

## Recommendations for consideration by Housing Scrutiny Committee 20<sup>th</sup> January 2020

Members of the committee will be aware that we did a scrutiny into homelessness last year and that we are awaiting recommendations from it.

We got evidence in committee from officers and from Islington Law Centre. Members of the committee visited or met with Streets Kitchen, Solace, councillor colleagues, St Mungo's, the Glasshouse temporary shelter, Dr Keen from Now Medical, the Streets Festival and Jubaa Somali organisation. The chair and vice chair are active professionally in the field and have had informal discussions and exchanges with many organisations and legal representatives particularly those concerned with legal rights, medical assessments, migrant issues (Sue is the migrant champion) and street homelessness. The chair also attended a seminar on homelessness run by Sarah Turley the outreach coordinator.

The vice chair met with Solace Women's Aid who shared details of several cases which caused them significant concern, involving women survivors of domestic violence with multiple needs. These were then shared in confidence with the Director and executive member for housing because they raised serious concerns about what had happened in these cases and how the borough works with key agencies

The recommendations we propose for the committee to approve are as follows. We have raised some concerns with relevant officers and their responses are noted below, but we propose that the committee pass the recommendations in any case in order to ensure that work on these issues progresses. This meeting is a chance for committee members to look at what is being proposed and comment on it. We welcome suggestions for amendments and additions. The committee will note that the scrutiny has already had some results, as can be seen by the officer responses.

Each recommendation is followed by a brief note explaining which we propose it and what has already been done on it.

**1. The council move forthwith to inhouse medical assessments for homelessness and housing applications.**

We were very concerned about how the assessments conducted by Now Medical have been the subject of many legal cases, often lost by the councils concerned because the assessments are not undertaken with knowledge of the person assessed or any personal contact. We are also concerned at the data provided by Now Medical which appears to show they spend very little time on these assessments which must affect their quality.

*Officer response: Following concerns raised at Housing Scrutiny we are looking at future options for delivering the housing medical assessments. This including consideration of employing a Housing Occupational Therapist who will carry out assessments – including home visits – on behalf of the service supplemented with assessments of mental health issues, where required in complex cases. It is hoped to start this new approach from Spring 2020*

**2. The relevant officers look at arrangements for liaison, communication and coordination with voluntary sector agencies and how multi agency working is functioning in the borough in relation to homelessness**

The discussions with Solace revealed major concerns about how their staff perceived liaison with council officers.

*Officer response: Co-ordination with voluntary sector agencies – Islington Homelessness Forum*

*Islington has a well-established Homelessness Forum which has been running for over ten years; MHCLG attended a meeting earlier this year and sited the forum as a model of good practice for authorities. Attendees include local and national rough sleeping services, housing providers, council teams, and voluntary sector organisations.*

*The last meeting included a presentation on psychologically informed environments and from Homeless Link. The focus of the forum is on information sharing - inviting speakers from different agencies to come along and discuss their work in order to facilitate referrals and networking between the attendees.*

*Our intention is to continue to grow the Homelessness Forum.*

**3. The Director look at the specific failures identified in the Solace cases and identify whether and how the guidance and procedures in use need to change.**

We were very concerned about how these very vulnerable women had found it difficult to access the services they needed

*Officer response: Domestic Abuse*

*Since the scrutiny Housing Needs have met with Solace Women's Aid to look at how we can work better together. Clearer information about how issues with individual cases can be escalated to managers in the housing needs team have been shared with Solace, a team structure and named contacts in Housing Needs have been shared. The importance of early identification and sharing of all pertinent information by Solace was also established to enable better outcomes for clients.*

*The Housing Department is preparing for DAHA accreditation for both our Tenancy Services and Housing Needs services which will lead to service improvements.*

*Housing Needs staff are scheduled to attend a rolling program of training sessions specific to domestic abuse; the training available to staff has been reviewed following issues raised during the scrutiny around how staff treat victims of domestic abuse. Current training available to all staff in housing needs includes:*

*Stalking and harassment- to raise awareness of stalking and harassment and how it impacts survivors, and empower staff to better support residents experiencing these things*

*MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference)- This covers an understanding MARAC as part of a multi-agency response to domestic abuse, how to refer into MARAC, how to present a case at MARAC, and taking follow up actions from MARAC and safety planning*

*Perpetrator briefings- This covers an introduction to work with perpetrators, giving participants an understanding of perpetrator behaviour and how perpetrator programmes engage and support perpetrators to address abusive behaviours, as well as practical strategies to help manage interactions with perpetrators.*

*Dynamic Abuse- This training focusses on understanding dynamics of abuse in LGBT relationship by exploring domestic abuse in gay, lesbian and transgender relationships or*

*abuse where survivor and abusers are not intimate partners but a blood family, step-family or in laws.*

**4. The Director review staff training, knowledge and understanding in key areas of dealing with survivors of domestic abuse and those with multiple needs**

See above

**5. The Chief Executive liaise with relevant directors to ensure that the proposed localities initiative takes the lessons learned from this scrutiny and from housing first into account in its design**

The localities initiative seeks to make the focus of council services the person concerned rather than potentially siloed services. We believe that some of the best homelessness prevention and housing first work done by the borough can inform this well

**6. Relevant officers should report to the committee on current arrangements for cross borough and pan London cooperation in relation to homelessness**

The issues about rough sleeping at Finsbury Park and Kings Cross illustrate how it is impossible to deal effectively with this problem on a single borough basis. The borough also places homeless households outside the borough, and although there are significant efforts to reduce this, it still needs good liaison with the boroughs involved.

**7. Housing Scrutiny Committee should insist that housing associations being scrutinised provide information about what they are doing to help prevent and deal with homelessness and why, if relevant, they are doing so little.**

We were concerned that we got very little evidence of the role these major providers of social housing play in dealing with homelessness, and believe that the committee can provide a point where this information is collated and may also inspire or shame some into doing more

**8. The committee request that the Director respond to it with details of all targets set for officers dealing with homelessness, the rationale for them and what is known about the effects of them**

It is the belief of some voluntary sector and legal focused organisations that boroughs have targets for reducing the numbers of homelessness applications. We have raised this with officers but not yet got a response. We are concerned that such targets reduce the ability of officers to respond appropriately to applications and individuals and are inappropriate given that the causes of homelessness in the borough are largely structural.

**9. Councillors should campaign actively to end Universal Credit and replace it with proper social security system that supports people rather than penalising them, and should consider other campaigns that tackle the root causes of homelessness.**

Given that the causes of homelessness in the borough are largely structural and out of the council's control it is incumbent on us as councillors to speak truth to power and try to eliminate the causes of homelessness if we can

