



Croydon's Homeless and Rough Sleeping Strategy

via Zoom

Thursday, 7 December 2023

7pm – 8.30pm

Present: Chris Adams, Elizabeth Ash (Chair), Ken Baker, Chi Yeung Chung, Sally Cook, Marion de Souza, Ola Dejo-Ojomo, Liane Dwyer, Beverley Foulkes-Jones, Libby Hamilton, Rhi Hughes (SWLLC), Isthiak Hussain, Simon James, Hamid Khan, Elaine Leck, Chris Lyseight, Georgia Mankertz, Bernard Mickelburgh, Steve Moores, Vincent Morrison, Sharon Newell, Lorraine Podiephatshwa,, Marilyn Smithies, Janet Stollery, Olivia Taylor, Sonia Thompson, Michael To, Paul Voden, Sue Wavell

Apologies: Cllr Margaret Bird, Rhian Clugston, David Hooper, Cllr Yvette Hopley, Ayiri Irone, Ian Leonard, Clive Locke, Cllr Ria Patel, Mahbub Sadiq Bhatti, Norman Young

Welcome and introductions:

Everyone was welcomed.

Updates and Notices

None. See website for current events and information.

Meeting

Simon James introduced himself. He is working on a number of projects, including the housing strategy and the homelessness rough sleeping strategy. This is a statutory review that all councils must carry out every five years on their homelessness services, which includes rough sleeping.

Isthiak Hussain recently joined the council's housing transformation team and is involved in a number of projects include supporting Simon with the homelessness and rough sleeping strategy and the housing strategy.

Hamid Khan also introduced himself. He is head of homelessness and allocations at Croydon Council.

The team made a short presentation of what the strategy is about and what informed it, including what is going on nationally as well as locally. There are five proposed themes that were explained, and views were sought on these. The presentation can be found posted on the CCC website [here](#).

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2024 to 2029 will go to Cabinet in the new year.

This homelessness review is being conducted in an environment of rising homelessness across London. This has risen by around 20% in the last year, so of great concern. Added to this are the challenges in terms of housing people.

As part of this review, the council has to set out how it is going to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping over the next five years. This will include looking at the issues around housing supply, such as how to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation and satisfactory services for those who are affected.

Officers explained that the council has made some considerable changes to the homelessness service. This was to address the situation where there was quite

unsatisfactory services for many of its residents in terms of how quickly and how compassionately they were dealt with.

Future issues the council is likely to face include a rising young population in Croydon. Croydon currently has the highest number of 0 to 19-year-olds in London, so in the future there is likely to be increased demand for accommodation. Coupled with this, there is a rising population of over 65s, which is likely to lead to increasing demand for extra supported accommodation. As part of this review, the council is looking at how it keeps people in their homes. It's often best for people's wellbeing that they're able to stay in their home but, if not, there needs to be a plan to have provision available for people where they're comfortable and properly accommodated.

Croydon has a disabled population of 19% against the average of London, which is 18.5%. Concerningly only 55% of adults with learning disabilities, and 32% of adults in contact with mental health services have stable and appropriate accommodation in Croydon, while the London average is quite a bit higher at 77%.

National factors were also explained, with supply of affordable housing not meeting demand. In the last year Croydon has lost 44% of their private landlords in the private and social housing sector. To put this in context, Croydon would need to build 3000 homes a week just to stand still to meet the demand.

There's also an issue around the quality of housing in the social housing sector. Croydon is quite unique in having 40 '[large panel system](#)' blocks. These were built in the late 50s or early 60s, and were built to a standard where four panels were welded together. They are coming very quickly towards the end of their shelf life, with no more than 5 to 10 years left in them.

There are issues around the private rented sector too. [Category 1 hazards](#) have increased. Numerous landlords have, for example, been found converting two-bedroom properties into four or five-bedroom bedsits, so there are issues around the planning system about enforcement.

While rough sleeping across London has shown an increase, Croydon has shown a slight decrease.

The officers then took us through the five themes identified, as follows

Theme 1 – Maintaining and managing housing supply

This includes delivering the first phase of Regina Road by 2026/27. There will be numerous secure homes as part of this scheme. The difference between this and an affordable home is a secure home has a council rent, which is the lowest rent you can get in the country, which will help the council with people who may be earning low income or going back into education and training.

The council plans to work with the private sector to improve standards. Officers explained how difficult this is to achieve as although there is legislative teeth in the 2004 Housing Act, the Act does not lead to a lot of enforcement as it's down to a lot of negotiation. If the landlord doesn't want to negotiate, it can take years before they could be taken to court.

It was explained that there's a long way to go in terms of turning properties around and working with partners.

The council is looking at new ways of maintaining and managing a healthy housing supply. A key element of this would be partnering with landlords, at minimal risk to the council. This would mean the council not paying any money up front, reducing its risk. The council might pay a couple of percent more on housing rates, but this will make the properties concerned hugely affordable to number of people in Croydon.

Theme 2 – Preventing homelessness and earlier intervention

There's a national crisis around homelessness, with the situation in London particularly acute. London has more people in bed and breakfast accommodation than anywhere else in the country. One in 50 children across the capital are now in temporary accommodation. Housing stock is decreasing. Private landlords are leaving the market because of the cost-of-living crisis, interest rate rises, etc. What is needed is a tailor-made service for early intervention and prevention of homelessness, and this process has started. Despite the challenges, the new service is geared to early intervention and prevention.

There have been around 2000 families in temporary accommodation, but the council will be changing that figure as the true figure is nearer 3250.

Croydon is working with other London councils to develop a united approach to procurement for temporary accommodation. In essence, all landlords will need to sign up to this process. They will need to demonstrate good standards of their accommodation - health and safety, cleanliness, all the things people would take for granted. The aim is to enforce higher standards, with penalties for landlords of properties used for temporary accommodation, who don't uphold those standards. For example, if there's a rodent infestation and it takes you two months to fix it, that would be two months money lost. The council is carrying out an audit of those living in temporary accommodation, making sure that people who need to be in accommodation are still there, and also capturing any changes in housing need. For example, a person may have been healthy once when they went into that property, but now they may have a disability or an illness, which makes the person's housing needs different to when the council first accepted their case.

Theme 3 – Minimising temporary accommodation

Croydon had the largest number of people housed in temporary accommodation but has brought that down through strong partnership working with all other London councils and the South West region. This is just not a Croydon issue but applies across London.

Theme 4 – Tackle Rough Sleeping

One of the key issues that Croydon faces is that Croydon is a net importer of people, rather than exporter, as other boroughs place some of their homeless population in accommodation in Croydon.

Croydon will take the necessary enforcement action against rough sleeping where needed, such as where aggressive begging is involved or where persons involved persistently refuse assistance and engage in antisocial activities. This strand of action is taken in partnership with Community Safety and the Metropolitan Police.

Theme 5 – Targeting services and working with partners

Officers stressed the huge pressures on Croydon. As an example, officers cited a meeting with colleagues in health last week where it was highlighted that Croydon is a net importer of people with health problems coming from other boroughs. Domestic violence is up. Drugs and alcohol dependency is up 20%. Croydon Council is looking to work with Public Health and the Home Office and various other organisations to do extended preventative work, to get people into off drug dependency, into rehabilitation, and give them some stability.

Croydon Council has begun developing quite a number of partnerships with the voluntary sector. It was accepted that this work was in its infancy so there is a lot more work to be done.

The collation of information is one of the major challenges being addressed. What officers were being told in the past was completely different to the reality of the data they now hold.

Having a central system to systematically log information and capture all data, which can be accessed by all parties within the council who need to access it, is a huge step forward. This is a work in process, but it's the first time in years that the Council have one housing system that will talk to all bits of housing, and lead to a more joined up approach across departments too, as different departments are dealing with similar clients.

Next steps

[The consultation survey closes at the end of Friday, 15 December 2023](#), and people were encouraged to spread the word and to feed in their views.

The following points and questions were addressed:

Treatment of Voids

In response to a question, officers explained that this term was used to refer to an empty property taken out of the system as the property required minor or substantial works to bring it up to standard. Once the process is complete, the property is put back in the system to allocate to someone. The time between somebody leaving, and somebody gaining that property through the system is still challenging, although it's a lot better than it was a year ago. There are new contractors in place which is helping. The way the council logs reports of repairs needed has changed. In the next 12 months it is hoped that tenants will see a substantial improvement in voids being turned around.

In response to a question about the Independent Housing Board expressing concerns about the volume of voids and the length of time that these properties remained out of action, officers reported that the board was generally pleased at the way the council is addressing this. Officers accepted that things were not yet as they should be so there was no place for complacency. This was a work in progress.

Blocks like Regina Road, at their end of life

In response to a question about the other blocks, like Regina Road, coming to the end of their life, officers explained that Regina Road will be a test bed for similar properties. Extensive testing will be undertaken shortly, including drilling in blocks to assess the degree of decay. Testing will inform priority.

Tests on 16 of those 40 blocks is being carried out. These are quite detailed investigations of the condition of those blocks, the results of which will be ready by next June, which will give a strong indicator of what the position is.

A number of residents expressed concern about the length of time it has taken to get some action on Regina Road.

Supply of affordable housing

The Mayor of London sets a target for new housing. Croydon is delivering that new housing, but the concern that many residents have raised with the council is that housing isn't really affordable in the sense that people on low incomes are not able to afford it.

To address this, one of the things the council is setting out to do is to have a New Homes Policy - a plan to deliver a supply of housing in the future. This will focus on use of council land around existing council sites, brown fill sites, garage sites etc that are currently under utilised.

The council plans to work more closely with housing associations and looks to maximise some opportunities. Work to rebuild these relationships is well underway.

In response to another question, officers made clear that the intention is not to build on greenbelt land, such as the green space by Forestdale at the bottom of Gravel Hill.

Pressures on housing due to the Home Office and immigration

An attendee was concerned about the additional pressure having the Home Office in Croydon placed on housing immigrants locally.

Officers confirmed that Croydon has the most displaced people in any London borough, with over 1150 at the moment, and there are people who have been in hotels for a number of years. However, in August of this year, the Home Office changed their policy. They started evicting people who then required housing, but these people are not the cause of the problem. The cause of the problem is a lack of decent and affordable housing across the capital and across the South East. 1000 people is a drop in the ocean. The real issue is supply.

Rhi Hughes from South West London Law Centres highlighted that the situation with people that are going through immigration processes isn't exclusive to Croydon. A lot of those visiting the Home Office travel in from other boroughs.

Hamid Khan reiterated that there is a national issue around displaced people, but that Croydon has the largest number of displaced people in any one contained space. The Home Office has tended to allow more and more people to be housed in these local hotels. Croydon is currently unique because we have these 1150 people but receives no government funding to assist.

It was also noted that the conditions in some of these hotels were extremely poor.

Housing people in new high-rises

Why people could not be housed in high rise developments such as those going up in the town centre around East Croydon was raised. In response, the meeting was told that the borough is meant to be delivering 20,000 homes over the next 10 years. Developments such as these will form a part of that housing. The concern that some residents and councillors have raised is that these properties are generally not really affordable for many people.

In response to a further question, it was explained that the council has no power to bring the rentals of these down. The council's Regeneration and Homes policies set out a long-term plan for building more homes which are affordable to try to address the issues. This includes using the land that the council already has e.g. garage spaces or spare pieces of land around existing sites and brownfield sites.

Affordable housing

A resident spoke with enthusiasm of the fantastic work the officers were planning to achieve and of her desire to help rough sleepers and the homeless. She was interested in knowing more about housing benefit for people.

Hamid Khan explained that rough sleepers may be subject to all sorts of issues. The problem faced is that housing benefit rates don't reflect local housing allowance or the cost of private accommodation. There are often very few options. Either a person with multiple issues who has been rough sleeping goes into some form of supported housing, and there is a huge waiting list for that, or they try to find a room in a house with multiple occupation, often sharing with six other people, so they can make the most of the single person's rate.

The majority of landlords lost in the last 12 months have gone out of the HMO business as it's just not worth it for them financially. There is the supported housing bill that's coming out which aims to raise standards etc. but it's some time away so we've got a perfect mix of unaffordable accommodation and benefits that don't cover the accommodation costs. Hamid spoke of the large number of people that come to the council, who are working two jobs but say they can just about afford their rent but can't afford anything else.

The government have lifted housing rates to 30% and that will attract some landlords, but it will take some time to get back to the position where we want to be in terms of affordable housing supply.

Volunteering

The semi-retired attendee explained that they knew quite a lot about housing and has been involved in property management. She explained that she understands housing associations and about some housing benefits, and offered her help. It was agreed that CCC would put her in touch with officers. **Action: CCC**

Elizabeth added that Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) has produced a Winter Support for Rough Sleepers and Homeless People guide. This lists organisations that help to support the homeless. This will be posted on the website following the meeting, along with the presentation.

Others suggested Crisis and [Change Grow Live](#).

Rough Sleeping

Council officer explained that rough sleeping is an important element of the council's strategy. Last week, SWEP – severe weather episode - was declared, where staff were on the streets looking for people who are at risk and making an offer of accommodation. This is via London Mayor funding. In the recent SWEP, even in the bitter cold, of the 29 people found one night, five refused the offer of accommodation.

The performance indicator called 'no second night out' is something that Croydon performs well in, in comparison with other boroughs. This is the number of people who the council manages to help before they have to sleep out for a second night. Around 80% don't spend a second night out.

Despite this, Croydon still has a problem in that about 15% of rough sleepers do not accept help or are people who are on a cycle where they're continually either by choice, or for reasons of mental health, addiction etc, back on the streets again.

Hamid Khan explained that for most rough sleepers, the council has no statutory duty to assist. The law is clear on this, and you need to be classed as vulnerable to gain assistance. Hamid gave an example of a case that went to the High Court in 2015 and the extremely high threshold to meet the criteria. In this case, a homeless person, rough sleeper, with mental health problems, a drug and alcohol user, went to the High Court and the High Court said that's not vulnerable.

The council has various organisations they work with, which costs roughly £1.8 million a year. StreetLink pick up the reports of homeless people, and try to re-engage them through housing support, and specialist officers from various agencies who deal with probation, mental health, and rough sleeping.

Wellesley Road Underpass

The issue of the Wellesley Road underpass was also mentioned by attendees, with stench of urine and people living in unsanitary conditions. The council are well aware of the issues there. The council's rough sleeping coordinator says the problem there is that it's such a changing population that no sooner are people moved on, other people arrive to take their place.

It was explained that there were very few enforcement powers. If somebody doesn't want to engage with the support offered, there is not a lot that can be done. Community Safety and the Police are trying to put a strategic response together in the longer run about moving people on if they do not accept help and support. As people hop around from borough to borough, though, it is an almost impossible task.

Floating Shelters

An attendee spoke of the Floating Shelter project, which was run by a number of the churches in Croydon, offering shelter from beginning of November to the end of March in various church buildings at night. The shelter provided a three-course meal, a pack lunch to take away the next day after providing breakfast. All the churches involved had mattresses. Washing and friendship was provided. This stopped due to COVID and issues of distancing and has not been reinstated.

Rhi and Elizabeth spoke of this being discussed at a meeting with Police, which included members of a church that was involved in the original scheme, and of attempts to get it up and running again. It was noted that floating shelters have been discussed quite a lot in other community meetings also.

It was understood that there were a number of ongoing issues, including Public Health being reluctant to have people share mattresses, because of the risk of transmitted infection. Officers suggested that Public Health should be spoken to as part of any plans.

The shelter was run by a charity. The churches provided all the services free of charge, but all the people who came were vetted by a charity. This also ensured that people with complex health or addiction issues, for example, were not referred. The person previously involved explained that a number of people were successfully rehomed through the project.

Restructuring and the right contacts at Croydon Council

A social prescriber in Croydon, working across a number of GP practices, spoke of concerns about not getting replies from Croydon Council regarding housing issues. GP practices have rough sleepers presenting at their surgeries and need a ready way to refer them on.

Surgeries have so many people with health conditions who are stuck in unsuitable accommodation, e.g. people living on upper floors without a lift, including wheelchair users.

Social prescribers would really like to have a close relationship with someone at Croydon Council, who they can go to when needed.

The council's new structure is now open five days a week, and Croydon Access is open four nights for every one day for people who need emergency advice and assistance. He confirmed that the email addresses should be working.

The new system, implemented in late September 2023, involves having a duty officer that picks up all the emails every day. There are two officers on answering telephones and up to six officers seeing people every day on the frontline to make sure people can come and get advice and information.

The Housing Register that the council inherited was fundamentally broken. The system was so poor people that people would send in application after application, with little if any joined up working. There is a backlog around housing assessments in terms of medicals, etc., but the reality is the average waiting time now for two bed properties is 12 years. Not everybody's eligible to join the Housing Register either. Just because a person has a medical problem does not mean they need new or different housing.

The council is revamping the housing allocation scheme next year too.

The council was not assisting in preventing homelessness, so customer after customer was left to their own devices. The team were informed that there was only a backlog of 700 appointments, but the reality was found to be over 2000. To address this, a specialist backlog team has been brought in to deal with the most urgent cases in crisis.

The council placed more people in temporary accommodation in the last month or two.

The council has moved to adopting a more welcoming approach, where people can speak with an officer face to face. Officers will treat people with respect and show empathy. They can support and explain to the person concerned in plain language. Getting an interpreter, where required, has also improved.

The new caring approach is a real bonus for the organisation and for homeless families across the borough. It's a more personal service, which people can access 9am to 4pm.

There has been resistance to change. This service has not been invested in for over 10 - 12 years and the impact of this is quite clear. Staff had previously kept information on spreadsheets, and bits of paper. Now there is an IT system so the council can log and track where somebody is with their case and what's happening.

Officers were very clear that the council has a long way to go, but a very good start has been made on the beginning of that journey. The council is also being open and honest about the situation.

More information about how the service was being restructured was requested. **Action: Housing Officers.**

They believe that over the next six to 12 months, people should see a massive difference.

StreetLink

Several people spoke of experiences, indicating that StreetLink is not working, with people having to stay sleeping in a park, for example, waiting for StreetLink to respond. Some even sleep at A&E, waiting for StreetLink, but with security guards trying to move them on.

A number spoke of there needing to be a better way to deal with this than people out and vulnerable waiting for StreetLink to respond. Whether it was possible for community groups to verify that a person was legitimately homeless, rather than wait for StreetLink to do so, was also queried.

Issues reported, included Thames Reach, which StreetLink send out, coming out as a result of a report but not being able to locate the homeless person for days on end although in a readily identifiable spot. Additionally, homeless people are having to stay in one place for many hours, or even days – not always possible if this leaves them more vulnerable in a public place or they need to leave to go to work or an appointment.

Street sleepers often feel vulnerable, particularly women and those of protected characteristics, so prefer to hide away to sleep.

Officers explained that StreetLink have a team of highly trained workers skilled in looking for really vulnerable people, including under hedgerows, derelict buildings, quiet areas, very dark areas. Others can refer someone to StreetLink. Details here:

<https://thestreetlink.org.uk/>

The strength of feeling in the meeting was this was not the case, and this had been raised by others in previous meetings attendees had attended.

Post-meeting note: A person unable to attend the meeting was put in touch with the housing team after the meeting as they reported a similar issue with a young homeless person, who had even been provided with a phone to help assist them being located by StreetLink, but still with with no joy. Officers agreed to take up this issue. **Action: Housing team**

CCC understands that the update on this case is still outstanding at the point of finalising the notes on 15/12/23 as officers have not provided an update to the person reporting.

Elizabeth agreed to follow up with police on the Intersectionality meeting on Homelessness that they recently held, to chase details of a future meeting, suggest input from council officers and to find contacts for Floating Shelter. **Action: EA**

Updates on progress

Hamid Khan agreed that regular meetings like this to feedback so people know what progress is, is really important, and were happy to commit to this.

Respect & Residents Charter

The council had identified that some people have felt that they've not been treated with respect by the council over the years, including council tenants, and this is something the council is determined to rectify. That commitment forms part of the housing strategy. The council has made a commitment in their Residents Charter, to respect and give better services to residents, and that commitment also extends to those who are homeless or rough sleeping. It's very important that people are treated humanely and with respect.

Blocks of flats run by Hyde Homes, London Road, West Croydon

A resident spoke of major issues of homeless people accessing the block repeatedly, causing alarm to residents in the block, defecating, and leaving mess everywhere. In one instance they set the fire alarm off, and everyone had to be evacuated in the early hours of the morning. Residents have informed the police as well as the council. The resident enquired whether the council has any sort of powers of enforcement against housing associations.

Officers confirmed that the council has no powers over housing associations, but that if antisocial behaviour problems are extreme this could be pursued through the [Safe Streets Partnership](#). Antisocial Behaviour Officers can look into issues such as these.

The housing association should be putting in heightened security for their tenants to address any ASB issues, such as this.

The poor reputation of Hyde Homes and the appalling things that residents in this block have had to put up with were well known as residents and local councillors have raised the issues with Hyde Homes and on social media. This included flooded hallways, mould, water running over exposed electrical wiring, broken lifts, filthy bin areas, etc.

The resident confirmed that Inspector Weston and Sgt Rowbotham had done as agreed at the last ward panel meeting for Broad Green and written to Hyde Homes to ask that they address the issues, but had not had a response as yet, although a month has passed since writing.

Rhi Hughes advised to report the issue to the Housing Association and if there has been no response within a week, make a formal complaint. The landlord should have a Complaints Procedure to be followed. When this is exhausted, the final stage is to go to the Housing Ombudsman. A clear log of actions taken needs to be kept, so it was advised to do as much in writing to evidence this.

South West London Law Centres also run 'Turn Up Tuesdays'. Rhi explained that this focusses on cost-of-living support, so not everything to do with bills, rent, benefits, etc. Details [here](#).

Rhi offered to provide information on how the tenants could build a case. Having established that there is evidence and tenants have already made complaints to the association with no action, she advised it should be escalated to the Housing Ombudsman.

Rhi also suggested that if there was no tenant or resident association, this would be worth doing. **Action: Rhi/CCC**

Housing Team

In response to a question, the team explained that Hamid Khan is responsible for homelessness allocations and the Housing Register. There is a housing management team. There's various other smaller teams that support all those processes. In essence, it's one big housing service, but there's housing management that deals with all the tenants. The team deals with people who are struggling with homelessness. There is the repairs team, that do all the repairs and work with contractors, etc. Tenancy do a lot of work around ASB, grounds maintenance, etc. It's all part of one big department. The council does not like to split it up too much or they'd be going back working in silos.

Consultation and closing remarks

With no further questions, officers were thanked for attending to explain, answer questions and hear from residents. The consultation is open until next Friday, 15 December at 23:59. Links to this and all other information discussed would go up on the CCC website following the meeting. Details [here](#).

Council officers thanked residents for attending and feeding in their views.

The Chair thanked Paul Voden for assisting with the meeting.

Joining committee or getting more involved

People were encouraged to get in touch if they were interested in getting more involved or if they wanted to know more. CCC is currently looking for a Treasurer and a Secretary or people could join the committee as a general member. There are also one-off or smaller tasks open for people who want to help out less regularly or don't wish to join committee.

Membership

Anyone can support CCC's work, [by taking up membership](#). Membership renews on September 1 each year. Members have voting rights and are eligible to stand for committee.

Donations to support CCC's work are also very welcome! Details [here](#).

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Meeting closed: 8.30pm

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