

HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF HOUSING SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE

NOTES OF VISIT TO RECEPTION CENTRE – 28 FEBRUARY 2017

On 28th February 2017, members of the Housing Scrutiny Committee visited the reception centre accommodation at 305 Hornsey Road to meet reception centre officers and residents and inspect the premises.

The visit was attended by Councillors Mick O'Sullivan, Osh Gantly and Una O'Halloran, Rose-Marie McDonald, and a representative from Democratic Services.

During the visit the following main points were made:

The Reception Centre

- Reception centres provided temporary accommodation for people whose homelessness application was being processed. Reception centre residents were considered vulnerable for a range of reasons; they may have a physical or mental disability, be elderly and frail, have young children, have alcohol or substance misuse issues, or be at risk of harm for other reasons. Officers advised that some residents had been terminally ill or pregnant.
- The reception centre provided basic self-contained accommodation. Each unit had a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchenette. Some units had two bedrooms and were suitable for families. There was shared laundry and waste disposal facilities.
- Each unit was spacious; it was commented that those leaving the reception centre to move into permanent accommodation would generally be moving to a smaller unit.
- Most residents were single adults; however there were five families in the reception centre. The centre's youngest single resident was 16 years old, the oldest was 90.
- Reception centre accommodation was only for residents who were capable of living independently. Reception centres did not provide 'supported accommodation', but staff commented on the need to support vulnerable people.
- The Hornsey Road reception centre had 38 units. The service operated two other centres, one with 17 units and another with 34, which included a flat with adaptations for those with disabilities. Three units at Hornsey Road were designated as 'out of hours' accommodation and were available to people presenting as homeless overnight. These were sometimes used by people fleeing domestic violence, or people in crisis situations due to fire or flooding. It was commented that more units were made available for out of hours use around Christmas.
- Residents usually stayed in the reception centre for a matter of days or weeks. In extreme circumstances residents had stayed for over a year. This was due to residents having very specific housing needs and a lack of suitable permanent accommodation was available. It was commented that single people were generally easy to house but it was much more difficult to house families.
- Most residents were working with social services or other support organisations. The reception centre did not make referrals to these organisations, as the referral would generally take place either before or alongside their referral to the reception centre.
- The Committee met with a single man in his 80s, and a single father with three young children, and spoke to them about their circumstances. Both commented that the reception centre was suitable for their needs, that they felt safe, and that the staff were helpful.

Staffing and services

- The reception centre was staffed by eight officers; a manager, a team leader, three officers, and three administrative and maintenance officers. It was commented that work in the reception centre was varied. As well as managing the centre accommodation; the centre staff provided all 'mainstream' housing services to those in the centre, including repairs and rent collection.
- The reception centre staff were not involved in processing homelessness applications. This was dealt with by a central team based at 222 Upper Street. Officers supported this division of responsibility, commenting that there should be a separation between the centre staff and those assessing the residents' applications. It was difficult to build trust with some residents and this would not be helped by centre staff being involved in the decision making process.
- The Committee heard that staff went the extra mile to support vulnerable residents. Staff had helped residents to redirect their post, apply for Freedom Passes, apply for benefits, and order items to the building. Staff also commented on the need to support people to live independently.
- Reception centre staff provided a care package to vulnerable tenants, which included a kettle, teabags, a plate, cutlery, soap, and toilet paper.
- A member commented that a recent Channel 4 dispatches documentary highlighted that some London boroughs were not providing a good service to vulnerable people in emergency situations. In response, it was advised that officers understood the pressures faced by housing departments across London, but the council worked hard to meet its legal responsibilities.
- Residents were able to bring their own possessions into the centre, but were discouraged from bringing too many of their own items. The centre did not have storage for personal items and having lots of possessions would delay the moving out process.
- The majority of residents paid their rent on time, but some were in arrears. The reception centre only evicted residents in extreme circumstances.
- Most voids were processed within four days; although if units were left in a very bad condition they could take up to ten days to process.
- The reception centre had screens displaying bus times, local news, and useful advice and contact numbers.

Security

- It was important to keep the reception centre secure. The reception centre had 24 hour security and guests were not allowed to stay overnight. Key security had been implemented, meaning that residents could only access the areas of the building they needed.
- Before being referred to the centre all residents were subject to a risk assessment. The centre did not accept high risk residents who would present a danger to the centre or other residents. It was commented that very few people were rejected for this reason.
- Some new residents initially struggled with the rules of the centre but most settled quickly. There was a low level of antisocial behaviour, and it was commented that the 24 hour security acted as a deterrent.
- All communal areas were covered by CCTV.

Identified issues

- Staff commented that one particular issue was hospitals directly discharging patients to reception centres. This may happen if the patient is homeless, or is unable to return to their own property. There had been instances where reception centre staff were not advised of what support or care these vulnerable people needed. It was advised that these people generally arrived without clothing or food and sometimes were not able to go out and get the supplies they needed. The situation was exacerbated if these residents arrived on Friday afternoon, sometimes it was difficult to liaise with the hospital or social services as staff had left for the weekend. The reception centre had started demanding that a care plan was provided in advance of these residents being accepted.
- Staff commented on the importance of liaising with other services, and indicated that communication between housing and social services, including children's social care, could be improved. An example was given of a homeless 18 year old in the centre, who had not lived independently before. Staff thought that this resident needed some additional guidance and support but found it difficult to action change in other services.
- During the visit one resident advised members that his application for re-housing had been accepted and he was awaiting a move date, however reception centre staff had not been made aware of this.
- Members commented on the financial challenges facing the council and asked if there was ever a "golden age" of providing support to homeless people. In response, it was advised that Islington Council used to have a greater supply of available homes and therefore more people were rehoused faster. Officers commented that some residents' applications for re-housing were denied and suggested that ten or twenty years ago people in similar situations were more likely to have their applications accepted.
- Officers commented on the financial pressures on the NHS and social care. It was reported that residents who needed support from social workers or district nurses received shorter and less regular appointments than in the past. As a result, it was advised that reception centre staff were providing ad hoc support and guidance to some residents when this was not strictly part of their role. Any support given by reception centre staff was informal and was not coordinated with other services.
- Staff commented on the difficulties posed by data sharing agreements and that the information they received on resident from social workers was inconsistent. Whilst staff appreciated the need for confidentiality, it was commented that staff needed to know some information on residents' needs to carry out their role effectively.
- Members commented that some rooms were cold and noted that the building was only single glazed. It was suggested that double glazing would keep the building warm and reduce spend on heating the building

The Committee thanked the residents and officers for their time.