



LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN

The London Borough of Camden has been an example of good practice in resolving homelessness for many years. From a position in March 2005 of having 2,172 households in temporary accommodation and accepting 1,148 households as homeless in 2004/5, Camden had reached a position by the start of 2017 of having fewer than 500 families in temporary accommodation and accepting just 71 households as homeless in the previous year. No families are housed in B&Bs, which has been the case for some considerable time.

Many councils were successful in reducing temporary accommodation use between 2004 and 2010 to meet the Government's then target to reduce temporary accommodation use by 50 per cent, but have seen it increase again in recent years. Camden's use of temporary accommodation has continued to fall, and has decreased by over 40 per cent since 2010; this is despite Camden being one of the least affordable boroughs in London to live in the private rented sector (PRS).

Key to the council's success has been the focus on early intervention in cases where residents are at risk of homelessness and the use of professional staff to provide tailored options to households to enable them to prevent homelessness using PRS accommodation. A range of policies work to make the homelessness prevention offer more desirable to households than being accepted by the council as homeless under part VII of the Housing Act 1996 homelessness legislation.

Although not covered in this report, Camden's development of the single homelessness pathway approach and record on tackling rough sleeping are also exemplary and have been widely copied and adapted by other councils.

There are perhaps four key elements to Camden's success in reducing their use of temporary accommodation.

1. The council's allocations policy. For years now, Camden's policy has given more priority to people who accept a homelessness prevention offer in the private rented sector (PRS) than who refuse this and are accepted as homeless under part VII of the 1996 homelessness legislation (although accepting a homelessness prevention offer is by no means a guarantee of getting social housing). Although always scrupulous about offering the option of making a homelessness application to people who would be eligible, the council has been successful in preventing homelessness for a much greater number of people than are accepted as homeless. So statutory homelessness is no longer the fastest route to a council property. Camden's homelessness accommodation strategy agreed in 2013, in which a key element was the adoption of the Localism Act power to end the main homeless duty with a PRS offer, further strengthened the focus on homelessness prevention. The borough has only had to conduct 71 Section 202 reviews of a homelessness decision in the past three years. However this strategy is only successful because prevention offers in the PRS can be made.

2. Working well with landlords. Camden pioneered and hosts the London Landlord Accreditation scheme²⁰, and requires all landlords it works with to be accredited. All new landlords have properties inspected by the council before they are let, but once they have a track record, photographs of the property are accepted. The council provides a responsive service to landlords with any tenancy related issues and vets tenants before they put them forward for a PRS let. Any potential tenants who are not deemed ready to sustain a PRS tenancy are accommodated elsewhere with additional support and are given pre-tenancy training. Where there are problems, the council operates a tenancy sustainment function which will work with tenants they have placed in the PRS to keep their tenancies going. Camden is also proactive in reaching out to new landlords, advertising using a range of media and events. For example they exhibit at landlord events at venues including Olympia and the Barbican, and have run advertisements on the Sky TV Property Channel. The borough offers a range of options to landlords, in which different levels of risk and housing management responsibility are taken on by the borough according to the landlord's preference. Rent guarantee and legal cover insurance is available to landlords, as well as a bond against damages, which in practice has had very few claims against it.
3. Working well with tenants. The borough has been able to give choice to tenants taking a PRS prevention offer, and has

historically been able to make up to three offers of accommodation. This is, however, getting harder, as the PRS in London becomes less affordable to people on low to moderate incomes. The borough also provides interim accommodation and pre-tenancy training to any tenant who might be at risk of not sustaining a tenancy in the PRS, as well as follow up support from a council officer for all households who have had homelessness prevented in the PRS to help them settle into the property, claim benefits etc. Every year the council follows up on PRS tenants it had let to in previous years to see whether tenancies have failed. In the very few cases where they have failed, the council attempts to find out why this has happened and learn the lessons needed to try to reduce the incidence of tenancy failure in the future.

4. Focus on early prevention. The focus on preventing homelessness is well embedded in the culture of the housing options service, and the council has a philosophy of working as early as possible to prevent homelessness, rather than waiting for a family to become roofless. This includes preventing homelessness amongst households who would otherwise have been intentionally homeless, but would often have been picked up by children's services if a homelessness application had been rejected. The council typically makes under 10 intentionally homeless decisions each year. Children's services also actively work with the housing options service to try to prevent homelessness among households they are in contact with. The council also place considerable emphasis on

²⁰ London Landlord Accreditation scheme



providing a personal service to homeless households, tailored to their individual needs and although Camden provides a well regarded online housing register application form, they intend to continue to emphasise person to person services for residents at risk of homelessness, rather than drive homelessness demand online.

Homelessness strategy

Despite, all this, like many other London boroughs, Camden is simply not able to accommodate everyone in the PRS in borough due to the affordability issues for tenants dependent on housing benefit, and actively procures accommodation elsewhere. Camden has responded to the Government's suitability order on location of accommodation²¹ by developing a zoning policy which determines where households may be placed in the PRS based on the individual circumstances of the household involved, with most families being accommodated in Camden or surrounding boroughs.

To date, very few households have been placed outside London, but the borough is worried this may change in future.

Empty homes

Camden works hard to bring empty homes back into use for homeless households, and has had some notable successes, including some quite large and complex deals. The borough attempts to trace absentee landlords, visits properties to confirm emptiness, and writes to landlords of empty properties offering to help, including provision of grants to bring properties into use where

applicable in return for access to those properties for homeless households.

Dealing with elderly owners of empty homes is a frequent need but can be challenging due to their age, the funds required, and the complexity involved.

In one example, Camden worked with an elderly owner of a property above a shop that had been empty for 18 years. The property was a shell and derelict, but the owner was very reluctant to do anything due to the amount of necessary work and the costs involved. By being empathetic about the owner's situation, and by being persistent and consistent, the owner was persuaded to submit a planning application for the conversion of the single dwelling into two flats. With the help of grant from Camden, the property was brought back into use to a very high standard, leased to a housing co-operative for 5 years and let through the council's PRS access scheme to two homeless households at local housing allowance (LHA) rent.

Contact: Shaun Flook
London Borough of Camden
shaun.flook@camden.gov.uk

Supporting information available at
<https://www.local.gov.uk/housing-our-homeless-household-case-study-resources-london-borough-camden>

²¹ Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012