

Scrutiny Mini-Review on Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Islington

DRAFT REPORT OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



London Borough of Islington
March 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Homelessness & Rough Sleeping

Introduction

1.1 The Committee commenced the review in September 2018 with the overall aim of exploring the Council's Housing Needs Service tackles homelessness and delivers on its key performance indicators and reduce Homelessness.

The Committee also agreed to the following objectives:

- To highlight compliance in assessments and decisions that are underpinned by the Housing Act(1996) and Homeless Reduction Act (2017).
- That prevention services and commissioned services are targeted and effective.

1.2 A decision was taken at the Committee meeting on 19 March 2019 for the review to continue into the 2019/20 Municipal year. Members agreed for a small task group comprising 3 councillors and housing officers to continue with the review and report back during the autumn of 2019 with findings.

1.3 The review exercise involved visits to voluntary organisations, obtaining evidence from St Mungo's Islington Law Centre, Shelter, Pillion Trust and community based organisations that advocate on behalf of homeless people. Members considered the types of accommodation services available, participated in rough sleep counts in the borough and examined funding streams available to support rough sleepers. In addition members considered performance data relating to the service.

Local context

The Council's vision is to make Islington fairer and create a place where everyone, whatever their background, has the same opportunity to reach their potential and enjoy a good quality of life. Many local residents face both complex and multiple challenges, such as housing, employment, offending, domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse including those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The council does all it can to ensure that being homeless does not prevent people having a secure and dignified existence, or interrupt their employment, education and access to healthcare.

It is generally accepted that there is a housing crisis in England. This crisis has been compounded by welfare reform changes and the reductions in housing benefit introduced by the Government which has increased the pressure on households' ability to manage their finances.

The Government has also introduced significant changes in homelessness law with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, in which local authorities are mandated to provide earlier prevention and relief from homelessness regardless of whether a person is in priority need. This has been hailed as the most significant change to homelessness legislation for 40 years. Islington Council has been focusing on early intervention and prevention for many years, with innovative schemes such as the sanctuary scheme for victims of domestic abuse and a rent deposit scheme. The new law stipulates further responsibilities legal requirements for all local authorities and public bodies in England.

Our Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2023 sets out how the council will:

- prevent homelessness through partnership working;
- focus prevention and support for those most at risk of homelessness. The support will extend to the health and wellbeing of individuals, in addition to a place to live;
- work towards eliminating rough sleeping.

There is well established strong partnership working through the Islington Homelessness Forum (IHF), which has been meeting regularly for over ten years and attended by a range of commissioned and non- commissioned voluntary and community sector organisations. These include senior representation from SHP, Pillion Trust, One Housing, St Mungos, Thames Reach, Union Chapel, The Manna, Homeless Link, Big Issue, No Second Night Out, Clash (NHS service provider) and Better Lives (NHS service provider). The strategy reiterates the continuing importance given by the council to a collaborative approach between sectors in reducing homelessness and rough sleeping. In recognition of the link between homelessness and health and wellbeing, the 2019-2023 strategy and its delivery will be sponsored by the Health and Wellbeing Board.

The national and local rise in homelessness has been attributed to the lack sufficient supply of affordable housing. Other significant factors include:

- the increase in homelessness arising from the termination of assured shorthold tenancies in the private rented sector;

- Housing Benefit restrictions introduced since 2010, which arguably has made it difficult for claimants to secure housing at rents which Housing Benefit will cover.
 - Four-year 1% rent reduction of social rents until 2020 has meant that local authorities have had less income than they previously expected, which has meant that it has been even more difficult for local authorities to build affordable new homes.
 - Impact of Welfare Reform - From November 2016 the total annual benefit cap was reduced to £20,000 (or £13,400 for single adults), and there are lower rates of housing benefit available for those under 35 years. Combined with freezes in Local Housing Allowance rates, this has meant that there are fewer existing homes available to provide settled or temporary accommodation for households in receipt of housing benefits.
 - Additionally, the roll-out of Universal Credit is likely to impact on homelessness by limiting the ability of local authorities to access accommodation in the private rented sector; a key prevention measure.
 - Reduction in tax relief for buy to let landlords which would impact on the availability of properties to rent in the private sector and an increase in average rents.
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- A total of 2,504 households approached to Islington Council's Housing Aid Team seeking advice on housing in 2017/18. This represented a decrease of over a quarter from 2014/15, when there were 3,503 households seeking advice.
 - Notably, not all of these households were homeless. Many of these households may also have sought help from other agencies who help with housing options and advice, such as how to tackle debt, or claim benefits.
 - Not all visits to the Housing Aid Team result in a homeless application. The number of applications received in 2017/18 is 32% lower than 2016/17 and demonstrates the continuing emphasis on prevention of homelessness.
 - However, due to a number of factors including the Homeless Reduction Act, recent case law and the likely impact of future welfare and housing reforms, we anticipate a higher number of applications and acceptances for at least the next two years.

Evidence

At its meeting on 14 January 2019, members received a presentation from Ramesh Logeswaran, the Interim Head of Housing Needs regarding Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Islington.

The following points were highlighted:

- Islington Council's overriding approach to the issue of homelessness is to help people build resilience through prevention and early intervention. As the reasons for homelessness varies, the council endeavours to provide practical assistance such as being able to access rent deposit schemes and signposting residents to organisations such as Home finder UK, Sanctuary scheme and Islington Lettings where alternative and affordable accommodation can be offered.
- Housing officers intervene on behalf of tenants with landlords in the private sector in alleviating homelessness by guaranteeing rental income especially where they are willing to offer discounted market rents.
- The Service makes decisions in line with the Housing Act and support remains in place until a decision is made for all those recognised as homeless.
- In comparison to neighbouring authorities, Islington has had a significant reduction in the number of homelessness decisions due to its approach and has therefore exceeded the Council's corporate target of 400 over the last three years. Meeting was informed that between 2016 and 2017, 1173 households were prevented from becoming homeless.
- Islington has one of the lowest numbers of households in temporary accommodation in London, of which 60% lie within the borough. Islington will continue to purchase properties to use as temporary accommodation, minimising the use of private sector accommodation and ensuring that those who are homelessness are still able to retain their social, educational and family networks.
- Collaborative and strong partnership across the public sector and ideas shared at the Islington Homelessness Forum and Lead officers at strategic housing needs across the North London sub region has resulted in a different approach to addressing homelessness.
- The Lead Officer acknowledged that increase in homelessness was due to insufficient supply of affordable housing and the removal of assured short-hold tenancies in the private sector such as housing associations. In addition, the introduction of housing benefit restrictions in 2010 and the government's welfare reform has worsened the situation.

- 2,504 households approached Islington Council's Housing Aid Team for advice in 2017/18 a fall from the municipal year 2014/15. Reasons provided include family breakdowns or family or friends not willing to accommodate and having children within the family or expecting a child.
- The meeting was advised that two thirds of accepted cases are between 20 and 40 years old and about two thirds of accepted cases tend to be female with a small majority being lone parents.
- The Homeless Reduction Act has introduced a number of changes, the duty to provide advisory service has been strengthened; the period during which an applicant can be considered as threatened with homelessness has increased from 28 days to 56 days; a new duty to assess all eligible applicants and for Council's to take reasonable steps to prevent and relieve homelessness.
- A Personalised Housing Plan is agreed between the local authority and the applicant.
- In terms of impact of the new legislation on the Housing Revenue Account, anecdotal evidence shows a reluctance of applicants to engage in Personalised Housing Plans, an increase in bureaucracy because of the new duties thereby diverting resources away from carrying out their specific duties of searching for alternative accommodation and negotiating with landlords.
- In light of the increasing numbers of people rough sleeping in Islington, meeting was informed that the Council's has robust plans addressing it, especially with it's multiple agency/department approach and externally with other London wide initiatives. In addition the Council has commissioned additional units for emergency shelters; recruited staff to support rough sleepers; joint working with neighbouring boroughs and services to tackle hot-spot areas and is seeking additional funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.
- Members were informed that in light of government's requirement that all local authorities have a strategy in place to address homelessness, the Council Executive has now agreed a five-year (2019-2023) Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, endorsed by the Health and Well-Being Board in 2019.
- Vulnerable groups continue to be included as part of the strategy. The meeting was informed that in addition to other groups, former members of the regular armed forces and people from outside of the UK without settled status and no recourse to public funds would be given particular attention.
- The Council proactively engages with stakeholders such as Homes and Communities, Children's and Adults Social Care, Community Safety and external partners such as Partners for Islington, Housing Associations and St Mungo's Outreach through which it is quickly able to intervene early in households before the situation worsens.

- Due to the dearth in social housing and applicant's reliance on private sector accommodation especially housing associations, the Council intends in the long run to build more social housing to address homelessness in the borough.
- With regard to extending the Council's criteria for eligibility to elderly and disabled persons which noticeably has been on the rise, the Lead officer advised that all applicants are treated the same irrespective of age with dignity.
- With regard to officer refusal's and outcomes from judicial reviews, the lead officer acknowledged that in general the Council has a good successful rate in appeal cases.
- On the issue of medical assessments, the Service Director, Housing Needs & Strategy acknowledged that the Service would be prepared to look at other options, will be in discussion with the local Clinical Commissioning Group on whether it would be prepared to carry out the medical assessments.

At committee's meeting on 12 February, Ruth Hayes and Stuart Hearne, Co-Directors of the Islington Law Centre highlighted what role the organisation plays in alleviating homelessness in Islington. The following points were noted:

- Islington Law Centre (LC) provides low income residents with accessible high quality legal advices to challenge the effects of poverty which is inextricably linked to homelessness. The law centre works in conjunction with statutory agencies, the Local authority, the Islington Strategic Advice Service and BAMER community organisations in addressing this issue.
- Through partnership working LC is able to provide a range of services to help reduce the risks of housing crises and homelessness and most of its focus and activities are centred around early intervention, welfare benefits and debt
- LC runs a drop in Reception and Referral service for residents threatened with evictions where they can bring in their correspondence and are assisted in understanding what stage their case is. LC also offers specialist weekly housing advice outreach sessions across the borough; specialist weekly welfare rights and specialist weekly debt advice outreach sessions.
- The Law Centre is funded by Council grants and receives additional funding from both Cripplegate and Cloudesley which is used for follow up casework when required and residents seek advice on a range of issues such as representations on possession proceedings, homelessness, succession rights, rent arrears, landlord and tenant matters, evictions, anti-social behaviour, rehousing etc

- The Law Centre also provides legal representation to help people avoid possessions, evictions and homelessness which is available through the Clerkenwell and Shoreditch County Court duty scheme. Tenants of different tenures whether Council, housing associations tenants and tenants in private rented sector are supported by LC.
- Record shows that LC clients tend to be Council tenants, only 8% of tenants in the private sector compared to 31% council tenants and 46% social landlord tenants seek advice and support. With regard to the 8% private tenants that receive pre-advise there is no evidence that they were placed in private sector housing by the Council.
- In light of the increasing overlap between the Law Centre's immigration work and housing needs, the Law centre offer services to Islington residents through its weekly outreach sessions at the Hackney Migrant Centre.
- With regard to the Council's No Recourse to Public Funds team, the meeting was informed that the Law Centre works with young people to regularise their status so that they are able to access work, continue education and benefits.
- With the introduction of the Universal Credit, LC continues to offer advise to young people at risk of losing their homes, however as its implementation is still in its infancy, LC has yet to able to analyse the impact, however it will continue to work with the Council on this issue.
- Homelessness is caused by a myriad of factors such as lack of security in the private sector, low income, erratic income, failures of the social security system along with crises such as job loss, ill health or family breakdown.
- In response to a question about the services of Now Medical, representative from the LC advised that the Council should consider the medical assessments made by the individual's GP or consultant as they were most aware of their state of health.
- In response to a question about local authorities employing the services of Now Medical for housing applications, the meeting was advised that it offers local authorities another option when taking a decision on housing needs of vulnerable applicants instead of relying on GP's opinions. LC representatives expressed

concerns that most applicants affected were vulnerable suffering mental illness, learning disability or physical disability.

- A suggestion by a member that the Committee consider scrutinising the Council's use of NowMedical in the future was noted.

Main Findings

Karen Lucas, Director of Housing Needs summarised the findings from the review as –

- There has been significant reduction in the number of homelessness decisions in the last three years in comparison to the number of homelessness decisions across London boroughs as a result of the Services focussing more on prevention activities.
- Between 2016 and 2018, 1173 households have been prevented from becoming homeless, as the council has been able to provide secured alternative accommodation or help residents remain in their existing accommodation.
- There is evidence of collaborative and strong partnerships across the public sector and a valued voluntary sector.
- The Service actively participates in strategic Housing Needs meetings across the North London sub-region and the pan London Councils meetings to ensure a strong lobbying voice and to help inform Government thinking.
- 2,504 households approached Islington Council's Housing Aid Team seeking advice on housing in 2017/18.
- In Islington, "Parents, family or friends no longer willing to accommodate" was the most common reason for homelessness acceptances, followed by domestic abuse and loss of private sector accommodation
- Having children or expecting a child was the most common category of priority need each year, making up 78% of all households accepted in 2017/18.
Age: consistently two thirds of accepted cases were between 20 and 40 years old.
Gender: consistently around two thirds of accepted cases were female, likely linked to the applicant having dependent children, as single parents were more likely to be female than male.
Lone parent: consistently majority of accepted cases are lone parents. This was likely to be linked to welfare reform, as lone parents are disproportionately affected by the welfare reform.
- Rates of households in temporary accommodation has been relatively stable across London between 2016/17 and 2017/18, however it has risen more recently.

- Islington reduced the numbers of households in temporary accommodation between 2015 and 2018, equating to an overall reduction of 21% in 2017/18 when compared to the numbers of placements made in 2015/16.
- Despite the wider market challenges, Islington has experienced continual reductions in the numbers of placements out of borough.
- This meant a significant proportion of households becoming homeless in Islington had been able to retain their social, familial, educational and employment networks.
- Evidence from Solace Women's Aid highlighted concerns related to the difficulties experienced by women seeking housing assistance from the Housing Need and Homes and Communities services. There was concern about how vulnerable women had found it difficult to access the services they needed.
- Questions was raised about what role do housing associations play in homelessness prevention in the borough?
- What is the impact on service users of the council's targets for homelessness?
- In relation to rough sleeping, London and Islington was seeing a worrying trend of increasing numbers of people rough sleeping and this was reflected in Islington's statistics.

Recommendations:

- The Committee recommended that the service commission an in-house medical assessment to assess housing applications in light of the level of complaints received regarding the present arrangement.
- The Committee acknowledges the present partnership working arrangements to alleviate homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough. However, it recommends that the Service review its liaisons, communication and coordination with the voluntary sector to ensure positive and effective multi agency working.
- To address concerns identified by domestic abuse services, the Committee recommends a review alongside a consideration of whether present guidance, training, knowledge of working with survivors and procedures in use would need to be reviewed.
- The Committee recommends that the Chief Executive liaise with relevant directors to ensure that the proposed localities initiative takes into consideration lessons learned from this scrutiny and from housing first into account in its design.
- The Committee welcomes the present arrangements of alleviating homelessness however it recommends that relevant officers regularly report to the committee on current arrangements for cross borough and pan London cooperation in relation to homelessness.

- The Committee recommends that housing associations be scrutinised on what they are doing to help prevent and deal with homelessness when invited to committee to explain their performances.
- That the Housing Director responds with details of all targets set for officers dealing with homelessness, the rationale for them and what is known about the effects of them.
- The Committee recommend that Councillors continue to campaign actively to end Universal Credit and replace it with proper social security system that supports people rather than penalising them, and to consider other campaigns that tackle the root causes of homelessness.

Conclusions

The Council's overriding approach is to help people to build resilience through prevention and early intervention, how the council works to prevent homelessness and support people who are homeless is a good example of prevention and early intervention in action.

Work to ensure that the council is using good quality temporary accommodation in borough will reduce the impact of homelessness on vulnerable people and families.

Whilst there is evidence of strong partnership working across the public sector voluntary sector we want to make sure that the most is being made of the many and varied voluntary sector and grass roots organisations who are able to work collaboratively with the council to help to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping.

In carrying out the review, the Committee met with officers, members of the public and others to gain a balanced view. The Committee would like to thank witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2018/19

Councillors:

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan (Chair)

Councillor Sue Lukes (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Theresa Debono

Councillor Troy Gallagher

Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE

Councillor Gary Heather

Councillor Ben Mackmurdie

Councillor Marian Spall

Co-opted members:

Rose-Marie McDonald – PFI Managed Tenants

Dean Donaghey

Substitutes:

Councillor Jilani Chowdhury

Councillor Tricia Clarke

Councillor Vivian Cutler

Councillor Osh Gantly

Councillor Satnam Gill OBE

Councillor Sarah Hyde

Councillor Roulin Khondoker

Councillor Nurallah Turan

Acknowledgements:

The Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.

Officer Support:

Karen Lucas- Director Housing Needs and Strategy

Ramesh Logeswaran

Ola Adeoye – Senior Democratic Services Officer

SCRUTINY REVIEW INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID)
Review: Homelessness and Rough Sleeping
Scrutiny Review Committee: Housing Scrutiny Committee
Director leading the review: Karen Lucas
Lead Officers: Ramesh Logeswaran
Overall aim: <ul style="list-style-type: none">To explore how the Council Housing Services addresses Homelessness and monitors the performance of its delivery.
Objectives of the review: <ul style="list-style-type: none">To ensure that the assessment criteria for applicants is robustThat the support and aligned services is targeted and effective
How is the review to be carried out: Officer presentation Evidence from St Mungo's, SHP and other providers Consider details of the rough sleep count Clarity on the ethnic origin and immigration status of rough sleepers Types of accommodation services. Funding support available for rough sleepers
Scope of the Review

- To consider the Council’s Prevention of Homelessness Strategy.
- To consider whether the service is capitalising on opportunities to prevent homelessness
- How the approach to dealing with Homelessness could be improved
- Where partnership working could be further developed

The review will focus on:

Those that are homeless and those threatened with homelessness.

Performance indicators

Examples of gaps and failures in service provision, and how these could be prevented.

Review of case studies/legal challenges.

Types of evidence:

Evidence from officers, especially front-line staff

Performance data

Examples of casework

Street count participation by members

Walk through the referral process

Evidence from the commissioning services

Homeless people and residents

Programme	
Key output:	To be submitted to Committee on:
1. Scrutiny Initiation Document	11 September 2018
2. Draft Recommendations	20 January 2020
3. Final Report	3 March 2020