

London Borough of Waltham Forest

Housing Scrutiny Committee

Themed Review 2023-24

Housing Options and Support

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Public access Open

Appendices Appendix 1 – Officer Response to Recommendations
Appendix 2 – EqIA Screening

1. Chair's Introduction

- 1.1. Having a roof over our head is something we should all be able to take for granted. Yet, in the context of the housing crisis that has been facing London, a frightening combination of rapidly rising rents, caps on benefits and a cost-of-living crisis has meant that more and more households are finding themselves at risk of homelessness. The Housing Options and Support team reported a 50% rise in people approaching them during 2023-24.
- 1.2. Being at risk of homelessness, let alone the process of finding yourself homeless, can be traumatic experiences that take a real toll on people's mental and physical well-being. As a Council we have a legal duty, as well as moral one, to help prevent homelessness and, if people should become homeless, typically a duty to make sure that they do have a roof over the heads. It is also incumbent on us to seek to minimise the trauma and stress involved in this, not least because the threat of homelessness does not fall on all equally.
- 1.3. Yet, just as the demand for housing support is greater than it has ever been, escalating rents for and increasing scarcity of suitable private rental properties means that the challenge involved in fulfilling these duties is greater than it has ever been.
- 1.4. In this context, the Housing Scrutiny Committee believed that this was the right time to look in much greater detail at our housing options and support work through this themed review, to understand how we are responding to these challenges and what more we still need to do.
- 1.5. This is a strategic priority for the Council. 'Tackling the housing crisis head on' is one of the six borough missions set out in Mission Waltham Forest, our plan to change and adapt the way we work to focus on

tackling the inequalities and issues that impact most acutely on our residents.

- 1.6. We have chosen to invest more in housing sustainment and homelessness prevention, with the Families in Housing Need fund, more support for private tenants, looked to reduce staffing shortages and brought back face-to-face services. High levels of council house-building have been important, not least in keeping the numbers of people in temporary accommodation (TA) below that of other London boroughs. We have also continued to engage in innovative means of securing more temporary and settled accommodation for those facing homelessness.
- 1.7. However, the evidence we were presented with underlined the extent of the challenges which Waltham Forest, in common with councils across London, is facing in managing this unprecedented demand for housing support, and the strain on resources and frontline staff that comes with this.
- 1.8. A good deal of what we heard was reassuring. We were largely impressed that the housing options and support team were confronting the severe challenges faced, had identified where services really needed to improve, and in these areas were making good progress towards best practice.
- 1.9. However, Scrutiny also identified areas to target for further improvement, or that required ongoing focus to continue to move towards best practice. These included: improving communication with those experiencing homelessness; looking to maintain and improve standards in temporary accommodation, especially in provision for families with children; and for those at risk of rough sleeping continuing to focus on improving 'move on' support. Because many of the tools for tackling this crisis lay beyond the remit of local government, we also identified issues on which the Council should continue to lobby central government for the policy changes we urgently need to help us minimise the threat of homelessness.
- 1.10. I hope that these recommendations and the work of this themed review will help to inform, guide and reinforce the ongoing improvement of our services as we seek to respond to this housing crisis we face.

2. Summary of recommendations

2.1. After consideration of the evidence provided by Council officers, the Committee recommends:

Housing Sustainment

Recommendation 1

- Services to ensure that all residents at risk of homelessness are, alongside guidance and support to find housing, provided with clear and easy-to-understand guidance on the law around homelessness and support on offer, the processes they could go through, and how these normally work. This should include how housing options support works, their rights, what they might reasonably expect, the difficulties involved, the sources of support (from the Council or alternative sources) which might be available.

Recommendation 2

- Residents in TA, or at risk of homelessness, and on the Housing Register, in their personal housing plan (PHP) or through other communication, to be provided with clear, accurate and realistic (i.e. neither too optimistic, nor too pessimistic) understanding of their chances of accessing social housing through the bidding system and how to maximise their chances of doing so.

Recommendation 3

- Services and portfolio holders to continue to lobby national government to continue to ensure uplifts in Local Housing Allowance sufficient to ensure that residents on Universal Credit or Housing Benefit are not effectively excluded from finding private rented accommodation, and to effectively increase the number of private rented properties which local authorities in London can identify to house those facing homelessness.

Homelessness Assessment

Recommendation 4

- Services continue to look to increase capacity for face-to-face assessment meetings, especially when the Families and Homes Hub comes into use, to move towards a point where there is capacity for face-to-face to be an option for those who express a preference for it.

Recommendation 5

- Services should continue to review the content and wording of PHPs and continue to seek to improve these so that they contain more advice

and information, and so that they recognise the context residents find themselves in, and the difficulties they are likely to face in finding accommodation (e.g. affordability, supply, income tests), such that these difficulties and barriers are acknowledged and recognised.

Recommendation 6

- Services to ensure all those not eligible for support are still signposted to local and regional voluntary sector organisations who may be able to provide support to those facing housing emergencies.

Temporary Accommodation (standards and provision within)

Recommendation 7

- Services continue to place high priority on reducing multiple moves by households living in TA (i.e. numerous moves from one accommodation to another), through for instance seeking to lease units which allow for longer stays, in order to minimise the stress, uncertainty and disruption this can cause to those living in TA. And where this is not possible, that services continue to look to reduce uncertainty and disruption by ensuring that the next booking is made before the current booking ends so that households in TA are given as much notice as possible.

Recommendation 8

- Services ensure that, as well as inspecting TA properties before a resident moves in, that we, to the best of our ability, continue to ensure that the property is inspected on a regular basis once occupied.

Recommendation 9

- Services to continue to ensure that residents in TA always have clarity from day one on who to contact if there is a problem with their accommodation, a single point of contact in the TA contract management team if they are not satisfied with the response, and that residents in TA are encouraged to report mould or damp and any other issues which could potentially affect health.

Recommendation 10

- In all instances of families with babies and very young children entering TA, services to ensure as a matter of course that there is provision of safe sleeping equipment such as cots, baby mattresses, or Moses baskets.

Recommendation 11

- When families with school age children are being housed in TA, services to ensure wherever it is practicable to do so that there is basic furniture such as a table or a desk which can be used for doing homework. Policy may recognise that nearby library facilities can be a fallback when absolutely necessary.

Recommendation 12

- Where possible TA accommodation includes adequate cooking facilities for the preparation of meals.

Recommendation 13

- To avoid families in TA facing digital exclusion and children in TA facing further educational disadvantage, services look to move towards all TA having access to wi-fi, recognising that we provide data on devices where wi-fi is not available.

Recommendation 14

- Services and portfolio holders to lobby the Department for Transport and/ the Mayor of London to look into the feasibility of ensuring that those who are statutorily homeless have access to free bus passes and public transport in recognition of the significant additional travel costs that families in TA can face, for instance in getting to work and school.

Temporary Accommodation (supply)

Recommendation 15

- Services to continue to find ways to incentivise private landlords to offer their properties as temporary accommodation, including through advertising schemes, provision of support services and other incentives.

Recommendation 16

- Services and portfolio holders to encourage and support any scope for greater pan-London cooperation on temporary accommodation, with a view to increasing supply and affordability, but also with a view to reducing the instances of other boroughs placing their residents in TA in Waltham Forest, while at the same time we place residents in TA in other boroughs.

Recommendation 17

- Portfolio holders to lobby Home Office to agree that when sourcing accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees they will not pay above market rates, thereby putting further upward pressure on the cost of temporary accommodation in addition to increasing scarcity of suitable temporary accommodation.

Rough Sleeping

Recommendation 18

- Services to continue to prioritise a focus on 'move on' through the rough sleeping pathway, encouraging and supporting a return to independent accommodation within the local community.

Recommendation 19

- Services and portfolio holders to call on national government to invest in homelessness prevention for residents newly granted refugee status including providing appropriate notification of decisions to local authorities and extend the notice periods for eviction from asylum accommodation following a decision to 56 days.

Recommendation 20

- Services to continue to prioritise and apply principles of Housing First.

Recommendation 21

- Services to ensure that accommodation provided under SWEP is utilised as an opportunity to end rough sleeping with a clear focus on move on into the wider rough sleeping pathway.

General

Recommendation 22

- Services should consider reviewing the Housing Allocations policy, last updated in 2021, to ensure that it is fully aligned with the new Housing Strategy and Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, and that it is fully aligned with any changes in policy and practice implemented in relation to these, or the ongoing work of the Housing Transformation programme.

3. Background

- 3.1. Data from 28 London boroughs shows a worsening homelessness situation across a range of key performance measures. Homelessness services have seen an increase in demand with the number of households in temporary accommodation also increasing. The data also shows a worsening situation for councils in procuring and retaining suitable accommodation, driving an increase in bed and breakfast accommodation usage.
- 3.2. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates are a significant driver of pressures. LHA rates should reflect the 30th percentile in each area but rates were frozen from 2020 until April 2024 when they did receive an uplift. However, even with this uplift, residents in receipt of LHA will still experience a significant shortfall between LHA and average market rent in Waltham Forest.
- 3.3. Pressures in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) are constraining the availability of temporary accommodation. A lack of suitable PRS supply makes it more challenging for the Council to secure long-term PRS accommodation for households currently in temporary accommodation, particularly homes that are in or close to the borough.
- 3.4. In response to these factors, the Council is reshaping its homeless support offer, this links to workstream five of the Housing Transformation programme. This involves a new approach being adopted with a greater emphasis placed on prevention. This includes a new team focusing on early intervention with households at risk of becoming homeless, the re-introduction of face-to-face assessments and the exploration of how the Council can improve its information and guidance offer to tenants in the private rented sector.
- 3.5. Therefore, Housing Scrutiny Committee decided to conduct its review to complement the ongoing work being undertaken as part of the Housing Transformation Programme, with a core focus placed on the support available to households facing homelessness and those in severest need of housing.
- 3.6. This review and broader Housing Transformation workstream intrinsically links to mission four of Mission Waltham Forest¹ – tackle the housing crisis head on, with one of the priorities outlining a preventative approach to homelessness and rough sleeping.
- 3.7. The Committee decided to conduct its review by first hearing from the service on its initial plans to reshape the service in line with the Housing Transformation programme. Then following this at each subsequent meeting, hear from the service on a range of key topics, including housing sustainment, homelessness assessments, temporary accommodation and rough sleeping. The Committee also received an

¹ [Mission Waltham Forest](#)

item on the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy² that emerged from the Council's new Housing Strategy³.

- 3.8. The comments and recommendations from the Housing Scrutiny Committee as part of this themed review will support and inform work to engage customers, commissioned services and wider voluntary and community sector partners. This work will contribute to achieving the wider goals as set out in the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, the Housing Strategy and also Mission Waltham Forest.

4. Methodology

- 4.1. In July 2023, the Committee received a report from officers setting out the context of the proposed scope for the review and an overview of the services identified to be reshaped in the Housing Transformation Programme. The Committee then used meetings from October 2023 to April 2024 to receive subsequent reports from officers outlining specific areas of the Housing Options and Support service, asking questions of witnesses from the service.
- 4.2. The Committee also received an online briefing from officers prior to their February meeting around temporary accommodation. Due to the complex nature of the legislation in this area, it was beneficial to the Committee to be given information beforehand, allowing for more informed questioning in the committee meeting.
- 4.3. A summary of the discussions had at each meeting can be found in Annex 1.

5. Key Findings

- 5.1. The Committee were able to make recommendations at each meeting for each report received. They form the full set of recommendations outlined above. The Committee recognised the work that was already happening to transform the service and supported the continuation of these transformations. However, they were able to identify other areas of improvement at a local level. They also recognised barriers faced as a result of national policy. Therefore, some recommendations are focused on central government and how certain changes could benefit local authorities in their delivery of this service.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1. The Committee are grateful to the officers for supporting this thematic review of the Housing Options and Support service. The Committee acknowledge that the service is still undergoing changes and recognise

² [Waltham Forest Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024-2029](#)

³ [Waltham Forest Housing Strategy 2024-2029](#)

the ongoing challenges in this area, particularly around temporary accommodation. The Committee hope that the recommendations made in this review are accepted and implemented and that they impact positively on the service and those who use it. The Committee would like to emphasise the importance of data collection and monitoring in this area and would appreciate updates from officers when appropriate. This means the Committee can continue their input to the benefit of local residents and the service generally.

Summary of Meetings

19 July 2023⁴

The Committee received a report outlining the scope of a themed review of the Housing Options and Support service. Ms Lindsay Jackson set out the context of worsening homelessness situation in the borough and across London, and included work that was already in progress to reshape the support offer available.

The Committee reviewed the proposed scope and agreed it, placing particular importance on temporary accommodation and rough sleeping as focus areas for the themed review.

17 October 2023⁵

The Committee received two reports at this meeting, the first around housing sustainment⁶ and the second on homelessness assessments⁷.

The Committee asked a question around what assistance the council provided for those not eligible for support due to their immigration status. Ms Lindsay Megson confirmed that such applicants had no recourse to public funding and officers would usually point them towards voluntary sector organisations.

The Committee inquired about the newly reintroduced face-to-face assessments. Mr Joseph confirmed that the system worked on an appointment only service, and the capacity at the venue was not comparable to the space available before the pandemic. However, Mr Joseph confirmed that there had been 21 assessments in the first two weeks of implementation and the number had since increased. Mr Garrod stated that in addition to face-to-face contact, the Housing Sustainment team were currently working in the community to make interventions at an earlier stage. Mr Garrod added that was an integrated approach, offering digital, phone and face-to-face appointments. Mr Garrod said that the housing service had acknowledged that face-to-face service was necessary and reintroducing these was a key part of the transformation programme. Ms Megson added that data was being collected from the introduction of services at Leyton library so officers could ascertain how many residents may need face-to-face contact to ensure this is considered in future service delivery.

The Committee asked questions around Personal Housing Plans (PHPs), and how these often point people towards the private rented sector, however do not always consider the barriers residents could face in this sector, such as no benefits policies or affordability tests. Ms Megson stated that a piece of work

⁴ [Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Committee - 19 July 2023](#)

⁵ [Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Committee - 17 October 2023](#)

⁶ [Housing Scrutiny Committee Report - Housing Sustainment](#)

⁷ [Housing Scrutiny Committee Report - Homelessness Assessments](#)

was needed to collate advice and signpost to relevant information that reflected needs in the borough. The Committee asked how often agreement on PHPs could not be reached. Mr Joseph explained that such data was only recorded when a resident formally requested a review. Ms Roach confirmed there has been no reviews requested this financial year but had been three the previous year.

22 February 2024⁸

The Committee received a report⁹ around temporary accommodation at this meeting.

The Committee emphasised the importance of temporary accommodation being of good quality and how the Council could ensure the standard was maintained. Ms Roach confirmed that the quality of temporary accommodation was managed by officers through the procurement process. She said that accommodation was inspected before use and then inspections took place after this point also.

The Committee asked a question around those who were in temporary accommodation often had to change location frequently and how we could minimise any disruption. Ms Megson explained that the Council were actively trying to acquire more properties and officers were ensuring bookings were made for people before the current booking end. Ms Megson confirmed that officers try to keep people in the same accommodation for as long as possible.

The Committee asked questions around the facilities and equipment provided to those in temporary accommodation, and if they were given access to wifi. Ms Roach confirmed that officers asked individuals what they may need, and that they tried to meet these needs where possible. Ms Roach also confirmed that data was provided in instances where wifi was not available.

The Committee asked how the Council could make Waltham Forest a more attractive place for private landlords to offer their properties as temporary accommodation. Ms Megson informed the committee that work in this area was underway.

The Committee asked if officers had explored a pan-London clearing system to avoid competition for accommodation from multiple boroughs. Mr Garrod said that was a history of inter-borough arrangements around temporary accommodation, but work was on-going to re-establish conversations around challenges and potential solutions.

The Committee also received a report on the new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy developed by the Council. The Committee referred to the housing allocations policy and if there were plans to review the policy. Ms Megson confirmed that work was underway on this and that the service was

⁸ [Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 February 2024](#)

⁹ [Housing Scrutiny Committee Report - Temporary Accommodation](#)

looking at the accessibility of the policy to ensure all residents were able to easily understand it.

The Committee asked if officers were confident that those in temporary accommodation, at risk of homelessness or on the Housing Register were given sufficient advice, guidance and a realistic view of their situation. Mr Shovlin explained that officers gave specific, meaningful information to residents. Ms Megson added that it was important that officers were able to manage residents' expectations around their housing situation, and often residents are not familiar with all the processes involved.

27 April 2024¹⁰

The Committee received a final report around rough sleeping¹¹ at this meeting.

The Committee asked how the support pathway was publicised to residents. Ms Megson explained that during outreach services, officers would engage with people they encountered rough sleeping, adding the priority was to prevent homelessness in the first place. Ms Megson acknowledged that more though could be given regarding how to publicise support services.

The Committee pointed out that in 2022/23, there were a higher number of people sleeping rough compared to previous years. Ms Megson explained that a high number of those sleeping rough for the first time were individuals not from the UK.

The Committee referred to the severe weather emergency protocol (SWEP) and asked what steps had been taken in this respect. Ms Megson confirmed that SWEP was activated for a short period in January 2024, and highlighted the importance of learning from the last activation of SWEP and it can take time to fully engage people with a support plan.

¹⁰ [Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 April 2024](#)

¹¹ [Housing Scrutiny Committee Report - Rough Sleeping](#)