

LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM

Report to: Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee

Date: 23/07/2024

Subject: Update on the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Unit

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SUMMARY

This report provides an update on homelessness and rough sleeping across in the borough and the actions that are in place to manage homelessness demand and improve service delivery.

As part of the Housing Services Improvement Plan, the service undertook a review of homelessness and temporary accommodation in the last quarter of 2023/24, against a backdrop of: -

increasing homeless approaches,
changing legislation,
insufficient supply of accommodation,
rising costs of temporary accommodation,
out-dated internal policies, and restricted funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the committee to review, feedback and comment on the report of Homelessness Prevention and the Rough Sleeping Unit.

Wards Affected: All

Our Values	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Corporate Plan and the H&F Values
Building shared prosperity	A priority for the homelessness service is to work with households to help them maximise their income and independence
Creating a compassionate and inclusive	Homelessness can happen to anyone.

council	Officers work with households to assess their housing needs and identify the housing options which may be available to them based on their individual circumstances.
Doing things with local residents, not to them	Personal Housing Plans are created with homeless applicants setting out the reasonable steps that the Council will take and the steps the applicants can take to prevent or relieve their homelessness.
Being ruthlessly financially efficient	The Council aims to prevent homelessness wherever possible to avoid the need to place into expensive temporary accommodation
Taking pride in H&F	The Council aims to achieve the best outcomes for homeless applicants and to perform well in meeting the Council's homelessness duties
Rising to the challenge of the climate and ecological emergency	With any property in housing, we are supporting the climate and ecological emergency.

Background Papers Used in Preparing This Report

None

THE COUNCIL'S HOMELESSNESS DUTIES

1. When a household approaches the homelessness service, the Council has a duty to carry out enquiries to establish whether the household is homeless or threatened with homelessness in 56 days. If a household is threatened with homelessness within 56 days, a Prevention Duty is accepted and officers work with the household to help prevent their homelessness from occurring or to help them find alternative accommodation to enable them to move on in a planned way. If a household is actually homeless or likely to be homeless imminently, a Relief Duty is owed and officers work with the household for 56 days to help relieve their homelessness by helping them find alternative accommodation.
2. Where the Relief Duty is owed, officers also have to consider whether temporary accommodation (TA) should be provided. The Council cannot assist all homeless households with TA, TA is only offered if the household has a priority need such as children, pregnancy, or a serious mental health or physical disability, (this is called the s188 priority need threshold).
3. Most homeless approaches are made by way of households completing an on-line form which is on the Council's web site. Professional bodies such as

Probation, Hospitals, Prisons, DWP also approach the service on behalf of individuals they are working with, using the Homelessness Duty to Refer.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

4. The three main reasons for homelessness are family/friends unwilling to accommodate, end of private sector tenancy and domestic abuse. An average 30% of households approach the service at the Prevention stage when they are at risk of homelessness within 56 days and 70% approach in the Relief stage when homelessness is more imminent.
5. Preventing homelessness is usually the best outcome for households because it avoids the disruption and instability of homelessness. A priority for 2024/25 is to increase the number of successful homelessness prevention and relief outcomes and additional officers have been appointed to focus on this activity. The following case studies provide examples of successful homeless outcomes during the last few months:

Case study 1:

6. This case study is our support approach to a householder who is experience financial difficulties because of changes in their employed in private rented tenancy. The service always wants to look at such cases in a resident centric approach of making sure we put the resident at the “heart” of our assessment work and more importantly find a solution for the family.
7. In this case, the family was at risk of homelessness from a private rented tenancy, which included a partner and two children. They have been living in the private sector tenancy for the last 18 months but were unfortunately served with a s21 notice because their financial circumstances had changed, and they were unable to afford the tenancy.
8. Working with the family the case officer understood that there had been changes in the family’s finances which had reduced their income for several months which in turn had affected their ability to meet their rent. To support the family, the officer undertook a financial assessment, and look at other fiscal options which led to the family to claim the appropriate benefit that enable them to also receive a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) to help them in the short term.
9. The officer assigned to the family, was able to persuade the landlord to allow that the family could remain at the property and was able to reaffirm that the landlord’s rental income was protected. The family stayed at the private sector tenancy and most importantly the risk of homelessness was avoided.

Case study 2:

10. An asylum seeker living in hotel accommodation provided by the Home Office made a homeless application following the Home Officer granting her asylum and given leave to remain in the UK, the applicant is required to leave her hotel within 2 weeks. The applicant has limited English so her case officer arranged an interpreter to translate during the assessment interview and explanation of the housing options available to the applicant.
11. The case officer identified potential private rented properties and the applicant expressed an interest in viewing a property in the Lewisham area. The case officer advised that applicant that she would need to view the property quickly because there is significant competition for vacancies in the private rented market. The applicant was anxious about finding her way to Lewisham and was still waiting for her benefit payments to be paid following her asylum decision so had no money to travel. To avoid losing the property, the case officer arranged a taxi and went to view the flat with the applicant. They were successful in securing the property and the applicant has signed a 12-month tenancy and will be able to move straight from her Home Office hotel room into her new home.

Homelessness caseload and outcomes

12. Homelessness demand has increased over the last 3 years with an average 280 households approaching the homelessness service each month.
13. Homelessness approaches during Q1 2024/25 remain stable with an average 260 households presenting each month.
14. The homelessness service is managing 1,085 open cases at present. We have developed a Temporary Accommodation Action Plan, where the priority is to reduce the backlog of homelessness cases.
15. Homelessness caseloads are high with average officer caseloads of 72 cases. This is partly due to the high volume of homelessness approaches but there has also been a high level of staff turnover and absence which makes it even more challenging for existing officers to progress cases swiftly. One of the difficulties with officers holding high caseloads is completing the casework and decision making within the Prevention period of 56 days and Relief period of 56 days. A target has been put in place to reduce the age of open cases and to ensure officers have no case older than 6 months by the end of the calendar year. The oldest case at present is 18 months.
16. A target has been set to reduce officer caseloads to 60 by end March 2025. This will reduce the operational caseload to 900 open cases.
17. The number of cases that have been open for more than 6 months is reducing and intensive casework management has been put in place to provide officers the support and direction they need to manage their caseloads, complete their enquiries and issue decisions. It is difficult for officers to achieve successful homelessness prevention and relief outcomes while their caseloads are high because of the time and focus that this work needs. Vacant posts are being recruited to with the target of all posts filled by the end of July.

18. We are changing processes to identify opportunities for preventing homelessness at the first point of contact, and the case studies set out above demonstrate the successful homelessness prevention work that is being achieved. Financial resources are available for officers to help residents meet private sector rent increases, clear arrears and rent shortfalls, and to help with the up-front costs of securing new private rented tenancies. These resources also help with costs such as accompanied viewings which can make a difference when helping applicants manage the stresses of homelessness.
19. It is important that applicants understand that the Council's duty is to work with them to help prevent or relieve their homelessness. It is not possible for the council to directly provide accommodation in all cases, and in many cases the private rented sector is the most realistic housing option. This is particularly important for single applicants to understand because if a single applicant is reluctant to consider a private sector tenancy and doesn't engage with viewing potential properties, at the end of the Relief period, the officer is required to make a main duty decision which includes assessing whether the applicant has a priority need. If there is no priority need, the outcome will be a No Priority Need decision and no further assistance will be provided.
20. Officers are also looking to make best use of the Housing Allocations Scheme by making greater use of the Private Rental Sector Partnership (PRSP) initiative which allows homeless households or those threatened with homelessness to join or retain a place on the Council's housing register if they move into the private rented sector, and by making direct offers of sheltered accommodation to homeless applicants over the age of 60 years whilst in the relief stage.

Homeless households in temporary accommodation

21. As a good landlord the Council, places households into temporary accommodation at crisis point. To support residents at this stage we assess their financial and personal circumstances to help them into medium to long term housing solutions.
22. The supply of temporary accommodation in-borough is limited, households are therefore also accommodated in boroughs across London and outside London. Every effort is made to secure TA in-borough whenever possible, and officers take factors such as medical and support needs into account when sourcing TA. There are 1,457 households in temporary accommodation (TA), of which 99 new placements into TA have been made since 1 April 2024.
23. When a main duty is accepted for a homeless household, they are placed on to the Housing Register and advised about choice-based lettings and how to bid for a home. Since 1 April, 94 homeless households have been rehoused from the housing register.

Rough Sleeping Unit

24. We have a range of measures in place to prevent rough sleeping within Hammersmith & Fulham.

25. We work very closely with local partners within Health – GPs and A&Es in particular and also Department for Works and Pensions, and Metropolitan Police who have a duty to refer anyone suspected of being homeless or rough sleeping.
26. Our Rough Sleeper Outreach team, delivered by Thames Reach act on local intelligence shared by these agencies (and also local people via the Street Link telephone number) to engage with people sleeping rough and refer them to our Rough Sleeper Assessment Hub. From here onward referrals can be made into more settled accommodation and support where needed.
27. We recognise that Housing First (rather than the more traditional supported hostel route) is the most sustainable method of ensuring former rough sleepers don't return to the street.
28. There is a robust assessment and housing pathway in place for rough sleepers. Thames Reach operate the outreach service and provide outreach shift 5 nights a week. There are 20 beds in an assessment Hub which provide a first place of stay while needs assessments are carried out.
29. The move-on pathway from the Hub includes 129 rooms of supported housing across 8 properties. Rough sleepers meeting the homelessness priority need threshold are placed in Temporary Accommodation and rehoused through the mainstream homelessness route. In addition, the Council has made the acquisition of 321 Lillie Road with its strategic ambitions to tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping in the Borough.

CONCLUSION

30. There is a high level of housing need in the borough from households approaching as homeless and rough sleeping.
31. The Homelessness Action Plan is in place to deliver a range of service improvements and developments to ensure homeless applications are assessed in line with statutory duties, homelessness is prevented to reduce pressure on TA and rehousing opportunities are maximised.