

Lewisham's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-26

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Introduction

Our overarching vision is that is that everyone has a safe, secure and genuinely affordable home. For this to be a reality, we must work towards ensuring that no one stays homeless in Lewisham.

The Housing Strategy 2020–26 outlines five key priorities for Lewisham. One of these priorities is ‘preventing homelessness and meeting housing need’ which outlines our overarching strategic approach to preventing homelessness.

This homelessness and rough sleeping strategy underpins our Housing Strategy. It provides more detail on how we will prevent homelessness and rough sleeping. It outlines how we, with our partners, will work with and support those who are at risk of, or experiencing homelessness.

The updated strategy is a response to a period of unprecedented change. Since the publication of the last strategy, we have transformed how we deliver many of our services for homeless households and people sleeping rough in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Whilst we have recovered from many of the immediate challenges presented by Covid, we now face many new challenges. At the time of this strategy being launched, residents are finding it harder than ever to meet rising living costs, including higher rents, mortgage payments and cost of other living essentials. With much uncertainty still remaining around the longer-term impacts of the economic downturn, it is crucial that public services are prepared to support residents.

The review of our homelessness strategy set out to assess whether the existing priorities were still relevant or required updating to reflect our residents current needs. The strategy review has been based on evidence and data which highlighted the main causes of homelessness, as well as input from a wide range of our key stakeholders and partners who have a valued stake and interest in issues relating to homelessness in Lewisham. Overall, feedback strongly supported the existing priorities.

Lewisham’s Strategic Vision

Lewisham’s strategic vision will guide all our work with partners to prevent homelessness and meeting housing need. Over the next three years we will:

- Prevent homelessness by supporting more households to remain in their homes or helping them to find alternative accommodation
- Where homelessness does occur, ensure there is a supply of suitable accommodation for eligible households to move into
- Deliver an ongoing reduction in the number of people sleeping rough and ensure that where it does occur it is rare, brief and non-recurrent.
- Improve pathways and partnerships internally and external with public authorities and other partner agencies to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

The full detail on the actions and initiatives that will deliver this vision and its objectives are set out under each section.

Summary of homelessness in Lewisham

Homelessness has increased during the last ten years and remains high, the private rented sector (PRS) has become increasingly unaffordable and there are not enough social homes to meet the demand for them.

Whilst there have not been significant changes to the drivers of homelessness in Lewisham, the number of people seeking assistance from the council is increasing, with 3,723 households approaching the council for homelessness assistance in 2021/22. This is an increase of 31% since the publication of the current version of the strategy in 2020.

People approaching the Council for assistance due to exclusion from 'family and friends' continues to constitute the major cause of homelessness, rising from 32% of all acceptances in 2019/20 to 37% in 2021/22. There has also been a national increase in the number of domestic violence and harassment cases reported leading to significantly higher levels of those fleeing their homes.

We know that there is sometimes mistrust of housing services, and people can sometimes feel that they are not listened to or that the support provided does not always meet expectations. More needs to be done to explain the pathway of a homeless application, how decisions are made and the reality of housing available in Lewisham. We also need to ensure we are engaging with and building trust with people throughout their contact with the service.

Both the economic downturn in the last year and changing housing market are contributing factors. In 2012, the council started building its own council homes again for the first time in a generation and it continues to push forward with an ambitious programme to provide new homes for our residents. However, huge funding cuts and a lack of the right powers and resources have meant that the number of social homes available is far below the need. Given Lewisham's lack of availability of social and council housing, and record waiting lists for accommodation, by far one

of the key tools that enables us to prevent homelessness is by supporting people to remain in their private rented sector properties or supporting applicants to find alternative PRS accommodation. However, with a continued increase in private landlords choosing to increase their rent in line with market prices, or choosing to leave the market altogether, the council and London more widely are experiencing a recent sharp drop in the supply of affordable accommodation.

The growing housing affordability crisis comes at a time when the financial pressures on low-income households in Lewisham have never been greater. While rents continue to soar at record rates in the capital, ongoing welfare reform means that housing benefits remain frozen at the same level they were at in 2020.

These changes have significantly impacted on our services ability to prevent homelessness from the private rented sector, and to move households out of temporary accommodation. Despite the council increasing the rate of prevention compared to pre-covid levels, the number of people in temporary accommodation has continued to increase to 2,700 in January 2023. Without an increase in genuinely affordable and decent housing across the private rented and social housing sectors in Lewisham, the reliance on temporary accommodation will continue to rise to unsustainable levels.

Rough sleeping is increasing too. After year-on-year reductions, the current housing outlooks has highlighted an increase in the number of people on our streets in the last year. More widely, new figures show a steep rise in the number of people sleeping rough across London. Of concern is the number of people sleeping rough for the first time is increasing. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the Councils response to tackling rough sleeping, and we set up a new Rough Sleepers Pathway and partnerships as a result.

This strategy is supports the delivery of the Lewisham Housing Strategy 2020-26 and reflects the vision of the service that everyone has a safe, secure and genuinely affordable home where they can live an independent and prosperous life.

This strategy also supports the Council to achieve its objectives set out in the Accommodation Procurement Strategy 2022-25. The Procurement Strategy set out how the council will Increase the supply of high-quality private rented accommodation, maintain a sufficient supply of cost-effective temporary accommodation and reduce the overall number of households in temporary accommodation.

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Priority 1 - Prevention

Homelessness prevention means providing people with the ways and means to address their housing and other needs to avoid homelessness.

Homelessness prevention refers to all types of activity including but not limited to:

- Housing advice – aimed at helping households to gain access to, or to retain private or social rented tenancies.
- Private renting access schemes – to help people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to access and sustain a tenancy in the private rented sector.
- Family mediation – help to reconcile relationship breakdown, often between parents and young people to prevent eviction from the parental home.
- Duty to refer - prison, hospital and other institution discharge arrangements to ensure people have a planned move into secure accommodation.

However, true prevention of homelessness is not simply a matter of managing to keep those at serious risk from losing their homes. The Homelessness Reduction Act defines someone at risk if their homelessness is likely to occur in the next 56 days, but we know we need to intervene even earlier to make sure our residents are getting help at the right time, and to prevent peoples housing issues arising in the first place. Timely access to advice, benefits, support to access employment and training, and strategies to deal with debt are all factors that can influence whether someone becomes homeless or not.

We will work with partners in adults and health, children and young people, the criminal justice system the voluntary sector and others to ensure that we are aware of cases in advance and able to secure support to avoid individuals becoming homeless.

What we have achieved so far:-

- Providing a face to face service in the community through various teams including the Rough Sleeping Team, Tenancy

Management & Resettlement Officers, Health & Housing Coordinator and Housing Enforcement & Intelligence team. We are also giving advice about housing through collation arrangements such as at the 999 Club.

- Encouraging partners to support us in preventing homelessness through raising awareness about the Duty to Refer, for which we have developed a specific online form where partners/ individuals can tell us about someone who could be homeless. We have received 648 referrals since 2019.
- Promote multi-agency working and discharge planning for patients leaving Lewisham Hospital with no accommodation, through the Health and Housing Coordinator.
- Continue to use our Rogue Landlord Team to intervene when tenants are threatened with unlawful or retaliatory eviction.
- Using data more effectively to spot groups at risk of homelessness, including fully embedding a new IT system to help improve our insight.
- Upskilling staff to support people at risk of homelessness to stay where they are, such as training officers to support residents to complete defence forms.
- Preventing homelessness from the private rented sector by providing financial support to people in rent arrears, working closely with the Council's Housing Benefit to access Discretionary Housing Payment and partnering with the Lewisham Credit Union to secure rent deposits/one off payments.
- Giving advice about housing through the newly created Housing Advice and Early Intervention Team, which supports residents to get timely information and advice before they become homeless.

Priority 1 – Prevention: Our goals

A high quality, efficient prevention service. We will achieve this by:

- Improving information on the Lewisham Council website on tenant rights and homelessness prevention support available in Lewisham
- Produce leaflets, videos and other information materials that can be used by partner organisations to inform residents who are at risk of homelessness of help and support available to prevent homelessness
- Increasing access to information and advice about homelessness prevention including more face to face contact with households at risk of homelessness
- Creating a home visiting function to work closely and support households at risk of eviction from family and friends

A higher proportion of homeless prevention outcomes. We will achieve this by:

- Promoting the work of the 'cost of living support hub' to manage the impacts of the cost of living crisis on homelessness in borough
- Continuing to use our powers to intervene when tenants are threatened with unlawful or retaliatory eviction
- Running awareness sessions about preventing homelessness in schools to educate young people about their housing options
- Exploring opportunities to co-locate with other services where housing advice can be provided at an earlier opportunity
- Ensuring assistance with accessing benefits, Discretionary Housing Payments, access to employment and skills training or financial management skills is available
- Continuing to ensure partner agencies meet their duty to refer under the Homelessness Reduction Act

Key measures of success:

- Increase in the rate of homelessness preventions
- Reduction in the number of people entering temporary accommodation
- Increase in referrals received under the Duty to Refer

Priority 2 – Accessing Accommodation

Homelessness in Lewisham is exacerbated by the lack of supply of suitable and affordable homes that our residents can access.

In 2012, the council started building its own council homes again for the first time in a generation and it continues to push forward with an ambitious programme to provide new homes for our residents. However, huge funding cuts and a lack of the right powers and resources have meant that the number of social homes available is far below the need.

We know that prolonged periods in temporary accommodation can have a detrimental effect on outcomes for families and children. Supporting people to move out of temporary accommodation requires a focus on increasing the supply of affordable accommodation. Lewisham has recently published an Accommodation Procurement Strategy which sets out how we will achieve this. We will ensure there is alignment between these two strategies to minimise the amount of time that households spend in temporary accommodation.

We must also ensure that the accommodation available supports a range of households. Those fleeing abuse and violence are at particular risk of homelessness. Our aim is that the service can recognise abuse in all its forms and know how to support victims. This should include a widespread awareness and understanding of coercive control and its impact on survivors and children. We must also review the needs of young people, vulnerable adults and people with accessibility needs to ensure suitable accommodation and support is available for different needs.

The council commissions a range of floating and accommodation-based support services to provide homes and support to young people, people with mental health problems, ex-offenders, women escaping domestic abuse, people sleeping rough and vulnerable adults. We will continue to work with our social care, health and commissioned partners to deliver this.

What we have achieved so far

- Established new and bespoke teams, including the Accommodation Assessment & Lettings Team who support people who are homeless to access suitable and affordable accommodation, and the Tenancy Management & Resettlement Team who supports people to sustain their temporary accommodation and move on into settled accommodation either in the private rented sector or into a social housing tenancy.
- Published a new Accommodation Procurement Strategy, setting out how we will ensure we have a sufficient supply of suitable, high quality temporary and private rented sector accommodation.
- Making the best use of capital funding to acquire new stock, or convert underutilised council-owned stock into temporary accommodation such as the acquisition of Sydney Arms.
- Utilise over 1,000 units of supported housing for vulnerable people including single adults, people with mental health needs, those sleeping rough and young people.
- Implementing the new Housing Allocations Policy which gives a higher priority for social housing to homeless households with additional needs.
- Supporting young people and care leavers to access accommodation, including developing a young person's joint working protocol, and supporting people leaving care to access social housing.
- Introducing new provision for people fleeing domestic abuse, including a new re-housing pathway developed for the local refuge.

Priority 2 – Accessing Accommodation: Our goals

Shorter stays in temporary accommodation. We will achieve this by:

- Ensuring that the housing service remains in contact with households during their stay in temporary accommodation.
- Implementing the new Accommodation Procurement Strategy to increase supply
- Developing an Empty Homes Strategy to help bring empty properties back into use for homeless households
- Engaging with tenants under-occupying Council homes, to ensure that we are making the most effective use of our housing stock
- Reviewing the impacts of the new 'Band 2 - Homeless with additional need' priority in the Housing Allocations Scheme
- Implement the Local Lettings Plan to identify new developments in the borough

Homes meet the needs of a range of Lewisham residents. We will achieve this by:

- Adopting and implementing use of the daily vacancy list for refuges for victims of domestic abuse
- Deliver domestic abuse training to staff across the Housing Service
- Review our Young Persons Joint Working Protocol to ensure it meets the needs of young people fleeing violence
- Reviewing arrangements for people fleeing social housing due to domestic abuse
- Implement the Accommodation for Ex-Offenders programme to increase the number of ex-offenders accessing accommodation
- Review the councils action plan on supported exempt accommodation

Key measures of success:

- Increase in housing supply figures
- Social housing allocations under new Band 2 priority for homeless households with additional need
- Reduction in the number of households in temporary accommodation
- Reduction in the length of stay in temporary accommodation
- Reduction in temporary accommodation expenditure

Priority 3 – Rough Sleeping

One rough sleeper on the streets of Lewisham is one too many. Lewisham has seen a reduction in the number of people sleeping rough on a single night year-on-year since 2019. Despite the progress made in Lewisham recent years, new figures show an increasing trend in the number of people sleeping rough across the capital, including Lewisham. It is crucial that we do not become complacent, and instead build on recent success to develop sustainable pathways out of rough sleeping.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on rough sleeping and accelerated the Council's response to tackling rough sleeping. Since then, we have established a Rough Sleeping Pathway and continue to commission a wide range of other accommodation and floating support services to reduce rough sleeping.

However, challenges remain. People sleeping rough often have worse physical and mental health than the general population, as well as worse access to health services. Through our Covid response we adopted a greater health centred approach to rough sleeping, however we know there is a smaller group of people sleeping rough with highly complex personal situations and support needs, such as substance misuse and mental or physical health needs. This can mean existing provision is not always suitable and cause them to stay on the streets for longer. People can also find themselves in this situation because their immigration status means they have No Recourse of Public Funds, restricting the services that would have kept many off the streets. We will work closely with our health partners to improve access to healthcare for people experiencing homelessness.

The government recently published its new Rough Sleeping Strategy, setting out for the first time a clear definition of what the government means by ending rough sleeping, which is that it is prevented wherever possible, and where it does occur it is rare, brief and non-recurrent. We will implement this definition in Lewisham.

What we have achieved so far

- Secured £2.4m Rough Sleeping Initiative Funding and £450,000 in Rough Sleeping Drug and Alcohol Grant Funding to continue delivering a range of services which support people sleeping rough.
- Commission supported housing services offering 24 hour, medium and low support options which can be used to provide short – medium term accommodation options to alleviate rough sleeping
- Offer people sleeping rough a range of move-on options, including social housing, supported housing and accommodation in the Private Rented Sector. Last year, the Rough Sleeping Pathway achieved positive move-on outcomes for 68 people. We have also commissioned a floating support service for a capacity of 50 former rough sleepers, to help people sustain their tenancies.
- Secured £212,000 grant funding to provide access to private rented sector tenancies for ex-offenders who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless
- Working with other local authorities to tackle rough sleeping, including a new sub-regional outreach service with Greenwich, Lewisham, Bexley and Bromley councils.
- Helped to regularise the immigration status of people sleeping rough where appropriate, such as helping obtain settled status. Of the 14 people with eligibility restrictions who were supported through Everyone-In, 6 have been supported into eligibility in the last year.
- Bring together a Rough Sleeping Strategic Group including partners from Community Services and Public Health, to oversee our rough sleeping work.
- Working with health partners to ensure that we continue to meet the varied needs of rough sleepers.

Priority 3 – Rough Sleeping: Our goals

Deliver an ongoing reduction in the number of people sleeping rough. We will achieve this by:

- Supporting Rough Sleepers with unclear immigration status to access available support and opportunities to find a sustainable route away from the street
- Establish reciprocal arrangements with other boroughs for female clients at risk
- Bid for funding opportunities to increase provision for repeat, long term rough sleepers
- Strengthen joint working with mental health services
- Review our female-specific provision for women sleeping rough with complex needs

Improve insights into why people sleep rough in Lewisham. We will achieve this by:

- Conducting a review into cases of new rough sleeping
- Conduct a review of flow between boroughs with neighbouring local authorities
- Contribute to Strategic Insights Tool for Rough Sleeping (SITRS) led by London Councils

Key measures of success:

- Reduction in the number of people sleeping rough
- Reduction in the incidents of repeat rough sleeping
- Reduction in the number of people living on the streets
- Increase access to support services

Priority 4 – Partnership working

Homelessness and rough sleeping is not simply a housing issue. Homelessness prevention needs to be a priority for all public services.

People facing homelessness experience a combination of problems and will require access to a range of support services. Recognising the different and often intersecting needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness must be acknowledged to ensure there is effective support.

The homelessness journey is full of transition points, from homelessness to being housed, from unemployment to employment, upon leaving hospital, care, prison or other provided accommodation. Planning for transitions and pathways between support services needs to be undertaken in partnership. This requires coordination of services, policies, and processes working together to find new approaches that maximise resources and provide the most effective support for people.

Our strategy will ensure we are engaged with partners who can contribute to supporting Lewisham residents threatened with or experiencing homelessness.

What we have achieved so far:

- Regularly meet with key partners such as the Registered Provider Partnership, the Rough Sleeping Strategic Group and the Homelessness Forum.
- Attend a range of key multi-agency groups such as the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference, Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements and Violence Against Women and Girls Board.
- Established co-located services with the 999 club to provide face to face housing support and advice.
- Working with Capital Letters to secure the right homes for households in need.

- Collaborating with other local authorities to guarantee the quality of homes that are procured, including adhering to the Inter-Borough Accommodation Agreement (IBAA) and 'Setting the Standard' scheme, ensuring an expected rate, quality and management of certain types of nightly paid and private rented sector accommodation.
- Established new ways of working with children's social care, including the implementation of a joint working protocol for young homeless people.
- Developing future funding bids and strategies in collaboration with council stakeholders, including the Rough Sleeping Initiative and Accommodation Procurement Strategy.
- Working with Asset Management and other partners to identify opportunities for existing council or community assets to be repurposed for homeless households.

Priority 4 – Partnership Working: Our goals

Establish new ways of working across partnerships to collectively reduce the risk of homelessness for families and individuals at risk. We will achieve this by:

- Co-Producing a protocol and pathway for vulnerable adults
- Ensure housing involvement and representation on strategic and operational joint working groups across the Council and with partner organisations
- Improve the availability of information on the range of services available in Lewisham
- Working with partners to develop joint bids for funding where relevant
- Delivering annual homelessness conferences to be attended by representatives of internal and external partners in the borough
- Attending the Homelessness forum to strengthen links between the housing needs service and partner organisations
- Working with partners across the council towards achieving the Domestic Abuse Housing Accreditation
- Work with partners to explore schemes that prevent someone affected by domestic violence from becoming homeless.

Key measures of success:

- Cross-sector buy-in to homelessness prevention
- Representation and attendance from a wide range of partners
- Agreed joint working protocols for vulnerable adults approved by partner organisations