

# HOMELESS VETERANS IN LONDON: INVESTIGATING HOUSING RESPONSIBILITIES

## BEYOND THE WORKSHOP – FINDING PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS

### KEY MESSAGES:

- Need for greater coordination across London, which may be partly addressed through a newly appointed London Armed Forces Champion, but which also requires leadership and engagement from both the public and charitable sectors.
- There would be value in a London-wide protocol to provide greater consistency in approaches to veterans accompanied by a user-focused guide to veterans housing. To be coordinated by London VAPC, who will explore the possibility of setting up a working group to be led by the local authorities.
- Further discussion needed of innovative solutions to the problem of supply. To be explored by the London VAPC working group.
- More research is needed into blockages to coordination, problems with decision making, and the role of the law in this area. To be led by Kent Law School.

## **1: Report on the workshop held on 3 June 2019 at the RAF Club**

Thirteen local authorities were represented; plus the leaders of the Labour and Conservative groups on the GLA, with five from the charitable sector, 11 from the VAPC, 7 from other military organisations, including the MoD, the RAF and Renewing the Covenant in the Capital. The event was co-sponsored by the Royal British Legion and Tesco, who have a veterans' network.

Discussions were divided into three sessions on homelessness, allocation of social housing, and working with others.

Attendees discussed the wider context of housing in London, noting funding difficulties for local authorities, lack of affordable housing, fragmentation of the social housing system and rationing of access to it. Attendees also highlighted the issue of public misunderstanding about the numbers of veterans rough sleeping on the streets noting there was relatively few in comparison with public belief, and for those who are rough sleeping, they are often there because of a range of factors, including in-work poverty. Some attendees noted from experience that some rough sleepers were veterans of non-UK armed forces, while others highlighted that UK veterans may not wish to identify as such for different reasons (e.g. sometimes negative perceptions in corporate / business world or if an individual were in special operations areas).

Attendees cited a wide range of different projects and initiatives to help those leaving the armed forces with housing and to support veterans on the streets, but many attendees noted a problem with **coordination of services**. The role of the GLA was cited as key here, but attendees also noted the key role of political leadership at different levels in individual local authorities.

Following the workshop, on 24 June, the Mayor of London and Chair of the London Assembly signed an updated Armed Forces Covenant, and named London Assembly Member Len Duvall as Armed Forces Champion. The move will be welcomed by attendees, as many suggested that more London-wide leadership was needed, including the need to appoint a London Armed Forces Champion (AFC) who could coordinate AFCs across London boroughs and establish a networking group of London AFCs to promote best practice. In addition, Some attendees noted that Borough AFCs do not necessarily know each other and very rarely meet, while others considered that there was a lack of clarity about the purpose of the AFC role and a risk that the AFC could become a fig leaf for inaction in an organisation. Another common theme in these discussions about coordination was problems with collection and collation of statistical information, including the need for improved record keeping and better sharing of data about veterans. Some suggested that regional leadership could help with these issues, while others suggested the need for greater guidance, minimum standards and potentially Terms of Reference for AFCs.

Many attendees cited a **disconnect between policy and delivery**, noting a desire to improve the situation for veterans at a policy level, but poor or inconsistent application of that policy in the delivery of services. Some noted high turnover of staff dealing with homelessness applications as well as staff training issues including weak knowledge of veterans and how they are defined/identified and a lack of knowledge of 3<sup>rd</sup> sector referrals. The absence of information about this on some local authority websites was cited as unhelpful in this regard. Some suggested there could be a greater role for advocacy services to assist with homelessness applications as well as the need for improved training for staff on possible referrals, as well as an understanding of the context and wide variety of issues which veterans can present with.

Attendees noted a role of the charitable sector in assessments, with local authority attendees noting that it is useful if Councils have good local connections to service charities that could assist

Councils in assessing Veterans' requirements. Others particularly focused on referrals to the charitable sector. However, attendees argued that it is important not to dump all responsibility on local authorities or on charitable sector – many suggested that the key is working in **partnership**, with charities and others, including housing associations. Some noted, for example, that while some charities have expertise in relation to veterans, they lack expertise in housing and may lack the capacity to commit to long term capital intensive projects.

In this context, participants highlighted the potential need for support/engagement after a veteran was housed – not just a focus on getting accommodation but on **support to sustain accommodation**. Participants highlighted the need for careful consideration of the appropriate role of the private rented sector for such veterans, and many noted the work of Project NOVA which provides mentoring for veterans who are in the criminal justice system.

Discussions of **the law** in this area highlighted a range of concerns, although some attendees did not consider the legal framework to be particularly problematic, and felt issues were more linked to administrative or organisational factors. Others considered that complex or unclear definitions were a factor in the difficulties which veterans could face and the law overall was too complex and difficult to navigate. In this context, some suggested an extension of the legal protections in relation to homelessness – to include all veterans irrespective of vulnerability in the priority need category, to include reservists, or reservists who had done a tour of active duty.

In relation to **supply**, participants discussed innovative solutions, including projects developing community land trusts using redundant Ministry of Defence land and a suggestion that The Treasury could be encouraged to waive VAT for renovations for housing the homeless, including veterans.

Nationally, participants cited ongoing work by the University of Strathclyde on best practice and the University of Northumbria on hotspots, which should be fed into further discussions about next steps.

Since the workshop, many attendees from local authorities, as well as representatives from local authorities who did not attend have contacted the London VAPC to express support for more discussions in these areas, and there is clearly enthusiasm for greater joint working, information sharing, sharing of best practice and discussion of ways to improve the situation for homeless veterans in London, which is to be welcomed.

## **2: Proposals**

- Participants suggested the need for greater coordination and emphasised the importance of leadership from Mayor's office and GLA. We are encouraged by the appointment of a London Armed Forces Champion, and hope this will enable greater coordination of AFC activity across London.
- Participants suggested there would be value in a London-wide protocol to provide greater consistency in approaches to veterans. It was suggested that this could be jointly produced by local authorities and the charitable sector, and could be initiated by a working group arising from the workshop. The protocol would aim to be a straightforward, easy to use approach for front line workers, to include asking those who present whether they have a Service record, details of referral options, and the basic law relating to veterans. This protocol could be accompanied by a user-focused guide to veterans housing.
- There is clearly appetite for further discussion of potential innovative solutions to the problem of supply, and suggest further meetings could be arranged to focus

- specifically on this question – meetings which might be expanded to include other potential stakeholders in this area, including developers and housing associations.
- More research is needed into blockages to coordination, problems with decision making, and the role of the law in this area, and we set out some questions for further research in this area below.

### **3: Research Questions**

**Local authorities:** How do local authorities respond to homeless veterans? Including: How is the legal test of ‘vulnerability’ applied in relation to homeless veterans? How do local authorities use the local connection test in relation to veterans? Do housing officers redirect/refer veterans to the 3rd sector? If so, how does this happen? Are there consistent principles in place in relation to referrals? Are there any cross-boundary approaches in place? How do housing officers establish service? Discharging the homelessness duty: What influences choices about referrals or placements of homeless veterans? Is the private rented sector seen as an appropriate place for veterans?

**Working with the third sector:** Is information availability the chief barrier to more effective working? Information sharing and coordination is seen as the key problem – is this right?

**Veterans:** how do veterans view the vulnerability test?

**Wider homelessness advice sector:** What experience do homelessness solicitors and caseworkers have of homeless veterans?