

Hidden homelessness in London

September 2017



Executive summary

- Hidden homeless people are those without a place to call home, but who are hidden from official statistics and not receiving support.
- They can find themselves in precarious situations, including sofa surfing, sleeping rough, squatting and sleeping on public transport. These can be dangerous, and leave people at risk of abuse, assault and exploitation.
- We have estimated the numbers in London and found that 13 times more people are homeless but hidden than are visibly sleeping rough – as many as 12,500 each night.
- Young people are most likely to be affected, particularly people who identify as LGBT. We also heard that this affects people who aren't eligible for homelessness support and people fleeing domestic violence.
- Only one in five young people affected present to a council, meaning they remain hidden from possible support.
- Some that do seek help from councils fail to be recognised as vulnerable, despite being in danger.
- The new Homelessness Reduction Act may help with this problem, but the Mayor and Government need to support local authorities in tackling it, look at gaps in eligibility for support, and do more to promote access to homelessness services.

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Introduction

Homelessness remains a huge problem in London. In the year to March 2017, 18,070 households were accepted as homeless by local authorities in the capital.¹ The number of those rough sleeping in London in 2016-17 totalled 8,108.² However, homelessness charities have long argued that official statistics only tell half the story. By all indications, the problem of hidden homelessness is on a much larger scale than that of observable homelessness. Those without a roof over their head, but who are not entitled to homelessness support from the Government, are often forced into dangerous and insecure forms of accommodation, such as rough sleeping, sofa surfing and trading sex for a bed.

Unless they approach local authorities or homelessness support services, this group remains hidden from official figures and has great difficulty getting back into secure accommodation. And without an accurate picture of the numbers of hidden homeless people it is hard for the Government and local authorities to effectively support them.

The purpose of our investigation was to learn more about the lives of those who are hidden from homelessness statistics and to understand their experiences. This is an under-researched area, not least because it is a 'hidden' phenomenon. The report seeks to explain the problem better. It is also a call to action for both the Mayor and others to delve deeper into this problem, and to stimulate further research and action

to prevent homelessness. This report highlights areas where improvements could be made and where the Mayor can show leadership in tackling this issue. We carried out a survey of homeless Londoners and spoke to a wide range of experts to inform the recommendations in this report. Details of our approach to the investigation and statistical analysis can be found in Appendix 1.

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About the Housing Committee

The Housing Committee scrutinises the Mayor's role and record in delivering the private, social and affordable homes London needs. The cross-party committee has 7 members: Sian Berry AM (Chair), Andrew Boff AM (Deputy Chair), Tom Copley AM, Tony Devenish AM, Nicky Gavron AM, Leonie Cooper AM and David Kurten AM.

You can find out more about the committee's work on [our website](#).

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What is hidden homelessness?

Despite the phrase 'hidden homeless' appearing frequently in the press, there is no government or otherwise agreed definition. However, from our investigation, a working definition would include those who:

- either have no right to live in a fixed place (through tenancy or ownership), or cannot stay in a fixed place where they might have a right (due, for example, to fear of abuse or violence)
- are not receiving formal homelessness support from a local authority or specialist support service
- have not made a formal homelessness application since they have become homeless
- are not living with a parent or guardian
- do not have the resources or financial means to avoid their current situation

This definition captures a wide variety of situations ranging from 'sofa surfing' through to rough sleeping. It includes those in certain forms of overcrowded or 'concealed' households, depending on their financial and tenancy status. However, it excludes those who are in night shelters or other hostel provision as they will be in receipt of local authority or charity support.

People who are hidden homeless frequently don't identify themselves as being homeless. This is often because they don't see themselves as a 'stereotypical' homeless person, typified by rough sleeping. Evidence to our investigation also suggests that many people don't identify with contemporary terms such as 'sofa surfing', which can glamorise the danger of situations they find themselves in. Often people tend to see themselves as simply 'between homes' – although this can last for extended periods.

Who are London's hidden homeless?

Government data shows that the biggest causes of homelessness are the end of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST) and relationship breakdown.³ Our survey work equally indicates that relationship breakdown is also a primary cause of hidden homelessness. The need to avoid domestic violence and other forms of abuse are also common causes. Our survey results suggest that specific vulnerable groups may be especially prone to becoming hidden homeless.

We heard that in some cases those who become hidden homeless should be entitled to support, but are unable to prove their entitlement. In other cases, they are not entitled to support, do not have the means to remain housed independently in their community and are unable to move elsewhere to find a home. People falling into these categories effectively become homeless, without being considered to be in 'priority

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need', the label which would entitle them to substantial state support to find housing.⁴ Unless they opt to sleep rough and are found by the authorities, such people become hidden homeless, below the radar of the homelessness statistics.

Groups likely to be affected include:

- those who aren't eligible for homelessness support from local authorities but cannot afford housing – young, single people without dependent children, especially young LGBT people
- those who are eligible for homelessness support under local authorities' duty but who don't apply, or whose applications are turned down because they can't prove their eligibility – primarily victims of domestic violence and abuse, often women
- those with no recourse to public funds, especially asylum seekers

Not eligible for homelessness support

Evidence we received suggests that the largest group affected by hidden homelessness are those who are single and without dependent children, and therefore not defined as being in 'priority need'. Most commonly this affects young people, who are less likely to have the financial resources, or to have developed support networks and knowledge of homelessness legislation, to navigate the system to their advantage.

Theresa's story

Theresa is studying for a PhD at an internationally renowned London university. She had been funded for the first three years of her studies, in which time she was expected to have finished her research. However, she hadn't finished by her third year and was left without funding while she needed to carry on studying. Without any source of income, she could not pay rent. Faced with the choice of becoming homeless or giving up on her PhD after three years' work, she chose to live between homes. Initially, she was able to sleep on friends' sofas and floors, but soon their hospitality ran out. When she has no place to go she has to scrape together what little money she can find to pay for hostels. She says she finds this extremely difficult to deal with, not knowing where she will sleep from one night to the next, on top of the added pressure of her research.

Theresa has recently been given a 'gift' from some academics at her university which will enable her to support herself for the final period of her studies. However, without a formal income she is unable to get a tenancy in the rental market, as she wouldn't pass reference checks. Therefore, her only choice is to continue sofa surfing or illegally sublet a room, both insecure forms of accommodation.

It appears family and relationship breakdown is the largest cause of hidden homelessness among young people in general, particularly among young LGBT people, who make up one quarter of youth homelessness.⁵ Two thirds of LGBT homeless youth reported parental

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rejection as one of the top three reasons for their homelessness.⁶ This issue is particularly prevalent among the transgender community, according to evidence we received.

Hidden homelessness insight: sofa surfing

Experiences of 'sofa surfing' among Londoners differ greatly. For some, it may involve moving in with close friends for short periods, which can be a positive experience. For others, the impact can be longer term and much more negative. We heard that many people report feeling like a burden on those who host them and move frequently to avoid "out-staying their welcome." Relatives and friends no longer being able or willing to provide accommodation remains the main reason for the loss of a last settled home.⁷

When the kindness of friends and family runs out, people can find themselves increasingly desperate. Many report staying with strangers or 'friends of friends' who may as well be strangers.⁸ We heard how the range of situations and experiences that people often describe as 'staying with friends' may be much more dangerous than it seems.⁹ Many of those forced to 'sofa surf' report poor mental health as a result of their often nomadic experiences and the energy they expend trying to find accommodation each night.

Affordability is another significant driver of homelessness among young single people, but is also increasingly affecting older Londoners on modest incomes.¹⁰ The lack of affordable properties in the private rented sector continues to cause issues in all corners of the capital. 43 per cent of hidden homeless respondents to our survey said inability to afford rent was the cause of their homelessness, while nine per cent of respondents also reported competition in the rental market as a contributing factor to their homelessness.

Changes to welfare, such as the freeze of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, also appear to have had an affect on homelessness. We heard from experts and respondents to our survey that the reduction in available benefits had made it more challenging, for young people in particular, to find housing, especially in the private rented sector. We heard that before the LHA freeze only 1.5 per cent of rental properties in London were affordable and let by landlords willing to rent to someone on benefits.¹¹

During the course of the investigation we heard stories of young workers getting their first jobs in Canary Wharf, who were having to use homelessness relief services because they couldn't afford a rental deposit, and of university students who couldn't afford rent or deposits for houses and were forced onto friends' sofas or paying for hostels on a night by night basis. These factors mean that an increasing number of ordinary Londoners are spending longer between homes.

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Eligible through vulnerability, but not accepted by local authorities

Although survivors of domestic violence and abuse are legally entitled to housing support from local authorities, due to their vulnerability,¹² we heard from Solace Women's Aid that an increasing number are being turned away. For many people who have experienced domestic violence and abuse (which particularly affects women, LGBT people and young people), leaving the home where the perpetrator is living is the only way to escape further abuse.¹³ However, despite their vulnerable status, and associated entitlement to housing, we were told an increasing number of victims find it difficult to get accepted by local housing authorities.

Solace Women's Aid say that survivors of domestic violence and abuse are frequently being warned off filling out homelessness applications at the point of presenting to a local authority. We heard that many local authorities now require those making a homelessness application as a result of domestic violence to provide a police report (or risk assessment) to back up their claim. Victims are often too scared to report their abuse to the police (even though without such a report they will likely not be accepted for support). Given that Solace suggest only about a third of women report cases of domestic violence to the police,

“I found myself in terrible environments. I slept on doorsteps, sometimes family doorsteps. I slept in Euston station. I tried to sleep on buses.”
Corey, 21

this problem is likely to be widespread.¹⁴ When they do report, most women have their cases dropped by the police because they won't make a 'good witness' or because of lack of evidence.¹⁵

Without local authority support, single homeless people often sleep rough. But for vulnerable women and young people, sleeping rough is particularly dangerous. They may also 'sofa surf' with friends or other family members. However, where they have no such personal network to call upon, or when they have exhausted those options, they may become more desperate and seek more dangerous alternatives which may leave them vulnerable to coercion.

We heard that some vulnerable people who face homelessness, particularly women, can become exploited in their desperation for a roof over their heads. This can vary in severity from exchanging unpaid domestic labour for a roof over their head through to 'survival sex.'¹⁶ For example, we heard from Women for Refugee Women that asylum-seeking women who are made destitute are "extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse, with favours expected in exchange for resources such as accommodation".¹⁷

There are also increasing reports that some landlords in London have been posting adverts offering rent-free accommodation in exchange for sex.¹⁸ A search of a popular listings website for 'free rent' turned up 22 adverts in the London area with these kinds of offers, luring desperate people into potentially dangerous and abusive situations.

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For those forced to sleep rough, we heard that women seek out quieter, more sheltered places in order to hide themselves from potential attackers and the general public. This means that they are less likely to be picked up by rough sleeping teams who would otherwise have counted them and, hopefully, supported them into housing. However, the issue of not receiving the support they are entitled to is not limited to survivors of violence and abuse. The Royal British Legion told us that six percent of ex-service men and women discharged in the last five years (who should also be classed as vulnerable by local authorities) report problems getting a council or housing association place.¹⁹

No recourse to public funds

Finally, those with no recourse to public funds, most commonly asylum seekers with claims waiting for approval, are at high risk of becoming hidden homeless, according to various charities who submitted evidence to our investigation. They remain hidden from various authorities because they do not want to make themselves a target for deportation. Some asylum seekers have waited as long as 23 years, while destitute, before being granted leave to remain. Women for

Refugee Women told us they estimate that there are hundreds, if not thousands of asylum-seeking women in London who are destitute, although others told us that it is not possible to quantify this. The issue of having no recourse to public funds can also affect those who travel to the UK on spousal or student visas, leaving them destitute if they lose their initial accommodation, through, for example, relationship breakdown.

“If a woman didn’t tell you how she lived, you would never know. A woman is forced to hide, with a man it’s different”

Asylum seeking woman

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How many people are hidden homeless?

There are many difficulties with accurately estimating the number of hidden homeless people on any given night in London. This is because of:

- the transience of the phenomenon as people move in and out of accommodation
- our inability to count those who do not present to any agency
- the incompleteness and inconsistency of existing local authority homelessness data

But there have been attempts to quantify the scale of hidden homelessness. For example, the Homelessness Monitor 2017²⁰ estimates there were 2.27 million households containing concealed single persons in England in early 2016, in addition to 288,000 concealed couples and lone parents. This has risen by around a third since 2008.²¹ Crisis estimates that this equates to 3.34 million adults in these concealed household units, which they would describe as hidden homeless. Further estimates by Crisis suggest that on any one night in England in 2016 there were 60,000 'households'²² sofa surfing.

Based on analysis of several polls, surveys and readily available homelessness statistics, we have been able to reach an estimate of the scale of hidden homelessness in London.

Around
1 in 10
people will experience
hidden homelessness in
any one year.²³

225,000
young people in London
have stayed in an insecure
or unsafe place because
they had nowhere safe to
call home.²⁵

1 in 5
16 to 25 year olds sofa
surfing in 2014. Of these
roughly half sofa surfing
for more than a month.²⁴

On any one night in
London we estimate a
minimum of around
12,500
people are hidden
homeless.²⁶

Thirteen times
more people are hidden homeless than sleeping rough
in London.²⁷

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Why don't they seek support?

Our investigation found that most people who experience hidden homelessness have not sought advice or support about their homelessness from local authorities or support services. The reasons for this are threefold:

- They know little about advice services and how they work.
- They don't expect advice services to be able to help them.
- They—or people they know—have had negative experiences of such services in the past.

Most respondents to our survey said they hadn't sought support or advice because they didn't think they would be entitled to it; one third didn't know where to find it. For those that did present, many reported wholly negative experiences with local authorities who couldn't provide them with help. Kesia Reeve at Sheffield Hallam University told us that most homeless people she had surveyed said that local authorities had identified them as homeless but not given them any advice or help²⁸ – a failure of their duty. However, detailed interviews revealed that most of these people *were* given advice and assistance, but that it was of such little value to them that they had not even recognised it as such.²⁹

Only 1 in 5

young people present to a local authority about their homelessness.³⁰

A fifth

of those who do present are turned away without any practical assistance.³¹

This paints a bleak picture of being homeless in London. Clearly, current legislation fails to support the majority of people who have no home, as only a small percentage are entitled to support. To gain a better idea of the scale of hidden homelessness, we need more people to present as homeless, to be recorded and to be helped towards a home.

The policy landscape has remained unchanged for many years, but the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 looks set to improve the situation, perhaps drastically. However, more needs to be done by the Mayor, Government and local authorities to successfully implement the Act, or its success will be limited.

Tackling hidden homelessness

The Homelessness Reduction Act, when it comes into force, could improve the situation because it aims to help people *before* they experience homelessness. However, in order to effectively tackle homelessness, the Act must be properly funded. The Act will require local authorities to produce more accurate figures. In addition, housing options services will need to radically change the way they address homelessness, moving to a more proactive stance of trying to prevent rather than having to resolve homelessness. The Mayor also needs to ensure that Londoners know that help is available by signposting them to support. Finally, the Government must make good its aim³² to end the injustice experienced by survivors of domestic violence by ensuring

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consistency in local authority vulnerability decisions and improving legislation around tenancy rights.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

The Act gained Royal Assent in April 2017, and will come into force in April 2018. The Act's main provision is the introduction of a universal homelessness 'prevention' duty for all eligible households,³³ alongside a 'relief' duty to take reasonable steps to secure accommodation for any eligible person who is homeless. Previously there was no statutory duty for local authorities to carry out prevention work for all households. The intention is to ensure that everyone threatened with homelessness, regardless of priority need status, is entitled to receive free information and advice to help them with their situation, and increased support if they do become homeless. It means that 56 days prior to someone becoming homeless (from 28 days previously) they should get help, assuming they approach the local authority. As part of the prevention duty, housing officers must create a 'personal housing plan' with those that present. The Act also places a new obligation on public authorities (such as the NHS) to notify the housing authority if someone they are working with is facing homelessness.

The implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act: lessons from Wales

The Homelessness Reduction Act aims to help people avoid a homelessness crisis before it happens. The biggest changes it introduces relate to the homelessness prevention work that local authorities will be required to carry out. It aims to help people avoid a homelessness crisis before it happens. Local authorities will be required to 'take reasonable steps' to prevent all eligible people³⁴ from losing their homes and help them to secure accommodation.

Experience in Wales may provide valuable lessons. In April 2015, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 was introduced, prefiguring several aspects of the Homelessness Reduction Act. Overall, the Act has been well received by charities and service users alike. As a result of the Act, more households are being assessed as homeless and given advice and support by local authorities. In the first year after implementation, the number of people presenting to local authorities as homeless rose by 25 per cent. The 2016-17 figures show an even larger increase in those presenting.³⁵ Almost two-thirds of those presenting as threatened with homelessness are successfully prevented from becoming so.³⁶ However, implementing the measures contained in the Act requires additional resource and time from local authorities.³⁷

Additional funding of £5 million each year was guaranteed for three years by the Welsh Government, with a further funding package of £7m

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announced for 2017-18.³⁸ Shelter Cymru told us that councils had found the funding helpful, but that more would be needed to see improved services continue beyond the initial funding period.

Shelter Cymru notes that the homelessness prevention service across Wales has dramatically improved, but that there is still work to be done. Specifically, there is evidence that non-priority-need applicants to councils are still being offered generic advice,³⁹ which would suggest that further training is needed within local authorities. Further criticisms include uneven provision within councils, as well as across councils, which have been challenged by the higher workload that the Act has created. Recent Welsh homelessness statistics show that one in ten people who approach local authorities remain homeless at the end of the prevention process.⁴⁰ It is not known where these people are going, but it is likely that they will slip into hidden homelessness.

The Homelessness Reduction Act will be a challenge for local authorities

As in Wales, many London boroughs predict that the new Homelessness Reduction Act will result in a significantly higher number of people presenting as homeless and therefore create additional costs for them.⁴¹ The Association of Housing Advice Services has estimated that London's 32 boroughs will face a combined bill of £161m to implement the new duties. The Government has promised to fund the new duties, offering an initial £61m of support to councils across the whole of England for

two years. After that, the Government expects that savings through preventing homelessness will make the Act self-funding. However, others disagree, and have called for an increased funding pledge from the Government. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) said it is considering further funding for 'high-pressure' areas, although exactly what constitutes 'high-pressure' is unclear at this stage. Given that homelessness is particularly acute in London, this may include most, if not all, inner London boroughs, as well as some outer boroughs.

We need better data on hidden homelessness to accurately reflect the scale of the problem

Data across London boroughs is inconsistent. Statistics only tell us part of the story and there are questions as to their reliability. In December 2015, the UK Statistics Authority published an assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics in relation to DCLG's homelessness and rough sleeping statistics. The assessment found that the Homelessness Prevention and Relief statistics 'do not currently meet the standard to be National Statistics.'⁴² Currently, local authorities are not required to record the numbers of people asking them for advice and support, only those whom they accept. The Homelessness Reduction Act should make the homelessness data recorded by local authorities more consistent. The Government has indicated that it intends to provide increased funding to improve data collection systems, although how much will be available is not clear at this stage.⁴³

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The Mayor should push for further consistency across London boroughs to provide a more detailed picture of the issue. We heard, for example, that local authorities often don't ask about the protected characteristics of those coming forward for assistance. This means that the extent of LGBT homelessness, for example, is hidden from official statistics, despite indications that it makes up a quarter of youth homelessness.⁴⁴ Improved recording of gender and sexuality, alongside other protected characteristics, would help the Mayor and local authorities to target support appropriately. This should only be implemented following comprehensive training of staff about the collection and purpose of such monitoring, in order that it not put people off presenting.

A culture change is required in housing options services

Our investigation found that most people who experience hidden homelessness don't seek advice or support from local authorities or support services. Our investigation also found that many homeless people are unaware of homelessness support and advice services available to them. This is counterproductive as there is significant

“In London very few people have a spare room. You may not have family nearby or willing to help. For many single people, your friends are your family.”

Survey respondent

evidence to show that preventing homelessness saves more money than resolving it.⁴⁵ Given that the Homelessness Reduction Act will place significant new duties on local authorities to provide prevention work, authorities will need to be ready to provide an adequate level of service to match the demand the Act will bring.

Implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act requires local authorities to deliver their services differently. Our investigation heard concerns with the way some local authority homelessness services are delivered. Our evidence indicates that most hidden homeless people who sought help found councils did not provide them with meaningful advice.

Recurrent criticisms of housing options services include:

- poor coordination and collaboration with other agencies, e.g. health services and social services
- being passed between services without meaningful help
- a lack of rigorous investigation by local authorities with some applicants turned away without receiving a full assessment, leading to charges of 'gate-keeping'
- inconsistent assessment of vulnerability and intentionality
- being given outdated information and generally poor advice
- pressure on local authority resources in terms of staffing and costs, particularly the cost of temporary accommodation

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We understand that budget cuts put local authorities under significant strain. Effective delivery of the Homelessness Reduction Act will place even greater demands on homelessness services. Indeed, we heard that the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 has added to bureaucracy for local authorities in Wales, which has increased staff workloads significantly. Equally, Southwark told us that high staff turnover in housing options departments has put pressure on services. If more people are to present to authorities as homeless, they must feel that doing so will prove beneficial to their situation, and so local authorities must be resourced adequately to deliver.

Some authorities are taking an innovative approach. We heard from Southwark, who are a 'trailblazer' borough,⁴⁶ that advice services are improving as a result of the new system and that innovations introduced as part of the trial are proving successful. However, they reported that bureaucracy has increased because of the longer prevention duty, and case workers can spend almost double the amount of time on cases than they did previously. When the Act is implemented, local authorities must support staff, recognising the increased workload this will bring, and the associated challenge to staff morale.

If the Act is to be implemented effectively, the Government must seek to reduce bureaucracy. Currently, the multi-stage homelessness duty means that people must be notified of which stage they have reached at various points of the process. Both charities and local authorities we spoke to recognised that lengthy decision letters involved in this process

do not help service users and are unnecessary, especially at a time of personal difficulty. We heard of innovative ways of providing information to service users being trialled in Wales, such as delivering updates over text or as part of personal housing plans. Overall, innovation should seek to free up housing options staff to spend more time in frontline services, rather than filling out increased paperwork.

The process for assessing vulnerability is inconsistent

There are two definitions of vulnerability – a legislative definition and a dictionary definition. Anyone who is homeless is, by the dictionary definition, vulnerable. However, providing evidence to support a decision that someone is vulnerable by the legislative definition is becoming increasingly difficult,⁴⁷ and decisions are increasingly inconsistent, both across and within boroughs. Evidence we received suggests that services have become so stretched that there is now a hierarchy of vulnerability being used by housing officers in local authorities. Indeed, some experts told us that the bar was "so high that it is almost impossible to get housing" for those that are vulnerable.⁴⁸ The number of those being assessed as vulnerable because of domestic violence has remained largely static in England since 2010,⁴⁹ despite a wider increase in the reporting of domestic violence and abuse.⁵⁰

The inconsistencies in decision-making processes mean applicants find it hard to understand how likely they are to be accepted as homeless. Their faith in the system consequently decreases and fewer people

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make full applications for support. Increasingly, it seems that people are being warned off at the first stage, before they even make an application, which presents issues in reaching accurate figures for homelessness. Solace Women's Aid suggested that many presenting to housing options are simply told that they will not have enough evidence to support their application, meaning it is not worth applying.

And all this comes during an extremely difficult personal crisis when people are already upset and vulnerable. In many cases, it seems that the very system which is designed to help them can cause them more stress.

Advice and support services in London need to be better promoted

We have found that homelessness advice and support services in London are not well promoted. There is good work in the sector: a wide range of services are available, both from local authorities and the not-for-profit sector. For example, helplines run by charities Centrepoin and Shelter are useful in directing people to support, but not enough people are aware of these services.

We also note that the Mayor has committed to a new rough sleeping outreach team on public transport,⁵¹ but this will only reach a limited cohort of those in need. Our investigation heard that hidden homeless people also frequent airports, so the Mayor should include these in his outreach work.

Among some groups there is still stigma attached to seeking formal support for housing issues. We heard that many feel too embarrassed to come forward. The Royal British Legion's UK Household Survey, for example, found substantial evidence of members of the ex-service community who are unwilling to seek formal support. Outside of health needs, of those reporting some sort of personal or household difficulty, only one in four reports using a source of support in the last year.⁵²

The Mayor has a significant voice that could be used to promote awareness of advice and support services. More prominent signposting to homelessness services could play a huge role in guiding more people towards support. The Mayor does not currently provide any information on the availability of advice and support for homelessness on the London.gov website, other than information about the Mayor's No First Night Out initiative. He has already committed to creating a new 'Homes for Londoners property portal', an upgrade of the current First Steps system,⁵³ intended to provide Londoners with links to social, affordable and shared ownership properties. The London.gov website draws significant traffic and seems a sensible first port of call for people seeking advice about homelessness in London. Including signposting to advice services on the London.gov website, or through his new property portal, could significantly increase people's knowledge of homelessness services and support in addressing it.

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Simone's story

Simone was referred to Solace Women's Aid by multiple agencies; she and the perpetrator had recently separated and did not live together. The perpetrator had made multiple threats to kill Simone during and after the relationship. There was a restraining order in place which the perpetrator had adhered to. However, he had recruited a group of men to stand outside Simone's property and harass and intimidate her. They were banging on the door and stated that they would kill her unless she allowed the perpetrator access to his child. Simone felt unsafe to remain in her property and so moved to sofa surf between two friends' properties.

Solace supported Simone to apply for an emergency panel landlord application; the local authority stated that Solace's risk assessment and multiple agency information were insufficient and requested a Police risk assessment. Simone was too scared to report much of the abuse to the police, therefore the risk assessment came back as 'standard' due to limited information. The local authority has stated that it doesn't believe that she is at high risk from the group of men threatening her outside her property and that she doesn't meet its criteria for a move.

Simone is currently still sofa surfing with family members. Solace has spent five months advocating for a move for Simone with no success. Simone is now sadly disengaging from support from Solace as she feels that nothing is going to change.

Transport for London (TfL) also has one of the world's biggest advertising portfolios, with posters in place at every station and on vehicles across the network. The Mayor and TfL regularly use these information posters to promote events and policy information. Using this advertising space to promote the availability of homelessness advice and support services would reach millions of Londoners easily, for very little cost.

Better housing support for survivors of domestic violence and abuse

Vulnerable people, such as survivors of domestic violence and abuse, face difficulties getting housing for which they are legally entitled because of inconsistency in assessments for housing by local authorities.

Local authorities have a limited by the number of homes available to support survivors of domestic violence and abuse, which are in high demand. There is specific demand for specialist housing for vulnerable people and those with complex needs, for whom general-needs accommodation is not appropriate. It has been noted that, because most people sleeping rough are men, homelessness services are typically designed around the needs of male clients. This means that specialist refuges, which provide safe accommodation and skilled support, are a vital lifeline for many women escaping domestic violence.^{54 55} A lack of refuge spaces and supported housing is not helping the problem. There was a shortfall of 326 refuge bed spaces across London in 2016.⁵⁶ The committee has already raised concerns with this issue in

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its report last year, Supported Housing in the Balance, but little has been done to improve the situation.

We also heard that victims could be better supported by clarifications in tenancy law that would give victims more claim over their housing. We believe that in London in 2017 it should not be so difficult to get housing support if you are vulnerable and genuinely homeless.

Authorities still lack guidance around tenancy rights in cases of domestic violence and abuse. It is unclear whether perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse should be allowed to remain in the property if a survivor flees. The Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016, developed by the Law Commission to simplify tenancy law, deals with this problem. It allows names on a tenancy to change throughout the contract, so that people who have experienced domestic violence and abuse have a higher chance of remaining in a tenancy following a domestic violence case, rather than the perpetrator. There is evidence that local authorities in London are already moving towards better working practices regarding domestic violence and tenancy rights, but this improvement needs to be enshrined in English legislation if it is to become widespread.

The process of finding a home for those that choose to leave the property of a perpetrator could be made easier. There are several examples of reciprocal housing agreements between London boroughs and housing associations which work positively for survivors. For

example, we heard that in the London Borough of Southwark women are able to keep their local authority housing eligibility band (which prioritises their need for housing) when they move out of the borough. The Pan-London Housing Reciprocal Agreement,⁵⁷ a voluntary collaboration between local authorities and registered housing providers in London, is a good example of this. It is an alternative housing route that can be utilised if a local authority or registered housing provider cannot meet the need of the tenant from within their own stock, including when the risk to the tenant is too great for them to remain within a certain area. The principle is that local authorities and registered providers in London cooperate to move households where suitable available accommodation can be identified. This is positive as it allows survivors of abuse to move away from a perpetrator, if they wish, and reduces the chance of homelessness. Making this practice commonplace, through new legislation, would improve the lives of victims.

The Government has announced it is planning to implement changes in the form of the Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill. We would welcome a strong focus on housing within this legislation, noting that previous attempts at improving support for victims have often focused on criminal justice issues rather than housing issues.

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Government should recognise the acute nature of homelessness in London and keep under review the funding to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act for London local authorities, to ensure that boroughs have sufficient resources to relieve and prevent homelessness.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should lobby London local authorities to record the protected characteristics of those presenting at housing options services, following comprehensive training of staff about the sensitivity required in collection, and the purpose of such monitoring. This would create better understanding of London's homeless population.

Recommendation 3

The Mayor should review the assessment of 'vulnerability', and advice given to non-priority need applicants across London to create best practice guidelines for local authorities and homelessness charities. This should make particular reference to advice and support for young and LGBT persons, as well as supporting vulnerable people. He should add this to the agenda for his No Nights Sleeping Rough Task Force.

Recommendation 4

The Government should rewrite the guidance around evidence required to reach an assessment of 'vulnerability' for those who have

experienced domestic violence and abuse to make it easier for authorities to identify victims accurately. They should ensure that staff know that police crime reference or risk assessment numbers are not required in order to validate an application.

Recommendation 5

In light of the Homelessness Reduction Act's introduction, and new data gained from prevention services, the Government should look to review the list of those who meet the criteria for 'vulnerability' under the legislation.

Recommendation 6

The Mayor should promote the use of existing homelessness advice and support services using the London.gov.uk website and TfL advertising space.

Recommendation 7

The Government should ensure that any future legislation on domestic violence and abuse gives survivors of domestic violence and abuse priority in tenancy law. This would mean that survivors are able to remain in their homes following an incident of abuse, if they wish, rather than the perpetrator.

Legislation should seek to formalise the use of reciprocal housing agreements between local authorities (and housing associations) to ensure that people who experience domestic violence and abuse can maintain their housing eligibility band across London.

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Appendix 1 – Our approach

This investigation is based on testimony from a number of organisations, primary research in the form of a small survey and analysis of secondary data sources.

The committee met twice formally to discuss this issue with invited guests, on 23 March and 27 June 2017. At our first meeting, we heard testimony from two people who had experienced hidden homelessness, as well as one woman who had hosted homeless young people as part of Depaul's Nightstop emergency service for homeless young people.

The following guests attended the two meetings:

- Dr Kesia Reeve, Principal Research Fellow, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
- Nicola Harwood, Head of Nightstop, Depaul UK
- Bob Green, Chief Executive Officer, Stonewall Housing
- Mary Mason, Chief Executive Officer, Solace Women's Aid
- Vincent Lawal, Housing Solutions Manager, London Borough of Southwark
- Jenny Barnes, Head of Policy and Research, Centrepont
- Deborah Halling, Senior Policy Officer, Housing and Land, Greater London Authority
- Jennie Bibbings, Campaigns Manager, Shelter Wales

We also launched a short survey on the issue of hidden homelessness, which we called 'Between Homes.' This received 114 responses to a mix of both qualitative and quantitative questions which informed our research outcomes, alongside additional testimony. The committee also met informally with the following organisations:

- Centrepont
- Crisis
- Nightstop (Depaul UK)
- Women for Refugee Women

In addition, we received written submissions from Housing Justice and the Royal British Legion, as well as several members of the public who had experienced hidden homelessness. Case studies used in this report are based on evidence to the committee, and from Solace Women's Aid.

The evidence base for this investigation is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data, both primary and secondary. Given that there is a limited evidence base to draw on, the estimates we have created through analysis of statistics should be treated with some caution. We have been careful to create minimum estimates rather than overstate the problem. However, it is likely that the problem is larger than we have estimated.

For further information, contact Tom Gill, tom.gill@london.gov.uk.

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References

Front cover photo by [@SDUBROCA](#) on flickr

¹ [Statutory homelessness and prevention and relief, January to March \(Q1\) 2017: England, Department for Communities and Local Government, June 2017](#)

² [CHAIN Annual Report 2016/17](#)

³ [Homelessness Monitor 2017, Crisis \(Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Hal Pawson, Glen Bramley, Steve Wilcox and Beth Watts\), February 2017](#)

⁴ The Housing Act 1996 defines people in priority need as those who: have dependent children, are homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of an emergency such as flood, fire or other disaster, are pregnant, or are vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap or physical disability or other special reason.

⁵ [LGBT Youth Homelessness, Albert Kennedy Trust, 2016](#)

⁶ [LGBT Youth Homelessness, Albert Kennedy Trust, 2016](#)

⁷ [Homeless Link, Statutory Homelessness Analysis Q1 2017](#)

⁸ 16 per cent of survey respondents reported staying with a stranger

⁹ [Danger Zones and Stepping Stones, Depaul UK, April 2016](#)

¹⁰ Homelessness caused by parents who are no longer able to accommodate their children accounted for 15 per cent of homelessness acceptances in 2016-17. Source: [Statutory Homelessness in England, House of Commons Library, July 2017](#)

¹¹ [Jenny Barnes, Housing Committee meeting, 27 June 2017](#)

¹² A local housing authority may consider someone vulnerable if they: are an older person, have a physical or learning disability or mental health problems, have had to leave their home because of violence or harassment, have been in care, were in the armed forces or have been in a young offenders' institute or prison in the past.

¹³ With this choice ahead of them, many victims choose to stay and put up with abuse in order to avoid the dangers of homelessness

¹⁴ [Mary Mason, Housing Committee meeting, 23 March 2017](#)

¹⁵ [Mary Mason, Housing Committee meeting, 23 March 2017](#)

¹⁶ 'Survival sex is usually understood in the context of homelessness to be the exchange of sex for accommodation and/or other material support. Survival sex is also referred to as, or correlated with, transactional sex and sex for favours. It differs from commercial sexual activity, which involves a clear fee-for-service transaction that is agreed by both the client and the provider.' Watson, Juliet (2017) Youth Homelessness and Survival Sex: Intimate Relationships and Gendered Subjectivities.

¹⁷ Allsopp, J., Sigona, N. and Phillimore, J. (2014) Poverty among refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: An evidence and policy review, Source: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2014/working-paper-series/IRIS-WP-1-2014.pdf>

¹⁸ [Landlords offer women free accommodation in London flats in exchange for sexual favours, London Evening Standard, 7 October 2016](#)

¹⁹ Royal British Legion, A UK Household Survey of the ex-Service Community, 2014

²⁰ [Homelessness Monitor 2017, Crisis \(Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Hal Pawson, Glen Bramley, Steve Wilcox and Beth Watts\), February 2017](#)

²¹ [Homelessness Monitor 2017, Crisis \(Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Hal Pawson, Glen Bramley, Steve Wilcox and Beth Watts\), February 2017](#)

²² Many of these 'households' are assumed to be single person households of working age

²³ A poll of 2,000 UK adults in December 2013 found 14 per cent had experienced hidden homelessness themselves, 20 per cent knew someone else who had

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experienced it, 2 per cent said they had both experienced it and knew others who had. Source: [Homeless Link, Hidden homelessness, December 2013](#)

²⁴ Based on poll by ComRes who interviewed 2,011 young people aged between 16 and 25 in the UK online between 13th and 21st October 2014. Data were weighted to be representative of young people in the UK aged between 16 and 25 by age, gender and region. Source: [Centrepoint](#)

²⁵ Estimate made by Centrepoint based on the YouGov statistics using 2015 mid-year population estimates. Total sample size was 2004 16-25 year olds of which 297 were from London. Fieldwork was undertaken between 7th - 14th September 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative by gender and region of all GB adults (aged 16-25). Survey respondents were given a specific set of problems and asked to indicate what sources of help and information they would turn to if faced with each one.

²⁶ Estimate made by London Assembly based on data from Crisis' base estimates of sofa surfing, squatting and sleeping in cars/public transport in England 2016, weighted to London using mid-year population estimates. Source: [Homelessness projections: Core homelessness in Britain 2017, Crisis, August 2017](#)

²⁷ 964 people slept rough in London in one night in 2016, based on DCLG's single night street count statistics. By our definition someone who is in contact with a rough sleeping team (and noted in statistics) is not hidden homeless. Source: [Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn 2016, England, Department for Communities and Local Government](#). Based on our extrapolation of Crisis statistics (see above), there are thirteen times more people hidden homeless than those visibly sleeping rough.

²⁸ [The hidden truth about homelessness, Crisis, May 2011](#)

²⁹ [Kesia Reeve, Housing Committee meeting, 23 March 2017](#)

³⁰ Our analysis suggests that in 2014 over 658,000 young people aged 16 - 25 'sofa surfed' for over a month in England and Wales. Based on one in ten people aged 16 - 24 sofa surfing for over a month in 2014 (see above), out of 6,580,466 people aged 16

- 24 in England in Wales in 2014. Source: ONS Statistics. However, of these only 136,000 presented as homeless to a local authority. Source: [Beyond Statutory Homelessness, Centrepoint, Sept 2015](#). Therefore, we estimate that only one in five homeless young people presented to a local authority about their predicament. While this estimate uses the term 'sofa surfing' to reach a figure, our definition of hidden homelessness would encapsulate a wider range of situations, meaning that the real number of hidden homeless people and those presenting to councils is likely to be higher. Equally, this figure only covers people aged 16 to 25 years old. Including a wider age range would no doubt give an even higher figure.

³¹ when young people do present to local authorities for homelessness support more than one fifth are turned away without any practical assistance. FOI data and Centrepoint analysis indicates that 22 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds in England and Wales who approached their local authority as homeless or at risk of homelessness were turned away without prevention and relief or acceptance as statutorily homeless. Source: [Beyond Statutory Homelessness, Centrepoint, September 2015](#)

³² [Theresa May: I want to transform how we think about domestic violence, The Guardian, 17 February 2017](#)

³³ Some people are not eligible for housing support. This depends on a person's nationality and immigration status

³⁴ Some people are not eligible for housing support. This depends on a person's nationality and immigration status

³⁵ [Homelessness in Wales 2016/17, Statistical First Release, Welsh Government](#)

³⁶ [Homelessness in Wales 2014/15, Statistical First Release, Welsh Government](#)

³⁷ [CIH welcomes latest figures on homelessness, Chartered Institute of Housing, 27 July 2017](#)

³⁸ [Wales gets £7.8m to prevent homelessness, Inside Housing, 11 January 2017](#)

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³⁹ such as simply being handed an often outdated list of private rented sector (PRS) providers is Source: [Reasonable Steps: experiences of homelessness services under the Housing \(Wales\) Act 2014, Shelter Cymru, 2016](#)

⁴⁰ [Homelessness Statistics, Welsh Government](#)

⁴¹ For example, Barking and Dagenham is predicting a 180 per cent increase in the number of homelessness cases it will have to support, at an extra cost of £4m, while Croydon Council predicts a 20-25 per cent increase in the number of people presenting as homeless. Source: [New homelessness duties not expected until next year, Inside Housing, 5 May 2017](#) The London Borough of Southwark told us they expect a 50 per cent increase in those presenting by the end of the financial year.

⁴² [Assessment of compliance with Code of Practice for Official Statistics, Statistics on Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in England, UK Statistics Agency, December 2015](#)

⁴³ [Homelessness Reduction Act to commence from April next year, Inside Housing, 16 August 2017](#)

⁴⁴ [LGBT Youth Homelessness, Albert Kennedy Trust, 2016](#)

⁴⁵ For example, overall public spending would fall by £370 million if 40,000 people were prevented from experiencing one year of homelessness, based on an average reduction in public spending of £9,266 per person a year. Rt Hon [Bob Blackman MP, speaking in Parliament, 28 October 2016](#)

⁴⁶ The government has designated £20m to several Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer pilot boroughs to 'develop innovative new approaches to preventing homelessness.' The pilot boroughs are testing out prevention duties that the

Homelessness Reduction Act will introduce, working with all households 'whether priority need or not' to prevent homelessness. Source: [Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers – Bidding Prospectus, Department for Communities and Local Government](#)

⁴⁷ A local housing authority may consider someone vulnerable if they: are an older person, have a physical or learning disability or mental health problems, have had to leave their home because of violence or harassment, have been in care, were in the armed forces, have been in a young offenders' institute or prison in the past. Source: [Applying as homelessness: priority need, Shelter, April 2016](#)

⁴⁸ [Mary Mason, Housing committee meeting, 23rd March 2017](#)

⁴⁹ [Homeless Link, Statutory Homelessness Analysis Q1 2017](#)

⁵⁰ [Revealed: shocking rise in domestic abuse of women in London, London Evening Standard, 5 September 2016](#)

⁵¹ [Help for rough sleepers on the transport network, Mayor's Press Office, 29 August 2017](#)

⁵² Royal British Legion, A UK Household Survey of the ex-Service Community, 2014

⁵³ [Mayor to 'name and shame' criminal landlords, Mayor's Press Office, 26 April 2017](#)

⁵⁴ Women make up the majority of reported domestic violence cases in London

⁵⁵ S. Hutchinson, A. Page and E. Sample, Rebuilding Shattered Lives Report, London, St Mungo's, 2014. Source: <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Rebuilding-Shattered-Lives-Final-Report.pdf>

⁵⁶ [UK Refuges Online, London Assembly Housing Committee, Agenda Item 4, Appendix 1, 27 June 2017](#)

⁵⁷ [Pan London Housing Reciprocal Agreement, Safer London](#)