



Westminster City Council

Homelessness Review 2024

Summary

DRAFT

Introduction

This Homelessness Review ('the Review') is the first step in developing a new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for Westminster ('the Strategy'). The Review was conducted using a mixed-methods approach that involved data analysis, stakeholder interviews and surveys, partnership engagement and lived experience research. It provides a picture of the current and projected levels, causes, and impacts of homelessness and rough sleeping in Westminster, as well as the scope of existing services and interventions. Key challenges that need to be addressed in the new Strategy have been identified throughout.

Defining homelessness

There are different categories of homelessness:

- **Rough sleeping:** which includes people bedding down on the streets.
- **Statutory homelessness:** where people or households approach the local authority for help (see below for information on legal duties)
- **Hidden homeless:** which is people or households that are not included in official statistics because for example they are staying with friends or family and are not approaching the local authority.

(Note that these categories of homelessness are not exclusive.)

Legal Duties

Local authority duties towards people experiencing homelessness are complex and were significantly changed by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Whether a legal duty is 'accepted,' depends on whether certain factors apply and if a person or household is 'eligible' for them, as defined in law.

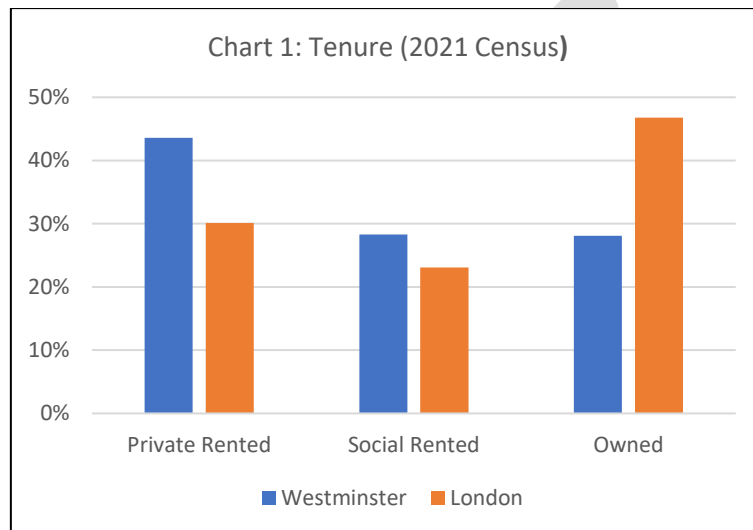
Known as the **Prevention Duty**, councils must work to prevent homelessness with anyone threatened with it in their area within the last 56 days and this duty lasts for 56 days. As part of this a Personal Housing Plan is developed setting out the actions both the council and the person threatened with homelessness will take to help end it.

If homelessness cannot be prevented the **Relief Duty** applies which requires the council to work with the person or household to find them accommodation which must be available to them for at least six months. This duty lasts for 56 days from the date of the acceptance of the Relief Duty.

If the Relief Duty is unsuccessful, as accommodation cannot be found, certain people and households are eligible for the **Main Housing Duty** which means the offer of social housing or private rented housing in some circumstances. There is also a duty to provide Temporary Accommodation if housing is not immediately available. Only people with 'local connection' and in 'priority need' are owed this Main Housing Duty. Households with 'priority need' include those with children or where someone has a disability or is vulnerable, as defined in law.

Context: An overview of Westminster

A view of the local housing market and social and demographic factors is essential to understanding drivers of homelessness. Westminster has an unusual tenure pattern with the highest proportion of private rented properties in England, making up 44% of the stock, and comparatively low home ownership rates of 28%. There are also high numbers of short-term lets and second homes with estimates suggesting 30,000 properties have no full-time residents. Homes are smaller than the London average with 72% being one or two bedrooms compared with 53% across London¹.



Westminster has some of the most expensive housing in London, with average property prices 18 times the average incomes². At the lower end (30th per centile) a two-bedroom private rented property costs £624 per week³, needing an income of £108k when a lower quartile Westminster household income is £31.5k⁴.

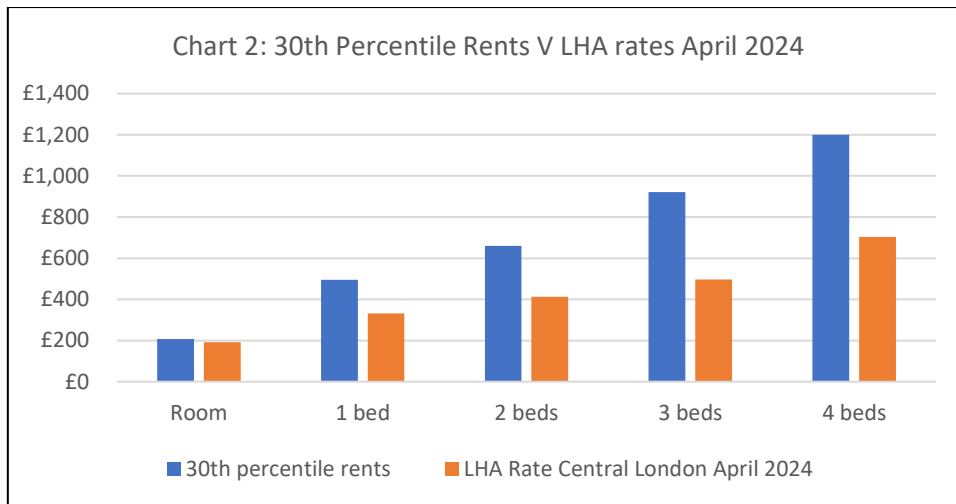
The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is not sufficient to cover lower end rental costs making it particularly hard for low-income households to live in the city. Increased LHA rates from April 2024 are unlikely to make Westminster significantly more affordable to those claiming benefits as chart 2 shows.

¹ Census 2021

² Hometrack analysis 2024

³ Hometrack 2024

⁴ CACI 2022

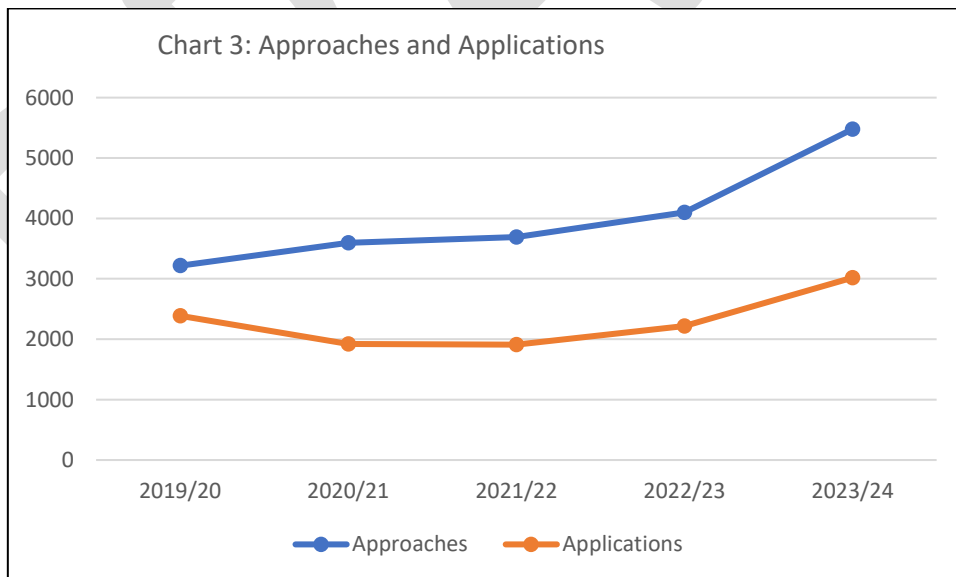


Source: Hometrack 2024

While there are affluent areas of Westminster c. 14% of households live in poverty⁵ and they are more likely to be concentrated in the Church Street, Westbourne, Queen’s Park, Harrow Road and Tachbrook Wards.

There is little land to develop new private and affordable housing and Westminster’s delivery target of 985 new homes each year is less than 2% of the London-wide target. Overall, these factors make preventing and responding to homelessness extremely challenging.

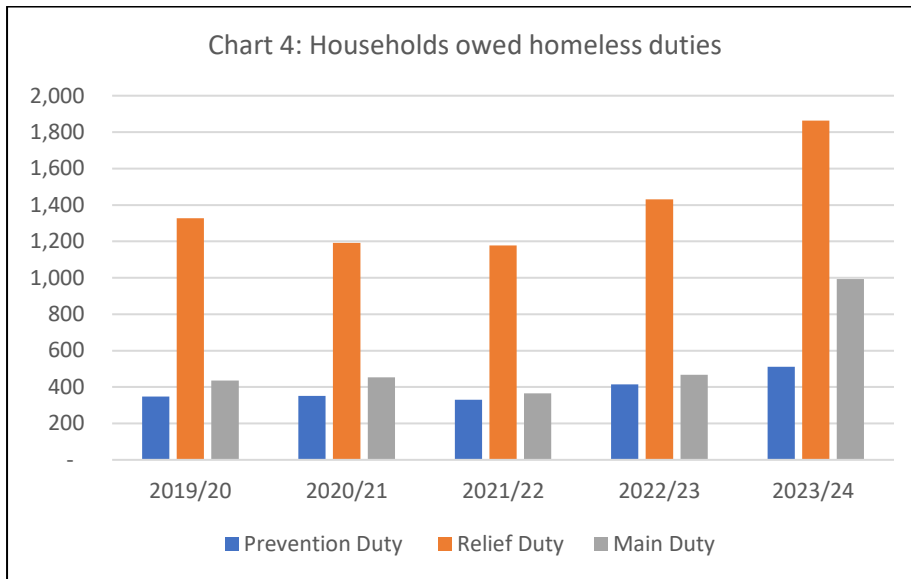
The Scale of Homelessness



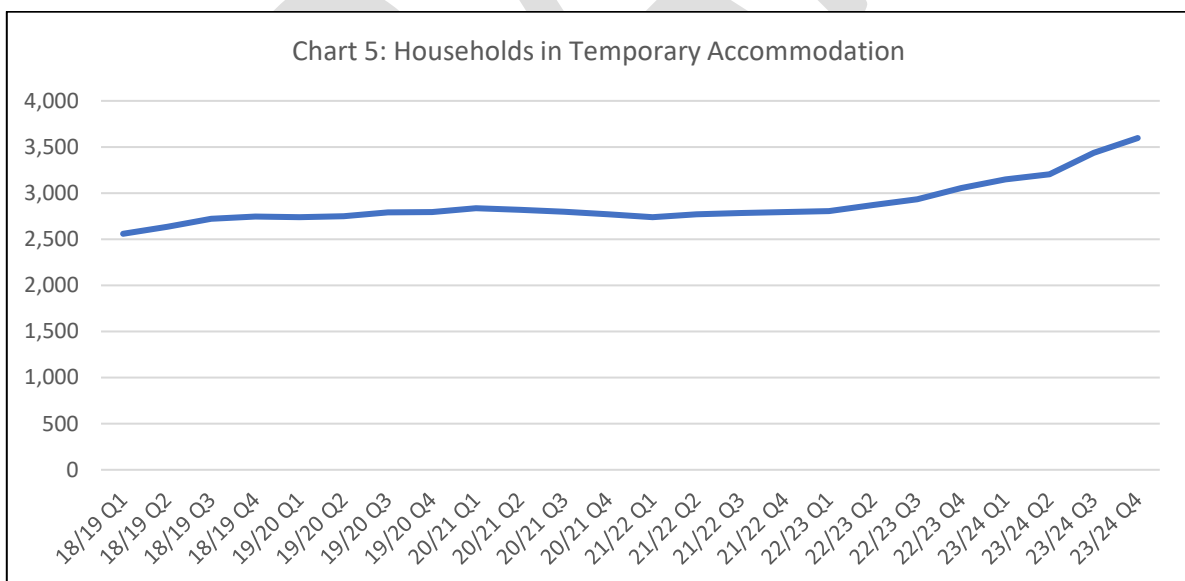
While homelessness currently affects at around 5% of the Westminster population, it is on the rise in Westminster and across London. London Councils estimated in August 2023 that 170,000 people across London were living in Temporary Accommodation. Nearly 5,500 households approached the council for advice and support in 2023/2024 compared with 4,098 in the previous year. Homeless applications are rising and were 36% higher in 2023/2024 than in 2022/2023.

⁵ Defined as the proportion of households earning less than 60% of median income.

There is an increase in households owed all duties under homelessness legislation, with Main Housing Duty acceptances more than doubling in 2023/24 compared with the previous year.



Temporary Accommodation use is also rising given the shortage of affordable housing with 3,597 Westminster households living in Temporary Accommodation compared with 3,056 at the same time in the previous year. Households experiencing homelessness make up 67% of all demand for social housing.



People experiencing rough sleeping is also rising locally and nationally. A total of 2,050 people were seen experiencing rough sleeping in Westminster (making up 20% of London’s total) during 2022/2023 which is a 21% increase from 2021/2022⁶. Westminster has the highest number of people sleeping rough across London and on a single night in May 2024, 283 people were identified bedded down on the streets compared with 215 in May 2023. The biggest rises have been seen amongst new people experiencing rough sleeping, although there have also been rises in people who have previously done so before.

⁶ [Rough sleeping in London \(CHAIN reports\) - London Datastore](#)

Who experiences homelessness

Although anyone can experience homelessness, certain households are more at risk in Westminster and these findings are in line with national trends:

- **Families with children** made up 55% of those owed the Main Housing Duty and 40% of those owed the Relief Duty in 2022/2023, compared with their 19% share of the population. (Recent trends also show more single people are now approaching the council)
- **Women** made up 75% of those owed the Main Housing Duty and 60% of those owed the Relief Duty in 2022/2023, compared with their 48% share of the population
- **People in the 25 – 44 age group** made up 57% of those owed the Main Housing Duty and 53% of those owed the Relief Duty in 2022/2023, compared with their 34% share of the population
- **Black and Middle Eastern communities.** Black African households made up 13% of those owed the Main Housing Duty and 12% of those owed the Relief Duty in 2022/2023 compared with their 5% share of the population. Arab households made up 20% and 19% respectively compared with their 8% population share
- **People with disabilities:** 24% of those owed the Main Housing Duty in 2022/2023 were disabled compared with 14% classed as disabled under the Equality Act.

Although data is limited, homelessness is also more likely amongst those with low incomes and there is a link between seeking work and homelessness. Thirty-seven per cent of those owed the Prevention and Relief duties in 2022/2023 were unemployed compared with 3.7% of the Westminster population. There are also well documented links between homelessness and poverty. Amongst those owed the Prevention and Relief Duties in 2022/2023, 49% were identified to have support needs.

People experiencing rough sleeping have a different profile⁷ and looking at people seen rough sleeping during 2022/2023:

- The majority (80%) are **men**, although research indicates that women are more likely to be hidden from official statistics⁸
- They are more likely to be **White** (61%), with high proportions amongst the White Other (19%) and Roma population (12%)
- They are spread across all age groups.
- A significant proportion (41%) are non-UK nationals.

Although data shows 43% have support needs, this figure is acknowledged to underrepresent the situation as the transient nature of rough sleeper population makes them hard to identify accurately). Support with mental health issues was the most significant support need, but 34% are identified to have multiple support needs.

⁷ [Rough sleeping in London \(CHAIN reports\) - London Datastore](#)

⁸ homeless.org.uk/news/making-women-count-challenging-the-systems-that-keep-womens-rough-sleeping-unseen.

The impact and causes of homelessness

Homelessness can have far reaching impacts. The worry of losing a home and unstable housing can have a damaging impact on health and wellbeing and becoming homeless can disrupt the support networks and services on which people may be relying on.

Given the shortage of social housing, families can spend years in Temporary Accommodation and 60% are living in homes outside of Westminster. Of the 8,270 people living in Temporary Accommodation, 3,800 are children.

Based on the lived experience of local families, research by the Cardinal Hume Centre⁹ shows the far-reaching impact Temporary Accommodation has on health, education, employment, and child development. Overall, families report feeling stuck, powerless, unable to parent well, and face challenges when living far away from their community. More recent research carried out by the Westminster Homelessness Partnership Co-Production Group in January 2023 also reinforces these findings:

"Basically, I had to bring my son to XXX Academy, which is in Westminster.... So, I had to travel for two hours on the bus, three buses on the way. I used to sit in the library, because I cannot go back to the hotel...because I don't have the time, because of my son's pick-up time. He finishes at 3.20pm, so I couldn't manage the time. So basically, I was at the library, just charging my phone, just sleeping, right on the table, until my son finishes school."

Interviewee - (Westminster Homelessness Partnership Co-Production Group)

Local Government Association research¹⁰ highlights how experiencing homelessness as a young person can increase the risk of life-long experiences of homelessness, poor health, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Young people can also face challenges in finding affordable housing in the private rented sector due to restricted levels of Local Housing Allowance for the under 35s, limiting their options to renting rooms in shared properties.

The long-term impact of rough sleeping can be catastrophic impacting mortality, health, and safety. Reports of abuse, violence, and exploitation amongst those experiencing rough sleeping are significant, despite going unreported to the Police. People experiencing rough sleeping are 17 times more likely to be victims of violence¹¹.

Those interviewed by the Westminster Homelessness Partnership Co-Production Group in January 2023 recounted harrowing experiences of sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation.

"I've seen everything being homeless. I've seen homeless people get stabbed. I've seen homeless people get beat up because they live on the streets, and that's wrong."

Interviewee - Westminster Homelessness Partnership Co-Production Group

⁹ www.cardinalhumecentre.org.uk/latest-news/report-lived-experience-of-families-living-in-temporary-accommodation

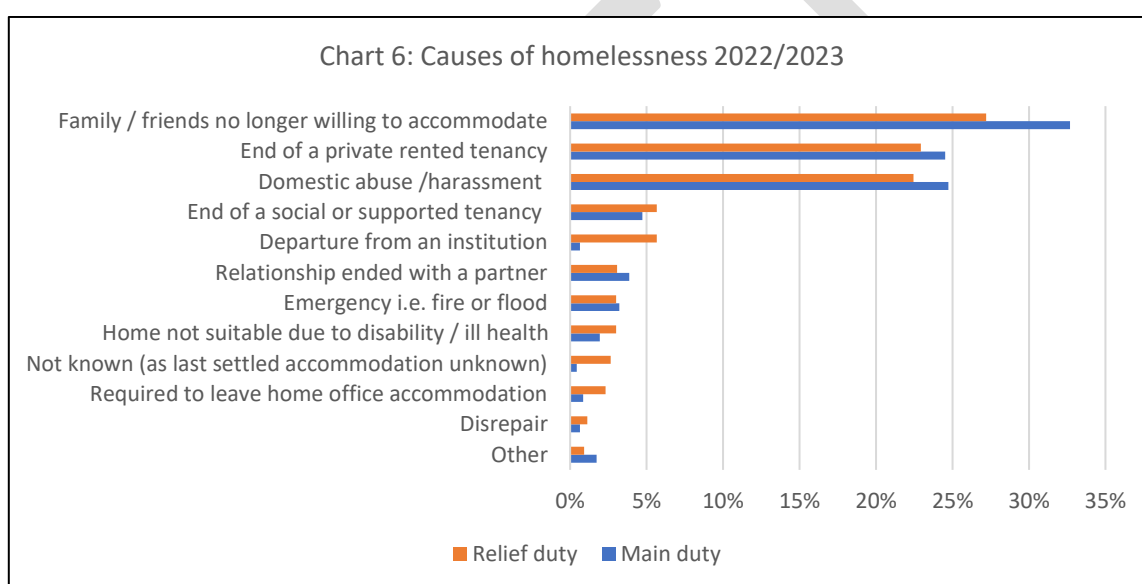
¹⁰ [22.7 HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS v08 WEB 0.PDF \(local.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ www.crisis.org.uk/media/gdrdmtyj/oneeyeopen_report.pdf

Common mental health conditions are twice as high amongst people experiencing rough sleeping compared with the general population and they are seven times more likely to be admitted to hospital as emergencies than elective inpatients¹². **The average age of death for rough sleepers is 45 for men and 43 for women**¹³. Trends on mortality show a drop during the Everyone In programme¹⁴ and in 2022/2023 but they could increase.

The causes of homelessness

Homelessness is caused by structural factors, such as the lack of affordable housing, poverty and inequality which can be exacerbated by personal situations such as loss of income, experiences of abuse, or relationship breakdown. Causes also vary between people and households threatened with homelessness and those that have become homeless. The data has its limitations as it only records one ‘main’ cause of homelessness, when the reality multiple causes are likely.



For those owed the Prevention Duty, the loss of a private rented tenancy is the overriding cause of their risk of homelessness, making up 88% of cases in 2022/2023 which compares with 46% London wide. The high cost of private rents, supply shortages and ability of landlords to evict tenants easily are all driving homelessness.

Friends and family being no longer able to accommodate a person or household is the top cause for those owed the later stage accommodation duties (Relief and Main Housing), making up 33% of Main Housing Duty acceptances in 2022/2023. This cause is the least understood even though it has been a leading cause for many years and needs investigation.

For those owed the Main Housing Duty, the loss of a private tenancy and domestic abuse or harassment are also major causes, both making up 25% of cases respectively during 2022/2023. Those experiencing domestic abuse or harassment approach the Housing Solutions Service when they are homeless.

¹² [Health Matters: Rough sleeping - UK Health Security Agency \(blog.gov.uk\)](https://www.blog.gov.uk/2022/07/14/health-matters-rough-sleeping-uk-health-security-agency/)

¹³ [Homelessness: Causes, Types and Facts | Crisis UK](https://www.crisisuk.org/homelessness/causes-types-and-facts/)

¹⁴ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9057/>

Departure from an institution, such as prison, children's social care, or a healthcare setting, was recorded as the main cause of homelessness for 6% of those owed the Relief Duty in 2022/2023. This is likely to be an under-represented cause in the recording of a main reason for homelessness.

The causes of rough sleeping are often multiple. Westminster is a draw for people sleeping rough with over 98% coming from outside the city or the UK so the factors leading to rough sleeping have started elsewhere. Interviewees for the Westminster Homelessness Partnership Co-Production Group in January 2023 mentioned false perceptions of what coming to London/Westminster would be like.

The factors leading to someone experiencing rough sleeping are complex and interconnected. In addition to structural issues, such as the shortage of affordable housing, inability to receive adequate help to manage poor health, wellbeing, debts or bills, alongside more personal ones such as adverse childhood experiences and mistrust of public services. There is a known 'gap' in statutory homelessness duties, where someone is homeless but not deemed to meet the 'priority need' threshold for Temporary Accommodation.

People experiencing rough sleeping often have multiple needs such as poverty, abuse, offending behaviour, poor mental and physical health, substance misuse, and trauma, where public service responses are not always suited to provide the help and support they need.

There has been a nearly doubling of rough sleeping due to an increase in asylum seekers being evicted from Home Office accommodation. While some (36%) come from Westminster hotels, those arriving in Westminster from outside London are the biggest group (46%).

Within the Gypsy/Roma/Traveller community cyclical rough sleeping throughout certain periods of the year is common and the drivers are complex, including 'push' factors to leave their country of origin due to poverty and discrimination, and 'pull' factors such as economic opportunity.

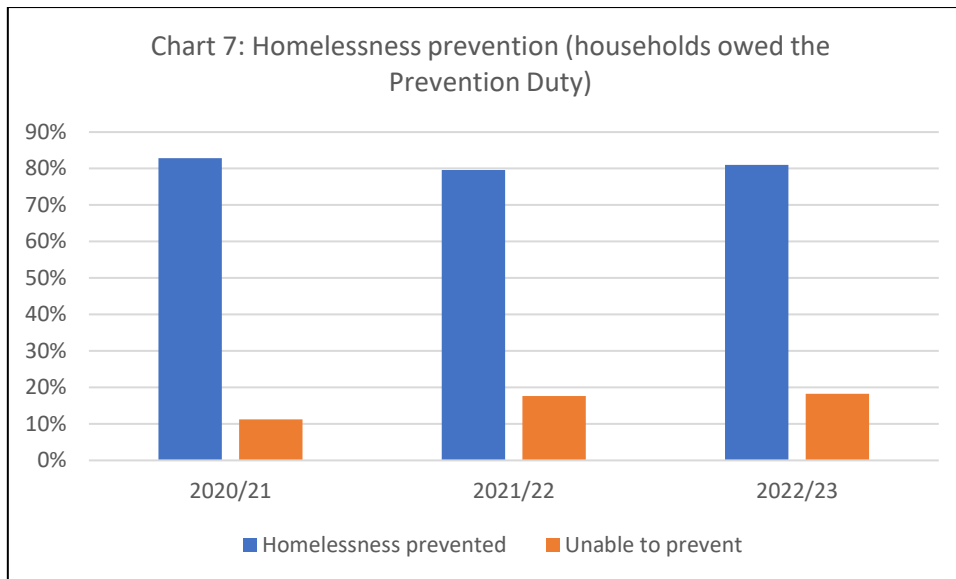
The response to homelessness

The council's current response to homelessness is broad and varied. Throughout, services are designed to meet the needs of those who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

Prevention and Advice

The council's Housing Solutions Service (HSS) Partnership works with people at risk of homelessness, such as through negotiating with private landlords or friends or family threatening eviction and supporting victims of domestic abuse to get help. Their work resulted in 52% of those owed the Prevention Duty remaining in their homes in 2022/2023. There is more likelihood of preventing homelessness with early help and over 2020/2021 – 2022/2023 it was prevented for 80% of those owed the Prevention Duty, but it could not be prevented in 16% of cases¹⁵.

¹⁵ For the remaining 4% applications were withdrawn for the homeless person was not willing to cooperate with the Housing Solutions Service



Other council and commissioned services also play a role in homelessness prevention, such as:

- **Shelter**, which are part of the HSS and provide community-based advice.
- **The Floating Support Service** which helps residents to keep their tenancies.
- **The Westminster Advice Partnership**, made up of Citizens Advice Westminster, Age UK, Asylum Aid and Deaf Plus provide advice on issues such as housing, debt, and benefits.
- **The Westminster Employment Service** provide support for residents facing housing related barriers to employment.
- **The Adult Social Care Team** provides a range of help to enable people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible.
- **Children's services** offer wide ranging support to families and young people such as care leavers. The three Family Hubs provide a range of services.
- **The Changing Futures programme** which is funded by Government and runs until March 2025 aims to improve outcomes for adults experiencing multiple disadvantage, many of which could otherwise be at high risk of homelessness. The learning from this programme will help inform the new Strategy.
- **The Private Sector Housing Team** takes action to ensure private rented properties are safe and licenses certain houses in multiple occupation.

There are also a wide range of voluntary and community groups across the city providing advice and support to those threatened with homelessness.

Accommodation

The Relief Duty, which lasts for 56 days, is owed when homelessness cannot be prevented. Data for 2022/2023 shows that Westminster has a higher proportion (77%) of approaches at this stage compared with London overall (55%)¹⁶. Accommodation could only be found for 28% of people, mainly single people, owed the Relief Duty between 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 due to

¹⁶ www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics

the shortage of affordable private rented housing and this is an ongoing challenge particularly for larger homes.

Temporary Accommodation is provided for households owed the Main Housing Duty and 3,347 households were living in TA in December 2023. There are significant challenges in providing TA, particularly in Westminster, due to increased demand and supply shortages and market inflation pushing up prices. The council’s Accommodation Placement Policy¹⁷ prioritises households for Temporary Accommodation by location in line with their health and welfare needs.

Table 1: Temporary Accommodation Location

	2019	2023 (December)
Westminster	46%	39%
London	51%	58%
Outside London	3%	3%

Not everyone experiencing homelessness can live independently and c. 900 supported accommodation units are commissioned to help people gain the capabilities for independent living, including improving health. The services are designed around the principles of trauma informed practice¹⁸. Moving on from supported housing is challenging given the lack of affordable housing options.

To help address households spending long periods of time in Temporary Accommodation and to reduce rising Temporary Accommodation costs a Private Rented Sector Offers Policy¹⁹ was introduced in 2017 to enable some homeless households²⁰ to be offered private rented, instead of social housing. A small number (109) of PRSOs were made during 2019/2020 – 2021/2022 due to a limited supply of properties and this Policy is currently suspended.

Social housing, including sheltered housing for older people, provides the most stable accommodation for people experiencing homelessness, however there are competing demands for a limited supply resulting in long waits. On average c. 670 social homes become available each year²¹ and 37% are let to homeless households, making up the largest proportion of lets to any single group.

Table 2: Estimated waiting times for social housing (based on social homes let in 2022/23)

Studio	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed
1 year	2.5 years	5 years	11.5 years	14.5 years

¹⁷ www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-policy-and-strategy/homelessness-policies

¹⁸ Trauma informed practice is based on the understanding that trauma has an impact on the person experiencing it and services therefore need to be geared towards this.

¹⁹ www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-policy-and-strategy/homelessness-policies

²⁰ Households applying as homeless on or after 9th November 2012 in line with the Localism Act 2012

²¹ Average over 4 years

As identified in the Fairer Westminster Strategy 2022 – 26²² a range of work is underway to increase affordable housing supply and to reduce waiting times on the list. This includes increasing social supply on the council's own land and a partial review of the City Plan²³ which aims to increase the proportion of new social housing coming through the planning system, from 40% to 60%, to better match need. However, despite this activity, the ability to address homelessness through new social supply will remain constrained given the high demand and in view of the challenges in developing new social supply in Westminster such as the high cost and shortage of land for development.

Rough sleeping

A range of services are commissioned for people sleeping rough and the council works in partnership with other organisations providing services. The response focuses around the three themes of Prevention, Intervention and Recovery, although there is overlap between them:

- **Prevention.** Council commissioned services include the No Night Out Scheme which provides emergency accommodation for those at risk of spending their first night on the streets. The council also works with partners providing prevention services, for example with Health Trusts on a Hospital Discharge Project
- **Intervention.** Council commissioned services include a Street Outreach Service which engages with new and existing rough sleepers, working quickly with them to support them off the street and into assessment centres, providing 81 units of self-contained accommodation with support. Thirty emergency bed spaces are available during the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol when temperatures fall below 0°C in London
- The council also works with partners providing intervention services, such as Connections at St Martins who support people with substance use and mental health issues, providing them with education, employment, and immigration advice alongside practical support such as access to food and showers. There is also joint work with the Greater London Authority who provide pan London services such as a Roma Support Service
- A range of health focused services are also commissioned by the council or jointly with other services. These include two specialist homeless GPs, a Homeless Health Nursing Team, and an Out of Hospital Pathway Teams, all of which aim to treat and support people sleeping rough and support them towards recovery.
- **Recovery services.** Health services, commissioned to address gaps in statutory services, include trauma support for men who have experienced sexual violence as adults or children which is a common experience. A multi-disciplinary team also works with those that would not normally meet the threshold for a statutory service.

²² [Fairer Westminster Strategy.pdf](#)

²³ www.westminster.gov.uk/planning-building-control-and-environmental-regulations/planning-policy/city-plan-partial-review

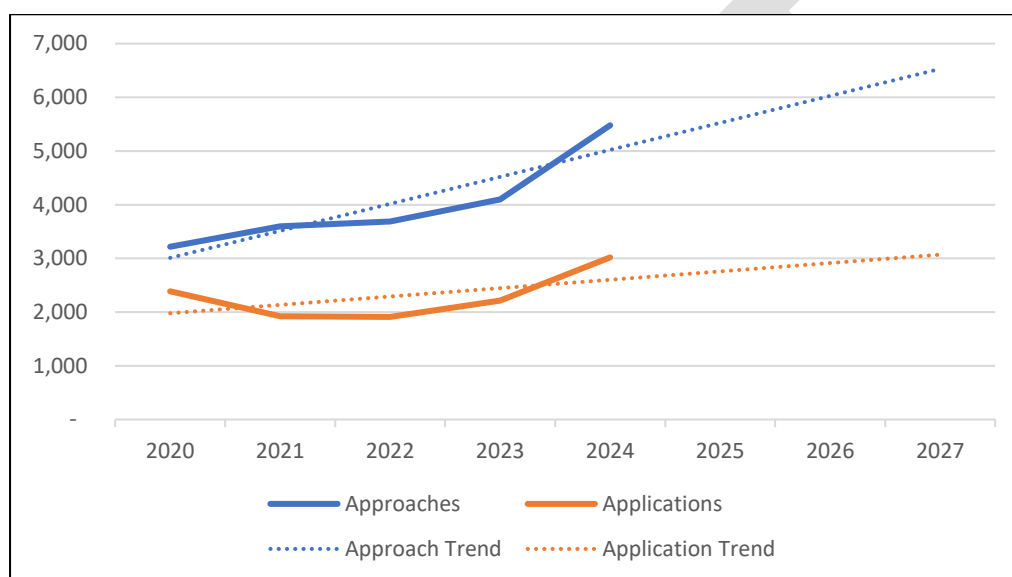
Developing the new Homelessness Strategy

To develop the new Strategy a range of factors need to be considered:

Future levels of homelessness

It is acknowledged that projecting future levels of homelessness accurately is challenging due to its multiple drivers. The following projections are based on past trends only, so do not consider any new approaches, changes to national policy or new local work which may on impact demand. All these high-level trend analyses predict steep rises in homelessness, which means Temporary Accommodation numbers could also rise.

Chart 8: Projected Approaches and Applications based on past trends.



The variation in rough sleeping street count data over the past four years makes future numbers hard to project, but if the current trend were to continue, it could rise to street counts of 332 people in May 2027 which would be a 17% increase from 283 in May 2024.

A horizon scanning exercise with partners has been undertaken which shows the range of factors which could impact future levels of homelessness and the response which the Strategy needs to be alert to:

1. **New legislation & Regulation:** Key legislation is the Renters Reform Bill which may impact the security of the private rented sector and the supply of homes.
2. **National and Local Elections:** The forthcoming national election creates uncertainty over future national policy and funding.
3. **Economic Pressures:** Rates of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis can affect rates of homelessness.
4. **National Policy:** Local Housing Allowance rates impact how affordable private rented housing is to low-income people.
5. **Social Pressures:** Such as the increasing number of children in care
6. **Public Health Issues:** Rough sleepers are at a higher risk from infectious diseases.

7. **Environmental Issues:** The climate crisis could increase migration amongst those in housing need.
8. **Technological Issues:** Those experiencing homelessness are more likely to be digitally excluded.

On many of these the factors council does not have a significant decision-making role or ability to influence, while they can often have a high level of impact. Understanding the context is important to the development of the Strategy to ensure that our aims and actions consider possible upcoming challenges.

The Resources Available

The council uses its own and national funding to provide homelessness services. The main national funds are the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG) and the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI). The 2023/2024 budget for all activity was **£51.117m** which included the net cost of Temporary Accommodation. Of this £18.106m was funded from external sources (including grants and contributions from other bodies), leaving £33.011m to be funded from the council's General Fund budget.

The council is projecting that it will need to spend more than £70m on homelessness activity in 2024/2025. It has had to build £38m of growth into its budget for the new financial year which places significant pressure on the General Fund position. Around 70% of this relates to the cost of providing Temporary Accommodation as funding from Government does not meet its true cost²⁴. This growth reflects increased demand, price inflation (as landlords demand higher rents) and the impact of supply shortages (which drive the use of more expensive forms of accommodation).

Westminster is not alone in facing rising Temporary Accommodation costs and London Councils estimated in August 2023 that 170,000 people across London were living in Temporary Accommodation and that boroughs were collectively spending £60m each month on it. They also estimated that the net deficit across London boroughs for their homelessness services would be £244m in 2023/2024, an increase of 37% from the previous year.

Government announced £120m of new funding for local authorities in England in 2024/20²⁵ to invest in homelessness provision, although further details are pending.

The council overall is facing a budget gap over the next three years which is partly driven by the cost of Temporary Accommodation therefore it is clear that new Strategy must have a strong focus on preventing homelessness and reducing demand for Temporary Accommodation. This will also free up resources to spend on other support-based activities. Any additional investment in homelessness services is likely to need to demonstrate that it will reduce Temporary Accommodation costs.

Cross cutting policies and initiatives

The new Strategy needs to be aligned with and contribute to wider council objectives, such as the Fairer Westminster Strategy²⁵ which includes a theme of Fairer Housing, and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which identifies that residents are more likely to have better health

²⁴

www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/node/40768#:~:text=Key%20findings%20from%20the%20latest,every%20London%20classroom%20is%20homeless.

²⁵ www.westminster.gov.uk/delivering-our-plan-build-fairer-westminster

outcomes if they live in good quality and affordable housing and feel part of communities. It also needs to take account of #2035, an evolving programme which aims to reduce the gap in life expectancy between the North and South of Westminster.

Conclusion

Westminster's new Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy will build on the data and insights in this Review to ensure that it is rooted in the reality of the challenges at hand. The growing risk of homelessness amongst the population in Westminster and the multi-faceted challenges faced by the council and all public services to effectively relieve homelessness are stark.

Preventing homelessness and ending rough sleeping will require us to work through or around several challenges such as:

- Poverty and inequality
- Housing supply and affordability
- National funding and Governance.

Whilst this Review does not provide strategic solutions, it raises a few key questions that the Strategy must address to be effective:

1. How do we improve prevention of homelessness?
2. How do we commission and co-ordinate effective services to prevent and relieve homelessness?
3. How do we provide services that are accessible and effective for people experiencing multiple disadvantage, inequality, and trauma?
4. How do we prevent homelessness where people come to Westminster in existing housing need?
5. How do we impact on drivers of homelessness that sit beyond the Local Authority's direct sphere of control?
6. How do we operate in a context of ongoing political, economic, and social uncertainty?