

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Draft 2016-21 Homelessness Strategy Outline

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Section 1 – Reasons for a Homelessness Strategy

Introduction

A local authority with housing responsibilities – a local housing authority – under the 2002 Homelessness Act may carry out a homelessness review for their district and following that may formulate and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results of that review. It is expected that such strategies should be refreshed every 5 years.

Tower Hamlets Council previously adopted a *Homelessness Statement 2013 to 2017* which set out the council's approach to both addressing homelessness needs as defined by legislation – meeting its statutory duties - and what advice and support it was able to give to help prevent homelessness.

The council has decided to adopt a new 2016/21 Housing Strategy which sets out in broad terms the council's broad approach to housing in its area. In connection with this, the council has decided to refresh its *Homelessness Statement 2013 to 2017*, building on what has been achieved; introducing new policy actions; and aligning the new document with the council's new housing approach. An important document to read in conjunction with this document is the Common Housing Register Allocation Scheme (also being refreshed in 2016) which sets out in more detail how the council and its registered provider partners intend to meet its statutory homelessness duties.

National Policy – Legislation and Guidance

In addition to the statutory requirements of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, the government from time to time issues guidance, for example on allocations, and also information on how local housing authorities can address specific issues, such as rough sleeping. Also published are Regulations that set out in more detail the requirements of legislation.

The Localism Act 2011 was intended to allow local authorities more flexibility when managing or allocating accommodation. The provisions included the power for local authorities to discharge their full homelessness duty by providing suitable private rented accommodation for people who applied after November 2012, regardless of whether the homeless person agrees.

An important document for consideration when framing the housing allocation scheme is the *DCLG Allocation of accommodation: guidance for local housing authorities in England (June 2012)*. This makes clear that people who are homeless should be given reasonable preference – a head start on some other applicants - when determining housing priorities.

The government also published a *Vision to end rough sleeping: No Second Night Out nationwide* (July 2011) which sets out six commitments related to people who sleep rough which are focused on:

- Helping people off the streets
- Helping people to access healthcare
- Helping people into work
- Reducing bureaucratic burdens
- Increasing local control over investment in services
- Devolving responsibility for tackling homelessness

The principle behind No Second Night Out is that a person's or household's housing crisis may mean they are homeless for one night, but that there should be a sufficiently wide ranging, flexible suite of services available from local authorities that ensure that they are not roofless for a second night.

The government published *Making every contact count: a joint approach to preventing homelessness (2012)* which stated that:

Effectively preventing homelessness goes beyond addressing immediate housing needs and requires a sustained commitment across all agencies to address the underlining causes of homelessness. These are often: unemployment, low skills levels, substance misuse, mental health issues, crime and dysfunctional family background.

The document highlighted the need to recognise that homelessness is often one symptom of a wider range of challenges applicants are facing and that such needs need to be met in a holistic fashion. This involves a considerable degree of cross departmental and inter-agency working and happens on a regular basis and it's clear that this kind of working is likely to increase.

For the future, it is expected that the government will be placing a homelessness prevention duty on local housing authorities in England replicating the duty adopted in Wales. Whilst this duty is not in place, this appears to be the direction of travel of national policy and the council will need to be giving early thought to how this requirement can be met at a time of increasing homelessness demand and diminishing resources. The council already provides assistance to non-priority homeless households on a discretionary basis, which closely mirrors the Welsh system. Subject to the detail of future legislation, if this responsibility becomes statutory, there are likely to be additional costs associated with the services required.

Regional Policy - Homes for London – The London Housing Strategy (June 2014)

The Mayor of London has a statutory duty to publish and consult on a housing strategy for the capital, which needs to be aligned with his London Plan. The current strategy was adopted by the previous Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and the council expects the recently elected Mayor, Sadiq Khan, to set in train a process to revise the current document.

There are two specific policy commitments homelessness which centre on working with boroughs to reduce rough sleeping and promoting the use of NOTIFY and the pan-London inter-borough accommodation agreement when placing homeless households in out of borough accommodation. The council will continue to help deliver the two policy commitments set out in the current housing strategy and will work with the new Mayor on new strategy and policy commitments designed to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping.

Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016

At the time of finalising this Strategy, a Private Members' Homelessness Reduction Bill was before Parliament. Core to the Bill's purpose is a duty to prevent homelessness, building on the current duty to meet its consequences. The council is already committed to preventing where possible homelessness in all scenarios. We recognise that it is important to prevent where possible the instances of non-priority homelessness as these have the potential to become priority cases of the future. Whilst the council is broadly supportive of the Bill's aims,

with sources of permanent and temporary accommodation diminishing, placing additional homelessness duties on local authorities will be challenging.

In conclusion

Ultimately, a sustained increase over the medium to long term in the provision of affordable rented accommodation (and associated supported housing) would lead over time to a reduction in reported homelessness. The amount of funding available to support the delivery of affordable rented housing supply across the capital is likely to fall given the government's commitment to supporting low cost home ownership accommodation. The situation is further exacerbated by trends in the private rented market.

The ending of Assured Shorthold Tenancies in the private rented sector has become the main cause of homelessness in London. This, combined with the fact that local housing allowance has been frozen since 2011 at a time when private rents in London have increased substantially has meant the private rented sector is an increasingly unaffordable and unsustainable housing option for people who are on average or low incomes and threatened with homelessness. This in turn is likely to result in homelessness continuing to have an upward trajectory.

The council has also struggled to procure affordable private sector temporary accommodation to fulfil its statutory duties to homeless households, resulting in a substantial increase in the cost of temporary accommodation to the general fund. Nevertheless there are occasions when suitable, affordable private sector options arise which can help prevent or relieve homelessness.

Given the availability of affordable private rented accommodation is likely to diminish, unless local housing allowance and temporary accommodation subsidy are increased to more closely match market rents, the council needs to actively plan for a future with the objective of diversifying the supply of temporary accommodation thereby reducing the dependence on expensive PRS stock and achieving an affordable pipeline of accommodation for the prevention and relief of homelessness. This will mean:

- Reviewing what accommodation we have access to now
- Creating our own portfolio of temporary accommodation and taking a strategic view on which areas this accommodation should be located
- Increasing the use of general needs accommodation for temporary accommodation purposes
- Securing our own emergency accommodation to reduce and ideally end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation
- Ensuring that available accommodation is allocated on need, and that the Council exercises its powers and ensures its lettings policy enables an annual reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation.
- Proactively monitoring the financial welfare of households who are likely to be impacted by the benefit cap to prevent homelessness
- Responding to the potential demands arising from a possible Homelessness Reduction Act in 2017.

This homelessness strategy is about how the council intends to meet the local impact of this trend. This will involve considering a range of permanent and temporary housing options described later in this document to meet these needs, both in the borough and outside it.

Section 2 - What we say about homelessness in our Draft 2016-21 Housing Strategy (July 2016) and reviewing progress that we have made

The Draft 2016-21 Housing Strategy sets out the following on its approach to homelessness.

Homelessness Strategy

The council currently has in place a Homelessness Statement 2013 to 2017 which sets out our approach to preventing and reducing homelessness focused on:

- *Homeless prevention and tackling the causes of homelessness*
- *Access to affordable housing options*
- *Children, families and young people*
- *Vulnerable adults*

Many aspects of this document are still relevant particularly those related to partnership working and prevention but over the next 12 months we will consider what other options are available to prevent and meet homelessness demand. These will include:

- Use of Temporary accommodation for homeless families

The Homelessness Strategy will also need to consider the options to reduce the number of homeless households from Tower Hamlets who are currently in temporary accommodation. At present there are around 2,000 households in temporary accommodation, of whom over 1,000 are outside the borough. Over 200 households are in bed and breakfast accommodation.

This form of accommodation creates uncertainty and upheaval for residents and is becoming increasingly expensive for the Council to procure, with suitable accommodation proving too expensive in borough resulting in more households being placed in outer London and beyond.

The Council needs to agree how best to tackle this problem with potential solutions including:

- *developing its own temporary accommodation as set out above*
- *using existing permanent council and registered provider properties for short term homeless housing,*
- *continuing to use homes temporarily on estates that are being decanted for regeneration*
- *continue publishing under what circumstances it will place households outside of the borough*
- *buying back ex-Local Authority homes sold under the Right to Buy*

We will update the homelessness document to reflect progress over the past 3 years and will engage fully with all partners in 2017 to develop a further 4 year action plan to continue to tackle homeless. There will be an emphasis on ensuring the most vulnerable and marginalised groups who face homelessness can continue to be assisted linking their support into their health needs, education and employment chances and overall wellbeing.

Progress since 2013 includes:

- **No wrong door Project**

The Council's Housing Options service introduced its innovative programme – called No Wrong Door to ensure that customers can access all the services they need to help resolve their housing problems from one point of contact rather than having to navigate their way through lots of different agencies themselves.

The Council's Housing Options service has been transformed to offer more help to those threatened with homelessness or needing housing advice. Instead of being able to simply offer advice on housing options, staff are working closely with other agencies so as to be able to offer information on a comprehensive range of services that help with problems that often cause homelessness or housing difficulties. This includes money advice, debt counselling, landlord and tenant mediation, specialist legal advice, help in accessing education and training, help in seeking work, access to child care and our Children's Centres.

Our Housing Options staff can make referrals to other agencies to ensure clients get the help they need, and some support services are now operating from Albert Jacob House in Bethnal Green E2 the where Housing Options staff are based.

- Overview and Scrutiny Commission recommendations

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission held a review of the Homelessness Services and produced 17 recommendations for consideration by the Housing Options Team. These recommendations are being addressed by the service and will either be implemented at an operational level or through the revised Homelessness Statement.

- Hostel Commissioning Plan

The Council is developing a Hostel Commissioning Plan (HCP) 2016-2019 which is subject to approval by the Mayor in July 2016.

- Homelessness Partnership Board

The Council will reform its Homelessness Partnership Board drawing on the expertise of Housing Association, voluntary sector and other statutory partners such as the health services to oversee the production, delivery and monitoring of the action plan.

Action 11: Refresh our Homelessness Statement and align it with the 2016-21 Housing Strategy.

Action 12: Reconvene the Homelessness Partnership Board

Section 3 – Reviewing the Homelessness Statement 2013-17

The council currently has in place a *Homelessness Statement 2013 to 2017* which sets out our approach to preventing and reducing homelessness focused on:

- Homeless prevention and tackling the causes of homelessness
- Access to affordable housing options
- Children, families and young people
- Vulnerable adults

Many aspects of this document are still relevant particularly those related to partnership working and prevention but over the next 12 months we will consider what other options are available to prevent and meet homelessness demand. In addition this strategy will also review the Council's approach to meeting its statutory accommodation duties to homeless households as set out above.

There will be an emphasis on ensuring the most vulnerable and marginalised groups who face homelessness can continue to be assisted linking their support into their health needs, education and employment chances and overall wellbeing.

Section 4 - Options to refresh the current Homelessness Statement to inform the development of the council's 2016-21 Homelessness Strategy

The themes to the council's approach are based on those previously adopted in the Homelessness Statement adopted in 2013. In that document was set out our overall approach to meeting homelessness needs and preventing its causes in the borough.

Aim

The overall aim of the statement is to tackle and prevent homelessness in Tower Hamlets. This includes:

- Preventing homelessness
- Supporting those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- Providing accommodation for homeless households

An important additional tenet to the final Homelessness Strategy will be a stronger focus on:

- Reducing the net number of people in Temporary Accommodation

Principles

Throughout discussions with partners there were common ways of working highlighted as being crucial to our achievements thus far as a partnership, and would be even more important in light of the new challenges and opportunities facing the borough. These ways of working have been grouped into three interdependent principles. These principles are intended to guide how we work together as partners, and as individual organizations, to prevent homelessness and provide services for homeless people. They are based on a recognition that the causes of homelessness are complex and multifaceted and therefore need a multifaceted approach. The principles are:

- Multi-agency working
- Early intervention
- Building resilience

An additional principle for the Homelessness Strategy that is finally adopted is:

- Increased property interventions

This has been added because the council needs to diversify its temporary accommodation portfolio and reduce the general fund costs associated with the supply of temporary accommodation.

Multi-agency working - The Homelessness Strategy is a partnership statement: multi-agency working is therefore paramount to the implementation of the statement. Taking a multi-agency approach to service provision is about agencies working together to better understand the needs of, and achieve the best possible outcomes for, families and individuals. As a partnership this will require us to actively share and make better use of information, expertise and resources to provide seamless, holistic services for homeless people and those at risk of being homeless.

Early Intervention - There is a growing body of evidence at the national and local level pointing to the importance of intervening early to improve outcomes for service users and

reduce costs to services. As a partnership, we are committed to taking a proactive approach to homelessness and moving away from simply reacting to crisis, both from a preventative perspective as well as in providing support services for homeless households.

Building resilience - The weakening of welfare support and a continually challenging economic climate will place increasing pressures on households and the ability of services to respond to growing needs. A key aspect of our approach to homelessness needs to centre on assisting people to be better able to assist themselves and take control over their own lives.

It is a commitment by partners to support and empower people and families to develop the skills, competencies and resources needed to successfully respond to challenges, be they economic, social or personal, and avoid reaching crisis point. It therefore requires a recognition and understanding of the multi-dimensional issues that make it difficult for people to cope with life events.

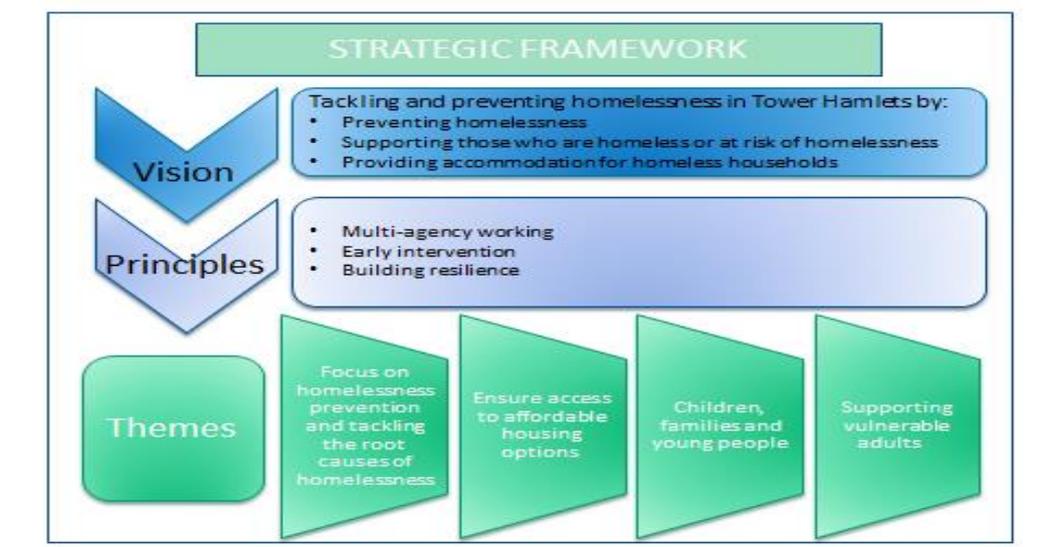
Increased property interventions – Means the council increasing and widening its portfolio of affordable temporary accommodation.

Themes

Using the findings from the evidence base and consultation with agencies, four key themes or strategic objectives have been identified as the basis of structuring the new Homelessness Statement, each with its own thematic objectives:

- Focus on homeless prevention and tackling the root causes of homelessness
- Access to affordable housing options
- Children, families and young people
- Supporting vulnerable adults

In diagrammatic terms, the approach can be illustrated as follows:



Theme 1: Homeless Prevention and Tackling the Causes of Homelessness

Objectives

Provide quality, timely and accessible information and advice focused on homeless prevention and support by:

- Ensuring that there is clear and consistent information at all key contact points for homeless households and those at risk of being homeless.
- Improving the quality and accessibility of housing and homelessness advice services and pathways.

Support people to remain in their homes by:

- Working proactively with social and private landlords to identify and support people at risk of losing their homes and assist tenants to maintain their tenancies.
- Providing advice and support for people at risk of losing their homes.
- Providing financial inclusion and income maximization advice and support for residents, particularly those at risk of losing their homes.
- Mitigating where possible the impact of welfare reform on homeless and formerly homeless people.

Address the root causes of homelessness as part of a partnership approach to tackling worklessness and exclusion by:

- Providing employment support and pathways to employment for households at risk of homelessness and exclusion.
- Strengthening strategic commitment and joint working on homelessness prevention and exclusion.
- Making better use of information and intelligence across the partnership to tackle homelessness and exclusion.

Theme 2: Access to Affordable Housing Options

Objectives

Increase the supply of housing across all tenures by:

- Working in partnership with housing providers and developers, to continue to provide new affordable homes.
- Identifying potential funding opportunities to develop new council homes.
- Bringing empty properties back into use.

Develop innovative and sustainable housing options in the private sector by:

- Improving the accessibility of the private rented sector as a continued opportunity to prevent homelessness, recognising that caps on Housing Benefit allowances influence affordability considerations
- Ensuring that the private sector offers safe and good quality housing options
- Creating a council-owned housing company to provide accommodation including both new build homes and existing properties.

Maximise the use of the existing social housing stock by:

- Ensuring that the common housing register allocation scheme reflects need and availability of accommodation
- Using general needs social housing as temporary accommodation

Ensure that there is a sufficient supply of appropriate temporary accommodation and reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation by:

- Developing a sustainable approach to procuring temporary accommodation.
- Supporting homeless households in temporary accommodation to secure settled accommodation.
- Adopting a Hostel Commissioning Plan for 2017-20 (subject to approval by the Mayor).
- Exploring the potential of purchasing accommodation to meet emergency housing need.
- Developing a portfolio of affordable temporary accommodation.

Theme 3: Children, Families and Young People

Objectives

In order to prevent families and young people becoming homeless, and provide appropriate support packages for those who do, we will:

Prevent homelessness among families and young people as part of an integrated approach to youth and family services by:

- Improving joint working across agencies to focus on homelessness prevention and early intervention for families and young people.
- Improving the use of mediation and respite to address family breakdown as a cause of homelessness.

Support homeless families and young people to be safer, healthier and emotionally and economically resilient by:

- Providing better support services for homeless families.
- Support homeless young people to achieve their full potential and positively progress to adulthood.

Theme 4: Vulnerable Adults

Objectives

In order to provide targeted support for vulnerable homeless adults and support them to live independently, we will:

Better identify the needs of vulnerable people through a personalised, multi-agency approach by:

- Improving the assessment of vulnerable adults, particularly those with multiple needs.
- Ensuring that structures and processes are in place to support a multi-agency approach to assessing vulnerable adults.

Address and reduce the support needs of vulnerable homeless people to enable them to live independently by:

- Developing a joint commissioning approach for homeless adults with complex needs, including substance misuse and mental health
- Having no new people spending a second night on the streets for rough sleepers and reduce the number of people who are living on the streets.
- Providing emergency accommodation to no priority need homeless clients for the purposes of preventing or reducing rough sleeping
- Improving move-on options for people in hostel accommodation and independent living skills of homeless people.
- Ensuring victims of Domestic Violence are supported and their housing needs are met.
- Supporting sex workers in their transition to a safe exit.
- Supporting ex-offenders to keep their homes or find suitable accommodation on return from prison.

October 2016