

Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes



Tuesday 12 November 2024

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Jacolyn Daly (Chair), Asif Siddique, Sally Taylor, Omid Miri, Frances Umeh and Adronie Alford

Other Councillors: Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness)

Guests

Stewart Proudly (Senior Service Manager, St Mungo's)
Michael Angus (Director, Barons Court Project)
Diana Ifemeni (Acting Lead Manager, Thames Reach)
Dan Rivers (Lead Worker, Thames Reach)
Elizabeth Odigie (Senior Operations Manager, Turning Point)
Grace Smart (Deputy Operations, Turning Point)
Peter Charalambides (CEO, The Upper Room)
Jo Carter (CEO, Glass Door) (attended remotely)
Lucy Baker (West London Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Coordinator, RBKC)
Jonathan Tan (CEO, Greater Change)

Residents

Martin Thirlaway
Scott Reete
Marie Thomas

Officers:

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing)
Dr Nicola Lang (Director of Public Health)
John Hayden (Assistant Director of Repairs)
Clare Dorning (Head of Homelessness)
Laura Palfreeman (Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager)
Debbie Yau (Committee Coordinator)

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2024 were agreed to be accurate.

4. **ROUGH SLEEPING UPDATE**

The Chair welcomed rough sleeping partners to the meeting.

Laura Palfreeman (Rough Sleeping Commissioning Manager) provided an update on rough sleeping in London and Hammersmith and Fulham (H&F) and the reasons accounted for the increase in rough sleeping. She outlined the rough sleeper pathway, accommodation outcomes achieved and partnership working with some examples whereby the rough sleepers who had refused to engage initially was offered accommodation. Laura then highlighted the challenges about rising demand, the lack of certainty over future resources and affordability of accommodation.

NOTE: Officer's presentation is attached in Appendix 1

Presentation by External Partners

Councillor Adronie Alford enquired about the number of residents being provided with Housing First support by Thames Reach. Diana Ifemeni (Acting Lead Manager, Thames Reach) noted that the organisation was providing support to rough sleepers to take up about half of their current 31 tenancies. Under the whole-team approach, Thames Reach also provided support to help those sustain their tenancies or secure a permanent accommodation.

Elizabeth Odigie (Senior Operations Manager, Turning Point) introduced their work across H&F in close collaboration with the partners including the St Mungo's hostel and weekly joint outreach with Thames Reach. Professional trainings were provided to different teams to raise their awareness around substance use and treatment pathways. Under the lived experience approach, ongoing recovery support was visible throughout the treatment journey with the services taken proactively to clients. Specialists like social workers, psychologists, and mental health wellbeing practitioners within the service delivered tailored and multi-faceted support.

Michael Angus (Director, Barons Court Project) said the Project was a day centre providing support to people living with mental health conditions at risks of homelessness. When the Project was first started 10 years ago, they received around 250 to 300 individuals a year with about 7,000 attendances of people with mental health needs (70%) and rough sleeping conditions

(30%). Last year, the figures rose to 900 individuals with 14,000 visits comprising 5% with mental health conditions and 95% rough sleeping. He was concerned that the centre had to turn away people with mental health needs because of capacity constraints. Michael then outlined the Project's holistic approach in splitting their services into three areas, i.e. Body (basic needs and medical care), Mind (handling benefits and housing forms, resume and job searching) and Spirit (activities related to arts, music, theatre, beach etc). The Project via its social enterprise called Homeless Made had sold some 35,000 amazing cards to raise money for the artists and the Project.

Stewart Proudly (Senior Service Manager, St Mungo's) introduced the organisation's accommodation pathway for homelessness in H&F which supported 129 people under 7 projects in any given night. Each individual was supported by a lead worker who executed a bespoke recovery plan which might include direct support from the Turning Point and/or NHS nursing team to meet their health needs. St Mungo's had recently incorporated adult and social care into their services, with social workers providing different levels of care packages for clients having past trauma, substance use, in their later years, or learning independent and better living in their own homes. The clients' recovery using their own strengths might be moved to lower level of support with the assistance of education advisor/progression coach and linked back to meaningful activities they used to enjoy doing in the past. They were also helped to get ready for or sustain paid work by the employment specialist.

Lucy Baker (West London Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Coordinator, RBKC) said the Service was hosted by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea covering 7 West London boroughs. It had received additional funding through the central government's Rough Sleeping Initiative Grant which had enabled them to commission services on a subregional basis on top of individual boroughs' capacity. The additional resources also enabled the boroughs to work better together through shared serving and learning, and to support more rough sleepers under joint commissioning.

Peter Charalambides (CEO, The Upper Room) noted that in addition to providing clothing, toiletries and sleeping bags etc., their organisation offered hot meals 5 days a week and was currently feeding around 100 people a night. They also provided employability and wellbeing services which sought to deal with the root causes of the clients' problems. In addition, The Upper Room offered unique driving lessons for young people at risk and those who had previous interaction with the criminal justice system.

Jonathan Tan (CEO, Greater Change) remarked that their organisation provided personalised budgets to people experiencing homelessness and helped them unlock debts and overcome financial barriers. Greater Change received referrals from partners and offered financial planning support and resources to meet individual ambitions and help them make good financial decisions.

In response to the Chair's question, Clare Dorning (Head of Homelessness) noted that Jonathan had met with H&F's Housing managers and team leaders

on Greater Change's provision and how the services could fill the gap of H&F's offers going forward.

Jo Carter (CEO, Glass Door) remarked that their organisation would have been serving the H&F communities for 25 years in 2025. She said that Glass Door offered year-round casework service for 3 boroughs including H&F, and emergency accommodation which was opened recently and lasted until next April. For the latter, there were 3 circuits in seven venues. The one in H&F was a Women's Circuit offering 35 spaces every night in direct response to the growing number of women experiencing homelessness requiring emergency shelter. During the past week, many shelter guests had met with the caseworkers to explore the pathways out of homelessness.

Discussion

The Chair referred to the H&F's annual count (a snapshot taken for the number of people sleeping rough in the area on a 'typical night') in the previous two years were 14 and 7 individuals respectively and asked if the snapshot annual count had reflected the reality.

Laura Palfreeman explained the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) aimed to have a good understanding of the actual numbers of the rough sleepers and the snapshot annual count might help avoid double-counting particularly those who might be moving across the borough boundaries. Clare Dorning added that Council officers had based on local intelligence and coordinated with partners to cover as much ground on the streets as they could. The figure was a snapshot of rough sleepers identified on that particular night, on top of those who were already bedded-down recently.

Members noted that the next annual count would take place on 28 November. In reply to the Chair's enquiry about the projection, Dan Rivers (Lead Worker, Thames Reach) said the figure would be so varied depending on the weather and the number of people evicted out of existing accommodation on that night. He said it might probably be 4 to 5 more than the last year's 14.

Noting that the Council would find a bed space for every individual found rough sleeping during the active Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) alert, the Chair was concerned whether additional beds were available to cope with the sudden surge in demand. Laura Palfreeman advised that SWEP and the related accommodation needs usually lasted for a few nights. Additional beds for that period could come from temporary accommodation from existing stock.

Addressing the Chair's concern about accommodating the homelessness during covid, Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) recalled at the advice of the central government, he and Dr Nicola Lang (Director of Public Health) had helped accommodate homeless people as well as those who had to live apart from the family to avoid cross-infection into local hotels. It was noted that those who had been rough sleeping for many years, found it particularly hard to stay in a box-like room and/or use a bed. Richard took the opportunity to thank all external partners in providing a great service to tackle rough

sleeping because it was more than about arranging people into accommodation.

Diana Ifemeni echoed and believed that all partners understood rough sleepers' previous traumas and dealt with them with a mental health mindset. She said some clients were able to receive legal services for their cases to be resolved. However, the number of homeless people/rough sleepers rose when former asylum seekers left the Home Office accommodation and when the under 35's could no longer afford private rentals in the borough.

Councillor Asif Siddique appreciated the work of partnership work done for the H&F. He enquired about the background and ethnicities of those homeless people/rough sleepers leaving the Home Office accommodation and how they were legally supported now. Clare Dorning and Laura Palfreeman noted that while the number of rough sleepers from Home Office accommodation was available, there were no breakdown on their ethnicities. Laura further noted that these people were not allowed to work or study while awaiting the decision and once a decision was made, they had to leave the Home Office accommodation in short notice. The support given to meet the challenge over a short period of time included helping them to get a job, apply for benefits or provide the right mental health support service. Clare added that those who were not eligible to remain would be connected with specialist legal advisor to regularise their status.

Noting that a significant number of people had no leave to remain status in this country and they were suffering from different issues, Councillor Siddique asked how many of them were related to this borough and receiving legal support. Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) referred to the refugee programmes undertaken in close collaboration with the Home Office and the refugee community. Relevant services were delivered by the Home Office, the Council or external partners to meet the needs. Clare Dorning added that for cases having received Home Office's negative decision, they would not be eligible to receive direct support from the Homelessness Service of the Housing team. However, these cases would be referred to Children and Adult Social Care which shall provide assistance upon positive assessments, or to external partners where appropriate. She further clarified that the numbers on Appendix 1 referred to rough sleepers who might choose to share or otherwise their reasons for rough sleeping. Laura added that there were four beds in H&F's rough sleeper assessment hub which were eligible for single persons with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). As such, those awaiting transition after Home Office's decision or undergoing litigation might also use these beds. In fact, everyone was entitled to receiving accommodation support during SWEP irrespective of their status. Dr Nicola Lang (Director of Public Health) also pointed out that everyone was eligible to receive GP as well as secondary care (urgent/emergency hospital care or cancer treatment) services regardless their NRPF status. These services were free and they would only be billed for non-urgent care.

On the Chair's enquiry about external partners' work for rough sleepers who had NRPF, Michael Angus reckoned the huge increase in demand for accommodation following the Home Office's decision to grant refugee status to 50,000 asylum seekers who were given 2 days' notice to vacate their hotel

accommodation. Since mid-September, the day centre of the Baron Court Project received around 5 to 8 new people daily. Because of the surging demand, the Board decided in mid-October to allocate a 2-hour slots for each individual to get food and have a shower once per week. They also worked in close collaboration with other external partners providing accommodation. Michael was pleased to note that most of the new people moved on in about 4 to 6 weeks' time.

Dan Rivers referred to the large cohort of NRPF individuals outside the category of asylum seekers. These people held expired student visas and some were victims of modern-day slavery. Thames Reach was currently providing support to this cohort through the pan London projects funded by the GLA. He said there were about 4 to 5 cases per month. Lucy Baker added that there were other services commissioned sub-regionally and/or across London, for example, providing immigration and legal advice to help individuals regularise their case (and then receive the mainstream services), or reconnecting NRPF individuals with families in their home countries. Addressing Councillor Siddique's concern, Lucy noted that there was no specific budget for NRPF cases but they would be signposted to receive children/adult social care services supported under other pieces of legislation.

On ways to overcome language barriers raised by Councillor Siddique, Dan Rivers noted that in addition to using online translation on site, lots of leaflets were in eight most common languages among rough sleepers, including Arabic, Romania and Italian. Thames Reach also kept a database of translators who might provide in-person translation if needed.

Councillor Alford asked about the reasons for people to resume rough sleeping after being helped to move along the pathway for longer term housing. Michael Angus said they did not want to see people coming back through the revolving door. He recalled that among the few returners he saw over the past 10 years, some did not manage to hold their accommodation. Baron Court Project had no restrictions for them to go through the process again.

In this connection, Laura Palfreeman noted that both new and returning rough sleepers were recorded on the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN). Returners were very few because support were provided for as long as needed.

As regards the accommodation for the rough sleeper's pet that might serve as their lifeline, Stewart Proudly noted that most services did allow animals as it was generally recognised leaving their pet could be a barrier for them to come off the street. He said that St Mungo's had partners looking after and providing support to animals when the rough sleeping owner was undergoing rehabilitation. Dan Rivers added that Thames Reach accepted pets in all their rough sleeping assessment hubs and arranged fostering service if the pets were in large amount. They also worked with street vets to provide care for the animals.

Councillor Miri Omid appreciated the work of the external partners as well as the Council's officers including Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for

Housing and Homelessness). On rough sleepers recorded on CHAIN, he was concerned why H&F borough had the highest increase in 2023/24 across London to 531 from 293 in 2022/23. Laura Palfreeman said the Homelessness Team had a detailed study on the significant increase and noted that the borough was a major transport hub where people might pass through and spend one night or two before moving on to alternative longer-term accommodation. Lucy Baker noted that many of these people contributing to the increase were seen once rather than repeatedly which suggested they were not local and it might not be necessary for the Council to look into longer-term provisions for them. Dan Rivers echoed that there were five major night bus routes and a tube line passing through the borough which brought passer-by for a short-term stay. Having a very strong Eritrean Sudanese community, the borough also attracted people leaving NASS accommodation to come and sleep here in large groups.

Councillor Sally Taylor was concerned about the mental and physical health conditions of the rough sleepers. Dr Lang referred to the survey done around 2020/21 for all clients in H&F's eight hostels, with many had dual diagnosis which meant having a mental health issue as well as drug and/or alcohol addiction. In addition to Turning Point's offer introduced earlier, the Council also commissioned services delivered by the Central Northwest London NHS Trust for dual diagnosis. Central London Community Healthcare (CLCH) provided homeless health service for hostel clients needing medical care for wounds or weeping leg ulcers. There was also a social worker who assessed homeless clients in hostels needing care act assessment or transferral to a nursing home.

Clare Dorning and Laura Palfreeman added that people with particular vulnerabilities like learning disabilities and autism would receive mainstream housing service support including temporary accommodation provided by the Homelessness Team.

Stewart Proudly highlighted the level of complexity of the support needs for people who had undiagnosed mental health issues stemming from complex trauma in the past/childhood. It was a difficult job to engage these clients with traditional mental health and GP appointment in the mainstream services.

Elizabeth Odigie said the Turning Point also worked closely with a homelessness health team with specialist nurses/clinicians who worked in a targeted way with the hostel clients and adopted a dual approach taking some intervention to different locations. Psychologists and psychiatrists were also in place to conduct initial assessment for those with undiagnosed learning disability and hold initial discussion on the level of needs to be provided.

The Chair asked about the allocation of roving beds and signposting them for single night occupancy. Jo Carter referred to Glass Door's Rotating Circuit, one of its three circuits which offered a total of 105 beds every night. 35 of them were beds in H&F under a Women's Circuit and other clients from the borough might be offered beds in the other two circuits at Kensington and Chelsea or Wandsworth. On signposting, Jo said Glass Door worked with partners and received referrals from them. The duration of stay varied from one night to the whole season, with an average of 25 days for last year during

which the waiting list had to be closed in four separate occasions to manage stakeholders' expectation.

Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) said it was shocking to see the rise in rough sleeping across the UK and London as reported by the CHAIN. On the other hand, it was encouraging to note the recent announcement of the increased funding of £2.7 million allocated for rough sleeping. It was also encouraging to see the MP's inquiry into rough sleeping to identify the root causes and to create longer-term solutions. Councillor Umeh referred to the past independent, resident-led rough sleeping commission which had been insightful in helping inform the housing, homelessness and rough sleeping strategies today and identify some of the root causes. Their work had also helped develop the partnership to which Councillor Umeh expressed her gratitude and said she looked forward to seeing the partnership continued the joint effort of tackling rough sleeping in the borough.

Questions from the floor

In reply to Scott Reete about external partners' funding, Clare Dorning advised that the funding was largely from MHCLG and partly from GLA. She said that local authorities bided for MHCLG's grant entitled Rough Sleeping Initiative on the basis of needs in collaboration with individual partners with unique knowledge and local experience. Laura Palfreeman added that grants from NHS were also available for public health initiatives. Michael Angus noted that 30% of Baron Court Projects funding came from the Council's Third Sector Investment Fund (3SIF) and some other grants. The organisation also applied funding support from trusts and foundations like the National Lottery and City Bridge and obtained donations from individuals and companies.

On the question of providing coordinated rough sleeping services through one agency, Clare Dorning highlighted the possible risk of failing to respond to the range of individual needs. Michael Angus echoed and considered individual partners had different approach that might suit different people.

Summing up, the Chair thanked everyone's attendance and their inspirational discussion and sharing.

RESOLVED

The Committee noted the information on the report.

5. VOIDS UPDATE

John Hayden (Assistant Director of Repairs) provided an update on the status of empty properties, i.e. voids in the housing service, including the current number of voids, improvements made over the past two years, an ongoing plan to reduce the number of vacant properties for different areas, and voids audits and reassurance. He reckoned by about June 2025, the voids target business as usual position would be maintained at 60 properties while the rental loss at any given time would be less than 40 days.

Richard Shwe (Director of Housing) appreciated the good job done by the Repairs team to reduce the number of voids. He highlighted the lessons learnt, including focusing on recovery of the voids for residents' use and enhancing the understanding of teams across the Housing Service about void management.

The Chair asked about the respective standards on recovering voids for council residents or as temporary accommodation for homelessness. John Hayden noted that they were two different types of voids. Voids properties turning into temporary accommodation for homeless people were not council stock but given by other housing bodies in the borough. All void properties of the Council met the Decent Home Standards upon recovery. Those used as temporary accommodation came in varied conditions and they might be recovered with or without decorations/flooring and meet the Decent Home Standards eventually.

Councillor Omid Miri was concerned about the impact of under-occupation during the recovery of void properties. John Hayden noted that starting about 6 weeks ago, the Council was incentivising people in under-occupied properties to move into some of the newly recovered properties as an option for independent living. The vacated properties would then be recovered for people on the housing register to bid for homes. He added that the voids recovery works were carried out by the term contractors.

Noting that potential residents might bid after viewing the void properties two weeks before completion, Councillor Miri was concerned the outstanding works might lead to their misinformation. John Hayden assured that the remaining works were just decorative finishing and the viewers would have received an online pack about the homes before viewing. He noted that surveys were conducted among residents six weeks after they had moved in to gauge the gap, if any, between expectation and reality.

Councillor Adronie Alford asked about the target dates of recovery completion of voids. John Hayden noted that it was 90+ days for major voids and capital works the current number of cases for which were 15 and 45 respectively. The major voids included structural works and major component replacement works whilst the capital works were more complicated with the majority of the voids having been subject to large insurance claims due to fire in tower blocks. He added that the remaining cases were targeted to complete within 60 days.

On Councillor Asif Siddique's question of recovering private voids, John Hayden referred to the Council's acquisition policy under the Asset Strategy whereby the Procurement team looked at opportunities for purchasing and recovering private voids to supplement temporary accommodation with outgoing leases. John agreed to provide a profile of identified private voids after the meeting.

ACTION: John Hayden

Richard Shwe remarked that a new system had been in place to report live information which allowed regular monitoring so that the Repairs team worked together with other teams on housing allocations and management to bring more homes back into use.

Councillor Frances Umeh (Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness) appreciated the teamwork of different parts of the Housing services to return empty homes into the stock. She highlighted the classification of voids with respective target dates of completion had helped streamlining the process which was recognised as fundamental and important by the audits. Councillor Umeh acknowledged that the Repairs team had worked incredibly hard to reduce the number of empty homes and bring them back into the service. She remarked that it was crucial for residents to provide feedback to the Repairs team to ensure the recovered properties met the required standards as expected.

Questions from the floor

Martin Thirlaway referred to the proposal of establishing a wholly owned council housing company which had been considered by the Cabinet at a recent meeting. In response to his concern, John Hayden noted that the void properties mentioned in this update were stock in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which would not be transferred to the housing company. Councillor Umeh added that private properties acquired under the housing company could be used for individual rental and would not form part of the Council's social housing stock.

Responding to Marie Thomas' question about the types of properties among the voids, John Hayden said many of them were properties in multi-occupied buildings with the majority being studios or 1-bed. A few of more complex voids with roofing and structural issues could be street properties.

As regards Scott Reete's question about the number of void properties in the Council, housing associations and private sector, John Hayden remarked that while benchmark data on voids against other local authorities was available, private associations did not publish their number of empty properties. John further noted that properties became voids when the tenant served a termination notice without which re-possession would be done through a legal process. He said that the scheme managers conducted daily checks with properties to ascertain their occupancy. Nevertheless, the local authority would not take possession of those properties whose residents had moved out due to medical needs.

RESOLVED

The Committee noted the information set out in the report.

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings:

- 27 January 2025
- 23 April 2025

Members noted the following reports would be considered at future meetings:

- 2025 Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Housing Revenue Account Budget 2025/26
- Compliance Update

Meeting started: 7.02 pm

Meeting ended: 9.10 pm

Chair:

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