LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: ALL

REPORT TITLE: Homelessness Scrutiny Panel Report to Housing Scrutiny Committee

REPORT OF: Homelessness Scrutiny Panel – Councillors Kemi Atolagbe (Chair), Tommy Gale and Nancy Jirira

FOR SUBMISSION TO: Housing Scrutiny Committee	DATE: 22nd February 2024

SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report outlines the establishment of the Homelessness Scrutiny Panel to conduct a deep dive analysis into homelessness services across Camden, to understand more about resident perceptions of homelessness and the support that can be accessed. The report sets out the key findings of the examination and subsequent recommendations for consideration which will be shared with Housing Scrutiny Committee.

Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information

No documents that require listing were used in the preparation of this report.

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Housing Scrutiny Committee consider the recommendations from the Homelessness Scrutiny Panel outlined in Section 8 of this report.

Signed: Kemi Atolagbe

Date: 13 February 2024

1. Introduction

1.1. In September 2023 it was agreed that Camden would establish a Homelessness Scrutiny Panel to conduct a deep dive analysis into homelessness services across Camden. It was commissioned in order to understand more about resident perceptions of homelessness and the support that can be accessed. It is also recognised that the Council plays a key role as a convenor across the wider system and therefore, should work to drive partnership working and integration across the health and care system also. The report sets out the key findings of the examination and subsequent recommendations for consideration which will be shared with Housing Scrutiny Committee.

2. National and London context

2.1. Homelessness continues to be a key challenge across the UK, with research from Shelter estimating that around 271,000 people in England are recorded as homeless, including 123,000 children. This equates to approximately one in 208 people without a home.

2.2. Within this figure, approximately 2,400 individuals are sleeping rough on any given night, 15,000 are residing in hostels or supported accommodation, and nearly 250,000 are living in temporary accommodation, with a significant portion being families.

2.3. The number of people presenting as homeless to local authorities across London continues to increase, and in 2023 the number had increased by 14.5% compared to 2022.

2.4. Over the past decade, there has been a 74% increase in the number of people living in temporary accommodation across the UK. This trend is attributed to factors such as a chronic shortage of social homes, reliance on expensive and unstable private renting, a freeze on housing benefit, and a cost-of-living crisis.

2.5. This situation is significantly worse in London, where over the last year the number of families living in temporary accommodation has risen to 63,631 (7%). Local authorities have a statutory duty to not keep families with children in commercial hotels or B&Bs for longer than six weeks, however, across London over the last year this number has increased by 272% (1208).

2.6. This can have a detrimental health impact on those living in unsuitable temporary accommodation such as commercial hotels and B&B and puts huge financial pressure on local authorities bearing the costs of temporary accommodation not met through the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). Research by Shelter shows that of those living in TA, 63% report a negative impact on their mental health, 51% report a negative impact on their physical health and 39% find it harder to access healthcare appointments due to their living situation.

2.7. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address homelessness, including increasing the availability of social housing, addressing issues in the private rental market, and providing adequate support for those living in temporary accommodation to mitigate the negative health impacts they face.

3. Understanding the challenges of tackling homelessness

3.1. Homelessness in London comes in various forms, each presenting unique challenges and requiring tailored solutions. At its core, homelessness denotes a lack of settled accommodation, but it overlaps significantly with issues of poverty, discrimination, and violence. As outlined below:

3.2. **Statutory duties around homelessness**: Under the legal framework established by the Housing Act 1996, local authorities in London have a duty to assist individuals or families who meet the 'priority need' criteria. This includes survivors of domestic abuse, who are entitled to support in securing accommodation.

3.3. **Rough Sleeping**: Perhaps the most visible form of homelessness, rough sleeping involves individuals bedding down in outdoor spaces or makeshift shelters, often in precarious conditions. However, official statistics may underestimate the extent of rough sleeping, particularly among marginalised groups like women, whose experiences may go unnoticed. We gave consideration to the report by Cllr Richard Cotton on supporting rough sleepers in Camden. It was well detailed with the organisations and networks that currently joint work in Camden to provide services and support to rough sleepers in the borough. The report gives insight into being a rough sleepers, the challenging to support and provide the right services for them and the quality works that Camden is doing with the internal and external partners to ensure the right support is provided.

3.4. **Other Forms of Homelessness**: Beyond rough sleeping, homelessness in London encompasses a spectrum of experiences. This includes individuals living in temporary accommodation provided by local authorities, those in supported housing tailored to specific needs, and individuals experiencing 'hidden' homelessness, such as 'sofa surfing' or inhabiting insecure and unsuitable living arrangements.

3.5. **Intersectionality and Vulnerability**: Homelessness in London is not a singular issue but intersects with several factors, including gender, race, and socio-economic status. Violence Against Women and Girls, for instance, is both a cause and consequence of homelessness, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive approaches to addressing housing insecurity.

3.6. **Data Challenges and Support Services:** Capturing the true extent of homelessness poses challenges, needing efforts to improve data collection and analysis. Moreover, addressing homelessness requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing not only housing provision but also support services aimed at addressing underlying issues such as mental health, substance abuse, and economic instability.

3.7.   **The Kerslake Commission** was established in 2021 to learn from the emergency response to homelessness during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kerslake Commission released its 2023 progress report to ensure the continuation of positive lessons and joint working principles.

3.8   **Urgent Actions Proposed by the Commission**
1.   Restore Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates to the 30th percentile of local rents.
2.   Explore options to increase housing supply, including topping up existing developments with grant funding, regenerating substandard housing, and building modular units.
3.   Provide status and support to destitute individuals who are sleeping rough, including those with limited immigration status, in Government financial support packages.

The Commission also proposed some key principles for Local Authorities in their approach to Homelessness Approach
1.   Prevent homelessness before individuals reach crisis point.
2.   Provide assistance before individuals become homeless.
3.   Ensure pathways out of rough sleeping for everyone.

3.9   To address the level of homelessness in the borough, Camden Council produced a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2024 with priorities and action listed as prevention, supporting, tackling the root causes of homelessness and campaigning.

4.   Camden's approach to joint working and homelessness
4.1.   Camden's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-2024 recognises homelessness as both a national and local challenge. The strategy outlines Camden's priorities and actions, including policies and strategies such as the Housing Allocation Scheme, Homelessness Accommodation Policy, Route of the Streets Strategy, and Homeless Young People's Protocol.

4.2.   A key priority is supporting individuals and families experiencing homelessness by collaborating with partners across the borough to improve coordination and integration of support services. To recognise the impact that homelessness and housing can have on and individual's health and wellbeing, Camden initiated a three-year jointly funded Homelessness System Transformation programme, aiming to implement a holistic, integrated approach to homelessness. The programme seeks to co-produce solutions with residents, leaders, and frontline services, with key outcomes focusing on improving access to support, enhancing practitioner understanding, fostering organisational collaboration, and empowering individuals to move away from homelessness. The programme identified five key priorities:
- Developing trauma-informed environments
- Implementing integrated working among various disciplines and agencies
- Facilitating joined-up commissioning and strategic planning
- Enhancing access to mental health support, including for individuals with substance abuse issues

- Emphasising a preventative approach to homelessness and needs deterioration.

4.3.   These priorities aim to create a collaborative, comprehensive system where every individual or family experiencing homelessness can access the care and support, they need to transition away from homelessness and lead fulfilling lives.

5.   Methodology of Homelessness Scrutiny Panel discovery process:

5.1.   **Purpose of the panel's examination**
The panel's task was to assess residents' understanding and perceptions of homelessness, their experiences accessing support services, and the council's role in convening a cohesive response within the broader homelessness system.

5.2.   The examination is framed within a 'whole system' approach to homelessness, aligned with the aims of the Homelessness System Transformation programme. This approach involves considering homelessness from multiple perspectives across health, social care, housing, justice, and community sectors.

5.3.   **Key Questions and Lines of Enquiry:**
To gather insights, key questions were formulated for internal officers, statutory partners, and the voluntary and community sector (VCS), focusing on areas such as the effectiveness of current support services, partnership working, preventative measures, and ideal outcomes.

5.4.   **Interviews with Stakeholders:**
Stakeholder interviews were conducted with internal officers, statutory partners, and the VCS to explore their experiences, challenges, and recommendations regarding homelessness support in Camden. Residents who had experienced homelessness were also invited to share their journeys and provide feedback on the support received.

5.5.   **Limitations and Recommendations:**
While efforts were made to engage with residents who were not homeless to gauge community perceptions, resource constraints prevented this task's completion. The recommendation is for the Homelessness System Transformation to address this aspect in the future.

5.6.   By following this process, the panel aimed to gain comprehensive insights into homelessness issues, support services, and residents' perspectives to inform future strategies and initiatives. Detailed information, including specific questions and responses, can be found in the appendix for reference.

6.   Themes developed during discovery of Camden's Homelessness system

6.1.   **Resource constraints**
1. Central government funding settlements are short-term and spread across multiple streams. This poses significant challenges, impacting the continuity and effectiveness of support services.

2. A critical shortage of affordable and social housing exacerbates homelessness issues, compounded by the end of national schemes supporting vulnerable groups, such as Homes for Ukraine.
3. Reduced funding for voluntary sector services has led to a decline in the level of community support available to those experiencing homelessness.

6.2. **Service Design -** *Capacity and Approach*
1. Housing officer capacity for preventative work is limited as most time is spent reacting to crises. The significant level of administrative tasks and paperwork that officers need to complete alongside homelessness applications reduces their capacity to do more direct work with service users. Ideas surrounding reducing this paperwork and streamlining records – such as the 'passport' project within the System Transformation project – were widely welcomed, both to free up officer capacity and also to simplify the process for service users.
2. Both residents and VCS partners noted that there are inconsistencies in approach by housing officers and the quality of experience is variable depending on which housing officer they speak to. It was raised that some staff were very understanding and take a trauma-informed approach to how they assess and interact with service users, whilst this approach didn't appear to be fully embedded with others. This was raised in relation to communication style and approach, but also in reference to how 'suitability' is determined – with some feeling that legitimate concerns (especially in relation to local support networks for vulnerable service users) are not always considered adequately.
3. VCS partners gave positive feedback about the ease of working with some teams, especially the benefits teams, Tackling Poverty teams and sheltered housing teams. This should be fed through to staff.
4. Frontline staff across all areas of the homelessness process, including VCS providers, have indicated they would like to be further embedded into the strategy and policy development process. Consideration should be given of how to harness the significant expertise of frontline staff throughout the system.
5. Many expressed support for the aims and proposed approach of the Homelessness System Transformation programme.

6.3. **Information and Communication**
1. Non-English speakers encounter difficulties navigating the system, emphasising the need for improved accessibility and language support.
2. Whilst recent improvements to the website are welcome and address some concerns, the sections of the website relating to homelessness were raised as an area for improvement. There were requests for clearer 'start-to-finish' information about the whole homelessness process in Camden, improved information on out-of-hours support, and including translation options.
3. The online application system was generally felt to be quite self-explanatory, although requests were made to streamline the process. These included replacing forms filled out via Word or PDF documents, which were felt to be confusing and messy, and replacing these with online

forms. The Discretionary Housing Payment form – currently only available online as a PDF – was given as an example.

4. It was frequently raised that service users would like to see in-person appointments offered again as it was felt that since the pandemic services have remained online – posing particular challenges for service users without access to the internet or those where in-person communication would be more appropriate.

5. Better physical publicity covering what people should do if they find themselves homeless, especially in areas where street homelessness is more prevalent, was raised as an area for improvement.

6. It was raised in multiple sessions that communication with housing officers can fall below expectations, with significant reply times and a lack of proactive updates on case progress.

7. Calls to service users often show up as being from a withheld number. This is an issue for those who have reasons not to pick up calls from withheld numbers, such as people facing domestic abuse.

6.4. **Escalation Processes**

1. MP and Councillor enquiries were felt to be an effective way of progressing stuck applications. However, these faults should be picked up by an internal review system before reaching this stage. Many partners were clear that housing team need a better way of dealing with cases that fall outside "the normal".

6.5. **Wider Housing System Concerns**

1. Various concerns were raised about the functioning of the points system. These included a lack of clarity on how the system works, violence and harassments points lasting only for 6 months, those in hostels not accumulating points, and the possibility of future issues (such as in domestic abuse cases) not being accounted for by points being removed once a person is perceived to have settled.

2. Families in hostels face various issues including practical issues upon moving out (as furniture is not permitted in hostels families can be faced with additional set-up costs when moving to the new property) and a lack of clear time limits of how long residents can be placed in hostels. Issues for those placed in hotels were also noted, such as frequent last-minute moves and a feeling that less support is received by residents in hotels than those in hostels.

3. Many residents with experience of homelessness raised that wider systems, such as the benefits system, are very confusing and they would appreciate further support in understanding relevant parts of this to housing – especially the benefits cap.

4. Other service users raised a lack of shower availability as a real challenge for those who are street homeless.

6.6. **Multi-Agency Working**

1. Statutory partners were positive about the coordination of the Homelessness Systems Transformation programme, such as the high-level sponsors of the Programme Board. NHS partners noted positive

experience of engagement with this process and were clear they want to continue working closely with the Council on this.

2. VCS partners noted a number of issues they would like to see addressed, including:
   o A lack of specific or named contact points in housing making effective partnership working difficult. Various VCS partners noted they had built up contact lists over time, but this is not systematised and is left too much to luck of knowing the right people. Rhyl Primary School, among others, noted that it has been transformational to cases they have worked on when involved Family Support Workers have got a list of team leaders in the housing department for them to contact directly.
   o Staff turnover is high and this can make building up positive working relationships challenging.
   o VCS staff would like further training from the Council on how they can best support clients they are supporting with housing issues. Many noted that they struggle to navigate the system themselves making it difficult for them to support others.
   o Escalation routes for professionals in both VCS and statutory partner agencies are unclear and this can slow down case progress where there are problems.
   o Joined up working is not embedded adequately in systems. For example, NHS partners noted there is notification system to tell them when families have moved in and out of the borough making support for vulnerable residents difficult.
   o Getting housing officers to attend multi-agency meetings can be challenging and VCS partners requested commitments for improvements in this area.
   o Partners with physical presence in the community, including schools, were keen for housing officers to attend their locations in-person for 'surgery' style events. This could help with picking up issues early and feeding into an improved preventative approach.

3. Partners in the community sector provide critical day-to-day and face-to-face support for vulnerable service users, however there was a general feeling among VCS providers that their voices were not always heard as clearly as other agencies in the professional network such as statutory partners. For instance, Doorstep noted that there have been occasions where they have not received a response but when solicitors have made the same points they have received an immediate reply. A wider forum for VCS partners was requested to improve their ability to raise issues, feed into improvements and communicate best practice between local organisations.

6.7. **Homelessness and Young People**
1. Schools and education providers play a key role in the homelessness process. Due to their physical presence in the community, parents often use school buildings and staff for tasks like completing forms and photocopying or scanning documents. School staff noted they often ended up acting as informal advisors in these situations and would like to see housing officers attached to the school in the style of Good Work Camden instead of going via a generic pathway each time.

2. Schools noted the declining attendance of pupils in temporary accommodation, especially those being moved regularly around hotels or when these hotels are out of the area.
3. Homelessness among young people in the borough is a real issue that needs further attention. New Horizon Youth Centre noted a number of areas for focus, including variation in the quality of pathway planning for children they support and instances of confusion around care experienced children receiving their proper entitlements including priority need status for housing. They noted they would be happy to do further training with the housing department on working with young people in these situations.

6.8. These overarching themes shed light on the multifaceted challenges within Camden's homelessness support system, providing valuable insights for potential changes and policy interventions.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Camden has demonstrated a commendable history of collaboration with residents and partners in the voluntary and community sector (VCS), aligning its priorities with the London housing strategy. Through integrated commissioning arrangements with NHS services and partnerships with various community and voluntary sectors, Camden has been proactive in providing support to homeless households, including those in temporary accommodation and rough sleepers, as well as those experiencing housing instability.

7.2. During consultations with stakeholders, it became evident that there is a strong consensus regarding the need to review the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and enhance collaboration to secure increased grant funding from central government. Stakeholders also emphasised the necessity of implementing a comprehensive resident information system to streamline data management effectively.

7.3. Recent significant changes to the homelessness section on the Camden website are expected to address many concerns raised during consultations, enhancing accessibility and transparency for residents seeking housing support. Moving forward, there is a recognised need to coordinate support around the individual, focusing on holistic solutions rather than addressing separate needs through separate channels.

7.4. We also note the significant incident of 10th September 2023 on Huntley Street that took place after this panel was established. We have had sight of the action plan set following this incident and welcome the immediate and longer-term actions outlined in relation to rough sleeping.

8. Recommendations

8.1. We asked that a review of the recommendations be brought to the Housing Scrutiny Committee in October 2024:
1. **Utilise Stakeholder Insights:** Incorporate insights from interviews with partners and residents into the ongoing work of the Homeless System Transformation programme and senior housing management's improvement strategies.

2.   **Facilitate Collaborative Forums:** Establish a forum for all partners, especially VCS partners, to ensure close collaboration and ongoing feedback mechanisms. Consider leveraging existing platforms such as the Camden Advice Network.

3.   **Enhance Multi-Agency Working:** Encourage housing teams to consistently participate in multi-agency meetings, establish named contacts for key partner agencies within relevant housing teams to facilitate productive collaboration, and explore establishing a system to notify NHS partners when families have moved into the area so they receive the correct support

4.   **Increase Training for Partners:** Ensure there are regular training opportunities for staff in partner agencies, including VCS organisations, on how to support service users through Camden housing processes. Consider including this in the distribution strategy for the new provision roadmap.

5.   **Improve Support for Hostel Residents**: Develop specific plans to better support residents in hostels, including opportunities for feedback, monitoring, and consideration of formal time limits for hostel stays.

6.   **Implement Trauma-Informed Approach:** Ensure the successful implementation and sustainability of a trauma-informed approach across housing staff through comprehensive training and ongoing support mechanisms.

7.   **Expand Outreach at Physical Hubs:** Build on successful models like Good Work Camden by stationing housing officers at key physical hubs such as schools and community centres to improve accessibility.

8.   **Empower Frontline Staff:** Embed frontline staff input within strategy development processes to foster a sense of ownership and facilitate effective change management. This should include staff from VCS and statutory partners.

9.   **Review VCS Funding**: Conduct a review of funding for VCS partners to alleviate financial pressures and ensure continuity of essential services.

10.   **Enhance Communications:** Review all communication materials in a year time to ensure clarity, accessibility, and inclusivity, including translations, simplified language, and replacing Word/PDF attachments with online forms. Consider options for reducing unacceptably long communication delays, including improved case management systems and clearer monitoring of KPIs relating to response times and case progression.

11.   **Review Out of Hours Provision:** Consider the effectiveness of current out of hours provision and improve communication of how to access the current provision.

12.   **Streamline Processes:** Review and streamline paperwork and internal processes to optimise officer time towards meaningful preventative work, improve efficiency, and enhance workforce retention.

13.   **Strengthen Internal Review Systems:** Improve internal review systems to address complex cases promptly and minimise reliance on external enquiries for resolution.

14.   **Facilitate In-Person Services:** Review arrangements for in-person services post-COVID to restore personalised interactions and support residents effectively.

15.   **Prioritise Housing Officer Capacity:** Consider how to rebalance staff time further towards meaningful preventative work, such as ring-fenced time for this work and further capacity in dedicated prevention teams. Gather

further data to show the positive value of preventative work to improve future business cases for investment in dedicated preventative capacity.

16.   **Promote Success Stories:** Incorporate success stories into the communications strategy to build trust, motivate staff, and demonstrate positive outcomes.

17.   **Review Points System:** Conduct a thorough review of the points system's impact on homeless residents and ensure transparent communication following the review.

8.2.   These recommendations aim to enhance collaboration, streamline processes, and improve support services to address homelessness effectively, ensuring a holistic and person-centred approach for all residents.

9.   Finance Comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services

9.1.   The twin drivers of increased demand and reduced supply are placing a major strain on the homelessness budget. The Council is currently forecast to overspend by £5.8m on temporary accommodation in 2023/24. The Council has received additional Homelessness Prevention Grant from central government and is taking a number of steps to prevent homelessness and reduce the cost of temporary accommodation. Despite this, a major budget pressure remains which needs to be addressed in the 2024/25 budget proposals to be considered by the Council on 4th March 2024.

9.2   Given the temporary accommodation financial pressures, the Committee will want to take the financial implications of the Panel's recommendations into account when considering the report.

10.   Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

The Borough Solicitor has been consulted and has no comments to add.

11.   Environmental Implications

There are no Environmental Implications relating to this report.

12.   Appendices

Appendix A Key Lines of Enquiry
Appendix B List of Sources
Appendix C Interview Notes

REPORT ENDS