

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

2024-2029

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Foreword

To be added - from the Mayor and/or the Lead Member

Why do we need a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy?

The council has a statutory duty, under the Homelessness Act (2002), to conduct a review of the nature and extent of homelessness in its District (borough) every five years and to develop a strategy setting out:

- how services will be delivered in the future to tackle homelessness; and
- the available resources to prevent and relieve homelessness.

This new strategy fulfils this statutory and mandatory requirement on the council in its role as a Local Housing Authority.

This strategy reflects the council's Strategic Plan 2022-26, the council's vision for the future and identifies its goals and objectives. Under **Priority 2: Homes for the future** – our ambition is that '**Everyone in Tower Hamlets lives in a good quality home that they can afford**'. The new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will assist in delivering this ambition.

How this strategy was developed

A review of homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough over the last five years has been carried out to inform the development of this Strategy. The review considered the support and services available for those at risk of/or who are experiencing homelessness or rough sleeping.

Both the review and the development of this strategy were undertaken in consultation with the borough's key partners, residents and stakeholders. A six-week consultation exercise took place (4 March - 26 April 2024), to gauge their opinions on the six priorities for the council which emerged from the findings of our review.

A total of 359 responses were received, which is significantly higher than number of responses other London boroughs' obtained when consulting on their recently developed homelessness and rough sleeping strategies. All six of the priorities in this strategy received strong support from respondents.

What do we know about Homelessness in the borough - findings from the Homelessness Review

The council has a legal duty to house homeless households under the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017). Since the introduction of the Act, the number of applicants seeking help has significantly increased. At the same time, we are facing the following challenges:

External challenges

- **Rising rents and housing costs** along with the recent **cost-of-living crisis** and **inflation**
- Post-pandemic **resurgence in demand for Private Rent Sector (PRS) accommodation**
- **Eviction ban lifted** on private rented accommodation.

- **Contraction in the supply of PRS accommodation**, partly due to small buy-to-let landlords' withdrawing from the market

Operational challenges

- **A lack of affordable accommodation in PRS** and difficulty in moving people on to settled sustainable accommodation. The gap between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and rent has widened, over the last 10 years.
- **The council competes against a Home Office contractor**, who find properties to house asylum seekers. The Home Office can pay higher rents and incentive payments to landlords, which diminishes the supply available to the council.
- More households seeking our assistance are being housed **in Bed and Breakfast and Commercial Hotels**, increasingly outside of the borough, and **for longer** due to the shortage of affordable temporary and private rent sector properties.
- There are **fewer prevention options**. More applicants are presenting at crisis point, leading to **more reliance on temporary accommodation**
- **Future government funding** for homelessness and rough sleeping remains **uncertain**.
- A considerable proportion of people approach the service **at crisis point**, rather than at an earlier stage, when the council may be able to prevent homelessness.

The review also provides insight into the applicants who seek advice and support from the council's Housing Options service:

Approaches and applicants

From the data review that informs this strategy (2022/23: last year of the previous strategy), **1,879** people (**60%** of the total applicants) approached the council for homelessness assistance **at the prevention stage** and **1,237** people (**40%** of the total applicants) approached the council **at the relief stage**.

Compared to the previous year approaches to the council **at the prevention stage had increased by 100%**; with approaches **at the relief stage increasing by 38%** on the previous year.

The most common reason for approaches was when **family and friends no longer being willing to or able to** accommodate applicants (**28%** of all approaches).

The second most common reason was **the end of Private Rented Sector tenancy (15%)**.

19% of all applicants had support needs for **mental health**, followed by **physical ill health and disability** or an offending history.

Single person households made the greatest number of approaches for assistance.

45% of all applicants were **Asian/British** who owed a housing duty. **37%** were from **the Bangladeshi community**.

41% of those owed either a prevention or relief housing duty were **under 35 years of age**.

Temporary accommodation

- **81% of households in temporary accommodation** included **children**.
- **41.5%** of temporary accommodation placements were **out of the borough**.
- **904** households had been living in temporary accommodation **for 1-2 years**; **755** households for **between 3 and 5 years**.

Rough sleepers

- **28%** of people sleeping rough identified as **White British**.
- **58%** of rough sleepers have a **combination of support needs** such as **mental health, drug and alcohol abuse**.

What this strategy does

As a result of the review, the following six priorities have been identified to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping in the borough.

- 1. Working with people earlier to prevent them from becoming homeless and to reduce the use of Temporary Accommodation.**
- 2. Provide good quality accommodation for people who are at risk of, or where they become, homeless.**
- 3. Improve customer service and the individual's experience.**
- 4. Making sure that people have access to the right support services.**
- 5. To prevent rough sleeping but where it does occur, it's rare, brief and doesn't happen again.**
- 6. Boost staff resilience and well-being.**

These priorities will inform the direction of travel which the council and its partners will take over the course of the next five years.

A Delivery Plan accompanies this strategy setting out activities which the council will undertake to meet these priorities.

The progress will be monitored by a newly formed Strategic Board comprising representatives from the council services and external partners.

Our six priorities

Priority 1: Working with people earlier to prevent them becoming homeless and to reduce the use of Temporary Accommodation

The most common reason for approaches recorded locally is where an applicant's 'family and friends are no longer willing, or able to accommodate them,' at both the prevention and relief duty stages. Followed by eviction from private rented accommodation.

The council provides or refer people to services that can help them remain in their homes. Support includes financial and debt advice, working with landlords and agents to resolve tenancy issues, mediating between the applicant and their family or friends where relationships break down and tackling anti-social behaviour or domestic abuse. we will ensure people have the best chance of staying in their home by acting earlier.

To achieve this aim, we will:

1. Introduce measures to increase the rates of homelessness prevention for Private Rented Sector tenants.
2. Increase the provision of upstream homelessness prevention advice.
3. Explore opportunities to utilise financial measures to help prevent homelessness and increase access to private rented homes.
4. Work with social housing tenants and landlords to increase prevention of homelessness due to eviction from social tenancies.
5. Undertake a review of the Common Housing Register Allocations Scheme.
6. Enable survivors of domestic abuse to stay in their own homes.

Priority 2: Provide good quality accommodation for people who are at risk of, or where they become, homeless

The council is committed to providing affordable stable accommodation for households to whom it owes a housing duty while seeking to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation.

A new Procurement Strategy sets out key activities related to priority.

To procure good quality sustainable accommodation options for people who are at risk of homelessness or who are homeless, we will:

1. Work with landlords and accommodation suppliers to increase the supply of good quality homes
2. Increase 'Move on' of residents living in temporary accommodation into settled accommodation.
3. Reduce the use of unsuitable and expensive temporary accommodation.
4. Repurpose or build new homes to increase the supply of temporary and long-term accommodation.
5. Increase the number of accessible and adapted homes available.
6. Ensure our Homelessness Accommodation Placement Policy remains fit for purpose.
7. Expand accommodation provision for people sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough.

Priority 3: Improve customer service and the individual's experience

Residents who seek our help are going through a stressful and difficult time in their lives. We want to ensure that those needing our support receive it in a suitable manner.

The staff who provide the support need to be equipped with appropriate knowledge and capacity.

The council plan to further improve our customer journey with an investment of £1.3M for ICT improvements and 34 new frontline posts. That will enable us to streamline the workflow to enable faster quality decision making on casework.

We recognise that the customer journey is not just a digital one. Face to face contact will remain as an option particularly for those in an emergency. To deliver on this priority we will aim to:

1. Deliver high-quality homelessness advice across a variety of channels and formats.
2. Deliver a service which is accessible for all residents.
3. Improve the resident experience of the homelessness process, delivering clear, empathetic, and timely communication throughout.
4. Improve communication with residents living in temporary accommodation.
5. Increase the work we do with service users and people with lived experience.

Priority 4: Making sure that people have access to the right support services

Many households and individuals facing homelessness need some form of additional support. Our Homelessness Review identified, 19% of all applicants approaching the council had mental health needs, and many may have multiple additional needs. Support needs are even more prevalent when it comes to rough sleepers with only 8% of them having no support needs.

We are committed to addressing and preventing youth homelessness. We recognise the critical importance of engaging with young people under the age of 17.

We are committed to developing a comprehensive approach that addresses the unique needs and challenges that vulnerable adults experiencing homelessness are facing.

We know that homelessness often worsens mental health challenges and social isolation, significantly increasing suicidal thoughts. Our approach, therefore, integrates specific measures to identify, support, and intervene for individuals at risk of suicide within the homeless population.

To improve access to and the effectiveness of support services our activities will include:

1. Deliver improved support and effective pathways for victims of domestic abuse
2. Implement a multi-agency approach to safeguarding vulnerable adults
3. Provide enhanced support to children and young people
4. Work with our partners to improve access to mental health and addiction support
5. Review and improve our hospital discharge pathway
6. Increase support for ex-offenders to aid their transition from custody to stable living situations
7. Assist our service users to access paid jobs

Priority 5: To prevent rough sleeping but where it does occur, it's rare, brief and doesn't happen again

While not the only form of homelessness, rough sleeping is the most visible and dangerous form of homelessness. Many people who sleep rough have experienced trauma and may experience substance use, mental and physical ill-health, or be subject to immigration restrictions. People may be survivors of exploitation and domestic abuse or have spent time in prison or care. It is crucial that people are supported off the streets rapidly.

The council commissions specialist supports services to find local solutions. The council will continue to do this and will raise resident's awareness of the support available to them. We will:

1. Raise awareness of the causes and solutions to rough sleeping
2. Develop innovative accommodation and support solutions for the most marginalised groups
3. Build new and strengthen existing partnerships with local partners, the North East London subregion and the National Rough Sleeping Initiative.
4. Ensure commissioning is data and evidence led as well as co-produced with people who have used rough sleeping services
5. Develop a targeted prevention approach to target early interventions and reduce risk of rough sleeping
6. Improve access to and outcomes from health and social care services for people rough sleeping.

Priority 6: Boost staff resilience and well-being

Staff in the council's Housing Options Service work in a highly intense environment. The number of customers approaching the service have increased significantly in recent years. Staff can be exposed to traumatic information and scenarios when delivering the service, which may increase their stress and anxiety. This is endemic across England and particularly prevalent in London.

Demand for social housing vastly outstrips supply in the borough. It can be challenging for our staff to manage the expectations of residents who hope to have access to social housing. Some residents may not be fully aware of the full extent of the housing crisis we are in.

The council will ensure it develops capacity on the frontline to provide an empathetic and dignified response to every service user seeking support. We will:

1. Improve our learning and development offer for staff
2. Enforce the council's customer code of conduct policy and protect staff from abuse
3. Improve the working environment
4. Work with staff when designing service improvements to improve wellbeing
5. Invest in our workforce to ensure that the service grows in response to the rising homelessness demand and implement measures to manage staff caseloads
6. Put in place improved systems, tools and processes to help staff in their roles

Governance and monitoring our progress

The Delivery Plan accompanying the strategy will ensure the six priorities are achieved through our activities.

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategic Board, comprising representatives from the council and external partners, will be established to oversee the delivery of the strategy. The Board will agree measures to be monitored and the monitoring period and monitor them regularly. The progress of the strategy delivery will be reviewed annually.