

Homelessness Strategy

2019–2024

Draft for consultation



City of Westminster

City
for
All



Foreword

Having a place to call home is one of the most basic human necessities, and yet in Westminster we face some of the toughest challenges in preventing homelessness. Westminster City Council has ambitious goals and priorities as a 'City for All', which requires supporting some of our most vulnerable residents, especially those who are at risk of or in a state of homelessness.

To address current and future challenges that too many of our residents face, we have developed a new draft homelessness strategy. This emphasises early intervention through personalised help and assistance in a much more holistic way.

In this strategy, we not only set out how our housing services will change to meet these challenges, but also how the whole council will be involved. This ranges from setting ambitious new targets to increase the supply of affordable housing to ensuring all our front-line services identify those at risk of homelessness - and refer them for support at the earliest opportunity.

This need for a change goes beyond the council however and requires the involvement of communities, key stakeholders and organisations across Westminster that are well placed to help prevent homelessness. This draft strategy proposes new ways of working together and I would like to use it to help break down some of the barriers that we know exist and to be clearer about what our council services can offer.

The publication of this draft strategy is an exciting opportunity to be bold and innovative by working together to better prevent and respond to homelessness. I very much hope you will give us your views on the proposals.

Andrew Smith

Councillor Andrew Smith,
Cabinet Member for Housing Services

About this strategy

Becoming homeless is devastating for people and families and it can have long lasting impacts on the health and wellbeing of those affected. The council already does much to prevent and to respond to homelessness. Last year we spent around £23 million on homelessness and rough sleeping services and gave advice to nearly 4,800 people. We also provide temporary accommodation for more than 2,700 households.

This draft strategy proposes areas where we want to do things differently to prevent and respond to homelessness. To develop these ideas, a full review of homelessness in Westminster was carried out which looked at all our services, those affected by homelessness, its causes and the resources dedicated to it. Officers from across the council have contributed to the review and this draft strategy. Some of the findings of the review are included in this strategy and it can be found in full at: westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies

The purpose of this draft strategy is to set out a strategy for:

- Preventing homelessness in Westminster.
- Securing that sufficient accommodation is and will be available for people in Westminster who are or may become homeless.
- Securing the satisfactory provision of support for people in Westminster who are or may become homeless or who have been homeless and need support to prevent them becoming homeless again.

A key focus in preventing homelessness is to reduce rough sleeping. Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness in Westminster and those affected are some of the most vulnerable in society. The council's strategy for reducing rough sleeping is contained in its Rough Sleeping Strategy 2017 – 2022, which it adopted in 2017. Because the causes of rough sleeping are different and it requires a very different response to other forms of homelessness, it is not covered further in this strategy. The Rough Sleeping Strategy can be found at: westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies

Tell us what you think

We would very much like to hear your views by **Wednesday 11th September 2019** on our proposals to help us complete our final strategy and action plan. Details on how to respond are on page 29.

Our vision: where we want to be

We want Westminster to be a city where our most vulnerable residents get the help they need when they need it, not when it is too late.

We want a new relationship with our community, as they too can play a role in helping to address homelessness, making sure everyone knows about our services and what they offer.

Our relationship with those who are homeless needs to be different, so we are not seen to be a council that can't help, but one that works with people and families to find solutions. We want a better and more collaborative relationship with other organisations which help homeless households, not one which is 'us' and 'them'.

We want Westminster to be a 'City for All' and our ambitious affordable housing programme will deliver at least 1,850 new homes by 2023. While we are doing everything we can to increase affordable housing supply in Westminster, we know that it will never meet demand and so we'll strive to also find other sustainable options for homeless people so they don't live in limbo for years in temporary accommodation.

All this requires change to the way we work and world-class services which are trusted, easy to use, compassionate, frank and honest.

This strategy is based around a ten point plan which lays out how Westminster City Council will work towards this vision.

Our ten point plan in summary

We'll do more to prevent homelessness by proactively making residents, communities and organisations aware of the help and support on offer, rather than just waiting for people to approach us. Through training and identifying trusted people living in areas where there is more likely to be homelessness, we'll work towards the community also having a role in preventing it.

Tackling the underlying causes of homelessness head-on is key and needs the whole council involved – including developing the most ambitious programme of affordable housing in a generation, better using data to identify those at risk or offering practical, bespoke support to our residents, including help finding work. We'll also talk to Government about how the benefit system can work better in central London.

We know our housing services can sometimes be difficult to understand and we'll strive to make them more transparent and accountable by setting up new Partnership Boards and by asking users of our services for their feedback. This will also involve better explaining the realities we face, including why every homeless household can't be offered a social home and why some accommodation offered is outside Westminster. We'll be up-front with our residents about the help we can provide and also about their role in preventing homelessness.

We'll work towards Westminster becoming a leader in homelessness prevention and play a key role in shaping the national debate on homelessness. We believe that by working together, in partnership with Government and other local authorities, we can share best practice and identify innovative methods to better serve our residents and support them to reach their potential.

Our ten point plan in summary continued

Preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place:

1. Reach more people at risk of homelessness at an earlier stage, by building a network of prevention and support, working with partners and communities.
2. Make our services more visible through targeted information campaigns.
3. Proactively offer personalised support to those at risk of homelessness where possible, from helping them negotiate with their landlord to offering employment and skills training so they can increase their income.
4. Do more to identify and address the main causes of homelessness in Westminster and also the wider causes, through research and outreach.

Improving our services and response when people become homeless:

5. Make our housing services more transparent, accountable and accessible.
6. Better communicate what we can and can't offer.
7. Ensure a range of accommodation is available for the homeless households that we have a housing duty towards, when homelessness cannot be prevented.
8. Review how people access supported housing and ensure our supported housing meets needs, now, and in the future.

Meeting the challenges ahead and having a homelessness system fit for the future:

9. Become a leader in the field of homelessness prevention proposing solutions and bringing key decision makers together to share information and ideas.
10. Make the case for homelessness services and prevention work to be fully funded and lead the discussion with Government and others on how the welfare system can work better for low income residents in central London, where the cost of living continues to increase beyond many people's means.

The ten point plan in more detail

Preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place



1.

Reach more people at risk of homelessness at an earlier stage, by building a network of prevention and support, working with partners and communities.

We will do this by:

- **Developing a 'Homelessness Prevention Charter'** with community groups, registered providers and others asking them to give a commitment to make people aware of our homelessness services and to have a role in homelessness prevention themselves.
- **Holding events in the community and offering a rolling programme of training to resident, faith and community groups about homelessness and our services**
The aim is to explain what our services can offer so people will approach them at an earlier stage and to explore how we can all work together to prevent homelessness. The events and training will firstly be in areas where there are higher levels of homelessness, and with groups that evidence shows are more at risk of it, or that don't generally use council services. These will then be rolled out more widely.
- **Recruiting 'Community Champions'** so that there are people with housing and homelessness knowledge in the community, who can also offer support and information. These 'Community Champions' could encourage households to approach the council earlier, rather than at crisis point or give support themselves.
- **Building referral routes to our services, for those working with people at risk of homelessness**, going beyond those organisations there is a statutory duty to work with.

2.

Make our services more visible by targeted information campaigns.

We will do this by:

- **Utilising local media and council-owned channels of communication to increase the visibility of our services.** We will target areas of Westminster where residents are most vulnerable to homelessness and reach out through all available channels, including newsletters sent by our housing services to residents on our estates and via social media and other channels.
- **Publicising success stories** to demonstrate how our services have helped people and by **improving the housing information on our website.**

3.

Proactively offer personalised support to those at risk of homelessness, where possible, from helping them negotiate with their landlord to offering employment and skills training so they can increase their income.

We will do this by:

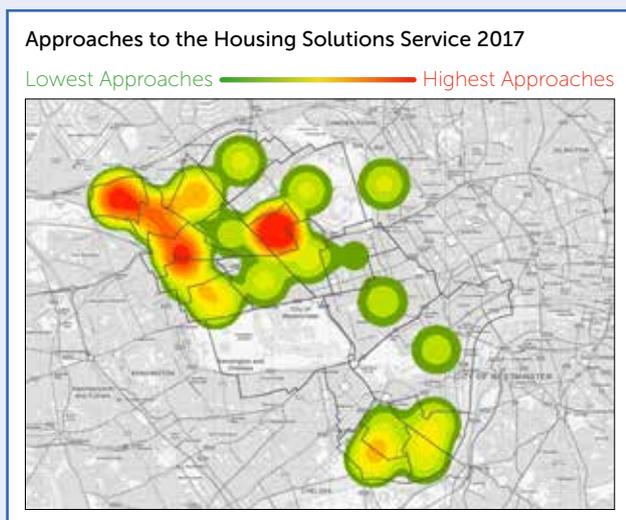
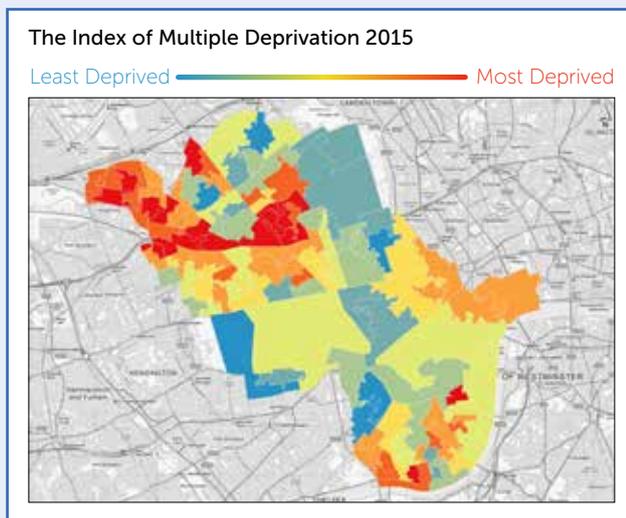
- **Looking for ways to continue and grow our Early Intervention Trailblazer Service in the longer term**, which works with people that are at risk of homelessness long before they would approach the council's Housing Solutions Service. This was funded by a Government grant and the council has committed to continue funding it until March 2020.
- **Using data and 'flags' to identify people at risk of homelessness and proactively offering them support**, rather than waiting for them to approach the council. A range of data could be used such as benefit data provided by the Department of Work and Pensions and that held by other parts of the council. As this work would be carried out by the Early Intervention Trailblazer Service, this proposal is subject to it being funded in the longer term. In Westminster, where rents are high, we know that someone can be at immediate risk of homelessness when they lose their job or have a reduction in benefit payments. We could use a range of available information to identify someone

that might be finding it hard to make ends meet, and then proactively offer help, which could be to increase their income or to find a job. We will also explore whether any non-financial risk flags could be used to indicate that housing advice is needed.

Why?

We know that certain groups and communities are more at risk of homelessness. In Westminster, women, households with children, lone parents and Black and Middle Eastern households have been more likely to approach our services, although the number of single people, particularly single men, approaching is now growing. Homeless households are also more likely to have low incomes, although they are often in work and 50% of households in temporary accommodation are in some form of employment.

Also, there is a clear relationship between areas of deprivation in Westminster and homelessness as shown below.



The impact of homelessness can be significant, for example research by Shelter in 2017 found that children’s behaviour can change when they are in temporary accommodation.¹ A 2017 report by the Local Government Association suggests there are high levels of mental health problems, self-harm, drug and alcohol use amongst young homeless people and that they are at risk of being drawn into a lifetime of being in the criminal justice, social care or health system.²

Although the council does much to prevent homelessness when people approach the Housing Solutions Service, more could be done to explain it and other available services and to encourage people at risk to seek help at an earlier stage. While we don’t yet know if this is a long term trend, even though greater numbers of single people are now approaching our service it is often at a late stage when it is too late to prevent homelessness.

Our aim is to reach every resident who is at risk of homelessness at the earliest possible opportunity and to support them to avoid, where possible, the stress and long-term impact of it. In law we need to give advice and support to people threatened with homelessness within the next 56 days, however our longer-term aim is for this to happen much earlier.

In 2016, the council was awarded funding from Government to run an Early Intervention Trailblazer Service, which includes research into homelessness and a team of officers based out in the community, to work with people at risk of it, at an early stage (before the 56 days required by the law). The evidence so far suggests that this ‘early prevention’ approach is working and 99% of the 220 people the team worked with did not go on to make a homelessness application.

1 england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/articles/as_schools_break_up_for_the_christmas_holidays_new_shelter_report_reveals_the_devastating_impact_of_homelessness_in_the_classroom
2 local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/22.7%20HEALTH%20AND%20HOMELESSNESS_v08_WEB_0.PDF

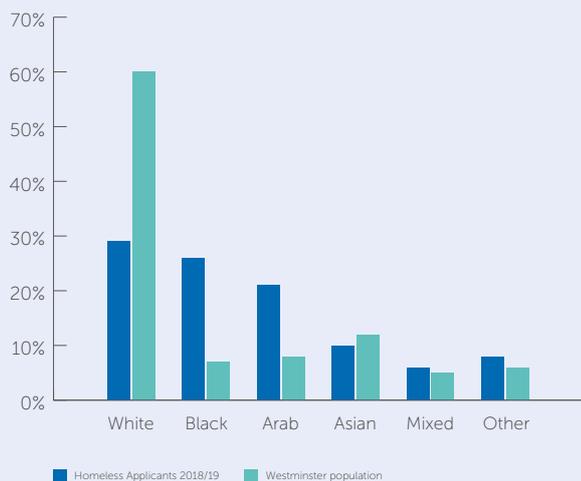
The team works holistically with people at risk, giving advice on employment, debt, education and voluntary opportunities and they also help people to find private rented housing. They run surgeries and attend drop in sessions across the city.

Research carried out for this project shows that council services were not always well known about in some communities. It also found that some people that had been homeless felt a sense of shame about their situation which could result in them not asking for help and that certain well connected members of the community, community groups and religious establishments were trusted and well placed to play a role in homelessness prevention.

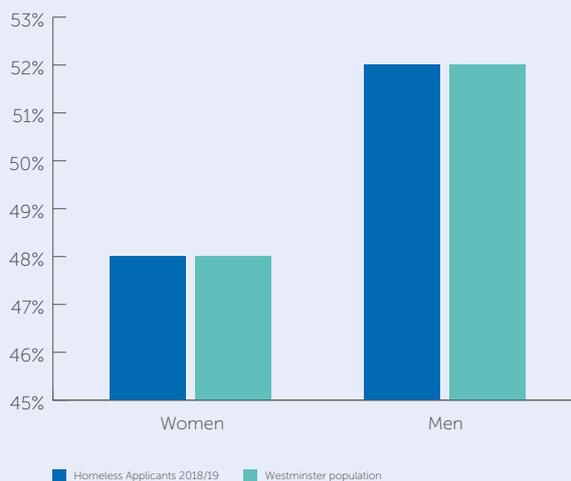
We need to work hand in hand with communities to support people at risk of homelessness, so that they get the help they need as early as possible. We aim to do this by working with them to raise awareness about our services and also by recognising the role that they also can play when people do not formally approach the council for help. This could be through sharing similar stories that others have gone through, reassuring people and providing them with useful information. This is particularly important, as it is recognised that some rely on friends to help them find places to live, preferring to go by word-of-mouth rather than approaching the council.

Homeless Applicants 2018/19

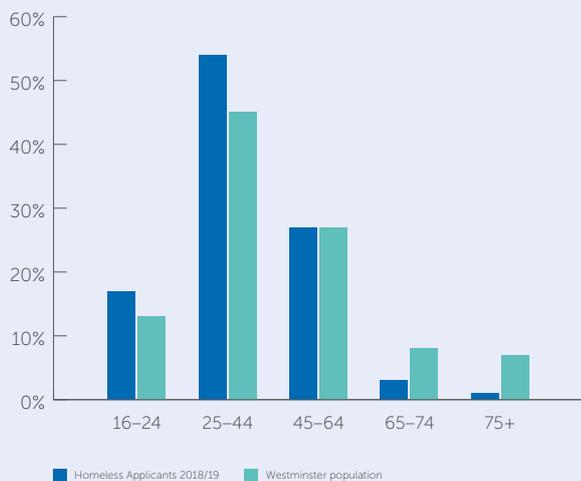
Homelessness and ethnicity



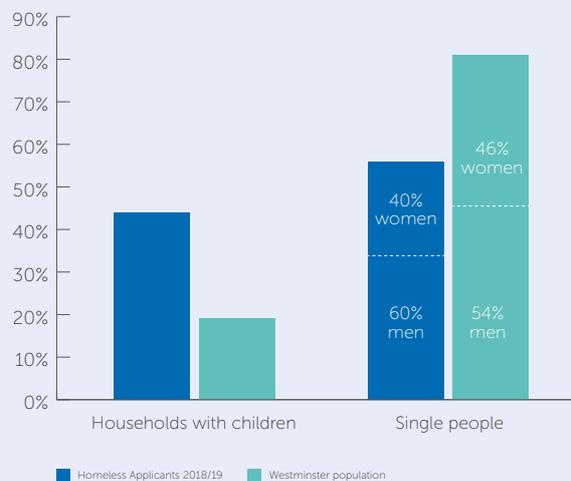
Homelessness and gender



Homelessness and age



Homelessness and household composition



What we do already to prevent homelessness

- **Giving advice about housing in the community** in our Family Hub, where a range of services for families are located and the Early Intervention Trailblazer Service also gives advice in different places in the community.
- **Developing a Personal Housing Plan with everyone at risk of homelessness that approaches the Housing Solutions Service**, setting out the actions both they and the council will take to help prevent them from becoming homeless. 966 plans were completed in 2018/19.
- **Offering mediation when someone is asked to leave their home by family or friends** if it has been caused by a disagreement. Even if this doesn't result in the person being able to stay in the long term, it can enable them to stay in their home while alternative housing is found. Mediation is also offered in some cases where there is relationship breakdown with a spouse or partner, where it doesn't involve domestic violence.
- **Preventing homelessness from the private rented sector** by negotiating repayment agreements with landlords if there are rent arrears, advising about Discretionary Housing Payment and offering Disabled Facilities Grants if the property has become unsuitable due to the tenant having a disability. We also work with landlords to ensure good housing conditions and take legal action if they are evicting a tenant unlawfully.
- **Helping people to find alternative private rented housing** if homelessness cannot be avoided and by offering private landlords rent deposits and incentives in some cases. In 2018/19 we prevented 238 households from becoming homeless in this way.
- **Signposting those at risk to a range of services which may help to prevent homelessness**, such as the Westminster Employment Service or the Environmental Health Team that deal with poor quality conditions in the private rented sector.
- **Monitoring repeat homelessness**
Taking a sample of cases, no incidents were identified during 2018/19.

4.

Do more to identify and address the main causes of homelessness in Westminster and also the wider causes, through research and outreach.

We will do this by:

Addressing homelessness from the social sector

- Letting grown-up family members living in social housing, with their parents or grandparents, who are at risk know about the housing options available through targeted mail outs and in any one to one conversations we have with them and their families. We want to do more to inform them about intermediate housing options as they will increase over the next few years and as they have priority for them and also about private rented options. The aim is to help this group move in a planned way, before a crisis point is reached, and to do this we firstly need to better understand them, so we will carry out research into those at risk in our own stock and share the findings with registered providers.
- Continuing to use our powers to intervene to help prevent unlawful or retaliatory evictions that can occur when enforcement action is taken and which may increase as a result of the Fitness for Human Habitation Act 2018, if the tenant has complained or is taking action against their landlord due to poor conditions. (At the time of writing, Government has proposed to consult on abolishing 'no fault' evictions in the sector).

Addressing homelessness from the private rented sector

- Working with landlords and lettings agents by firstly running a small pilot to understand how best to engage with them and to build an early alert system so they contact us, with their tenant's consent, when rent arrears start to occur or when they may be leaving the market. Using learning from this pilot, this approach can then be rolled out more widely.

Addressing homelessness due to relationship breakdown

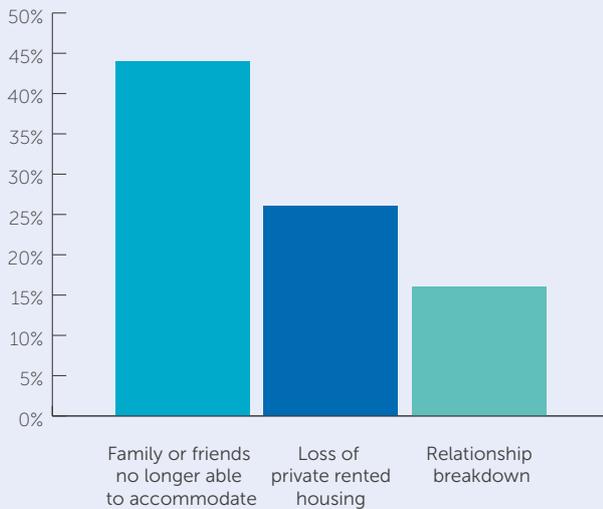
- Better understanding the reasons behind relationship breakdown and if there is a role for the council in helping to prevent it, for example if there are opportunities through the national Reducing Parental Conflict Programme, which the council is participating in.

Addressing the wider causes of homelessness

- **Working with the organisation 'Mybnk', that helps young people to take charge of their money, to provide financial capability training to young people aged 18–25 that are homeless or at risk of it.** After this we will then consider if this approach could be rolled out more widely to other groups.
- **Working with the Westminster Youth Council and Children's Services to run awareness sessions in schools and youth centres,** if possible, about the factors that can lead to homelessness, its impact and on what can be done to prevent it.
- **Ensuring employment support is always part of Personal Housing Plans,** by letting private and social landlords know about our employment services and by ensuring our employment coaches can identify and refer those at risk of homelessness for support.
- **Supporting vulnerable households with the move onto Universal Credit** by working closely with the Department of Work and Pensions, and by having a coordinated approach across the council, so we know when the transfer is happening and by letting those affected know about support available.

Why?

Main causes of homelessness 2018/19



The main recorded cause of homelessness in Westminster is eviction by family or friends and this was behind 44% of applications in 2018/19 and it has been the main cause for many years. Due to the shortage of affordable housing locally, 'households within households' can form, often in the social sector, and family tensions and overcrowding can result in them being asked to leave. Often, they don't approach the council's Housing Solutions Service until a late stage when their homelessness is harder to prevent or delay.

More needs to be done to let them know about their housing options and any support to move. As part of the council's plans to increase affordable homes in Westminster, more intermediate housing will be developed over the next few years and overcrowded sons and daughters of council tenants have priority for this. The council is also well placed with its knowledge of the private rented sector in London to give advice on where this type of housing is more affordable and could offer help to move at a stage when tensions start.

The second biggest cause of homelessness is the loss of a private rented tenancy and this was the reason behind 26% of applications in 2018/19. Welfare reform continues to play a significant role here. Westminster has

the largest private rented sector in England with an estimated 53,000 properties and it includes some of the highest rents in London. The Early Intervention Trailblazer Service has found a number of people struggling in the sector with rent arrears accumulating or people living in poor quality housing, but afraid to complain to their landlord. More could be done to work with landlords and lettings agents at an earlier stage to prevent homelessness. While this may not always result in someone remaining in their private rented home in the long term, earlier intervention can give them more time to move in a planned way.

The third biggest cause of homelessness is due to relationship breakdown and it was behind 16% of applications in 2018/19. Alone, domestic violence accounted for 11% of homelessness. Relationship breakdown is one of the most complex causes of homelessness to address and clearly in many cases it is not appropriate to try and prevent it. However, there may be situations where support can be offered at an early stage when tensions in a relationship start, where for example they are identified through close work with a family for other reasons.

Data on the causes of homelessness tends to focus on the reason for the loss of the last home, which is often only part of the reason why someone has become homeless. The reality can be far more complex and be the result of much wider factors such as unemployment, low income, the shortage of affordable housing, debt or having a mental health problem. Often there is no one single cause and there are many contributory factors. Research by Crisis found that homeless people are five times less likely than the wider population to be in employment.³ A report by the Local Government Association⁴ found that common mental health problems are more than twice as high amongst homeless people as within the general population.

³ [crisis.org.uk/pages/work-and-skills.html](https://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/work-and-skills.html)

⁴ [local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/22.7%20HEALTH%20AND%20HOMELESSNESS_v08_WEB_0.PDF](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/22.7%20HEALTH%20AND%20HOMELESSNESS_v08_WEB_0.PDF)

What we do already to address the main and wider causes of homelessness

- **Setting an ambitious target to develop at least 1,850 new affordable homes by 2023, which is three times higher than what has been delivered in the past.** This includes a programme of estate renewal and developing new homes on 'infill sites' on existing estates. Higher targets are being set through planning policy (our new City Plan), so 35% of all newly developed housing will be affordable in future. These new homes will be both social and intermediate and will result in a better range of housing options for people in Westminster that can't afford market housing.
- **Making the best use of our social housing** by offering incentives for under occupiers in council homes to downsize and by offering fixed term tenancies, so under occupiers can be offered smaller homes when they are renewed.
- **Prioritising overcrowded sons and daughters of council tenants for intermediate housing** so they have alternative housing options locally.
- **Offering employment support for residents of all tenures,** through Westminster Employment Service. During 2018/19, employment coaches worked with 749 people and helped 296 people into work and there is a specialist service which works with those at risk of homelessness.
- **Offering a range of advice, including financial and debt advice through a contract with the Westminster Advice Partnership.** During 2018/19 advice was given to 1,000 households.
- **Adding to our allocation of Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) from Government,** which is funding to help bridge the gap between benefit levels and rents, for example due to the Local Housing Allowance caps. While DHP is not a long-term solution, it can enable someone to remain in their home while they look for alternative housing. It can also help with the move into work by paying benefit at a higher rate for a temporary period.
- **Establishing a Housing Standards Taskforce** to gather and share intelligence on problematic private landlords in Westminster and using it to ensure coordinated action against the worst landlords. Scoping is underway on whether there is a case for a discretionary licensing scheme in Westminster.
- **Responding to more than 1,600 enquiries annually about poor conditions in the private rented sector and taking enforcement action where needed.** On average around 300 enforcement notices are served on private landlords each year.
- **Informing tenants about the Fitness for Human Habitation Act 2018** in our communications with them, so they know that they can also take action against their landlord for poor conditions.

Improving our services and response when people become homeless



5.

Make our housing services more transparent, accountable and accessible.

We will do this by:

- **Setting up a new Partnership Board** which meets annually, made up of people that use our homeless services and members of the community. The aim of the Board will be to get views on our services and to hold us to account. It will also be to explain the environment in which we operate and some of the decisions we make.
- **Carry out 'mystery shopping' exercises**, possibly with the help of people that have used our services to get their perspective and to better understand the type of service we offer and how it could be improved.
- **Seeking the views of those using the service to guide us, using innovative methods**, for example through setting up service user panels, seeking feedback by text and through exit interviews.
- **Improving digital access to the Housing Solutions Service**, so more people can fully apply online, while also ensuring the requirements of people who need to use more traditional methods are met.
- **Becoming more 'person centred' to improve peoples' experiences.** This will involve ensuring the service is easy to navigate. It will also ensure that those using the service are at its heart, are involved in decisions made and that staff are well trained to support people in difficulty and crisis. We are aiming for the service to become accredited by the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance to ensure those affected get the best response.
- **Applying the learning from our Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) pilot and then rolling it out across our services** to help them to better serve vulnerable people at risk of homelessness. We recently joined the MEAM network which helps to coordinate services for people experiencing multiple disadvantage. We are currently piloting this approach for ten people, providing them with a single point of contact to help guide them through the services they need.

6.

Better communicate what we can and can't offer.

We will do this by:

- **Carrying out a 'communications campaign' about our services and what people can expect from them** using different channels of communication and targeting areas of Westminster where people are more likely to be homeless. This will involve publishing 'what you can expect' leaflets and explaining them widely. Not only do we want everyone to know about the

support and help available to them, but also about the realities of the housing market and why being homeless will increasingly not result in the offer of social housing, but an offer of private rented housing. We also want to communicate the message that addressing homelessness requires the person or household affected and the council to work together to find a solution.

Why?

Research carried out with a small number of people using the Housing Solutions Service has shown that there is sometimes mistrust of it and it is not well understood. People can on occasions feel that they are not listened to which leads to frustration as their expectations are not met. A 'review' of decisions made is often requested, for example during 2018/19 there was a review request about the suitability of 11% of temporary accommodation offers and this rose to around 23% when these offers were outside Westminster.

Sometimes people can feel it is wholly the council's responsibility to prevent their homelessness and that they can be offered a new social home quickly and are

not aware of the shortages in supply. We also have to work to help change these expectations as they do not reflect the reality of housing available in Westminster and this will help people to consider housing options much earlier on. More needs to be done to explain the service, how decisions are made, points of access, the context in which it operates and to hold it to account.

We also want to manage our residents' expectations so that they understand when they approach our services that we are not able to offer many people a social home but can offer a wide range of other services to help them into a stable home.

7.

Ensure a range of accommodation is available for the homeless households that we have a housing duty towards, when homelessness cannot be prevented.

We will do this by:

- **Continuing to make developing more affordable housing a priority for the council**, setting a new challenging target, when our current one is met in 2023 and constantly looking for new ways to do more.
- **Regularly updating our action plan** setting out how we will procure enough private housing for temporary accommodation and private rented offers for homeless households and **continuing to look for innovative ways to increase supply**.
- **Increasing the number of private rented sector offers we make** and, where these can't be in Westminster due to high costs, do more to support people moving to other areas to help get them settled in their new community. This will involve:
 - » Looking at ways to offer households more choice over the location of these homes, by for example looking for properties in areas where people may have family or friends, or they are already living in temporary accommodation. This will help avoid the disruption of having to move to a new area or one where they don't know anyone.
 - » Do more to explain why these offers are generally outside Westminster, due to the cost of private rented housing locally and benefit levels.
 - » Recruiting 'Community Connectors' in local areas to help people to settle in if needed, to explain local facilities and services, possibly delivered through a social impact bond where social investors make a contribution to the costs. These 'Community Connectors' could give people face to face support and help households to build new networks and feel settled in an area.
- **Continuing to invest in innovative schemes**, which offer households longer term private rented homes, with support, building for example on the Real Lettings scheme which has involved £30million of investment and offers homes with follow on support from St Mungo's.

Why?

Average waiting times in temporary accommodation for social housing

Studio	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4/4 plus bed
2.5 years	1 year	10 years	16 years	34 years

(Different waiting times apply depending on circumstances)

Affordable housing, both social and intermediate, is an important way of responding to homelessness and the council is on track to meet its ambitious affordable housing target of at least 1,850 new homes by 2023. However, evidence suggests that this won't be enough to meet the needs of homeless households and other groups with priority for housing. Currently there are nearly 4,000 households with priority for social housing, (of which 2,700 are homeless) and 3,000 for intermediate housing.

Understandably some people feel that waiting for a social home is better than moving into the private rented sector, but the reality is that households can wait over ten years for a social home and this wait increases for larger households. Although the council is doing everything it can to increase affordable housing in Westminster, it is likely that supply will never meet demand for it.

During these waits for social housing, homeless households are living in temporary accommodation, which is often outside Westminster and can be the least secure form of housing. As highlighted on page 11, the evidence suggests that living in temporary accommodation can have a serious impact on health and wellbeing in the long-term and it also costs the council more than £4m annually, as national funding doesn't meet costs.

In 2017 the council moved away from always offering homeless households a social home and introduced a policy of making private rented sector offers. The approach provides a more stable home more quickly than waiting for social housing in temporary accommodation for many years. During 2018/19, 82 households moved into the private rented sector from temporary accommodation.

Although the starting point is always to look for private rented homes in Westminster, the high cost of market rents here, combined with Local Housing Allowance levels not covering market rents, means that, although 24% of offers were in Westminster or adjoining boroughs, 76% were outside those areas. Only 5% however were outside London in Surrey or Berkshire.

A review of the policy after one year found that most households would prefer a social rented home and that more could be done to explain the policy, the reasons behind it and to offer more choice over the location of homes and more support when moving to a new area. It also found that more could be done to make these offers in locations where households were already living in temporary accommodation (54% is outside Westminster). The review recognised that more needs to be done to help people link in with their new community to feel settled.

8.

Review how people access supported housing and ensure it meets needs, now, and in the future.

We will do this by:

- **Developing an online referral system for supported housing**, so more partners we work with can make referrals into it and so there is more transparency on how it is offered.
- **Reviewing the needs of young people** to ensure suitable accommodation for different needs, e.g. care leavers, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those at risk of homelessness.
- **Working with our specialist providers to ensure dedicated support for survivors of domestic abuse.**
- **Reviewing the sheltered housing we commission from registered providers** to ensure it meets needs.
- **Re-procuring our offender services**, considering how we can better support young offenders and reduce reoffending.

Why?

Offering supported housing, where the accommodation includes some care and support, plays a role in preventing homelessness as it helps to avoid tenancies breaking down and as there is a clear move on path to other forms of housing. It is also a response to homelessness when someone approaches our service and when it is clear that they are not able to live independently.

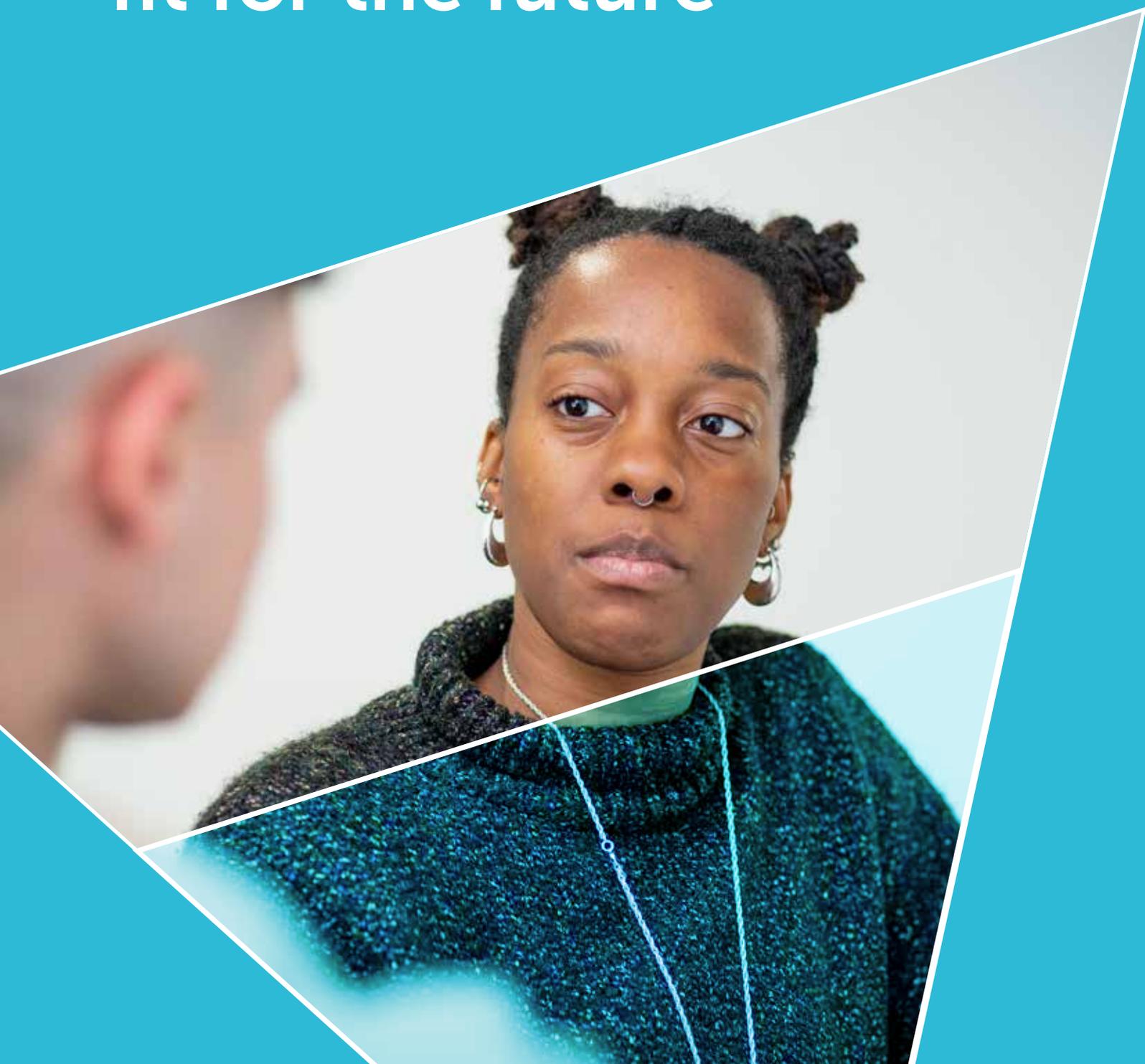
Supported housing in Westminster provides homes to young adults, people with mental health problems, ex-offenders, women

escaping domestic violence, rough sleepers and older people. It is commissioned jointly across the council and with the health service and provided by specialist providers. A close look at these services and the challenges ahead has resulted in the above priority areas being identified to focus on over the next four years.

What we do already to respond to homelessness

- **Retendering and restructuring the homelessness service** in 2017 to create a unique Housing Solutions Partnership, which brings experience from the statutory and voluntary sectors together.
- **Providing temporary accommodation for 2,700 homeless households** and by having policies in place to ensure there is enough accommodation to meet needs and that it is as close to Westminster as possible. There are also policies in place to ensure those with the highest needs are prioritised for temporary accommodation in Westminster or in adjoining boroughs.
- **Offering social housing** and awarding those with a longer connection to Westminster, and that are working, enhanced priority for it. As already set out on page 17 the council is doing everything it can to increase new affordable housing supply.
- **Offering homeless households private rented housing** using rent deposits and incentives to private landlords to do this and ensuring these properties are of good quality. Resettlement support is available for those moving outside Westminster. As for temporary accommodation, there are also policies in place to ensure those with the highest needs are prioritised for accommodation in Westminster and adjoining boroughs.
- **Commissioning nearly 2,000 units of supported housing** for a range of different groups that are not able to live independently.

Meeting the challenges ahead and having a homelessness system fit for the future



9.

Become a leader in the field of homelessness prevention, proposing solutions and bringing key decision makers together to share information and ideas.

We will do this by:

- **Using the learning from the Early Intervention Trailblazer Service to improve our services** and by sharing this with others and by **hosting workshops, inviting Government and other councils and organisations** to discuss best practice across London, so we can all learn from each other.
- **Reviewing this strategy after it has been implemented for one year**, when we have a better understanding of the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

10.

Make the case for homelessness services and prevention work to be fully funded, and lead the discussion with Government and others on how the welfare system can work better for low income residents in central London, where the cost of living continues to increase beyond many people's means.

We will do this by:

- **Highlighting problems with the existing benefits system and proposing solutions to Government where appropriate.** In relation to welfare benefits there are several options and we recognise the need to protect the public purse. Local Housing Allowance levels for central London need to be more reflective of actual rents, for example they could be calculated by taking the bottom third of rents, as is the case in other areas, but by also excluding 'super prime properties' from the calculation. Super prime properties are a unique characteristic of Westminster and they currently distort any calculation of rents. This in turn makes the scheme unworkable for Westminster.
- Alternatively, councils in areas where the cost of living is significantly higher than average could receive long term funding to make up the difference between rents and benefit levels for certain households, expanding on the current funding of Discretionary Housing Payments provided for households impacted by recent welfare reforms.
- **Cultivating a positive, constructive and wide-ranging conversation with the Treasury on how we finance local government and come up with a sustainable model.** We believe that the best way to fund local government is through fiscal devolution and we are seeking the ability to raise our own funds for critical work like preventing homelessness. Last year, we pioneered the Community Contribution to encourage Band H council taxpayers to contribute more voluntarily to their locality. Now we are willing to go a step further, asking the Government to allow us to pilot new local levies related to service use and give us the ability to introduce additional council tax bands, using the revenue to invest in our communities and support our most vulnerable residents. We will continue to make the case for positive local measures to raise funding for our essential services.

Why?

Clearly preventing homelessness and addressing the risk factors that can lead to it at an early stage is better for those affected and less costly for councils and to achieve this we need to offer the most effective prevention services possible to meet the challenges ahead. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, implemented from April 2018, marks a step change in the way councils address homelessness, placing a much greater focus on prevention at an earlier stage and enabling a wider group of people to receive a service.

Although the longer-term impact of the Act is hard to predict, and will not be known for some time initial analysis shows:

- Homeless applications rose by over 140% during 2018/19 compared with 2017/18 and acceptances (where a full rehousing duty is owed) reduced.
- Temporary accommodation use has increased from 2,500 households in March 2018, to 2,700 in March 2019.
- The administrative costs are high.

Homelessness in Westminster and how we can respond to it is greatly affected by the national socio-economic context and policy set by the Government. We cannot tackle it alone. To effectively prevent homelessness in Westminster, we therefore need to cultivate an open and constructive dialogue with our colleagues in national Government to develop practical solutions to support our most vulnerable residents.

The costs of delivering homelessness services are high and providing temporary accommodation alone costs over £4m each year. There are significant challenges in procuring enough temporary accommodation which is affordable to the people living in it (i.e. within benefit levels) and to the council, i.e. within subsidy arrangements. A long term and stable funding solution is needed for temporary accommodation and for all homelessness services.

Of particular concern to Westminster are proposals to change the funding formula for councils, which if implemented, would see a reduction in the council's core funding which in turn could impact on our ability to provide homelessness services.

Benefit levels not meeting rent levels has played a part in increasing homelessness in Westminster, particularly as most of Westminster is affected by the Local Housing Allowance caps which as the table on the next page shows are significantly below even the cheapest rents for larger homes.

	Shared	1 Bedroom	2 Bedroom	3 Bedroom	4 Bedroom
Westminster rents per week (30th percentile)*	£160	£375	£525	£724	£924
Central London LHA rate (capped rates) per week	£144.84	£268.46	£311.40	£365.09	£429.53
Gap per week	£15.16	£106.54	£213.60	£358.91	£494.47
Westminster rents per year (30th percentile)	£8,320	£19,500	£27,300	£37,648	£48,048
Central London LHA rate (capped rates) per year	£7,531.68	£13,959.92	£16,192.80	£18,984.68	£22,335.56
Gap per year	£788.32	£5,540.08	£11,107.20	£18,663.32	£25,712.44
Overall benefit cap rates	Singles: £296.35 per week, £15,410 per year Couples/households with children: £442.31 per week, £23,000 per year				

*The 30th percentile is the bottom third of rents. Source: Hometrack data March 2019, with the exception of the shared rent, which is a lower quartile rent from Valuation Office Agency data. LHA rates are for March 2019.

This situation results in the council having to generally go outside Westminster to find private rented housing for temporary accommodation and for private rented offers which can lead to dissatisfaction amongst residents particularly those with strong local connections.

How to respond

We want to know what you think about our ten point plan to prevent and address homelessness **by Wednesday 11th September 2019**. To let us know your thoughts, please fill out our online survey which you can view here:

westminster.gov.uk/housing-strategies

Or send us a completed feedback form to homelessnessstrategy@westminster.gov.uk or using the free post address below:

FREE POST WCC OPEN FORUM
Westminster City Hall
London, SW1E 6QP
(Homelessness Strategy)

