

Behind the Headlines: The hidden trade in temporary accommodation

In his latest piece for HQM on the temporary accommodation crisis, **Keith Cooper** investigates how some London boroughs are using former office blocks in other towns and cities to house their homeless - with detrimental results.

The new town of Harlow is infamous for its high concentration of temporary accommodation in ex-office blocks. Many are based on an industrial estate, far from shops or facilities, the nearest school 45 minutes' walk away, across main roads along which 30-tonne lorries thunder along.

But none of the hundreds of homeless households occupying these blocks are from Harlow. They have been placed here instead by mainly London boroughs, according to council leader Dan Swords. Cllr Swords says he understands the pressures they are under but is tired of the town becoming a "dumping ground". A proposed new agreement between Essex and London authorities to stem the flow of homeless households into the county "is not going to be worth the paper it is written on," he adds.

What's happening in Harlow is the result of a largely hidden trade in temporary accommodation in which councils short of their own supply buy or lease properties outside their area. An additional concern is the use of units created under so-called office-to-residential permitted development rules. As these residences don't require planning permission, they can be of poor quality and lack adequate play space for children or basic facilities, like laundries.

"There's a housing crisis in England. But if your solutions lead to more people living in worse quality housing, that's a false economy that leads to all kinds of other issues"

Ben Clifford, Professor of Spatial Planning and Governance, Bartlett School of Planning

Novel research

It's impossible to tell the full extent of this trade in out-of-area temporary accommodation or the number of households in ex-office blocks. But evidence of their existence can be traced through the anecdotes of newspaper headlines, council investigations, and some novel research from the University of Nottingham into out-of-area temporary accommodation.

The Nottingham research found that the government was underestimating the extent of all out-of-area placements in England and that thousands of homes were either owned or leased in other local authority areas for homeless households.

While official figures put the number of households in out-of-area temporary accommodation at around 28,000, the University of Nottingham study puts the figure at more than 36,000. It also found that some 8,400 homes were held by local authorities in other areas for temporary accommodation long term.

Four London councils were each found to hold more than 1,000 properties, mainly in other boroughs. Kensington and Chelsea owns or leases more than 1,700 homes in other boroughs, including 200 homes in three boroughs: Westminster, Brent, and Tower Hamlets. Lewisham has more than 100 in Croydon, Bromley, and Greenwich. A staggering 800 homes in Enfield and 400 homes in Ealing are owned or leased by other boroughs.

Ealing Council said the presence of other boroughs in its temporary accommodation market had an obvious impact on the availability of housing. This was worse when other authorities had long-term leases with landlords than if they rented hotel rooms for a few nights. "We continue to face a temporary accommodation and housing affordability crisis across London, with thousands of families in temporary

accommodation and thousands more on social housing waiting lists,” a spokesperson for Ealing said.

Enfield Council said it was aware that other boroughs held stock in its area, as the collapse of the private rental market and high levels of “no-fault” evictions had driven “record number of families” to its doors for help with housing. “Up and down the country, the growing homelessness crisis is causing huge financial pressures for local authorities,” a council spokeswoman said. “This has forced families to live in unsuitable accommodation for prolonged periods.”

The government’s decision to delay the uplift of local housing allowance levels to spring 2024 had left “hundreds of families with a very uncertain winter ahead,” the Enfield spokeswoman added. “This limited help will not make a dent in the acute lack of housing.”

‘Nothing positive’

Helen Lawrence, the housing researcher who worked on the University of Nottingham project, said the people she interviewed had “nothing positive” to say about out-of-area placements.

“It was overwhelmingly negative for people’s mental health and their connections with their families. Many were uncertain about how long they were going to be out of the area and had no information about this from their local authority,” she adds. “Families with children didn’t know whether to enrol their children in school. They weren’t sure whether they’d still be in the same area when time came to take up the place.”

People with a pre-existing mental health condition found it hard to access the support upon which they’d previously relied. “Their temporary accommodation was often claustrophobic and felt all-engulfing, they often didn’t want to go out and explore their new area and sometimes suffered an interruption in getting their medication,” Ms Lawrence says. People without any previous experience of mental health problems began experiencing anxiety or depression, they told researchers.

While the study found some households had been sent more than 200 miles away, researchers were also told that distance mattered less than being cut off from their support networks. This was a particular issue with bed and breakfast or nightly paid accommodation where access to the internet through wifi was often unavailable.

‘Disconnection and dislocation’

“This was felt as an extra form of disconnection and dislocation from their friends and family and a lot of impacts intertwine very quickly,” Ms Lawrence says. “Under normal circumstances, when a household is struggling with their mental health they can reach out to family and friends. When that option is removed, it can be a real problem.”

The University of Nottingham research is, however, likely to have underestimated the extent of the trade in out-of-area homes. While the response rate for its Freedom of Information request was high at 88%, not all authorities revealed how many properties they owned or leased in other areas.



One of Harlow’s office blocks

Newham Council, which didn't provide figures, is known to lease many homes in Essex and Kent, the two home counties in which London councils tend to seek cheaper temporary accommodation.

Local Space, a housing association set up by Newham Council, has since 2006 purchased more than 200 properties in Essex to lease back to Newham for temporary accommodation. While most of its property portfolio is in London, it includes 87 in Thurrock, 73 in Basildon, and 28 in Southend-on-Sea, according to official figures.

Local Space chief executive Josie Parsons says the Essex properties were purchased under a previous contract with Newham Council. It stopped buying homes outside of the M25 in 2017 after a new administration ended its contractual requirement to do so. "We are looking at what we continue to do with our properties in Essex and whether continuing to provide nominations to Newham is the right way forward," Ms Parsons adds. Local Space had asked Essex authorities whether they might be interested in accessing these properties.

Another example of an authority buying up temporary accommodation en-masse is the east London borough of Redbridge. It began moving its homeless households into Canterbury in 2006 after outbidding the east Kent city for 200 homes in the former Howe Barracks. At the time, Canterbury had 2,500 people on its housing waiting list. In 2019, Redbridge secured leases on a further 32 homes in the same city, pipping it to the properties once again.

Most recently, in December, Newham Council outlined plans to buy a 172-home accommodation block in Harlow known as Burnt Mills, with half of the units earmarked for temporary accommodation. Its purchase was described by

its cabinet member for homelessness, Shaban Mohammed, as a "key acquisition" and "part of the continuation of our accelerated acquisition programme to support our efforts to reduce homelessness".

In October, Medway Council, in Kent, raised concerns about another ex-office block in Chatham, called Anchorage House, being used to house homeless households from a London local authority.

Medway's portfolio holder for housing, Naushabah Khan, is particularly concerned that this accommodation has been converted from office space under so-called permitted development rights. "[This] allows the conversion of office space into housing without planning consent, giving the council little control or influence."

Cllr Khan isn't alone in her concern about the use of permitted development rights to create temporary accommodation from office space. It's a form of housing which many authorities appear to be using, despite concerns about the poor quality of many such blocks.

Residents of three temporary accommodation blocks in Croydon, which were converted from offices, described their flats as "uninhabitable" in a letter to the south London authority last month (December). The letter alleges that some blocks lacked laundry facilities, have no space for children to play and develop, and that parts of their buildings are plagued by rats, mice and bed bugs. "Ex-office buildings are unfit for human habitation because they were designed for office use, not for vulnerable people to share a room for years," the open letter states. South West London Law Centres' community engagement manager Rhiannon Hughes, who helped organise the letter, said the council had been given to the 18th January to respond.

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Enfield Council



People without any previous experience of mental health problems began experiencing anxiety or depression – University of Nottingham research (stock image)

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Helen Lawrence, housing researcher, University of Nottingham



Local Space, a housing association set up by Newham Council, has purchased more than 200 properties in Essex to lease back to Newham for temporary accommodation

Permitted development rights

Harlow Council leader Dan Swords says that many of the hundreds of families housed there by other authorities are in ex-office blocks, which were converted under the permitted development rights rule. As such conversions don't require planning permission, councils are often unaware of them unless they go looking.

Cllr Swords suspects the true number of households living in them is closer to 1,000. Harlow officers found in 2018 that this number of units of accommodation had been created in the town using permitted development rights in 13 individual blocks. These are now known as 'human warehouses', 'nightmare towers' or 'crime blocks', depending on which media outlet you use or who in Harlow you ask.

Harlow's investigation was prompted in part by concerns from schools, police and other public services. Essex Police had received a "high volume" of calls about these permitted development blocks. Children had been exposed to drug dealing and alleged knife crime and were found playing in corridors when they should have been at school.

Cllr Swords says the blocks are either owned by London boroughs or leased long term by them from their private owners. He claims London authorities are also block booking hotel rooms in the town and eyeing up development sites to swell further their temporary accommodation portfolios there.

He says a single mum with young children from Ealing has been living in temporary accommodation in Harlow for more than five years. Ealing Council declined to comment on this alleged placement.

Concerns about the use of temporary accommodation created by permitted developments have been raised for some time by campaigners for better quality housing, such as the Town and Country Planning Association. And their impact on residents' health is now being studied by the Bartlett School of Planning in a £2m project, funded by the National Institute for Health and Research, the research arm of the NHS. An earlier exploratory study of thousands

of units in Hillingdon, Hounslow, Lambeth, and Southwark pinpointed 29 distinct health impacts linked to homes created under permitted development rights.

Bartlett professor of spatial planning and governance Ben Clifford, who's leading the research, said the project would be examining the health impacts of temporary accommodation created under the rules, including how children living in them were affected. "There's a housing crisis in England," Prof Clifford says. "But I think if your solutions lead to more people living in worse quality housing, that's a false economy that leads to all kinds of other issues."

Radical action

After years of taking on London's homeless, seeing its offices converted into temporary accommodation for other authorities, Harlow is finally taking some radical action. It has just issued an article 4 direction to prevent any further conversions of office blocks under permitted development rights and is planning a major shake of the way it allots its own council housing.

Cllr Swords wants to put paid to the perception that Harlow is a "soft touch" to which other authorities can outsource its homeless population. It has proposed doubling the length of time applicants must prove they have a local connection to the area from five to 10 years, and giving extra priority to people born in the town, including a specific measure that ensures "households placed in temporary accommodation by other councils do not have access to local housing over and above Harlow residents."

None of this will, of course, end the misery of the hundreds of households stuck in ex-office blocks on Harlow industrial estates or elsewhere. And as the acquisition of such out-of-area housing accelerates, even more homeless households will find themselves in these dislocated communities with very little chance of returning to their home area anytime soon.