

HOMELESS VETERANS IN LONDON: INVESTIGATING HOUSING RESPONSIBILITIES

*Updated Research Findings
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Homeless Veterans in London: Investigating Housing Responsibilities

Report 2

UPDATE (April/May 2019)

Introduction

In advance of the seminar organised by the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee (London Region) and partners, we have been asked to review developments since our December 2016 report. This short updating report is in 2 parts; setting out developments in the national context; and setting out developments in individual local authorities.

In relation to the latter research, which updates our 2016 report, we are pleased to note some significant improvements in information provision for veterans. Greenwich, for example, signpost advice for homeless veterans very clearly from their homelessness homepage and the veteran specific information provided by Haringey, Havering and Newham is also very good. Some improvements may be linked to the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (discussed further below). For example, on Brent's homepage for homelessness, there is a direct link for former members of the armed forces alongside other groups specified by the 2017 Act, with information about homelessness applications as well as other possible sources of support. Westminster also have specific information and advice and have a page entitled Information and Advice for armed forces.

However, many of the public facing websites we reviewed could still be improved, and there are some local authorities who provide very limited information for veterans. Our focus for this report is to highlight examples of what we consider to be best practice in this area and to note areas in which we consider further improvements could be made.

National Developments

Nationally, we recommended in 2016 that the Government should update the Code of Guidance, that greater clarity is needed on the way to apply the test for vulnerability, and Government should consider whether the test fit for purpose and can be properly applied by local authorities. We suggested this should include consideration of whether the duty should be expanded to include reservists, and we recommended that the Mayor of London and London Councils should explore whether a cross-London approach could be agreed to ensure consistent application of the test.

Since the report was published, a new Code of Guidance has been published, the Homelessness Reduction Act has become law, and further policy proposals have been made in relation to the allocation of social housing. We discuss each briefly below.

New Homelessness Guidance

The new Homelessness Code of Guidance was published on 22 February 2018 and has already been slightly amended 5 times since that date. The new Code includes specific guidance on veterans at Chapter 24.

Homelessness Reduction Act

The key sections of the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force on 3 April 2018. Among other requirements, it requires that local authorities must design and provide advice services particularly catered to particular groups, including former regular members of the Armed Forces. In addition, where public bodies – including the Armed Forces – believe an individual

may be homeless or threatened with homelessness, they are required to seek consent to notify a relevant housing authority.

Other policy developments in relation to housing veterans

The Defence Secretary announced on 19 February 2019 that former service personnel will now be able to stay in their homes for 12 months after the end of their service¹ and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have consulted on new guidance in relation to access to social housing for veterans. The proposed guidance would clarify that mental ill health should constitute grounds for additional preference and would encourage local authorities to disapply local connection rules for former partners of veterans. They also propose to consolidate the guidance given in relation to veterans, to provide extra training for Council staff and – as noted below – to suggest that all local authorities inquire about veteran status in relation to applicants for social housing. The consultation closed on 8 March 2019 and is currently under review.²

Review of local authority approaches to veterans

As with our December 2016 report, we have reviewed publicly available information for each London local authority, including information on websites and housing policies and strategies. The recommendations made in our previous report in relation to local authorities and developments in each area are set out below.

Armed Forces Champions:

Recommendation: We recommend that every local authority and the Mayor & GLA appoint and publicly announce an Armed Forces Champion. We encourage these Champions follow up on this report and seek to implement the recommendations in it where appropriate.

Findings: Many authorities have still not publicly identified their Armed Forces Champion.

Priority Need:

Recommendation: All local authorities should state that former members of the armed services will be in priority need if they are vulnerable as a result of having served in the regular armed forces.

Findings: In 2016 we noted that 9 websites make specific reference to applicants being in priority need because of vulnerability linked to service in the armed forces while 24 London boroughs do not make any reference to priority need for ex-service personnel.

Many more boroughs now state that applicants could be in priority need because of vulnerability, but still not all. Some Councils do not discuss any of the criteria to be considered but simply refer visitors elsewhere (often to Shelter), some note that priority need is important and then provide a link to sources which explain this further, while others set out more details, or explain it in detail as part of specific pages aimed at veterans.

For example, Brent, Hammersmith & Fulham, Islington and others refer applicants to the information provided by Shelter, City of London refers to the National Homelessness Advice Service, and Croydon refer to gov.uk³. Hillingdon now set out more details about the meaning of priority need, and include vulnerability as a result of service in the armed forces, and also provide a link to the information provided on the gov.uk website on priority need.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-extends-housing-offer-to-veterans>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-access-to-social-housing-for-members-of-the-armed-forces>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/emergency-housing-if-homeless>

The best examples of information provision in relation to priority need came from the veteran specific pages discussed above, and for example, in their 4 page leaflet aimed at ex-armed forces, Newham state:

General rules for people in priority need

It can be easier to get help if you qualify under the general rules for people in priority need, for example if you have dependent children or are pregnant. Newham Council should also look to see if you are vulnerable in some way. This may involve showing how a disability, mental health problem, addiction or other issue effects your ability to secure housing for yourself compared with other people who are rendered homeless.

Extra homelessness rules for the armed forces

You should also be treated as being vulnerable and therefore in priority need for accommodation if you can show that your vulnerability is as a result of being a former member of the armed forces. When deciding this, Newham Council may consider:

- how long you were in the forces and what role you had
- if you spent any time in a military hospital
- if you were released from service on medical grounds (and have a Medical History Release Form)
- if you have had accommodation since leaving service and if you have been able to obtain or maintain accommodation since you left
- how long it has been since you left service

To help support your case, you may need to provide medical evidence from the MOD, including a Medical History Release Form (if you were given one).

It can be hard to establish that you are vulnerable. You may need to seek independent legal advice or help from a specialist agency to make representations on your behalf if this Council decides that you do not meet the criteria set out above, and therefore it does not owe a duty to you to provide you with accommodation. You can contact :

<http://www.veteranshousingadvice.org.uk/>
https://england.shelter.org.uk/get_help/helpline

Recommendation: Applicants need to be provided with more information about how the test will be applied, including what questions they may be asked, and local authorities should ensure that individuals who are able to explain why they are vulnerable, have some knowledge of the test or have sought help are not penalised (as research suggests may happen at the moment).

Findings: There is not a great deal more information from many local authorities about how the test will be applied beyond references to the Code of Guidance and the statutory requirements. It is not possible to assess whether applicants who are aware of their rights are penalised.

Homelessness Applications & Service Information

Recommendation: All local authorities should clearly inform applicants that if they have served in the armed forces they should include this information in their application.

Findings: Many local authorities make this clear in relation to applications to be allocated social housing, and it is implicit in many websites which discuss the rights of veterans.

Recommendation: All local authorities should provide clear information online about what information might assist a homeless application by a former member of the armed services. This might include a request that if they have them in their possession applicants bring along relevant documents (including for example certificates of discharge, statements of service,

medical history release forms and other medical records) but should state explicitly that success in their application is not dependent on their ability to produce these documents.

Findings: While the veteran specific pages highlighted above do provide some more detail in relation to these recommendations, many other local authorities have not provided further information in relation to this. There are some examples of websites which indicate what papers might be useful; Hackney for example, note that supporting documents might include discharge papers from ex-armed forces applicants.

Identifying Veterans

Recommendation: All housing officers should ask applicants if they have a Service history and this should be recorded.

Findings: It is not possible to assess this based on publicly available information, but we note that in relation to applications for social housing, the Government is proposing to introduce statutory guidance suggesting that this question be asked by all local authorities.

Third Party Support

Recommendation: Local authorities should consider whether and how to provide improved signposting to third sector sources of support for veterans as part of their online public facing homelessness information.

Findings: There is evidence of significant improvement in many local authorities in relation to signposting. As noted above, for example, Brent provide details of a large range of possible sources of veteran specific support, as do Greenwich, Haringey, Richmond, and Southwark, while the Cities of London and Westminster link to the gov.uk resources available.⁴ However, many other local authorities could still improve in relation to this recommendation.

Homelessness Strategies

Recommendation: Local authorities should review (and where necessary, update) their homelessness strategies, including specific consideration of homelessness amongst veterans.

Findings: In some instances, where strategies have been updated, there is evidence of consideration of veterans. Hillingdon's 2017 strategy, for example, references veterans several times. It notes there is a requirement to design the service to meet the needs of certain groups/people, including former members of the armed forces, and states that Hillingdon will provide greater priority and 'additional preference' to former members of the armed forces. The strategy further notes that housing must be tailored to groups such as former members of the armed forces and services must be designed to meet the needs of specific groups such as former members of the armed services. Lambeth's 2018 update notes that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 means more bespoke provision of advice and services is needed, for example for former members of the armed services.

Online applications for social housing allocation

Recommendation: All local authorities should review their online systems to ensure that they are fit for purpose and applicants to join the housing register are not given incorrect information at a pre-application stage.

Findings: There is significant evidence of improvement in information provision in relation to applications by former service personnel. In Barking & Dagenham's online questionnaire about

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/veterans-welfare-service-useful-links-for-service-personnel/useful-links-for-the-service-community>

eligibility for example, one of the first questions asked is whether you are a former member of the armed services or due to leave in the next 6 months, and the information states that applicants will be required to show evidence (but it is not specified what evidence would be needed).

Other recommendations

We also made a series of other recommendations drawing from research which cannot be assessed using publicly available information, but which we set out here:

- All local authorities should ensure that housing officers know how to check for service records, using the forms at Veterans UK.
- Every local authority should review the information it collects about veterans (in relation to homeless and allocations), and seeks to improve the collection and publication of information about the provision of housing for veterans. To achieve consistency in data collection, the Mayor should coordinate this effort (including, for example, taking into account military discharges as directed by the Code of Guidance) and consider whether other cross-boundary strategic approaches could be implemented, including London-wide Armed Forces Housing Officers.
- All local authorities should ensure that staff are aware of the up to date law, including the changes in relation to vulnerability and local connection, and do not rely on the Code of Guidance.
- Local authorities should review the practice of other authorities and reflect on how they could improve the discharge of their homelessness duties towards veterans.
- All local authorities are encouraged to consider whether there are other ways they can offer assistance to veterans in their allocations policy and procedures, drawing on best practice from other local authorities.

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