

Housing Scrutiny

Housing Needs & Homelessness Service ‘Deep Dive’

28th October 2024

Housing Needs & Homelessness Service 'Deep Dive' – one year on

The presentation covers the following areas:

- Section 1 – Restructure of the service
- Section 2 – Setting the strategic direction of the service
- Section 3 – Key performance review
- Section 4 – Support to victims of domestic abuse
- Section 5 – Addressing rough sleeping in the borough
- Section 6 –Transformation projects

Section 1 - Housing Needs and Homelessness service one year on

Reasons for the change

- Lack of direct customer interface – homelessness advice was conducted via telephone appointment and residents had little or no direct contact with Officers.
- Poor customer experience - long waiting time for appointments with the earliest offered 6 months away resulting in a backlog of about 500 initial appointments. There was also several entry points and case hand-offs
- Low prevention outcomes - benchmarking against other London boroughs showed Croydon in the bottom quartile.
- 60% of applicants who presented to the service were placed in temporary accommodation per month (average of 120/200 households placed a month).
- Lack of support to households in temporary accommodation to move into alternative settled accommodation.
- Duplication of roles and insufficient management capacity to support front line staff.

Section 1 - Housing Needs and Homelessness service one year on

Outcomes

- Restructure completed and implemented on 25th September 2023.
- A new service operating model is in place with realigned staffing resources to provide a service that fully complies with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- Residents were to be positively encouraged to participate in their journey towards finding a settled home or supported to remain in their current home.
- Supported the Council's MTFS by delivering savings of £1.25m

Section 1 - Housing Needs and Homelessness service one year on

(a) Challenge - High absence levels due to sickness impacted the change process and frontline service delivery.

Response

- A dedicated Human Resource (HR) to support the service and managers was introduced in May 2024.
- Full adherence to absence management policy e.g. regular welfare calls, referrals to Occupational Health, Phased Return to Work, Return to Work interviews and formal sickness review meetings.
- Signposting of employees to Employee Assistance Programme.
- Sickness absence training for managers delivered on steps to take from start to finish to support employees to return to work.
- Introduction of wellbeing welfare panel chaired by a Housing Director from another division to provide an objective perspective to guide managers in managing individual absences.

Section 1 - Housing Needs and Homelessness service one year on

(b) Challenge - Sector wide difficulty in filling vacant posts including key management posts

Response

Permanent appointments to key posts, including Director and Heads of service.

(c) Challenge - Poor customer care, knowledge and skills gap needed to respond to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

Response

- A training programme developed which covers customer care, soft skills, legal, personal effectiveness and management development. First phase of the training has been completed, including Customer First (see Appendix 1) and second phase is being scheduled for delivery over the next 12 months.
- Performance management framework implemented with reporting tools to track key indicators.
- Annual service plan and appraisals in place supported by regular formal supervision.

Section 1 - Housing Needs and Homelessness service one year on

(d) Challenge - Significant backlogs were identified during the change process.

Response

- 2,267 outstanding homelessness applications cleared in June 2024, of which only 198 households (9%) were placed into temporary accommodation.
- A backlog of 2,700 temporary accommodation households (out of 3500) without an active housing register application. The backlog was also cleared in June 2024 to enable the residents to actively participate in their journey towards securing a settled home by having accounts to bid for available social housing properties.

(e) Challenge - Staff feedback: poor communication and lack of understanding of the new roles and responsibilities

Response

- Regular staff huddles and formal meetings held
- Regular newsletter/bulletins to disseminate information
- Bi-monthly staff engagement events are held for staff across the division to come together and strengthen the one-team culture.
- A post-implementation review of the structure has been completed – outcome is that it is agile and designed to meet the current and future needs of the service. To be kept under continuous review in view of changing demand.

Section 2- Setting the strategic direction of the service

A strategy and accompanying policies have been developed to set the strategic direction and priorities for the service.

(a) A revised Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024-2029

The draft strategy was consulted widely with residents, statutory and voluntary partners across the borough. Their feedback has shaped the final strategy which was agreed by Full Council on 17 July 2024. Below are the key priorities set out in the strategy:

Priority 1	Listen to our residents and provide a good and responsive service
Priority 2	Act at the earliest possible stage to prevent homelessness from occurring
Priority 3	Reduce the reliance on the use of temporary accommodation
Priority 4	Reduce the numbers of people who are rough sleeping in Croydon
Priority 5	Manage our stock and encourage new affordable, private rented and social housing
Priority 6	Reset partnership relationship with the Voluntary and Statutory Sector and deliver a more integrated approach to tackling homelessness

Section 2- Setting the strategic direction of the service

(b) Council's Housing Allocation Policy

The last Allocation Policy was last updated in 2019. It is essential to update the policy regularly to ensure the Council is responding to any impact of micro and macro-economic impacts on housing demand and supply.

A review has been carried out with proposed changes agreed at Cabinet on 17th October 2024 which is subject to full consultation with residents and key partners across the borough. The changes include:

- Ensuring the policy is much clearer for our residents to understand.
- Increasing the number of social housing lets available to our care-experienced young people.
- Ensuring sheltered housing is allocated to those who would benefit most—specifically, individuals of pension age with low to medium levels of support due to frailty, ill health, or mobility issues.
- Extending the residency criteria in Croydon from three to six years .
- Implementing the use of annual lettings plans to allow the council to respond to local conditions, such as the financial pressure caused by increasing numbers of households in temporary accommodation.

(c) Placements policy –This is sector good practice as it provides a framework for transparency in decision making regarding out of area placements. The policy was approved by Cabinet on 17th October 2024.

Section 3 – Performance review: Improving customer experience

Baseline – September 2023

Homelessness advice was conducted via a telephone appointment and those who were homeless on the day, had little or no direct contact with Officers. and placements to temporary accommodation were handled by phone

Telephone appointment waiting time for initial assessment was an average of 6 months

Current – September 2024

Face to Face service is offered to residents requiring initial housing needs assessments, except where otherwise requested.
An average of 500 residents a week are seen at Access Croydon. Applicants who are homeless and can't wait for an appointment are now seen on the day by an Officer in person.

The waiting period for initial assessments following contact from residents at risk of homelessness has now reduced from six months to two months. The aspiration remains to assess 90% of the applications within 14 days

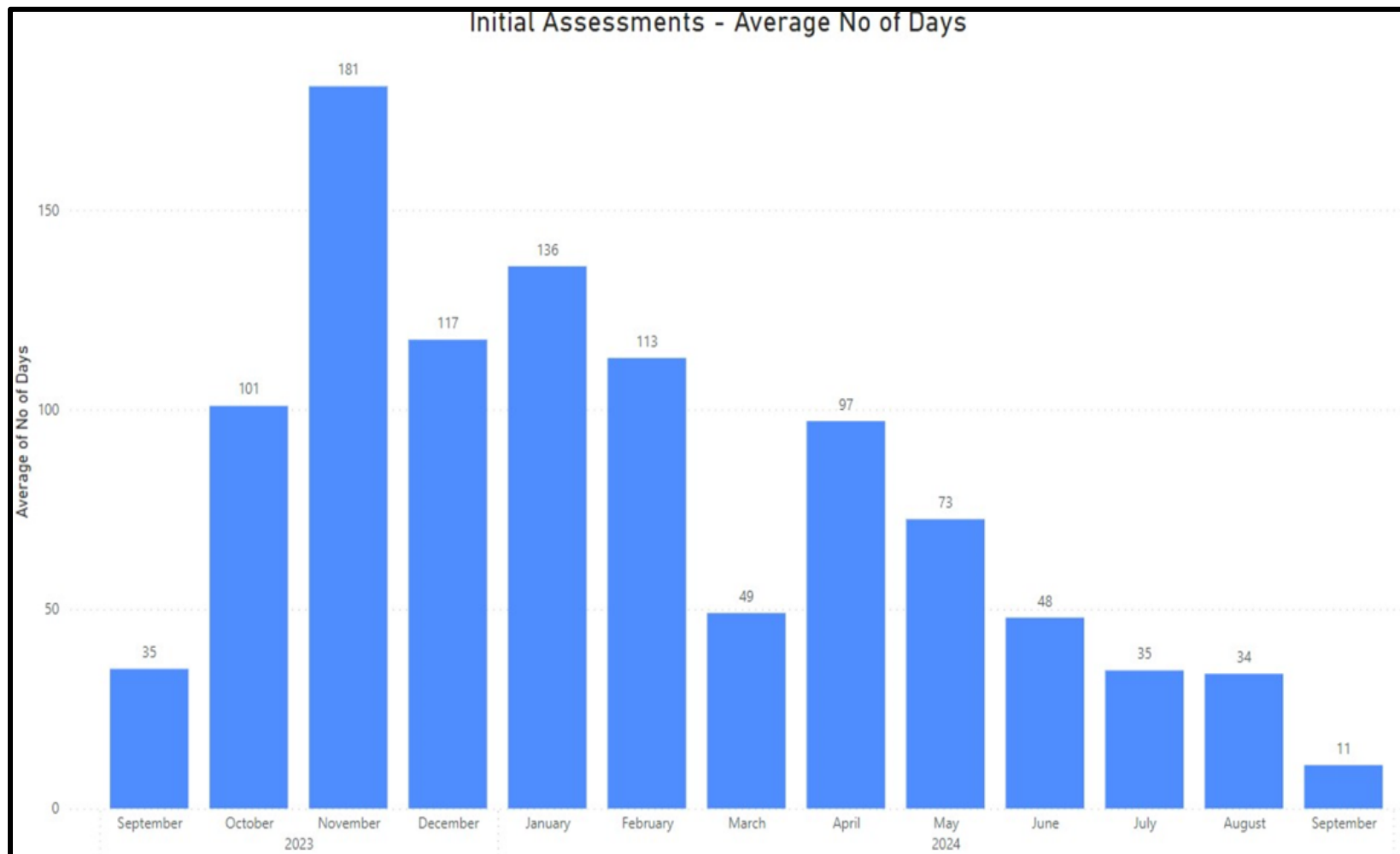
Improved working relationship with voluntary and statutory partners, and e.g. sharing of weekly rota, providing details of named officer contacts, regular meetings, joint-decision making panels, and escalation pathways.

Cleared a backlog of complaints and significantly reduced the number of overdue Member Enquiries.

September 2023 – 6 months

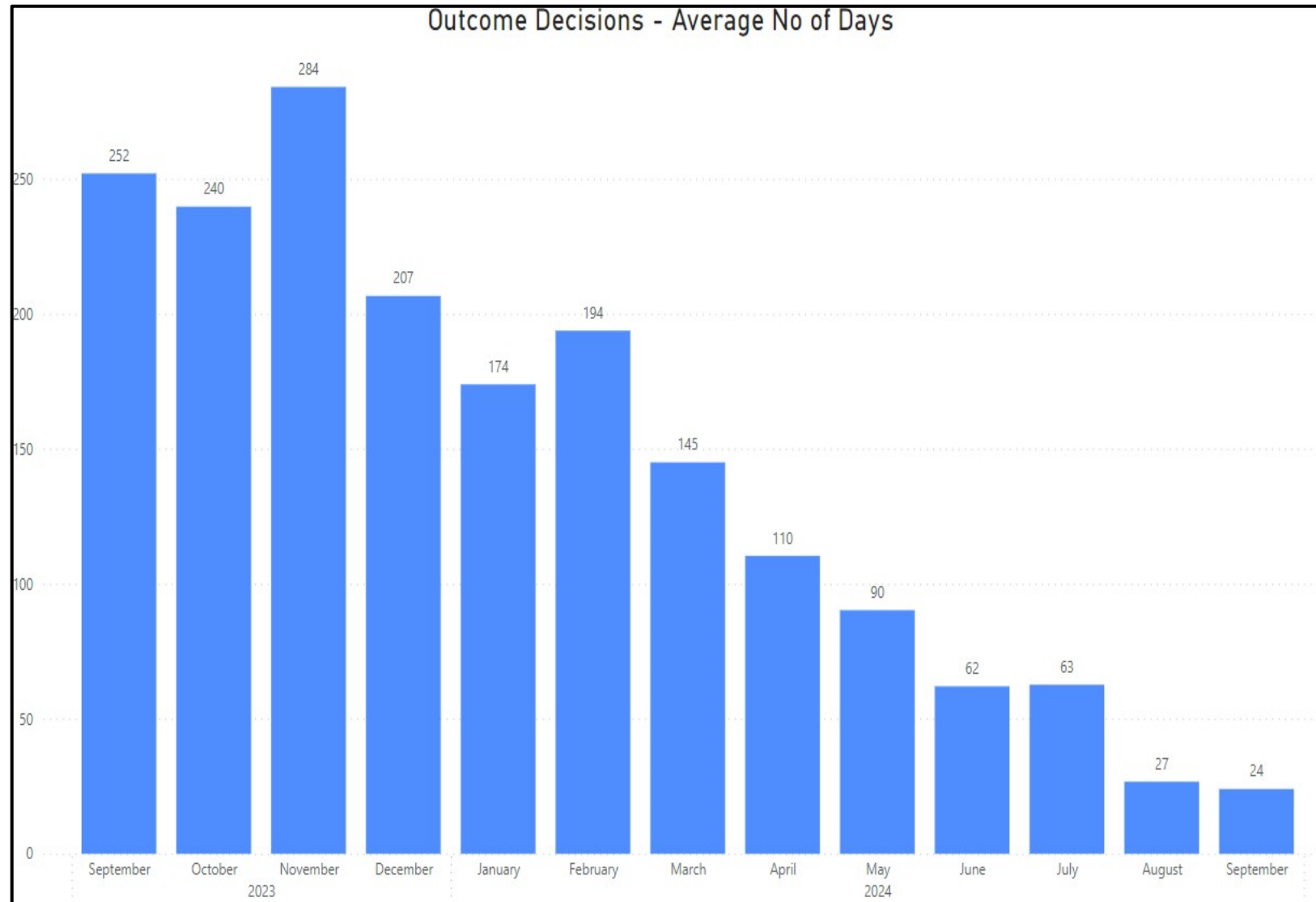
The graph shows the timeliness of initial homelessness assessment once an application has been received to determine eligibility and what housing support can be provided to applicants.

There has been a steady improvement in performance over the last 12 months which has reduced the time taken from an average of 6 months to 2 months.

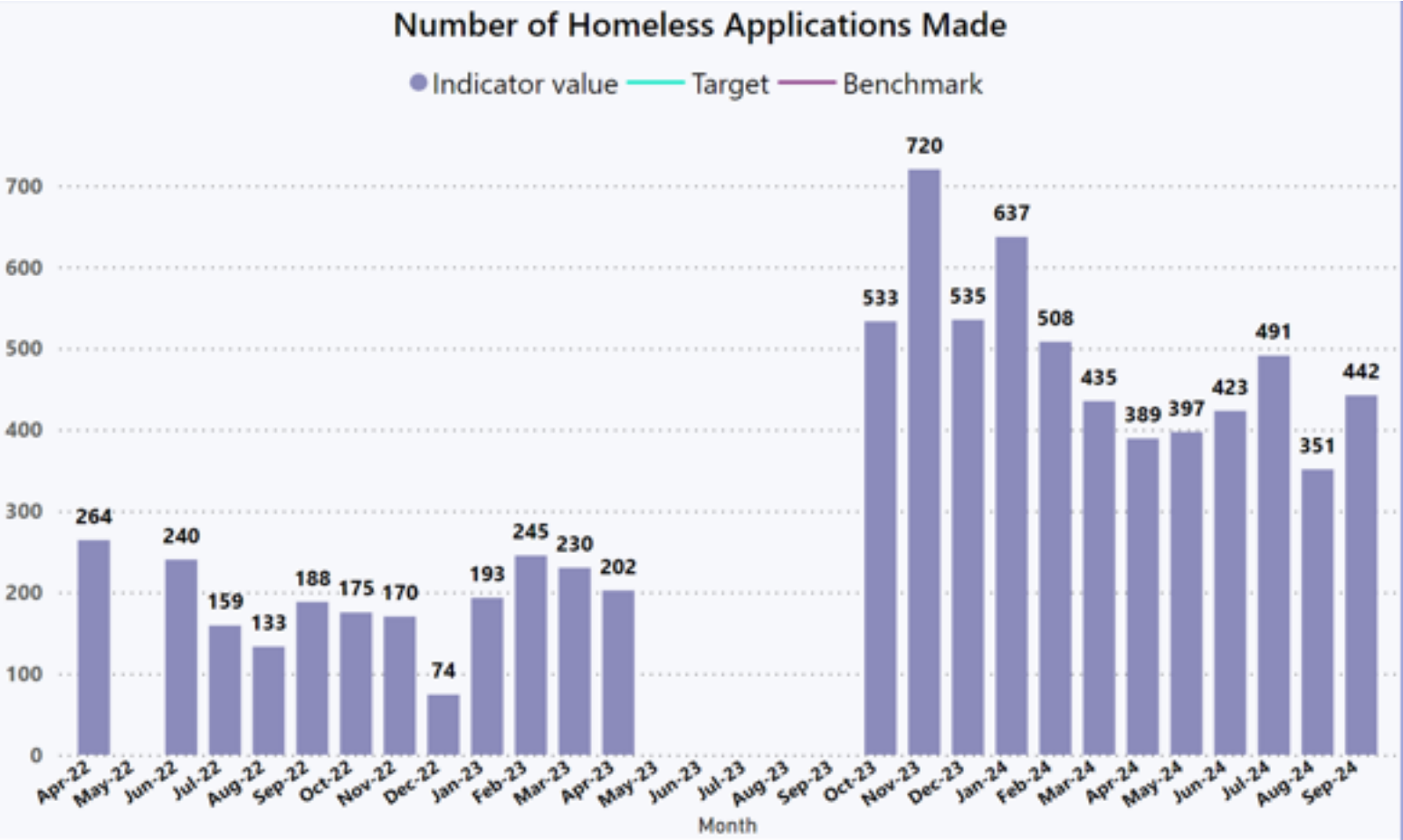


September 2023 baseline data is not available.

The graph shows that there has been a steady improvement in the time it takes to make statutory decisions on homelessness applications; from an average of 8 months when the new structure was implemented to 2 months a year on.



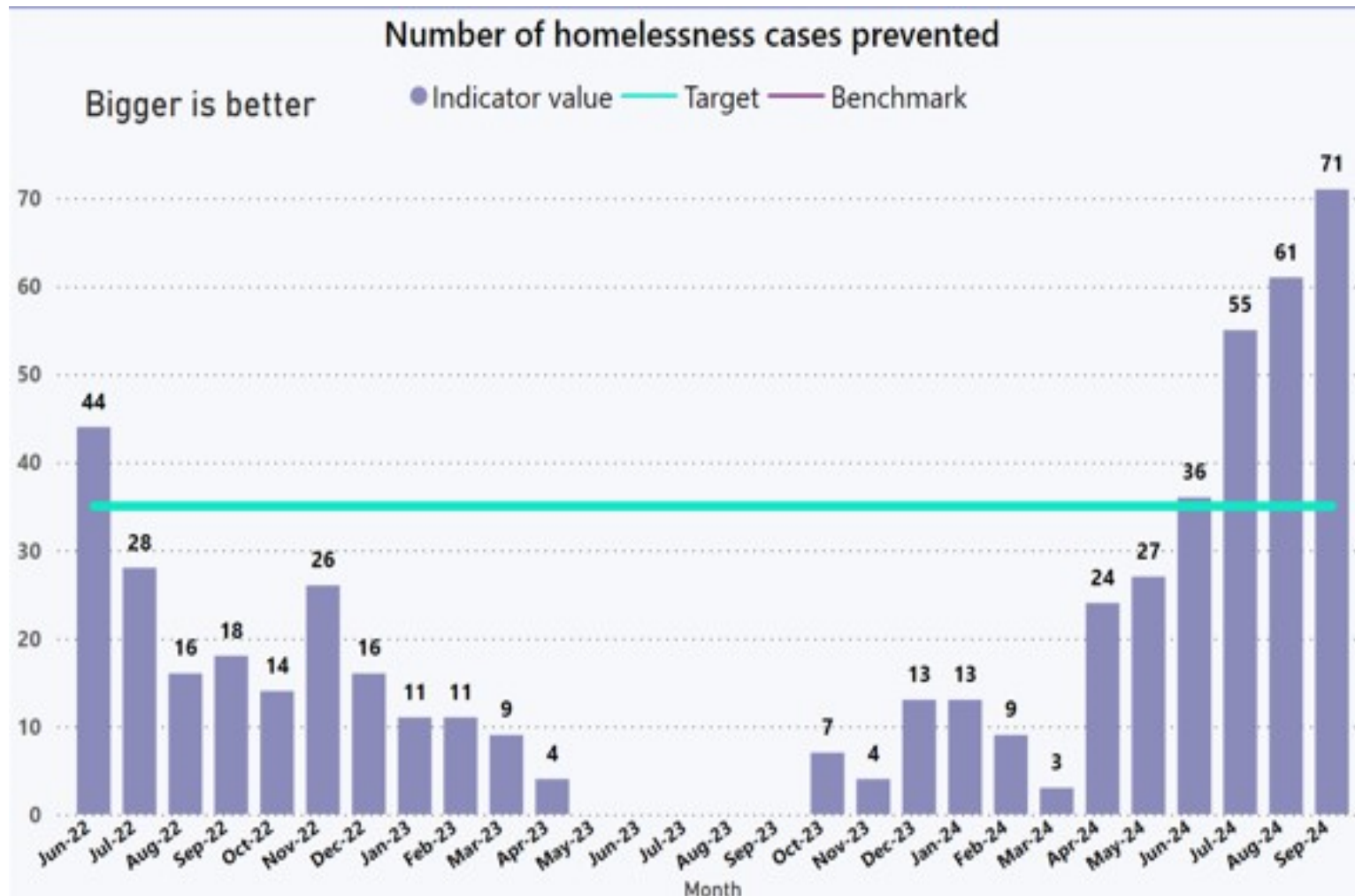
Section 3 – Performance review: demand management



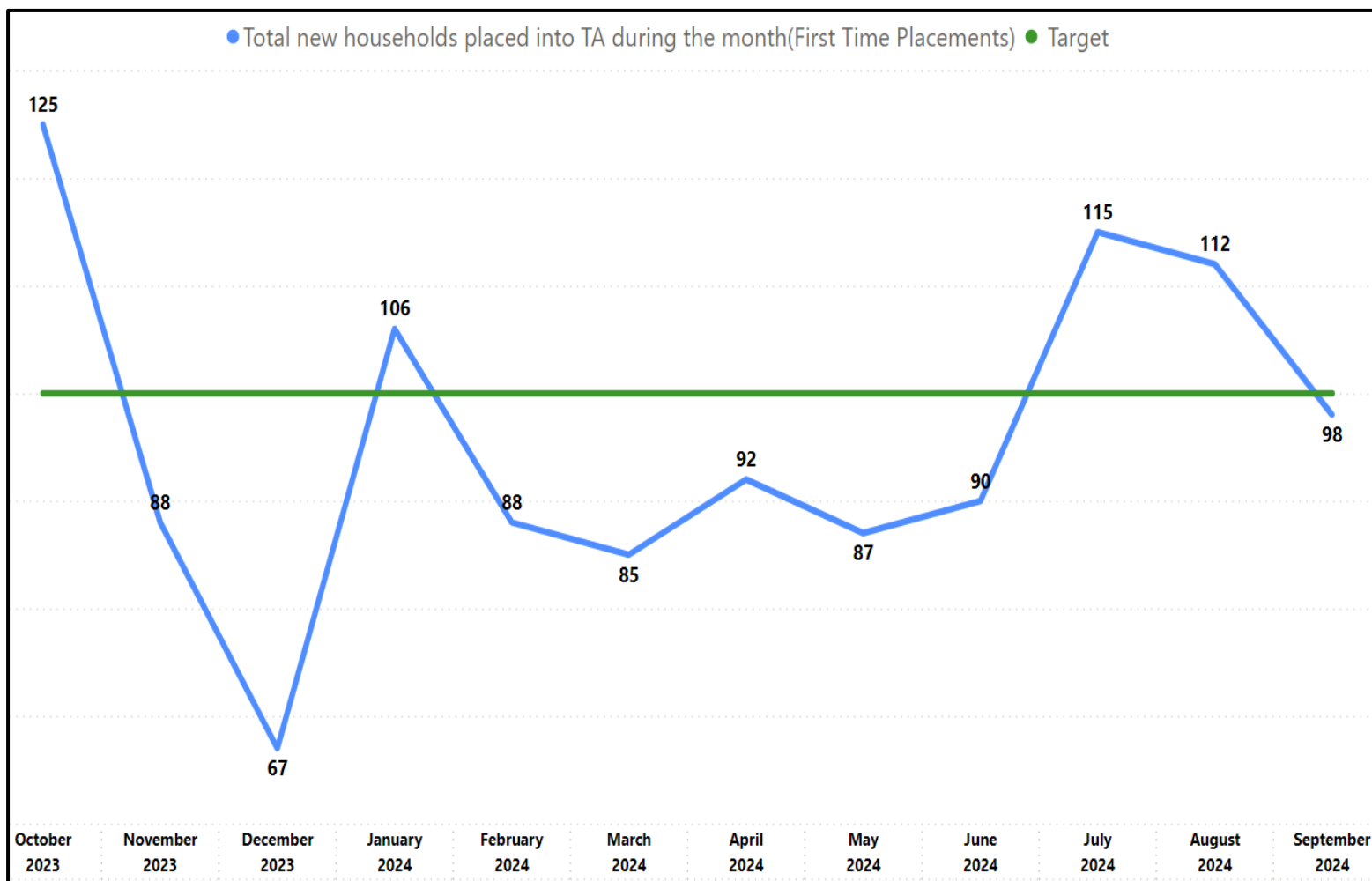
This is a demand tracker to help the Council to identify pressure points so that appropriate measures are put in place to mitigate against any financial impact.

The statutory homelessness figures published in October 2024 by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government shows a large increase in the number of households owed homelessness support by their authority in England in 2023-24 compared to the previous year. In total, 146,430 households were assessed as being threatened with homelessness, which is a 3.1% increase from 2022-23. Most categories of reasons for homelessness or threat of homelessness had increased since 2022-23.

In Croydon, an average of 400 applications per month are received, requiring homelessness support. This has doubled compared to 200 the previous year.



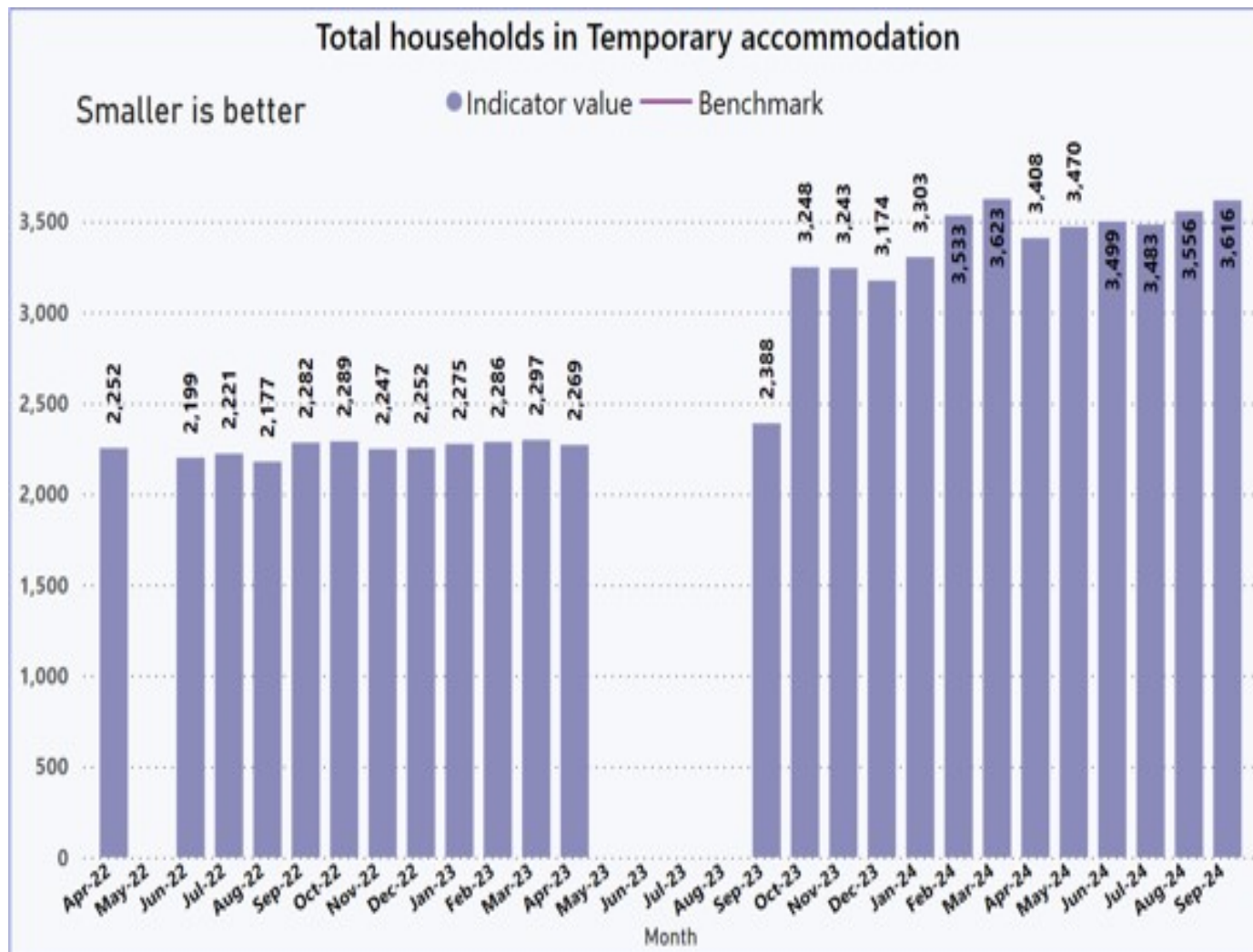
There has been a steady and consistent improvement in homelessness prevention outcomes as the new way of working following the service restructure is embedded.



Controls in place and robust assessments has resulted in an improvement in performance as the new ways of working is embedded following the service restructure. As a result, 1 in 4 households are placed in temporary accommodation each month i.e. 25% new placement rate (100 out of 400 new applications received a month).

Previously, 60% of applicants who presented to the service were placed in temporary accommodation per month (average of 120/200 new applications per month).

The current performance compares favorably with other good performing London boroughs.



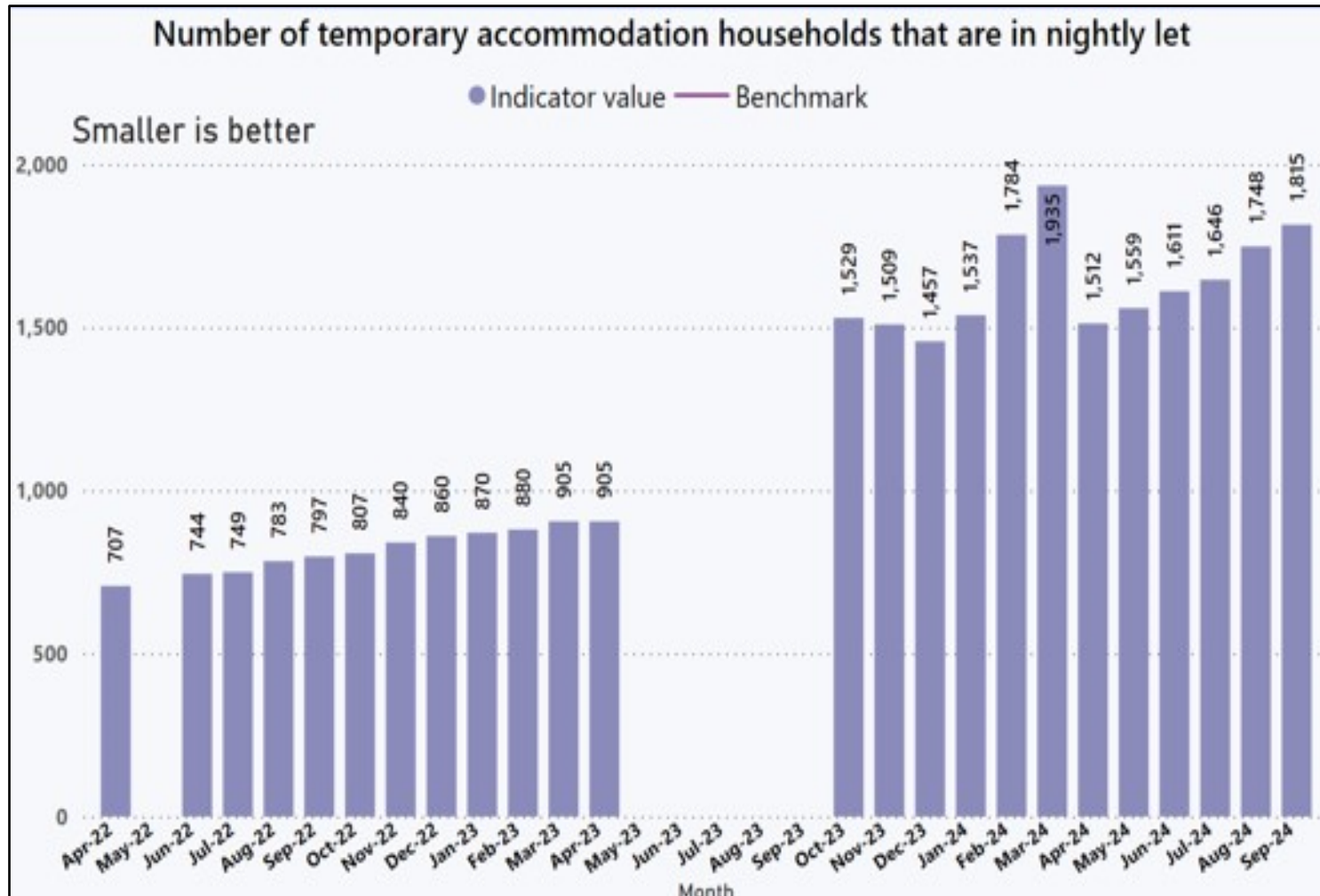
The number of households in temporary accommodation was previously under-reported and the increase from October 2024 reflects the true position - an additional 1000 households were confirmed to be living in temporary accommodation following occupancy checks and data cleanse.

This is a demand-led indicator and the context is rising homelessness both nationally and, most seriously, in London. This is driven mostly by pressures in the private-rental sector such as no-fault evictions and unaffordable rent-rises.

The statutory homelessness figures published in October 2024 by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government shows the number of households living in temporary accommodation in England has been increasing since 2021-22, and reached 117,450 on 31 March 2024, an increase of 12.3% from the same period last year and is higher than at any other point since the data series began in 1998.

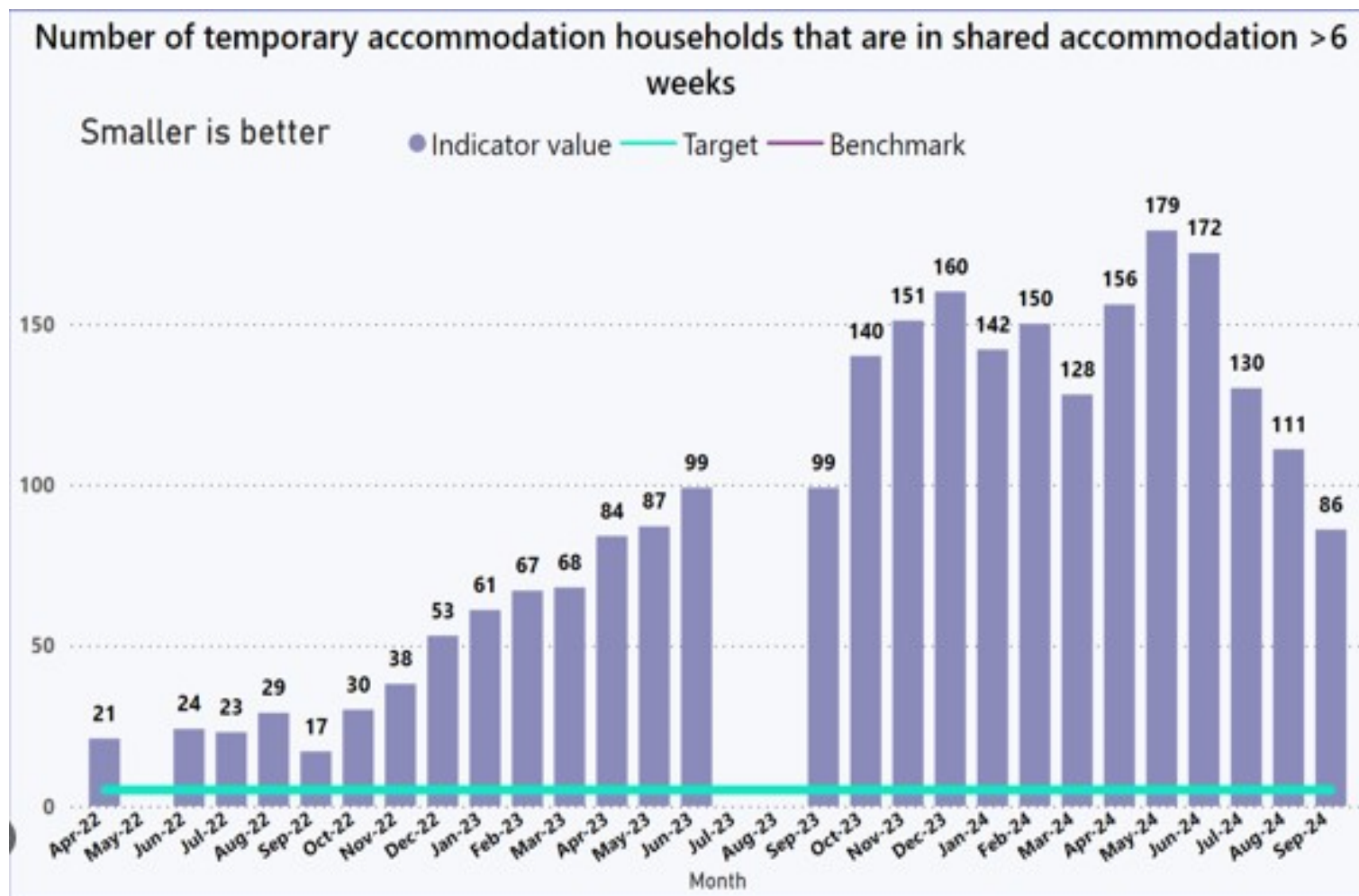
In London, there were 17.8 households living in temporary accommodation per 1,000 households compared with 2.5 households per 1,000 in the rest of England. Newham London Borough had the highest rate of temporary accommodation in London with 53.1 households per 1,000 households. Slough Borough Council had the highest rate outside London with 18.2 households per 1,000 households.

In comparison, the number of households in temporary accommodation in Croydon remained relatively stable over the past year. At end of March 2024, there were 3,623 households, and at end of September 2024 was 3,616 which equates to 23.3 per 1,000 households in the borough.. We are continuing to support households to move into alternative affordable settled housing solutions.



The ongoing increase in nightly paid accommodation is due to private landlords exiting longer leased temporary accommodation arrangement and those interested in continuing to operate within the temporary accommodation market prefer to do so on a nightly paid basis. This is because it offers them the flexibility of responding quickly to market changes whilst maximising income from their assets.

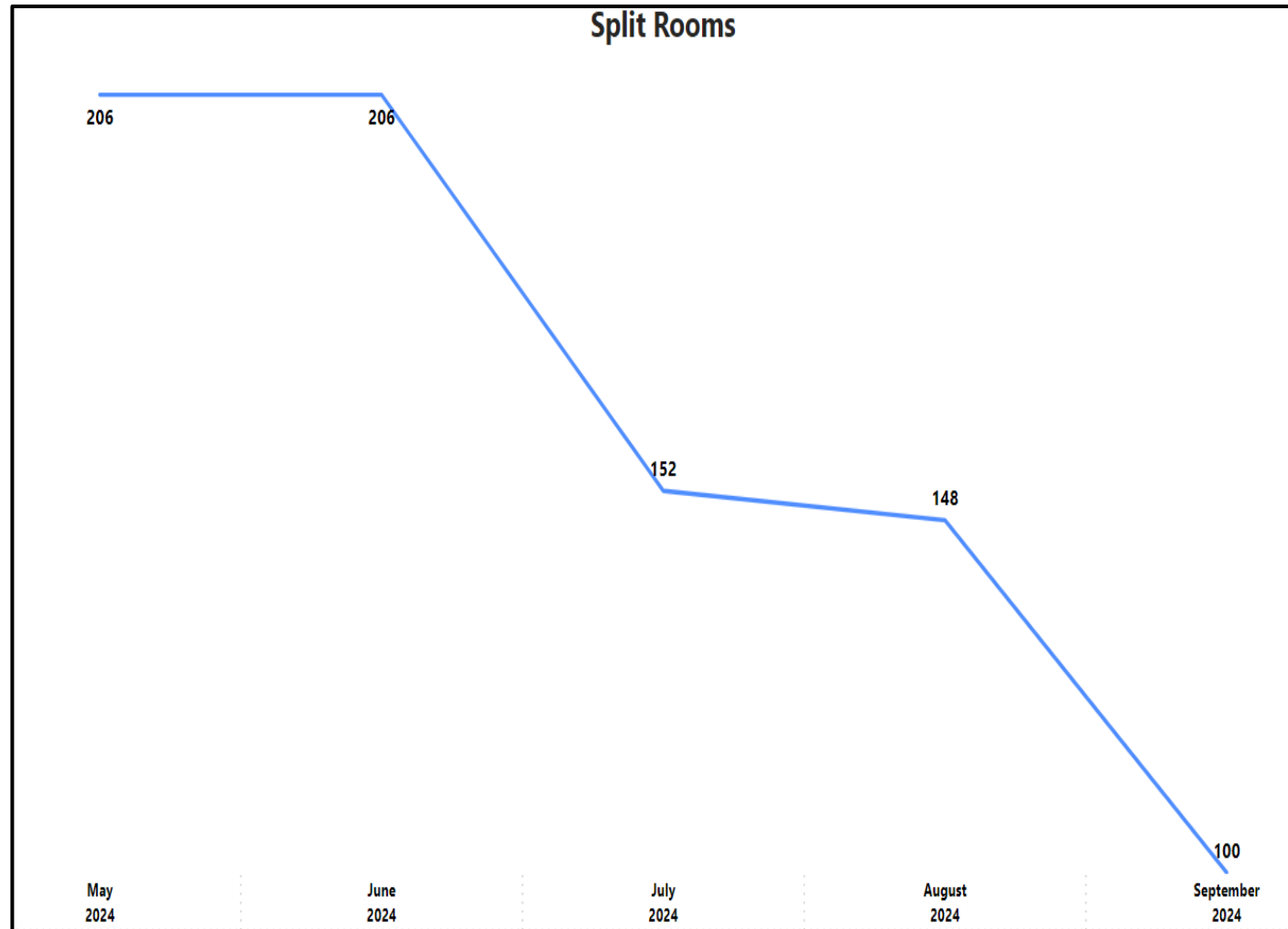
Between September 2022 and June 2023, landlords removed 12% of total temporary accommodation stock in London which was previously secured through long-leased arrangements . This loss has inevitably contributed to the increased usage of nightly paid accommodation to meet existing and new demand.



Shortage of affordable accommodation and increase in homelessness demand means that sometimes families are placed in Bed & Breakfast (B&B) type accommodation with shared facilities.

The statutory homelessness figures published in October 2024 by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government shows the number of households with children in B&B who have been resident for more than the statutory limit of 6 weeks on 31 March 2024 increased by 80% compared to the same time last year.

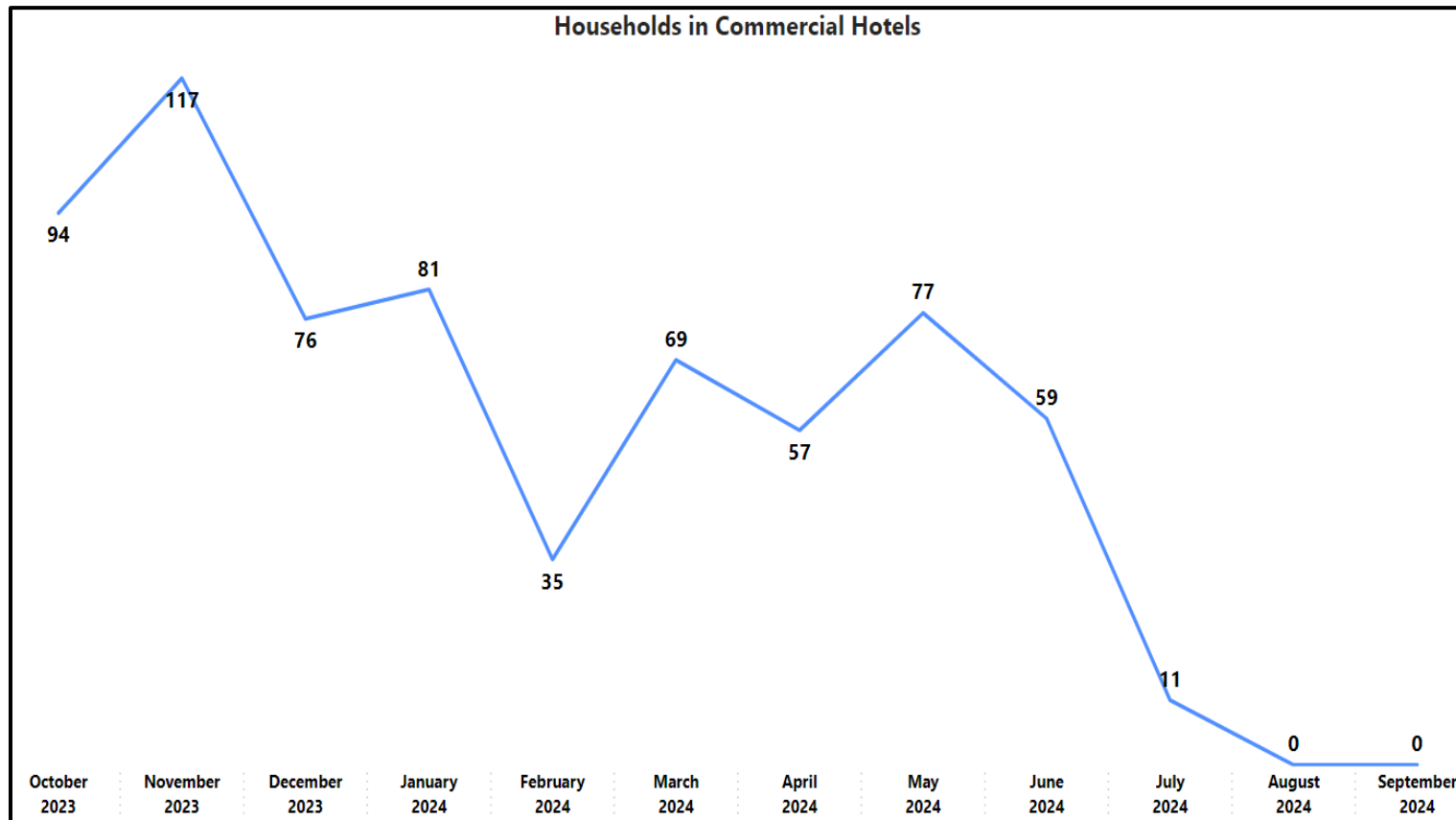
This increase is also seen in Croydon but there has been significant reduction shown by the downward trend seen in the graph. Families are supported to move into more suitable, settled housing solutions.



Good progress has been made in this area as a number of families have been moved into one accommodation unit despite the shortage of affordable large sized accommodation.

In June 2024, there were 206 households living separately. This number has reduced to 100 households to date.

This is a positive indicator of the service efforts to reunite split households or prevent them from being separated in the first place. The decision to place families in separate units is not taken lightly and is very carefully considered.



The service has reduced its reliance on commercial hotels like Travel Lodge over the past year. Since the end of July 2024, no households have been placed or living in commercial hotels.

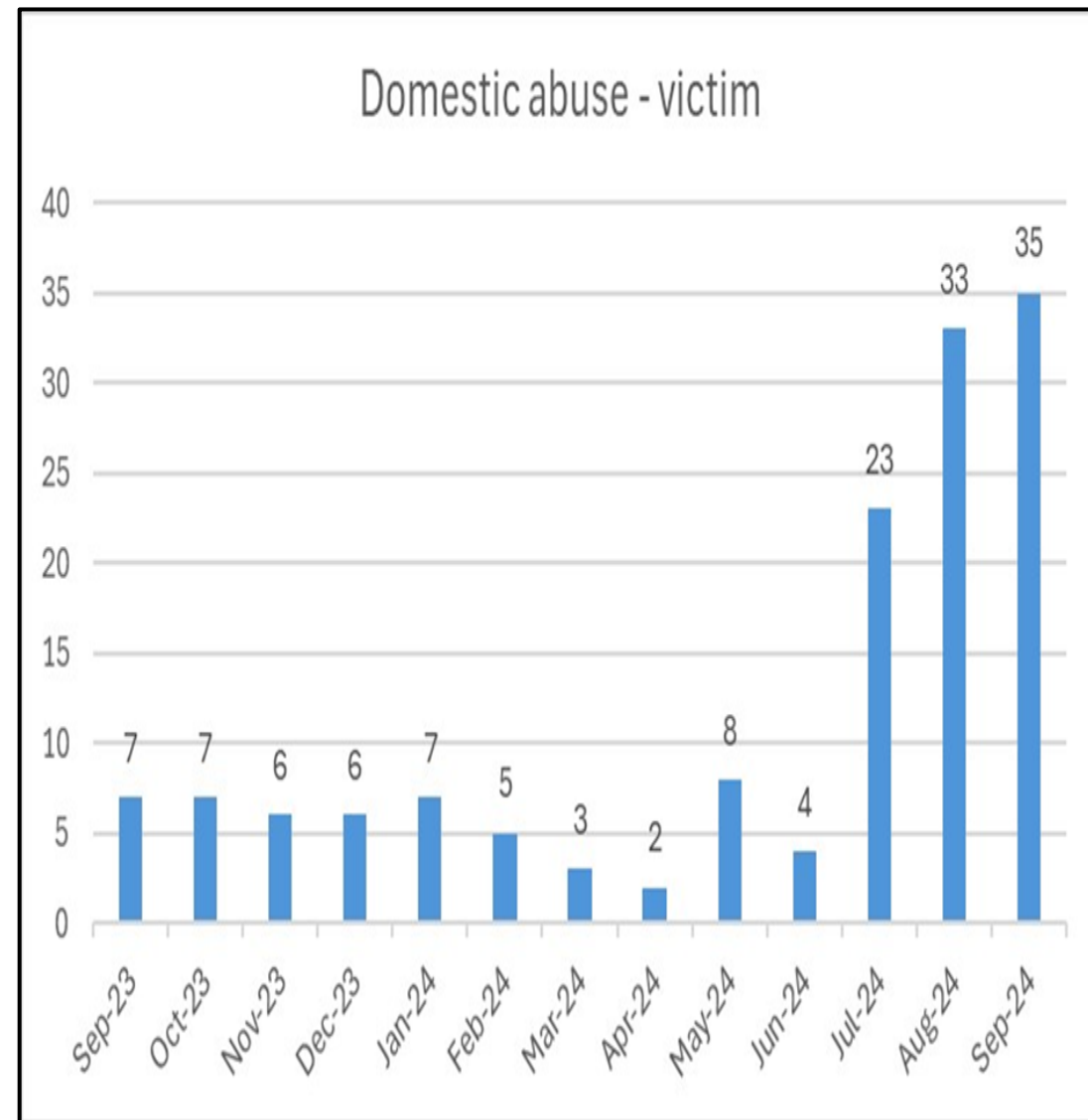
Section 4 – Supporting victims of domestic abuse

The service works collaboratively with the Family Justice Service (FJS) to support victims of domestic abuse who require housing assistance.

From the period between 1 September 2023 and 30 September 2024, FJS received 1499 unique referrals. Of those, 956 were individuals from Croydon. This means, that about 37% of the applicants who were referred to FJS were from other local authorities.

For the same period, 165 homelessness applications were made to the Council by residents fleeing domestic abuse. This includes those referred by FJS and direct approaches. The increase in numbers from July 2024 reflects a change in working practice between the Council and FJS as all applications for housing assistance are now recorded.

The service offers a personalised and holistic approach which includes assessing the needs of applicants and exploring suitable housing options such as refuge, private sector renting, and or temporary accommodation.

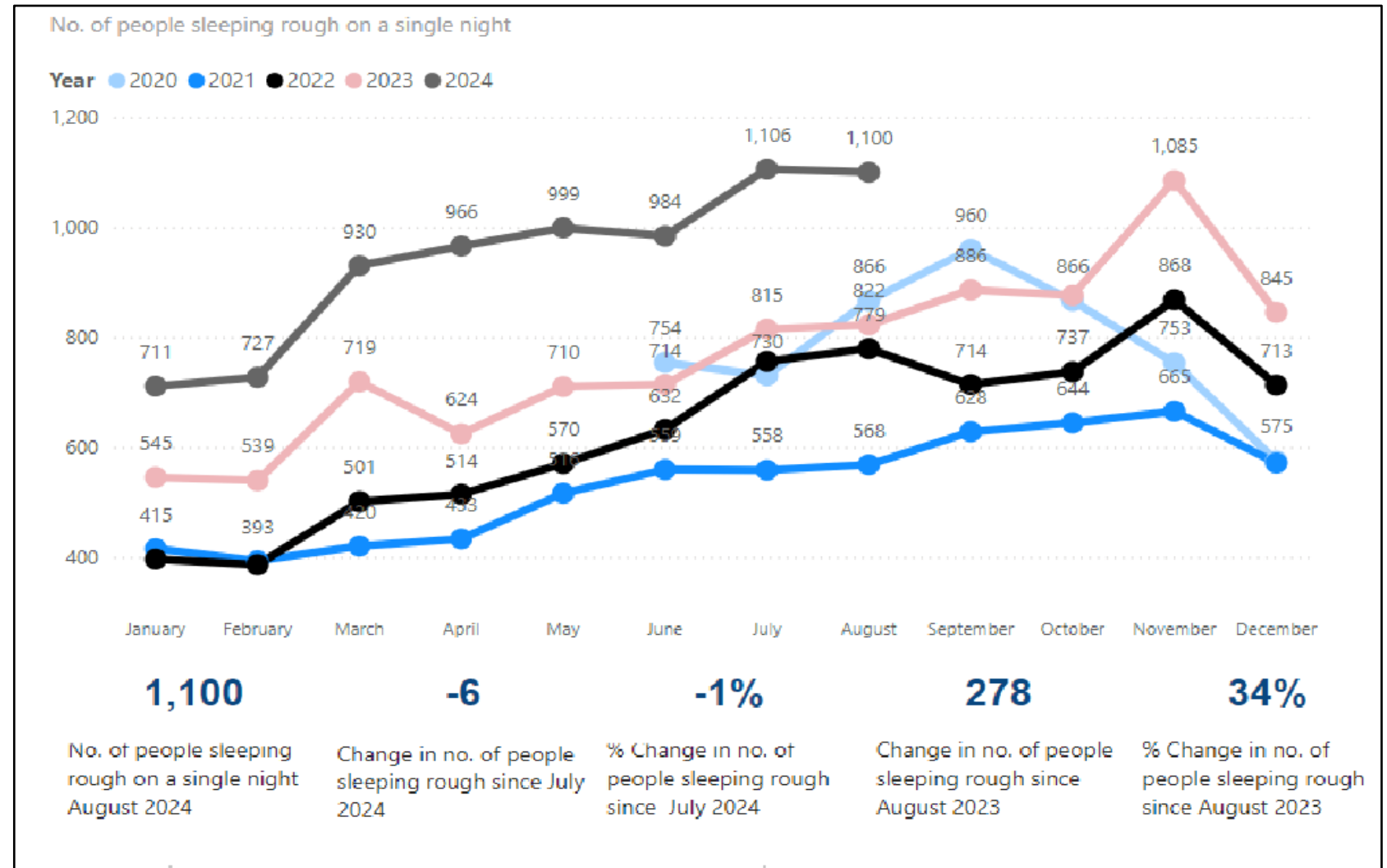


Section 5 – Tackling rough sleeping

National context

Nationally, the number of people who are sleeping rough has been increasing year on year as shown.

The graph also shows more than 1000 people were seen sleeping rough on a single night over the last two months.



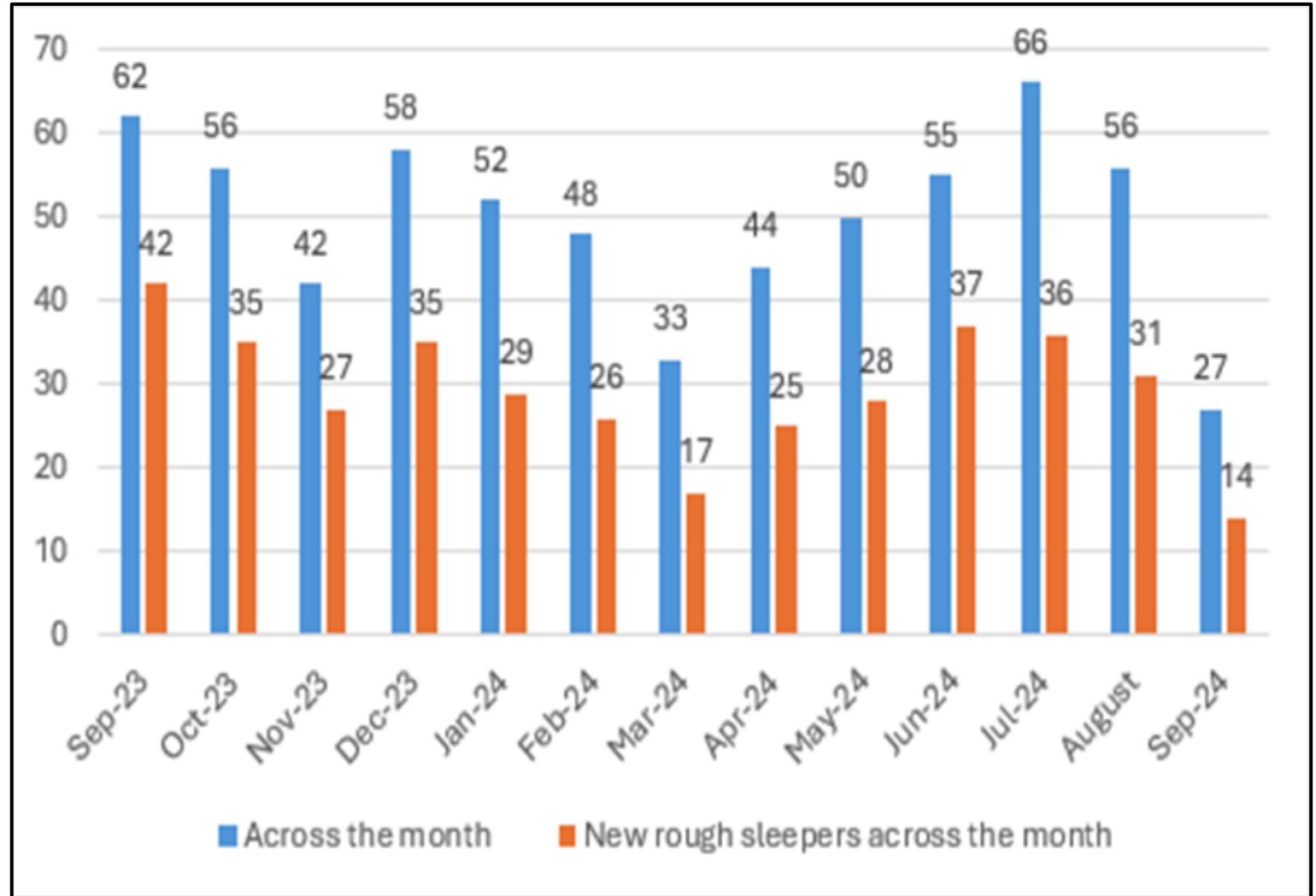
Monthly total – including new rough sleepers

Croydon picture

This chart shows the number of people sleeping rough each month, of which total numbers who are new to rough sleeping.

Croydon consistently see an average 30 people every month new to the street, which is approx. 70% all rough sleepers each month.

Work is being done to understand the cause and who the individuals are to address this increasing trend in rough sleeping.



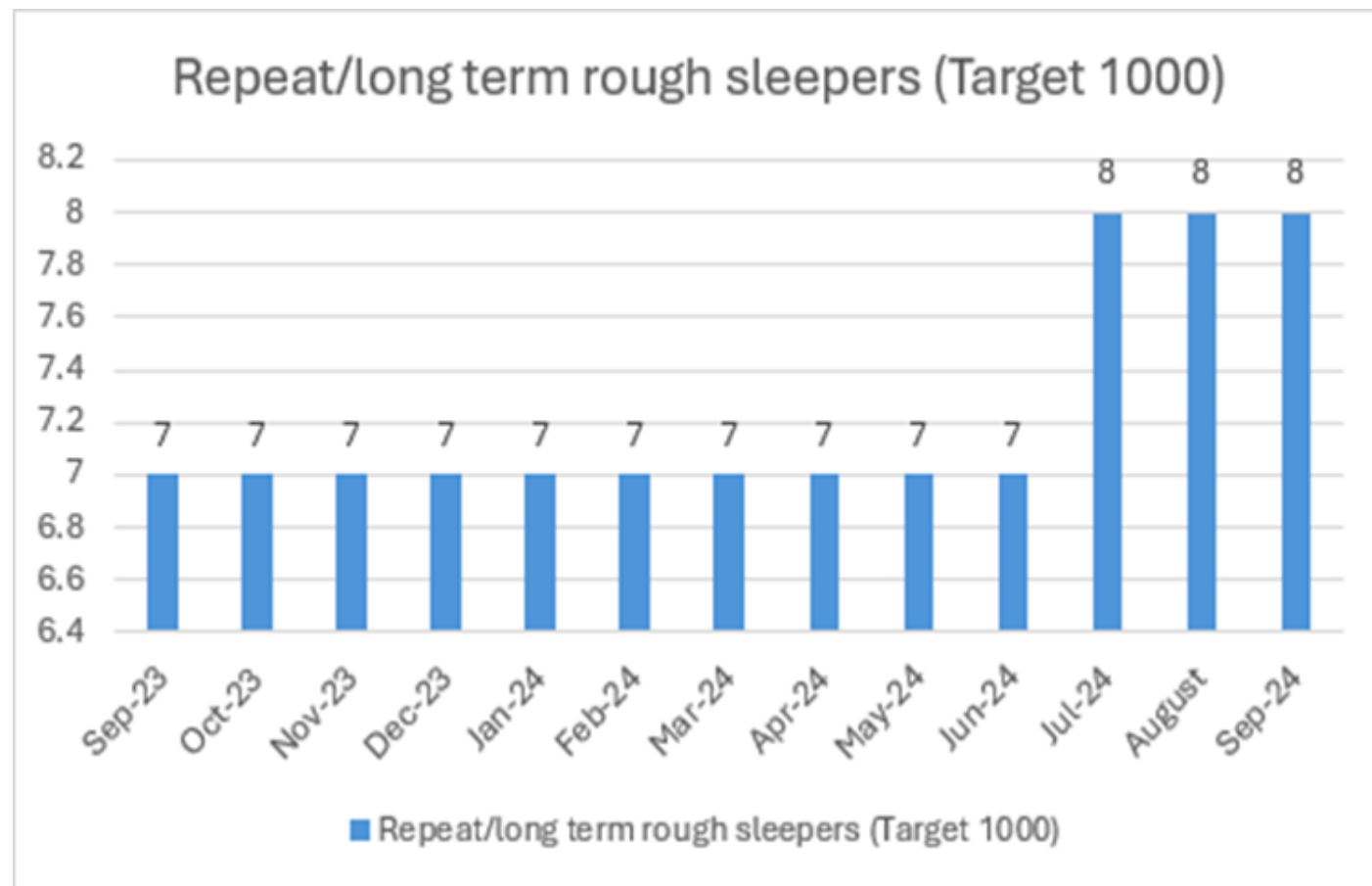
T1000 – Long Term Rough Sleepers in Croydon

Croydon picture – entrenched rough sleeping

This chart shows the number of long-term or repeated episodes of sleeping rough. These rough sleepers often have complex unmet needs.

From September 2023 to September 2024, the number of entrenched rough sleepers increased by 1.

50% (4) have accommodation but keep returning to the street. There is ongoing joint working with other partners including public health to support those accommodated and get the other 4 to engage with services. This continues to be a challenge.



2024- 25 Croydon Initiatives Commissioned for rough sleeping:

- A street outreach service–Housing Led Outreach and Casework service
- A 28 day assessment hub- Direct off the street rapid assessment
- Emergency Accommodation– Dedicated accommodation for rough sleepers including a guesthouse for vulnerable female rough sleepers
- A dedicated Housing First service for RoughSleepers – focusing on entrenched rough sleepers
- A personalisation and access to recruitment programme
- A PRS procurement service for rough sleepers– Private rented accommodation
- A Severe Weather Protocol Programme of emergency beds–
- The Following Dedicated Specialist officers:-
 - Rough Sleeper Coordinator
 - Complex Needs Navigator
 - Project Delivery Officer
 - Dedicated Anti-social Behaviour Officer
 - Dedicated Housing Needs Officer

Section 6 - Transformation Projects

(a) Availability and quality of data

Issue - Lack of capability of the council's housing systems meant that a number of systems and spreadsheets were used to record data which made it difficult to get an accurate picture of Croydon's end to end homelessness and temporary accommodation demand and to have full confidence in the data being captured.

Response

- The successful implementation of the NEC Housing system since June 2023 has been a significant operation and is integral to the new ways of working. Data has been cleansed, allowing for the full adoption of the system.
- The housing application process is now fully automated, enabling the storage of all data in one place, which is accessible to appropriate staff to support service provision.
- As part of the data cleansing work, a number of households living in temporary accommodation without corresponding rent accounts were identified. This meant that rent had not been charged, and therefore no income was being collected. Working with the Housing Benefit Team, the missing rent accounts were set up, and housing benefit claims were reassessed, resulting in the collection of an additional £4.5m in 2023/24 through eligible Housing Benefit. Controls are now in place to ensure rent accounts are set up from day one.
- A suite of new live PowerBI reports has been introduced, allowing officers and managers across the service to monitor and manage performance across the division more effectively. KPIs have been developed based on more reliable baseline data.

As a result of these data improvements, we have been able to submit publishable data to central government (Homelessness case level information (H-CLIC)) for the first time since 2022.

Section 6 -Transformation Projects

(b) Supported housing review

Issue – Supported Housing contracts required review

Response

Homeless Link (a national homeless charity) was appointed to carry out a full review of existing services and to support the service to retender new contracts informed by the outcome of the review.

This service is for care experienced young adults; rough sleepers; single homeless people with support needs and victims of domestic abuse

Aims: Reduce overall costs, agree a cross-departmental vision and specification, improve provision, strengthen contract monitoring, maximise use of housing benefit exempt supported housing, co-design services with service users and partners.

Next steps:

- Complete cross departmental consultation
- Consult Service users
- Market warming
- Agree specification
- Commence Procurement
- Evaluate Bids
- Award Contracts

Section 6 - Transformation Projects:

(c) Approved Landlord List – improving quality of nightly paid temporary accommodation

Issue - About 45% of the temporary accommodation portfolio is acquired on a nightly paid basis from over 60 suppliers who provide daily email availability of vacancies and officers negotiate rates on each unit of accommodation. There was high expenditure on this portfolio without formal contractual arrangements in place with the providers (non-compliance with procurement regulations) and a lack of contract management.

Response

An Approved Landlord List (ALL) has been implemented and existing and new suppliers are being onboard.

- Robust contracts with approved landlords, clearly outlining the Council's requirements and the obligations of the landlords.
- Full risk management procedures, including insurance, health and safety compliance e.g. gas certificates etc. are in place:
- Performance measures will be regularly reviewed, with documented feedback provided as necessary.
- A transparent method for displaying availability and accommodation costs to achieve best value.

A new IT system, ADAM, has been procured and implemented to manage the application process, property rentals, and contract management of approved landlords. ADAM is now being used by more London councils as boroughs have to use and manage more nightly paid temporary accommodation.

Section 6 –Transformation projects

(d)Temporary accommodation occupancy checks

Issue – there was limited contact with households in temporary accommodation (TA).Over 500 households have been in TA for more than 5 years.

Response:

Occupancy checks have been undertaken with the aim of ensuring the households allocated the properties are still living there, identify other issues e.g. disrepair, welfare checks, safeguarding etc. and ensure the residents have the support that they need.

Outcomes

- Occupancy checks completed to 3200 properties and 2,840 (89%) tenancies confirmed with no issues.
- 97 properties not occupied by the households allocated the property – action is being taken to recover the properties.
- 72 properties where disrepair concerns including damp and mould – action is being taken with the provider.
- 28 Safeguarding concerns raised which has been referred to the relevant services
- 163 properties where further enquiries are being made to establish occupancy.

Section 6 -Transformation Projects

(e) Delivering the Council's joint Housing and Children protocol for care experienced young adults (CEYA)

Issue – CEYA placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation for year as the only housing option.

Response:

- A joint Housing and Children's Social Services protocol was approved by Cabinet in June 2023 intended to deliver upon the Government's and the Council's expectation that a stronger safety net is provided for CEYA in housing need.
- For CEYA in temporary accommodation, Joint Housing and Children Service Panel is in place to review their housing and support needs and identify the right housing pathway to live independently e.g. supported housing, social housing or private rented sector.
- There is a Homelessness Officer based in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) team to facilitate & promote joint working between Housing and Children Social Services. The officer facilitates joint assessments of 16/17 year old where a corporate decision can then be made on the support given to this highly vulnerable age group
- As a part of the Allocation Scheme review subject to consultation, we are proposing to:
 - Award a higher housing priority for CEYA for allocation of social housing.
 - Use the Annual Lettings Plan to ensure we meet commitments to rehouse agreed numbers of CEYA.

Next Steps.....

- Continued review of Demand and Supply Pressures:
- National and London/Croydon Context
- Implications on resourcing and accommodation supply (including private sector housing)