

BRIEFING ON HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

1. The definition of hidden homelessness is to be hidden from support, advice and statistics. As such, reporting on it presents a number of challenges, not least that there is no available data. The government's own statistical releases on homelessness notes hidden homelessness as a phenomenon but also states that they cannot quantify it.
2. The last piece of national research into hidden homelessness was undertaken by Crisis in 2011 which found a sizeable group hidden from view in squats, with friends, in police cells, with strangers, or sleeping rough in less visible locations. It found that single homelessness was synonymous with hidden homelessness. Since then no equivalent piece of research has been conducted. Last year Crisis estimated that 63,000 people in England were sofa surfing on any given night, as part of research into this issue. It is people in these circumstances that are most likely to constitute "hidden homeless".

Single Homelessness

3. In respect of single homelessness, much has changed since the 2011 research. The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 has introduced additional duties on local authorities to help meet the housing needs of single people. Last year 207 single adults in Oxford were owed a prevention duty by the city council. This duty applies when someone is threatened with homelessness within 56 days, and requires the council to work with the individual to prevent them from becoming homeless. Additionally, 126 people were owed a relief duty under the HRA, which applies when someone is homeless, and the council has 56 days to try and find them new accommodation. Prior to 2018 this help would not have been available to this group.

Sofa-surfing

4. If the Crisis figure for the number of people sofa-surfing, was distributed evenly throughout the country, there would be 175 people accommodated in this manner in Oxford. Whilst there isn't any data available on this, there are some proxies for it in the data on people approaching the council who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Prior to approaching the council, people living with family or with friends may well have been part of that number of people who are said to be sofa-surfing. Certainly the fact of their presentation to the council is an indicator that they were precariously housed. Table One below summarises the number of people accommodated in this way prior to asking the council for help.

5. **Table One. People who may have been sofa-surfing prior to approaching the council for housing assistance**

		2019/20		2020/21*	
Accommodation of those owed a prevention duty	Total	392	100.00%	504	100.00%
	Living with family	89	22.7%	132	27.00%
	Living with friends	36	9.2%	56	11.10%
Accommodation of those owed a relief duty	Total	172	100.00%	756**	100.00%
	Living with family	34	19.80%	80	10.60%
	Living with friends	15	8.70%	76	10.10%
*Figures extrapolated from 1st quarter data					
**The high number of relief cases are accounted for by the numbers of people housed under "everyone in", in respect of whom homelessness applications have been taken where possible					

6. The data shows that last year, of cases where people may have been sofa-surfing, 125 were given a prevention duty, and 49 people were given a relief duty. Unfortunately we don't know how many other people are accommodated in this vulnerable manner. The prevention data for the current year provides some further insight as we see approximately a 20% increase in the number of people owed this duty. A likely reason for this is the impact of Covid19. Many shared living arrangements came to an end as people sought to minimise the risk of infection. This had an impact on people requiring assistance from the council and the increase in prevention duties. It is difficult to imagine a more significant impact on vulnerable shared living arrangements than the current pandemic. It would be expected therefore that the first half of this year represents the peak, of people who are sofa surfing needing to approach the council for help with housing.

Conclusion

7. The availability of assistance with Housing has changed radically since the 2011 Crisis report on "hidden homelessness". Single people are no longer excluded from this provision, and are visible to housing services. This is especially the case in Oxford where we have a thriving homelessness sector. People who are new to rough sleeping are quickly identified, and are supported to access interim accommodation. We have great information about people sleeping rough in Oxford thanks to the collaborative work of the St Mungo's Outreach team, the Council's Community response team and Thames Valley Police. This is supported by an engaged public who regularly report incidences of people rough sleeping.
8. People who are sofa surfing are approaching the council for help when these arrangements come to an end. The impact of Covid19 on these numbers has not been that great, suggesting that there is a reasonable awareness of the help available from the council in these circumstances. Although we don't know the number of people who might not be aware of this help, the worst

outcome would be that someone ends up rough sleeping, and as described above, in this event support would be provided very quickly.

9. In 2018 and 2019, the city council led the Oxfordshire Trailblazer in homelessness prevention. This project took a partnership approach to identifying people at risk of homelessness and taking action early to stop this happening. The project worked with colleagues across the county in housing, health, childrens' social care and criminal justice. All partners recognised that there was a collective responsibility to tackling homelessness. Colleagues in partner agencies were the "eyes and ears" of the project and this allowed people to be identified, who may have previously gone unnoticed, and to get the support they needed to avoid becoming homeless. Such an approach further reduces the hidden nature of some forms of homelessness.
10. In order to end homelessness, it must first be understood. Understanding requires evidence, and the Housing Needs service is making more and more use of data, not just to understand the picture of homelessness today, but to try and identify those households that are likely to be at risk of homelessness in the future. In this way we can ensure that homelessness is visible to us, which will allow us to develop the right solutions to end it.

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