problems as caused by the sheer scale of a country with 1 billion people. In this country we think of ourselves as "civilized" but what is the difference between street homelessness in one country or the next?

At Citizens Advice Eastbourne we have helped hundreds of people over the years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and we know of the hard work other agencies put in to supporting those affected. Sometimes our work can prevent homelessness which has a hugely beneficial effect on the lives of those involved.

But to the general public, seeing homeless people on the streets can be alarming. They wonder why this is still going on in 2018 in the UK and they wonder how they can help. They wonder why it is that no one appears to be doing anything about it. They read headlines which tell them that homeless people aren't genuine and beggars live in comfortable houses and their sympathy changes. They see people drinking or causing trouble in the town centre and start to think homeless people cause their own problems or choose to live that way. The picture becomes unclear.

We decided to produce this report to help us understand homelessness in Eastbourne, looking at the local context against the backdrop of the national situation. We wanted to highlight the wonderful work which is being done by so many in the town, without whom it would be hard to imagine how much worse it would be. These groups work tirelessly and very quietly in the background and their efforts are not publicized as much as they should be.

We also wanted to produce a better picture of the varying and complex reasons which can cause people to become homeless so this can be better understood. In part this is to counter the misinformation from certain sources and talk to homeless people and those who work with them.

We also wanted to identify options to improve the situation in Eastbourne, whether that be through small things which we can achieve locally, or something which feeds in to national policy with the hope of a bigger change. We produced our list of recommendations at the end of the report.

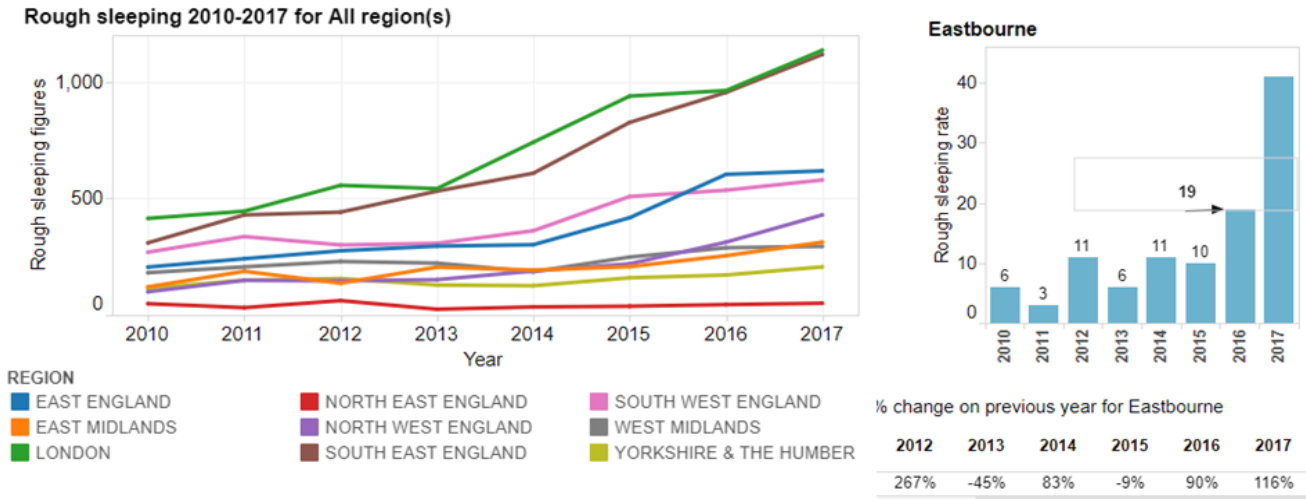
We hope you find this a useful document and I thank all those who contributed to it, the people we spoke to and the great team of volunteers who have helped to write it.

Alan Bruzon

Summary

Context

The general trend from official national statistics shows rough sleeping has doubled in the past 4 years in both London and the South East. In Eastbourne the figure has quadrupled since 2015 going from 10 people in 2015 to 40 people in 2017.



Source: Homelesslink.org.uk from figures produced by MHCLG

These figures only include people who are classified as rough sleeping based on the annual official count. Many people who become homeless do not show up in official figures. This includes people who become homeless but find a temporary solution by staying with family members or friends, living in squats or other insecure accommodation.

Research by the charity Crisis indicates that about 62% of single homeless people are hidden and may not show up in official figures. Local figures for hidden homelessness are more difficult to establish. Eastbourne Foodbank report 959 of their clients were categorised as homeless in 2017.

Research Method

In addition to the statistics establishing evidence of the rapid rise in homelessness, we wanted to investigate the situation in Eastbourne. To do this we collected anecdotal evidence from people who had found themselves homeless as well as from a series of agencies across Eastbourne that offer services to homeless people. Specifically, we interviewed four people who are homeless as well as the following organisations:

Local & Central Government / Public Sector

- Eastbourne Borough Council:
 - Councillors
 - Housing Needs team
 - Adviser for Business Crime
- Eastbourne JobCentrePlus (DWP)
- East Sussex County Council
 - Adult Social Services
- Sussex Police
- Sussex Rough Sleeping Prevention Project

Private Stakeholders

Eastbourne Chamber of Commerce
Sanctuary Housing
MasonBryant (Lettings Agent)
GetaRoom (Lettings Agent)

Voluntary & Charitable Organisations

Brighton Housing Trust (BHT)
Eastbourne Citizens Advice
Eastbourne Foodbank
Salvation Army
Winter Night Shelter
Matthew 25
Absolute Angels for the Homeless
Homeworks
Eastbourne Foyer
Fulfilling Lives
Seaview Project, Hastings

We wanted to gather data on the provision of direct services such as accommodation and food and indirect services such as advice and support services, to determine their views on the current situation and to understand what they think could be done to alleviate the rising numbers of homeless in Eastbourne.

We asked the agencies the following questions:

- Tell us about your organisation
- What kind of help do you provide to homeless people?
- How many people do you help a year?
- What do you think is the public perception of homeless people?
- What reasons do your clients give for becoming homeless?
- Have you seen changes in these reasons over the years?
- What barriers do your clients seem to face when trying to get back into accommodation?
- What needs to change?
- What are your recommendations/priorities to alleviate homelessness in Eastbourne?

Key findings

The various agencies had similar views on many of the subjects discussed and each brought their own special perspective based on their experiences of supporting homeless people over the years.

The causes of homelessness

The main themes identified were:

- Individual's lack of financial capability / budgeting skills / money management skills including getting spending priorities wrong
- Changes to the benefits system – Welfare Reform including the Local Housing Allowance. Additional financial pressures push many people into debt, especially those on benefits or on a low income. This is compounded by the rising cost of living and a changing employment environment, creating unstable earnings.
- Universal Credit. The “Full service” went live in Eastbourne in October 2017 although some single persons would have been on UC earlier in the town. The effect of Universal Credit on people's financial situation has been well documented elsewhere. In Eastbourne, UC has

created some problems but, so far, is unlikely to be the cause of the increase in street homelessness described above. Nevertheless, all agencies continue to see many people dealing with difficulties caused by the new benefit.

- Debt. Budgeting problems, poor choices in priority spending and increasing costs have meant that levels of debt in Eastbourne remain high, increasing the risk of homelessness for many.
- Relationship breakdown – people don't have enough savings put away to cover the costs of setting up a new home. Those without friends or family locally are at greater risk of homelessness when relationships come to an end. This includes those experiencing domestic abuse and this had led to an increase in homeless women.

Difficulties experienced when homeless

The first port of call for those anticipating homelessness is often Eastbourne Borough Council. With limited housing stock available many face long periods in temporary accommodation.

For those found not within the local authority's duty to house, many can end up staying with family, friends or acquaintances which is sometimes referred to as "sofa surfing".

For those who become street homeless, they can experience various difficulties such as:

- Reduced ability to self-care – food, cleanliness, general health
- Reliance on local charities – Salvation Army, Matthew 25, Foodbank, Winter Night Shelter etc
- Exposure to drugs and alcohol and crime
- In Eastbourne town centre they can find they have no place to go, leading to groups congregating in Terminus Road and being associated with street drinkers
- Temporary accommodation and other services have strict "no drugs or alcohol" rules which some find impossible to comply with and therefore walk away from or are ejected
- Problems accessing benefits, difficulty applying, communicating with the benefit agencies, maintaining a claim including the need to communicate via an online journal for Universal Credit.

Barriers faced in finding a home

Homeless people face various barriers which they will need to overcome in order to find a home, take up a tenancy, make it their home and remain within a stable environment. The key barriers were:

- Up-front costs – deposit, rent in advance, guarantors, fees for references etc.
- In recent examples criminal record checks have been requested
- Difficulty maintaining a tenancy – skills, budgeting, readjusting
- The need for "half-way" support for people with drug and alcohol problems
- Private Landlords are reluctant to rent to "benefit claimants". CA Eastbourne have found that less than 1% of properties being advertised to let would have the full rent covered by the Local Housing Allowance. Recent stories in the national press about long delays in payments of Universal Credit have made more landlords unwilling to rent to people on benefits.

Additional factors

There were two other major factors affecting homeless people which all agencies commented on: mental health difficulties and drug and alcohol dependence. Sometimes these two difficulties go together and sometimes are completely separate. The limited resources which provide support for either problem were mentioned by all the agencies we spoke to.

In some examples, people who become homeless have neither mental health difficulties nor drug or alcohol problems but develop them as part of being homeless. People experience depression and anxiety as well as low self-esteem and in some cases become suicidal as a consequence of homelessness. Similarly, drugs or alcohol become a coping method for some homeless people and can be part of the environment they find themselves in.

Many of the agencies we spoke to felt that there was a need for a significant increase in resources to support people experiencing both types of difficulties.

Homeless people—profile

All agencies reported a variety of clients seeking help as homeless. More than half were originally from Eastbourne and a high proportion had no previous connection with the town. The majority were men but there had been an increase in women seeking help. Women can be more vulnerable when homeless and at greater risk of exploitation. Some specific groups who face additional difficulties were also identified within current service users:

- Prisoners not receiving support prior to being released
- Women fleeing domestic abuse
- Ex-servicemen / women
- People discharged from DGH psychiatric unit or local secure units like Amberstone

Public perception

The agencies reported that public perception of homeless people was mixed. Some expressed the view that many people are sympathetic and try to offer support. Others are more negative towards homeless people and blame them for their situation, assuming they have brought the problem onto themselves or that they choose to be homeless. Some violence and abuse was reported. Overall it was felt that the public did not have a deep understanding of the issues involved and were often unaware of the type of support which is available in the town.

Statutory services

Statutory services have a central role to play in preventing homelessness and providing solutions in terms of alternative housing. The agencies all agreed that there are major restrictions imposed on local authorities by central government and they are aware of how the Council's capacity has been affected by changes over the years.

- Eastbourne Borough Council now has limited capacity to assist, which has been reduced over the years by central government.
- EBC has a Homelessness Strategy and a Housing Strategy (see further reading links) which includes actions by various agencies and progress against the strategy is reviewed on a regular basis.
- Eastbourne has a Homelessness forum which is now being redesigned by EBC.
- The Homelessness Reduction Act which came into effect from April 2018 has placed more responsibility on the Council in terms of preventing homelessness but only a limited amount of additional resources have been made available by central government for this. At the time of writing this report, the Council is recruiting new staff including an Outreach Worker and there are high hopes that this role will have a very positive impact on the town.
- The Jobcentre and Department for Work and Pensions (and for many, EBC Housing Benefit department) have a vital role in ensuring people receive the financial support they need from the benefit system. The introduction of Universal Credit is a major concern, having switched

to the “Full Service” from October 2017, meaning most new claims will now be for UC. Delays in the first payments have been widely reported and changes to this part of the system are underway, hopefully reducing the build-up of rent arrears. All agencies will be monitoring how this affects their service users in the coming months.

- Adult Social Care provide essential support for victims of domestic abuse, vulnerable people and fund homelessness prevention work through Homeworks. Proposed cuts to East Sussex County Council budgets are being considered at this present time with difficult decisions needing to be made.

Some of the factors described above are likely to make homelessness in Eastbourne worse over the coming years which is a major concern to all those we interviewed.

Local Charities

A huge amount of work is being carried out in Eastbourne by charities and volunteers and this has been consistent for a number of years. Direct support for street homeless people is provided by Salvation Army and Matthew 25 by providing food, clothes and other support on an ongoing basis. For many people this support is an essential lifeline. They are finding the demand for their services is increasing steadily and the work involved in helping people get back into accommodation is increasingly complicated, leading them into more complex areas of bureaucracy.

Similarly other faith based groups including the Winter Night Shelter, Foodbank, Sanctuary Housing and others continue to provide invaluable support to people with substantial numbers of local people volunteering to help.

Citizens Advice Eastbourne has seen an increase in enquiries from people at risk of homelessness including benefits problems, financial difficulties, rent arrears and debt. BHT Eastbourne Advice provides specialist housing advice for homeless people including at times, challenging decisions by Eastbourne Borough Council when they believe the Council does have a duty to assist.

All the voluntary and charity agencies have limited resources to help including limited funding and are often reliant on volunteers to create enough capacity to meet the demand for their services. Many have experienced cuts to their funding and this may continue during 2018. Despite this, they remain resolute in their willingness to help homeless people or those at risk and do whatever they can to assist.

Conclusion

Clearly, homelessness in Eastbourne is a highly complex subject and will require a number of separate approaches to start making improvements in the town. Some would say, at present it will be impossible to make significant improvements without major changes to national government policies.

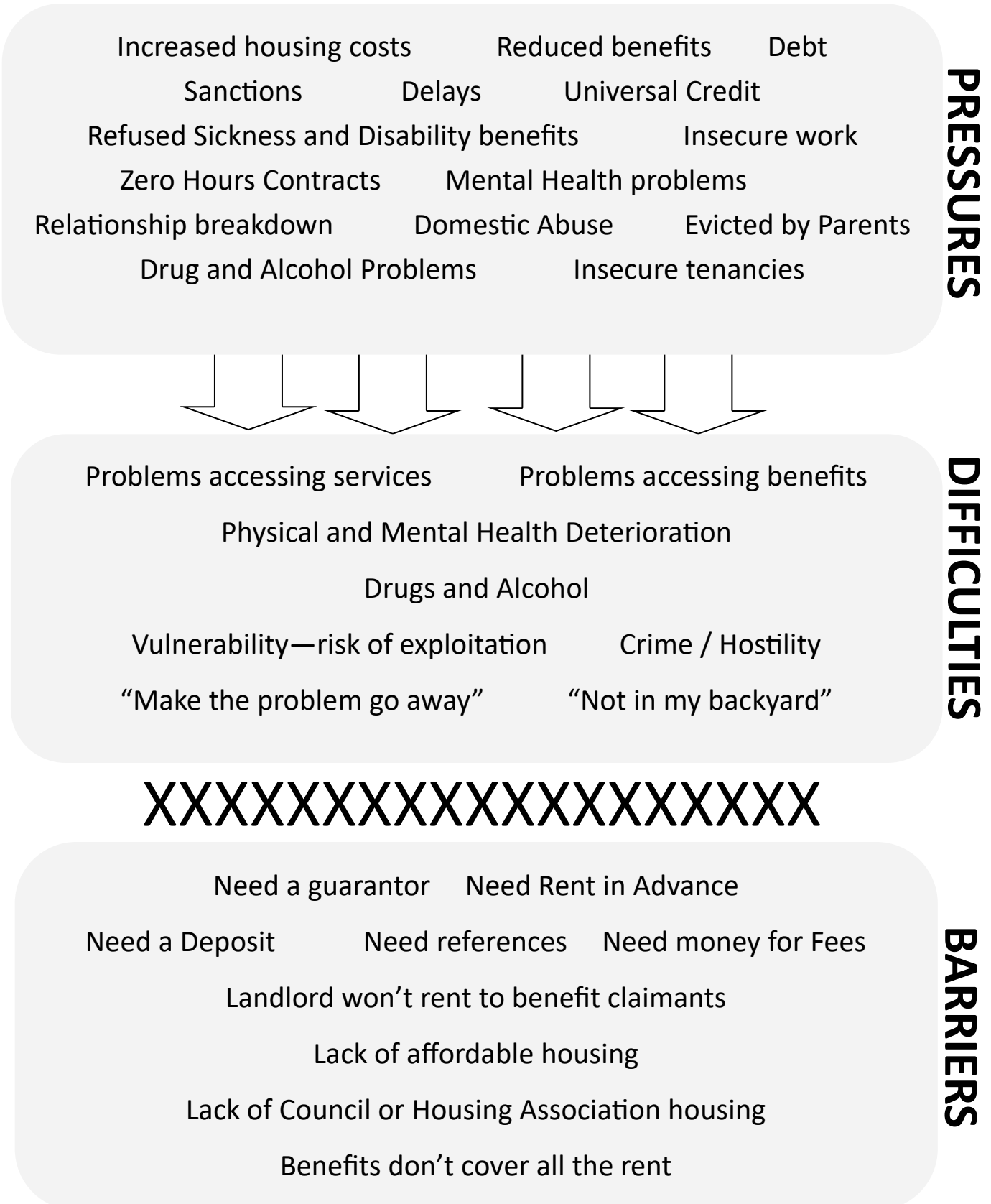
A wide range of people are at risk of homelessness and separate cohorts require very different approaches—preventative work for people at risk, improvements to people’s housing rights, effective support from the benefits system, support for those currently street homeless and strategies to enable people to be rehoused successfully. Our recommendations seek to address these.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the potential scale of the problem and some factors appear to be likely to make the situation worse in the coming years. However, our research has shown the impressive work being carried out by the various agencies included in the appendices and this is a very positive aspect for the town, especially the size and scope of the work provided by charities and volunteers and the Council’s new initiatives.

The Homelessness Trap

One of the overarching themes this research has identified is how it is becoming increasingly easy to become homeless. Most people are only a few pay cheques away from homelessness. Once in that situation, there are many difficulties to contend with and it isn't easy to overcome the increasing number of barriers which prevent people from getting a home of their own.

This is the “Homelessness Trap” and dealing with the problems involved is key to improving things for homeless people.



Our Recommendations

National issues

- 1. We need more affordable housing in both the private sector and social housing.**
- 2. We need benefit rates to equal rent costs.**
- 3. We need to review the types of tenancies being used to give greater security of tenure to people who rent.**
- 4. We need a benefits system which supports people at their time of greatest need and which doesn't adversely affect people's housing.**

Local Issues

- 1. We need properly funded day care centres which build on the work of Salvation Army and Matthew 25.**
- 2. Maximize the use of services for homeless people – somewhere to wash, do laundry, internet access, access to phones.**
- 3. We need temporary housing options which will work for vulnerable single people, including people with drug and alcohol problems.**
- 4. We need a housing first approach. See <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/>**
- 5. We need homelessness prevention work, to enable people to stay in their own home.**
- 6. We need more private landlords to take on benefit claimants.**
- 7. We need to remove the barriers people face accessing private rented accommodation – guarantors, deposits, rent in advance, high fees etc**
- 8. We need a hostel and other local councils need the same.**
- 9. We need supported housing options for people at major transition points such as leaving mental health institutions, leaving prison etc.**
- 10. We need to raise awareness of the causes of homelessness, the amazing amount of work being done by local agencies and the barriers people face getting back into housing.**
- 11. We need to explore the use of empty properties in Eastbourne.**
- 12. People need to be able to learn "life skills" such as budgeting, managing a tenancy etc, especially young people.**

What can you do to help people who are street homeless?

You could give them money but if you're unsure about this there are other options.

Buy them a hot drink or some food. Ask them first if this is a gesture that would be welcomed –sometimes it's not. Don't be offended if they say no and don't feel bullied into giving them money instead.

Ask them if know where to go for help in the town. Examples of agencies you could direct them to are:

- Citizens Advice Eastbourne, 8 St Leonards Road, BN21 3UH
tel: 03444111444
- BHT Eastbourne Advice, 8 St Leonards Road BN21 3UH tel: 01323 642615
- Salvation Army, Eastbourne Citadel, 141 Langney Road BN22 8AG,
tel: 01323 640382
- The Matthew 25 Mission, Brodie Hall/Christ Church Seaside BN22 7NN,
tel: 01323 726960
- Eastbourne Borough Council, 1 Grove Road BN21 4TW, 01323 410000

Donate directly to a local charity who gives help to the homeless (see above list)

You could donate money or goods to a charity shop or local agency

Or volunteer with one of the local charities

Use Streetlink.org.uk to inform local services

Citizens Advice Eastbourne

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