

# STAYING IN

## UNDERSTANDING EVICTIONS & ABANDONMENTS FROM LONDON'S HOSTELS

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Homeless Link is the national membership agency supporting organisations working directly with homeless people in England. Homeless Link has been funded by the Oak Foundation to run a project to reduce evictions and abandonments from London's homelessness services. This report looks at the causes and solutions and is the first stage of the project. The Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York provided advice on the research element of the project.**

## CONTEXT

There have been a number of central government initiatives in the last twenty years to reduce rough sleeping. In 1999, Coming in from the cold built on previous successes and set an explicit target of reducing rough sleeping by two-thirds by 2002 and subsequently to "as close to zero as possible". Despite the successes of these initiatives, the number of people sleeping rough in both London and England "flat lined" in 2003. The Places of Change programme has invested £170 million in creating welcoming hostels in which individuals are able to rebuild their lives.

In 2006 Homeless Link launched a campaign to end rough sleeping by 2012. In November 2008 the Government launched its strategy, No One Left Out: communities ending rough sleeping, in which it stated its commitment to ending rough sleeping "once and for all" in England by 2012. In the same month, the Mayor of London published his Draft Housing Strategy in which he pledged to ensure that this target was achieved in the capital.

## METHOD

For this research we reviewed existing literature and commissioned quantitative analysis of London's CHAIN data and SP outcomes/Hostels KPI data. Between July and October 2009, we visited 14 hostels and 2 day centres, as well as speaking to representatives from 4 local authorities and holding consultative focus groups with clients and outreach workers. At each hostel we interviewed the manager and held either focus groups or semi-structured interviews with clients and frontline staff. In total 64 clients, 14 hostel managers, and 40 frontline staff were involved.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

From the literature we found that there were five frameworks for looking at evictions and abandonments:

1. It is important to see eviction and abandonment in the wider context of social exclusion with eviction and abandonment impacting on the most socially excluded
2. There are individual risk factors for eviction and abandonment, with some individuals more likely to be evicted or abandon due to their demography, their support needs and level of resilience
3. Rent arrears and economic structural factors are a significant cause of evictions and abandonments
4. Evictions take places due to the hostel rules and boundaries and client behaviour
5. Improving outcomes for this client group is possible through improving team culture, involving clients in the formation of rules and boundaries and training staff in dealing with challenging behaviour, so that hostels can provide a positive experience of inclusion.

## PREVALENCE

The 2009 CHAIN research on London's rough sleeper population demonstrates change in evictions and abandonments between 2001 and 2008:

- The proportion of planned moves has grown and the level of abandonment has halved, but there is a slight increase in eviction levels
- The CHAIN report suggests that there has been an increase in substance misuse needs and resulting chaotic behaviour over this time which may have impacted on eviction rates
- Clients are twice as likely to have an eviction for behaviour as for arrears.

**Analysis of London's CHAIN data tells us that evictions and abandonment contribute to the levels of rough sleeping amongst those with the highest levels of need:**

- 48% of clients who are evicted and 47% of abandoners are subsequently seen rough sleeping
- People who are evicted or abandon have usually been on CHAIN for some time
- 9% of people had multiple evictions and abandonments, but most people either only ever abandon or get evicted
- People who are evicted or abandon generally have high support needs, which are higher for the group getting evicted
  - > 6 in 10 evictees and 6 in 10 abandoners had an alcohol support need
  - > 6 in 10 evictees and 1 in 2 abandoners had a drug related support need
  - > 4 in 10 evictees and 1 in 3 abandoners had recorded mental health problems.

**Additionally, analysis of hostel data and Supporting People data found that:**

- Hostels with lower rates of unplanned moves have more exclusion policies
- Clients with unplanned moves are less likely to have had their support needs met.

**KEY FACTORS IN MAINTAINING TENANCIES ACROSS 14 HOSTELS**

Some factors cut across all types of evictions and abandonments:

- Whether evictions and abandonments are seen as preventable by the hostel, particularly the manager. Some interviewees stated that there is an adverse impact on other clients when evictions are not carried out.
- The availability of move-on was cited as a key factor that motivated clients to modify their behaviour and to maintain their tenancies.
- Relationships with staff were a key area highlighted by clients. Clients wanted staff who visibly respected and cared about them and had the skills to offer the level of support they needed. At a number of hostels, clients were dissatisfied with staff. Informal engagement was seen as particularly important.

"...they are always swapping your keyworker, so you have to start all over again... We didn't participate. I couldn't see how we'd get out of there, people had been there six years, and there wasn't any point."

**Client, medium hostel**

- The quality of the physical environment and availability of activities impacted on how motivated clients felt to maintain their tenancies.

"it's clean, spotless, that's major." **Client, medium hostel**

- Many clients described hostels as tense environments or as boring. Mealtimes and night time were identified by both staff and clients at some hostels as a particular flashpoint for incidents. It was seen as important for staff to assertively maintain a safe environment and respond quickly and consistently to behaviour.
- Staff needed to have the time and the skills to challenge behaviour appropriately whilst on shift; using a less skilled team of night staff or agency staff could result in ineffective immediate responses with a lasting impact.

"how well its dealt with will depend on who's on shift-how its followed up, how its challenged. The manager will take action but the damage is done, its how it is dealt with at the time of the incident"

**Staff, small hostel**

- Some managers stated that having to report evictions, abandonments and serious incidents to their commissioner or another external person was important in increasing accountability and enabling a discussion about approach. It was seen as important that local authority monitoring focused on both the target to increase the proportion of planned moves, but also at the service provided.

**GOOD PRACTICE: PATHWAYS/ TRANSFERS, CAMDEN COUNCIL**

**Camden Council has developed a pathways approach for homeless people, which has reduced evictions and rough sleeping in the Borough. Providers work together with other local providers to prevent clients who present challenging behaviour from being evicted on to the street by always looking for alternatives within the pathway. These sideways moves or transfers allow clients to access another opportunity and potentially more appropriate levels of support. The pathway is a progressive model towards independent living, so it can act as an incentive to modify behaviour.**

## EVICTIION FOR BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

All the hostels experience challenges in managing clients' behaviour. There are significant differences between hostels over what kinds of behaviour trigger sanctions, including eviction. Preventing eviction is both about preventing incidents from occurring and finding ways to respond to incidents without evicting.

Projects that evict least are those that regard problematic behaviour to be a support need and limit their use of escalatory sanctions. Staff teams at these services focus on the causes of problematic behaviour and look for individualised solutions. Issues are addressed face to face and with a level of mutual agreement from clients.

Clients who are evicted for behavioural reasons showed a greater resistance to reflecting on the causes than those who are evicted for arrears or abandoned.

### There is a great deal of variety in the types of behaviour leading to sanctions:

- Drugs and alcohol fuelled many of the incidents leading to eviction; alcohol often led to disruptive behaviour, whereas drug users would often not engage.
- Self harm is sometimes identified as an issue that could lead to eviction.
- Neighbourhood issues and anti-social behaviour are a particular challenge for some projects.
- Visitors can be problematic, both in terms of clients contravening visitor rules and visitors causing disturbances.
- Some hostels described instances of clients challenging rules leading to evictions; at a few projects there was an implicit suggestion that challenges to authority may have influenced the decision to evict on other grounds.

### Hostels take different approaches to dealing with behavioural issues:

- All the hostels have escalatory systems of warnings and other sanctions that can be triggered in response to behaviour contravening hostel rules.
- Some services developed alternative approaches, such as de-escalatory techniques, rewards and the withdrawal of privileges. One project uses an approach incorporating a meeting, discussion and written record similar to some warnings and contracts, but without including any threat of exclusion.

- At some services appeals are strongly encouraged to the extent that receiving a Notice to Quit (NTQ) is in practice more of a conditional threat than an actual eviction. Opinions vary on how useful this practice is.
- Some services use temporary exclusion to manage the risk that clients' behaviour presents. In many cases exclusion is for a few hours or nights only, but a minority of hostels exclude clients for longer periods. Views on this practice vary greatly, with one manager describing it as a "discharge of responsibility" and others seeing it as a way to manage short term risk to enable development of longer term solutions.
- Interviewees talked about the value of transfers to other provision and finding alternatives, with the Local Authority playing a key role. In some areas the system is formalised into a pathways approach, sometimes including case conferences.
- Many services emphasise the importance of involving the police when they believe an offence had been committed and described the benefits of this. Some hostels reported difficulties in getting the police to engage with them, and one hostel did not seem to use police even in serious incidents.

### Regarding approaches to managing behaviour, the clearest distinction between hostels lay in how they used sanctions, based on their underlying ethos:

- Hostels that are proactive in dealing with behaviour, but are not punitive had the lowest levels of evictions.

"a stepped structured process doesn't work for this client group. If a warning system was used then 3 warnings would be used up in a weekend. If you start a process then they may disengage. Most residents here have been through the warnings process in other projects and it hasn't worked for them. We don't use a final warning, we might as well give up"  
**Manager, very small hostel**

- There appeared to be a mismatch at some projects between expectations of behaviour and the client group that the hostel works with. At some projects, an ethos of recovery and change seems to be more significant than the support needs of their client group in influencing the level of tolerance towards behaviour.
- Some staff and managers expressed concern that warnings and contracts could lose their impact if over-used and at a few projects there seemed to be a form of 'sanctions inflation' occurring as a result.

- There was a strong emphasis amongst clients and staff on the negative impact of receiving warnings in the form of a 'letter under the door' which was experienced as 'antagonistic' and 'threatening' in comparison to a face-to-face interaction. Some projects adopt a more contract-based approach emphasising two-way discussion, an increased offer of support, and an individualised and mutually agreed warning or contract, with one client stating that:

"The contract system is good, it makes you think they want to keep hold of you" **Client, medium hostel**

- The approach to managing behaviour ranges from trying to apply sanctions equally through to taking individualised responses depending on circumstances.

"Good staff will deal with an incident well, some staff are more willing to chuck you out. It's common sense, you have to deal with an incident on it's own merits. But it has to be fair. You need a middle ground."

**Client, medium hostel**

- One of the strongest messages from clients is the need for approaches to behaviour to begin with a conversation about why the behaviour had occurred.

### **EVICION FOR ARREARS**

The levels of eviction for arrears varied widely; some hostels had had no evictions for arrears, whereas at others arrears were the main cause of unplanned moves.

There was no clear association between the client group and the prevalence of eviction for arrears. Establishing and maintaining housing benefit claims and the collection of services charges (especially where they are high) presented challenges for hostels. We saw how individual hostel managers were able to bring about reduction in eviction for arrears with their approach.

#### **There were some key reasons for arrears:**

- Clients often struggle with financial hardship and debt and often can't pay their service charge due to other debts, which include complex relationships of financial interdependence with other clients.
- Some projects with high service charges are notable for particularly high levels of eviction and abandonment associated with arrears. Some of the most expensive hostels have the poorest facilities for service users.

- A number of services identified clients entering employment as a particularly high risk group for arrears.

#### **Staff and clients identified the importance of a well-managed, consistent and assertive response to arrears:**

- Some projects help service users to maximise income and manage money more effectively.
- Most projects working with the highest need clients hold money for them in order to ensure that they pay rent and other bills.
- A number of services encourage clients to set up direct service charge and arrears payments from their benefits and this was seen as positive by many.

"Rent should be paid automatically, none of this you choose, opt in or opt out. If you're on the gear you're not going to do it." **Client, medium hostel**

#### **GOOD PRACTICE: LONDON ROAD, FRAMEWORK HOUSING ASSOCIATION**

The hostel previously had a problem with large numbers of evictions resulting from incidents involving confrontation between clients and staff. Recognising that evictions were too high and that evictions from emergency access accommodation left people street homeless, new management brought about a change in staff culture to tackle the problem. Rules that had previously led to temporary exclusions and bans, which would often escalate to eviction, such as smoking, waking people up for cleaners to access rooms and issues with drug use, were reviewed and a more tolerant and realistic staff approach was adopted.

Staff are encouraged to respect clients' individual needs and informal keywork from the outset is promoted so people feel supported straight away. Staff are encouraged to use warnings sparingly and tighten monitoring and recording systems to ensure staff reflect on their decisions. Over time clients and staff have seen an increase in positive moves, more effective keywork and less incidents leading to eviction.

## ABANDONMENT

A combination of factors, both inside and outside the hostel, led to a client's decision to abandon:

- For many people who abandon, the immediate trigger lay in changes external to the hostel, which included escaping debts or being taken into custody.
- Across the hostels, a particular group of repeat abandoners were identified as entrenched rough sleepers. Some projects have successful approaches to engage with this client group, indicating that such abandonment could be prevented.
- Putting too much pressure on clients to engage formally with staff or other services was identified by staff as a key cause of abandonment, and at some projects formal keywork was optional for this group.
- Positive relationships with staff were identified by many interviewees as the most important factor in preventing abandonment.
- At a number of hostels there is a strong association between arrears and abandonment.
- Responses to abandonment vary in terms of how long a client had to return before their tenancy ended.
- The extent to which clients who abandoned are followed up differs between projects. It was seen as positive to inform street teams and actively pursuing clients.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Evictions and abandonments can and should be reduced to as close to zero as possible. This research shows that with dedication and combined effort it is possible. In order to make this happen, we would like to recommend the following actions:

### At a National Level

1. The Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) should publish data on outcomes for planned and unplanned moves from hostels and the TSA needs to revise and improve its data collection on evictions and abandonments from hostels.
2. National Indicator (NI) 141, the percentage of vulnerable people who achieve independent living, should be a priority in all areas.
3. The investment by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) in the Places of Change

Programme should continue; the report shows that the commitment to quality accommodation helps reduce the numbers of people returning to the streets.

4. The CLG and TSA have a role to play in promoting and encouraging practice that contributes to reductions in evictions and abandonments from hostels.

### At a Regional Level

1. Government Offices and the London Delivery Board, in order to best monitor and support improvements in performance around NI141, should focus on the role that Local Authorities can play in reducing evictions and abandonments.
2. Homeless Link, CLG and the TSA regional advisers should support Local Authorities, Housing Associations and homelessness providers to promote and challenge poor practice and highlight the key findings from this report.

### At a Local Authority Level

1. The Audit Commission through the Comprehensive Area Assessment should ensure that their monitoring of performance around NI141 takes into account the full range of factors leading to evictions and abandonments.
2. Local Authorities should monitor the levels of evictions for behaviour or arrears and abandonment in their commissioned services as standard practice.
3. Local Authorities should lead a proactive local area approach to identifying alternatives to evictions, including case conferencing and sideways moves.
4. Local Authorities should consider, and if appropriate commission, specialist longer term projects for those with multiple needs.

### At a Hostel Level

1. Hostel managers need to make the reduction of evictions for arrears or behaviour, and abandonment a priority across their staff teams.
2. Hostel managers should performance manage staff to make informal engagement and a focus on the causes of behaviour commonplace.
3. Hostels should put in place policies to eliminate all evictions for arrears, involving welfare benefits agencies and through proactive payment plans.

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