Tackling Homelessness and Ending Rough Sleeping Strategy

Our Commitments

- Deliver a person-centred approach to preventing homelessness.
- Implement the government's Rough Sleeping Strategy to end rough sleeping by 2024.
- Reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation and improve standards in the sector.
- Improve the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector.

We are determined to continue our record of preventing and resolving homelessness and rough sleeping through early intervention and strong partnership working. This document sets out our strategic approach to achieving our commitments that are detailed above.

Rough sleeping is the most acute form of homelessness and has a significant toll on people's mental and physical health. It is, therefore, our priority to end it. We will use a trauma-informed approach to put in place personalised plans for rough sleepers to help them off the streets and sustain moves into more settled accommodation.

Preventing people from becoming homeless requires a holistic, system-wide perspective and upstream focus. This requires mapping, coordinating and delivering services with the rights, needs and desires of the user at the centre. Adopting this holistic approach to preventing homelessness will lead to a decrease in the number of people presenting as homeless.

This renewed focus on a person-centred approach to homelessness prevention will also reduce the need for temporary accommodation (TA). As the number of households accepted as homeless has risen, we have been increasingly reliant on expensive TA to house people. Reducing the number of households in TA, improving the standard of TA and lowering the cost to the Council are key aims of this strategy.

Our ambition is to reduce the number of people requiring TA but also to help people move out into more settled housing. One element of this is to increase the supply of genuinely affordable homes, which will be detailed in the Ensuring the Supply of High Quality Homes section of the wider Housing and Homelessness Strategy. As a sector, we also need to recognise the important role that the PRS can play in providing settled homes for households that are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We will seek to collaborate with PRS landlords and representatives to enhance our decision making and the PRS offer in the borough.

A Systems Approach

Homelessness is complex and the product of many interrelated factors that interact in unpredictable ways. These factors can impact the individual or the structures around them but are often out of the individual's control. For example, homelessness can be influenced by factors such as the availability of affordable housing, economy, social policy, income, housing security, physical and mental health, relationship stability, public attitudes, investment in prevention and quality of support services[1]. An individual who is or is at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping cannot change many of these factors.

To demonstrate this, we have worked with frontline services to piece together a typical example of someone's pathway into homelessness and rough sleeping.

Sarah's Story

Sarah lost her privately rented home because of financial difficulty triggered by reduced working hours on her zero-hours contract. She was unable to find another job, had no savings and moved back to her family home. Overcrowding caused tensions to mount after several months and she was asked to leave. Unable to afford a deposit and rent for a privately-rented flat and unlikely to secure social housing quickly, she relied on the kindness of friends for as long as possible. Sarah's mental health worsened as she became increasingly anxious and depressed. To avoid feeling like a burden on those she was relying on, Sarah began sleeping on the streets. The toll of rough sleeping further deteriorated Sarah's mental and physical health to the point where she was unable to maintain her employment and relationships that would help her access a settled home.

There are numerous points in Sarah's Story where she was unable to improve her situation because of the existing structures that are beyond her control. For example, her financial hardship was caused by the economy and employment laws that do no guarantee job security. An undersupply of adequate affordable housing and benefits that do not cover the full cost of private rented sector housing means she is unable to find an alternative home.

By taking a systems approach to preventing and resolving homelessness, we will aim to address the different factors that impact our residents' route into homelessness. We will lobby central government for policy changes that influence structures such as welfare, employment and the economy. We will seek to make service-level improvements such as improving information sharing, expanding joint working and embedding strategic aims to reduce homelessness and end rough sleeping. At an individual level, we aim to offer people an ecosystem of services built around their needs that addresses multiple disadvantages.

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[1] Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2018: https://www.homelessnessimpact.org/post/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-systems

Deliver a person-centred approach to preventing homelessness

- Establish a Homelessness Prevention Board to drive a joined-up approach to homelessness prevention.
- Use data more effectively to understand the routes people with multiple disadvantages take into homelessness and rough sleeping.
- Review the restructured homelessness services that were implemented following the enactment of the Homelessness Reduction Act to further improve outcomes.
- Develop digital infrastructure that is designed to improve outcomes and assist staff to achieve their aims.
- Support vulnerable groups such as survivors of domestic violence and abuse and victims of modern slavery.
- Improve access to employment opportunities and address in-work poverty for people in housing need or at risk of becoming homeless to help them sustain their housing in the long-term.
- Review the use of Discretionary Housing Payment to address the increased demand for additional financial support that has been required following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The Homelessness Reduction Act represented a significant shift in housing and homelessness legislation. It placed a greater emphasis on preventing and relieving homelessness, regardless of priority need status. Between 2018/19, when the act was introduced, and 2019/20, the number of successful homelessness preventions achieved by our services increased from 1,022 to 1,211. We aim to continue to improve these services to prevent homelessness upstream, which will help households before they reach a point of crisis.

We will focus our resources on the factors that have the greatest impact on preventing homelessness. Among the households accepted as homeless, the most common reason for loss of last settled accommodation was eviction from a friend or relative's home. The next most common reasons were termination of assured shorthold tenancy and those leaving accommodation provided by Home Office as asylum support.

To deliver a more person-centred approach to our upstream prevention services, we will set up a Homelessness Prevention Board with wide range of partners. This will be our next step in developing an ecosystem of services that are built around individuals and address the complex systems that impact them.

We aim for services to share data, information and insights to develop a shared understanding of the cross-cutting issues and expert insight into our interventions. This will help us better understand the routes people take into homelessness and support people who are experiencing multiple disadvantages before they reach a point of crisis.

We will also continue valuable work with partners to identify and support the most vulnerable groups to prevent crises and protect the welfare of residents. The Council will be looking to build upon our services that were awarded the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) accreditation. This includes supporting survivors of domestic abuse and violence and victims of modern slavery. We will also engage with perpetrators of these crimes to prevent future violence.

To continue to improve the effectiveness of our services, we plan to expand our training offer to staff and partners. This will allow us to have greater influence over housing outcomes as we will be able to adapt to challenges that rise in the coming years and work towards the overarching aim of continuous improvement.

Part of the training will be focused on supporting staff to get the most of the systems that are in place. We will also look to upgrade our digital infrastructure to improve the resident journey when accessing our services. The aims of this will be to improve efficiency to allow staff to dedicate more time on supporting residents, improve our data capabilities to monitor and design outcomes more effectively and to introduce new digital services to improve communication and coordination.

Accessing employment or training can be key in helping people avoid or recover from homelessness. While recognising that in-work poverty still affects many households in the borough, increasing a household's income can help to unlock different housing options. We will, therefore, continue our valuable partnership work with Beam and Greenwich Local Labour and Business (GLLaB).

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Implement the government's Rough Sleeping Strategy to end rough sleeping by 2024

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- Scale our outreach services to enable meaningful engagement with rough sleepers.
- Embed health-based solutions into services offered to rough sleepers.
- Provide suitable emergency accommodation for rough sleepers to help them off the streets and for a place where our services can engage with them.
- Ringfence move-on accommodation in Council homes for rough sleepers who have been assisted by our commissioned services.
- Monitor outcomes and explore opportunities to expand our Housing First model project for rough sleepers.
- Develop initiatives to improve partnership working with other boroughs to address cross-border activity, prevent displacement and share information.
- Support London-wide initiatives that support rough sleepers such as No Second Night Out, Routes Home for non-UK, Severe Weather Emergency Protocol, Pan-London Safe Connections, Pan-London Accommodation Network and London Homeless Health Programme.

Our two strategic aims to help us end rough sleeping are to help people who are sleeping on the streets recover and to prevent future instances of street homelessness. This section of the strategy will address recovery and the next section deals with homelessness prevention more broadly. We will, however, continue to monitor the causes of and trends in rough sleeping to ensure that our upstream prevention methods incorporate the lived experiences of these people.

We aim to achieve these aims against a backdrop of increased homelessness activity. The number of rough sleepers in the borough has been increasing over the last few years. Between 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of rough sleepers rose from 91 to 133. In addition, the proportion of people who are sleeping rough in the borough with multiple complex needs, such as for substance misuse and/or mental health, has also increased.

We recognise that each one of these cases represents an individual facing tremendous hardship. Each one will have different experiences and disadvantages so will need personalised support to help them sustain settled accommodation in the future. We, therefore, have to take a person-centred approach to help each individual recover.

We aim to expand our outreach services to continue to meet demand and increase the provision of suitable emergency accommodation to help to engage with rough sleepers and move them off the streets. These services will be person-focused and tailored to the needs of the individual. In addition, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we will seek to ensure that emergency accommodation does not threaten the health and wellbeing of those who require it.

Rough sleepers may often have worse mental and physical health than the general population but many people experiencing street homelessness do not regularly see medical professionals. Improving access to healthcare helps people feel empowered and improves self-esteem and studies have shown that it can positively impact housing and employment outcomes. One of our key strategic aims is, therefore, to ensure that we work with our health partners to improve access to healthcare and working towards our shared objective to end rough sleeping.

We aim to expand our housing-based initiatives because evidence strongly suggests that housing-based solutions for rough sleepers are more effective at helping people sustain accommodation. The Council will monitor our Housing First units and look for funding opportunities to expand this initiative. We will also ringfence Council homes for rough sleepers who are moving on from our commissioned services and use our procurement service to provide access to the PRS.

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Reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation and improve standards in the sector
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- Secure the delivery of Council and affordable rented homes for those in priority housing need, as outlined in Strand 1.
- Develop a cross-departmental TA and procurement strategy to enhance value for money, improve standards and ensure that TA is being used effectively.
- Work in partnership with other local authorities in London to coordinate TA rates.
- Review our downsizing incentives to encourage people who are living in council properties with spare bedrooms to move into homes that fit their housing need.
- Reduce our usage of expensive emergency overnight accommodation by increasing the supply of good quality and affordable TA.
- Explore opportunities to develop our own TA units.
- Review our arrangements with private sector landlords to allow us to use their properties for those in housing need.

The number of households in TA has nearly trebled since 2015/16, with the number reaching 1,272 at the end of March 2020. The nature of TA means that the people cannot put down their roots when living there and the accommodation might be ill-suited to their needs. It is the last resort for relieving homelessness and so our goal is to reduce the number of people who get to this stage, improve accommodation standards and help those in TA move on. Our ultimate aim is for TA to only be used in emergencies and for a limited time period.

We want to reduce the use of B&Bs and nightly-paid accommodation until it is only used sparingly as emergency accommodation. The increase in the number of households in TA has meant that we have had to use imperfect solutions in emergencies to put a roof over the heads of the families and single people who we have a duty to support.

At the end of March 2020, 5% of the households in TA were living in bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation, which is not the high quality and stable home environment we want be obtainable for all residents. A further 56% of households in TA were living in nightly-paid accommodation. Both of these types of accommodation are generally more expensive than alternatives but can be arranged quickly to help residents who are in crisis.

Part of the strategy to significantly reduce the use of B&Bs and nightly-paid accommodation is to reduce overall numbers in TA but we also aim to improve the standard of the TA we use. We will explore all opportunities to develop our own TA by using our in-house development team and Council land. This will give us the opportunity to directly provide high quality TA at a more affordable cost.

This will form part of the total supply of TA but we also aim to increase the number of private sector leases. These are units that we lease for an extended period so we can more closely monitor the standard of accommodation. Developing our relationships with PRS landlords will also be key to achieving this, as detailed below.

> **Improve the quality of accommodation that we use in the private rented sector.**
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> - Develop a pipeline of high-quality PRS units to use as TA and suitable move-on accommodation for our customers.
> - Review our Landlord Business Forum to improve engagement with the sector.
> - Collaborate with landlords to bolster our understanding of the sector and to better inform our initiatives.
> - Develop a data-informed approach to landlord incentives.
> - Provide a rent guarantee scheme that is attractive to landlords and with rents that are within Local Housing Allowance levels.
> - Offer tenancy workshops with residents to help them sustain their PRS tenancies.

The private rented sector has an important role to play in the housing market so accessing the full potential of the sector is one of the key aims of the strategy. To do this, we will develop our collaborative approach with the sector and strengthen our partnerships with landlords and lettings agents. This can then help to increase the supply of high-quality PRS units to be used as TA and move-on accommodation to those in temporary housing.

Since 2001, the number of people who rent in the private sector has more than quadrupled[2]. As the proportion of people living in PRS properties has grown, the demographics of those living in it has evolved. The PRS is traditionally perceived to cater for young professionals who want the freedom to move between homes with ease to access different employment opportunities. However, a survey of renters showed that only six percent of private renters live in the sector primarily for the freedom and flexibility it provides[3] and a quarter of all new-born babies' first home is in the PRS[4].

The unaffordability of purchasing a home and the undersupply of social housing means that the PRS is the only feasible option for a significant proportion of households who would rather live in alternative tenures. Whereas households with higher incomes have more relative freedom to move, lower-income households are limited by factors such as cash deposits, discriminatory practices (i.e. refusing to let to people on benefits) and local housing allowance (LHA) levels that do not match market rents.

The legislation and perception of the sector has lagged behind these shifts. The PRS is now an essential part of the housing market and needs reform to be fit for purpose. Many of these shortcomings are structural and need nationwide reforms to resolve. This legislation needs to be developed with the input of partners to ensure it is robust and achieves its aims.

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[2] This is the difference between the 2001 Census (8,312) and our PRS modelling (38,000).
[3] YouGov, 2017
[4] Royal London, 2019: https://www.royallondon.com/media/press-releases/2019/march/half-of-all-babies-now-born-in-rented-accommodation/

One key issue is that much of the private rental market is unaffordable to those who are reliant on benefits. Housing benefit and the housing element of Universal Credit (UC), have been capped at LHA levels significantly below market rents for years. In 2019/20, for example, the LHA rate for a two-bed in the borough was £210 and market rent for a relatively cheap[5] two-bed was £277. This means that benefits would only cover up to a limit of 76% of some of the lowest rents in the borough. The government rightly increased the LHA limit to cover the rent of 30% of properties in each area for one year in its response to the pandemic but this needs to be raised year-on-year to prevent it falling behind rents again.

Other issues relating to benefits for households renting privately include the bedroom tax, the single person cap for under-35s and the five-week wait for UC claims to be processed. There also needs to be consideration for how furloughed workers return to work and those with rent arrears are treated fairly to avoid mass evictions from the PRS. The government needs to address these structural failings as part of its approach to mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic uncertainty.

We plan to continue to lobby central government to improve the security of tenure for renters in the sector. This includes abolishing Section 21 evictions with robust legislation and close monitoring to ensure it achieves the aim of improving security of tenure.

Unlike other tenures, there is little-to-no centralised or statutory data available to make evidence-informed decisions. As a result, policymakers have a less comprehensive understanding of the sector compared to social housing and there are fewer channels of communication. We are, therefore, committed to improving our understanding of the sector by developing a collaborative approach to decision-making with local landlords and lettings agents. We aim to review our Landlord Business Forum to improve engagement and inform meaningful changes.

Greater engagement and improved communication with landlords will also help to improve standards in the minority properties that are poorly-managed. We can outline the standard of accommodation that we expect to landlords and highlight that we only want to use properties that meet these standards.

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[5] This refers to properties in the lower quartile of rental values i.e. the bottom 25% of rents.