

# How to Respond to a Local Housing Emergency

a practical guide



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Emergency Planning</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Housing Resilience: The Immediate Response</b>	<b>05</b>
What is an emergency?	
Characteristics of different types of emergency incident	
Decision to evacuate	
Fire	
Flooding	
Building safety	
Evacuating vulnerable residents	
Accommodation options and record keeping	
Shelter and temporary accommodation	
Registered Providers of social housing	
Transport	
Pets	
Food and subsistence	
Financial resources and controls	
Fraud risk	
Staff well-being	
Access to resident records	
Trauma and anxiety	
Communication and public relations	
Role of elected members	
Mutual aid	
<b>Housing Resilience: The Recovery Period</b>	<b>12</b>
Hotel stays and Unsuitability of hotels	
Longer term temporary accommodation	
Use of vacant social housing	
Returning home and those who cannot return	
Accessing and recovering belongings	
NRPF cases	
<b>Case studies</b>	<b>15</b>
Grenfell Tower fire, RB Kensington & Chelsea, 2017	
The Chalcots building safety, LB Camden, 2017	
Samuel Garside fire, LB Barking & Dagenham, 2019	
Harry Zeital fire, LB Hackney, 2019	
Worcester Park fire, LB Sutton, 2019	
WWII UXB, RB Kingston, 2019	
Canterbury Villages earthquake recovery, New Zealand, 2011	
Hull flooding 2007	
Covid-19 pandemic housing response, London 2020	
<b>References and further reading</b>	<b>19</b>

# **Introduction**

This guidance has been commissioned jointly by the London Local Authorities' Panel (LAP) and London Housing Directors' Group to improve emergency housing resilience guidance, training and partnership arrangements for London Boroughs in responding to large-scale evacuation and rehousing incidents.

## **Housing Resilience in London**

The aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017 and a number of subsequent fires and evacuations in other parts of London in 2018 and 2019 highlighted the need for additional guidance to Housing Directors in London Boroughs regarding best practice in responding to and recovering from larger-scale emergencies that result in large numbers of residents being rehoused temporarily, sometimes for very extensive periods of time. Then, in early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a national lockdown and a Ministerial "everyone in" call for local authorities to provide emergency accommodation to rough sleepers and all those threatened with homelessness. London Boroughs and the GLA acted quickly to accommodate over 5,000 people, mostly in hotels otherwise vacated during the lockdown. At the time of writing, efforts are continuing to move people into longer term homes.

## **Purpose**

This document is intended to complement other emergency planning documents and forms the basis for live training discussions and exercises in individual boroughs, between groups of boroughs and with partner organisations, such as registered providers of social housing. Its purpose is to improve resilience, in terms of readiness to rehouse large numbers of people in an emergency.

# Emergency Planning

Housing Directors need to understand the principles of emergency planning and how the emergency response is organised in each borough as well as the role that the housing service and partner housing providers should play in preparedness, response and recovery. Each borough has an emergency plan and Housing Directors will need to be regularly involved in reviewing and updating these plans.

This guidance and the associated training activities are part of the preparedness role. The guidance sets out best practice for the housing service input to the immediate response and longer-term recovery periods.

**Response** refers to the decisions and actions taken to deal with the immediate effects of an emergency; to protect life, contain and mitigate the impacts, and create the conditions for a return to normality. This period typically may last for hours or days.

**Recovery** refers the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the community following an emergency. It is more than simply replacement of what has been destroyed, and the rehabilitation of those affected; it may also be an opportunity for regeneration, transformation and revitalisation. This period may last months or even years.

The local authority role in the response period is to provide immediate shelter and welfare for survivors, family and friends not requiring medical support via evacuation, rest, humanitarian and other centres to meet their immediate needs. Local authorities then provide social services support and financial assistance for the medium to longer term welfare of survivors in the recovery period. This guidance focuses on the housing service issues and input to each period.

It is important to note that emergency planning is distinct from business continuity planning, although both activities may need to happen simultaneously. **Emergency planning** has an external focus on response and liaison with other agencies. **Business continuity** is focused on the internal operations of an organisation and returning to ‘business as usual’. It is important to assign separate and complementary teams and resources to each activity.

In researching this guidance, it was notable that many social housing providers do not have distinct plans for emergencies outside of business continuity plans and do not have senior staff assigned to these separate roles. Housing Directors need to be aware of this when responding to emergencies and raising issues with registered providers of social housing.

London Housing Directors Group is recommended to take this issue up directly in regular Pan-London liaison with the G15 and also raise with the GLA and the Regulator of Social Housing. London Councils is recommended to lobby MHCLG to include regulatory requirements for emergency planning by registered providers (RPs) in the forthcoming White Paper strengthening the social housing regulatory framework. Pan-London exercises/training for RPs are also recommended as part of the roll out and dissemination of this guidance.

## ACTION

***Review your borough emergency plan – does it include up-to-date contact details for local RPs and other housing providers?***

***Talk to local RPs – do they have emergency plans in place and responsible lead officers?***

# Housing Resilience: The Immediate Response

## What is an emergency?

The Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) defines an emergency as an event or situation which threatens damage to human welfare, the environment or the security of the UK. The Homelessness Act refers specifically to people made homeless as a result of fire, flood or other emergency. The distinction of a CCA-type emergency is that the challenges involved require the use of assets beyond the scope of normal operations.

This guidance for Housing Directors is intended for scenarios where a borough needs to take action that goes beyond the normal provision of housing for a relatively small number of individual households, i.e. where a large number of households needs to be rehoused at once. To some extent the scale will be relative to each borough – some authorities routinely deal with large numbers of homeless households and are already resourced accordingly, others have a lower level of need normally and might find a relatively small emergency incident more challenging. The guidance also considers where mutual aid between boroughs may be essential to responding effectively.

## Characteristics of different types of emergency incident

In relation to housing services, the principal issue concerns emergency incidents that require residents to evacuate their homes and be provided with alternative accommodation. Evacuation may be necessary due to a range of risks – terrorism, release of hazardous substances, spread of fire, risk of explosion, damage caused by weather, risk of flooding, risk of contamination, etc. It may be that buildings that had appeared to be safe to occupy are discovered to be unsafe or dangerous and must be vacated for remedial works to be done or even for demolition and reconstruction. Accommodation may be needed to isolate individuals to prevent transmission of disease.

A number of recent examples of such incidents were researched to inform this guidance and specific lessons learned are set out in the case studies section at the end of the document.

## Decision to evacuate

Although in many scenarios the decision to evacuate will not fall to the Housing Director, an understanding of the principles of evacuation decision-making is important in responding well. There is clear on-line government guidance ([Evacuation and Shelter 2014](#)) which sets out these principles. The focus is on protecting life. In simple terms, the intention is to evacuate to a place of safety, provide shelter there, and then facilitate return as soon as safely possible. The priority must be the safety of the public and emergency responders. Depending on the incident and the risk, sheltering in place may sometimes be better than evacuation.

## **Fire**

Where a fire is spreading rapidly, the commanding fire service officer will decide when to evacuate neighbouring properties (including the decision to move from Stay Put to Simultaneous Evacuation from a high-rise residential block of flats). The fire service or the police would normally contact the local authority for assistance in this scenario, for example setting up a rest centre, or finding temporary accommodation for displaced households.

If there is an alarm system that the fire service or building manager can operate, then this can be used to inform residents to evacuate. In most residential buildings other than hotels, care homes and some sheltered blocks, there is not an alarm system to prompt evacuation. So, in most cases, the fire service will need to knock on every door to alert residents to evacuate, as well as notifying any residents contacting the fire service control room via 999 calls.

## **Flooding**

Where flooding is threatened, there may be time for a multi-agency strategic meeting to decide when evacuation of homes is needed, involving the police, other emergency services and the local authority. The agencies can then agree together how to notify residents of the need to evacuate and where shelter is available.

## **Building safety**

Where a residential building is found to be unsafe or dangerous (for example, after storm damage, being struck by a vehicle, or where defective fire safety works come to light), the decision to evacuate typically rests with the building owner or manager, on the advice of the borough's dangerous structures surveyor or the fire service.

Following the Grenfell Tower fire, inspections of cladding systems and other fire safety features of high-rise buildings resulted in consideration of whether to close buildings, requiring immediate evacuation, or to switch from relying on Stay Put guidance to a default of Simultaneous Evacuation in the event of a fire.

The fire service has enforcement powers to prohibit or restrict the occupation of buildings under Article 31 of the Regulatory Reform Order 2005. However, this power is rarely used and doesn't actually force occupants to evacuate. If an Article 31 notice is threatened or issued, the building owner would then be required to ask residents to evacuate. If they refused to leave their unsafe homes, the owner would need to seek an injunction to forcibly remove them from occupation.

The police and fire service generally have no power to require responsible adults to leave their homes. Evacuation may be assisted by the police, but they are not empowered to forcibly remove residents (i.e. arrest them for failing to evacuate) unless the building is actually on fire, is within the inner cordon of a terrorist incident, or is a crime scene.

## **Evacuating vulnerable residents**

Authorities should anticipate difficulties evacuating people who are frail or vulnerable. Evacuation can be traumatic, especially for vulnerable people. Assistance from social care or health professionals may be needed. In some cases, it may be considered a higher risk to evacuate someone than for them to stay put, given their vulnerability or medical condition. It is advisable to keep clear records of assessments and decisions regarding evacuation of vulnerable residents.

Boroughs should be aware of the capabilities and capacity of local voluntary organisations (including RPs/housing associations) and how to access their services. Emergency contact details for local social housing providers should be included in borough emergency plans and regularly kept up-to-date.

## **Accommodation options and record keeping**

At the point of evacuation, some residents will choose to go immediately to stay with friends or relatives, some may arrange their own hotel accommodation (possibly through personal insurance), others will have no other option and will depend on assistance from the borough or their landlord. It is important to record as accurately as possible who has been evacuated and where they choose to go. This can be a challenging task in the chaos and confusion surrounding an unfolding incident. Ideally, telephone and email contact details should be obtained for each person as well as details of their address, tenure type and family composition. Emergency planning documentation should include template forms for capturing the relevant information, including seeking each resident's consent to use and share their personal data for the purpose of responding to the emergency incident.

## **Shelter and temporary accommodation**

Boroughs have established plans and resources in place to set up rest centres and provide humanitarian aid in an emergency. Typically, a borough will have identified school halls, leisure centres or other community buildings that can be quickly repurposed to provide a safe place for displaced residents, with refreshments available and the capacity to stay overnight on camp-beds if needed. Each borough holds a central supply of equipment for use in setting up rest centres in emergencies.

Rest centres provide little or no privacy for people staying overnight. Where more private overnight accommodation is needed immediately, Boroughs will usually book local hotel accommodation, often using private hotel providers with whom they have pre-existing relationships for housing homeless households. Where a large number of hotel rooms is needed quickly, Boroughs are likely to exhaust local supply and may need to book rooms in neighbouring areas and more expensive hotels than would usually be used for homeless households. Boroughs can assist each other with information about local hotel provision.

Where there is a large scale need for emergency accommodation, particularly where other hotel demand remains strong, the use of normal booking systems (websites and telephone booking of individual rooms) is slow, fails to prioritise based on need and risks simply forcing up prices through competition for limited spaces.

Ideally London Resilience would like to establish an emergency booking arrangement with hotel chains across London. However, given the disparate and uncoordinated nature of the London hotel sector, with most hotels operated effectively as independent businesses, even when part of a branded

chain or group, this has proven difficult to broker to date. At the time of writing, this is being actively explored by Dame Louise Casey and MHCLG as part of the government response to Covid-19 and improving preparedness for potential future waves.

If residents need shelter for more than a few nights, they should be offered self-contained temporary accommodation as soon as possible, either in a vacant social housing property or in a private property secured as temporary accommodation by the borough. See the Recovery section below for more detail on the longer-term provision of temporary accommodation.

## Registered Providers of social housing

While boroughs are category 1 responders in an emergency incident and have a statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation in an emergency under the Homelessness Act, there is also an expectation that Registered Providers of social housing (such as housing associations) will step in wherever possible to provide accommodation in an emergency involving their own tenants and leaseholders. However, there is a wide range of RPs, from large national landlords with over 100,000 homes across many local authority areas, through medium size providers with a few thousand homes in a smaller area, to small local providers with fewer than 1,000 homes.

Larger and medium-sized RPs should have insurance policies in place that will pay for hotel accommodation for residents displaced in an emergency. Many smaller RPs find that the cost of such insurance is excessive given the relatively low probability of the risk occurring. It is vital that councils clarify early on, in dialogue with RPs, which organisation is taking the lead role in booking hotels and other temporary accommodation as well as managing liaison with insurers.

### ACTION

**Talk to local RPs – find out what insurance cover they have, clarify how ready they are to respond to an emergency need for hotel or other temporary accommodation.**

## Transport

Boroughs may also need to provide transport to reach accommodation, either directly using local authority community vehicles or paying for taxis, coaches, train fares, etc. This provision should be covered in the existing borough emergency plan. Liaison with RPs is needed where social landlords can provide transport for their residents.

## Pets

Wherever possible, residents need to be able to bring pets with them when they evacuate. This can be particularly challenging in hotel accommodation. Animals may need to be accommodated separately by specialist providers until pet-friendly self-contained temporary accommodation can be provided. Pets can be a very important source of emotional support and stability for their owners, so the impact of being separated from them should not be under-estimated. Some providers are reluctant to accommodate pets without access to veterinary records and history, which can be difficult to source at short notice.

## Food and subsistence

Where residents are displaced from their homes, particularly if placed in non-self-contained temporary accommodation without cooking facilities, they will need to eat takeaway food or in restaurants. There is no standard, nationally prescribed financial amount to cover food expenses and each borough or landlord will need to decide what is reasonable. Careful thought is also needed about how subsistence funds will be provided, for example through cash, vouchers or paid directly into residents' bank accounts.

## Financial resources and controls

Emergency plans need to consider the maximum level of spend that may be required and ensure that corporate credit cards issued to relevant senior and front-line managers have sufficient credit limits. In some cases, staff will need to be able to hand-out cash to residents to cover immediate subsistence and transport costs. Protocols and controls need to be in place for approving and recording these payments.

**Fraud risk** – there are particular sensitivities in relation to challenging potential fraud in times of crisis as well as a duty to put in place sensible safeguards to prevent and reduce the risk of fraudulent receipt of financial assistance and temporary accommodation.

### ACTION

**Talk to your finance and audit colleagues and make sure you have arrangements in place so that the right people can approve sufficient levels of spending in an emergency. Make sure you have safeguards in place to prevent fraudulent claims for money or emergency accommodation.**

## Staff well-being

Borough and RP staff come under stress and pressure in responding to emergencies and so may need additional management support and attention to their welfare and well-being. Where an emergency continues for an extended period of time, it is vital to put in place rotas so that staff are regularly relieved and given space to rest and recuperate between shifts. Staff may need to be organised into separate teams to ensure the emergency response is given enough attention and business as usual elsewhere in the organisation can continue at the same time.

## Access to resident records

From the emergency response perspective, responders would ideally have a detailed list of every resident affected by the incident available immediately, so that their whereabouts and safety can be tracked and followed up. Where possible, this should include equalities data to inform and tailor individual responses. However, the reality of modern life is that the owner or manager of a residential building can never expect to have accurate up-to-date personal information about every resident in the building, and of course people may have guests, while others may be away at the time of the incident, so responders cannot expect to know precisely who was resident or actually present in the building at the point of evacuation.

Nevertheless, for social rented accommodation, it is very helpful to have a list of residents provided by the landlord or building manager as early on during an incident as possible. It is also vital that records are kept of interactions with residents throughout the incident, including obtaining their contact details and any particular needs they have (e.g. disabilities / vulnerabilities; language / translation needs). Quickly putting in place data capture and tracking systems is vital, particularly in relation to providing confidence in the temporary and longer term rehousing process.

### ACTION

**Review how you keep resident records updated and how easily you can access records remotely in an emergency.**

## Trauma and anxiety

Across a range of potential emergency incidents, there is a clear need for adequate and ongoing availability of trauma counselling, social care, and independent advice to residents, both in the immediate response period and throughout the recovery process. While these services will be led by health and social care colleagues, available housing staff may sometimes be better directed towards providing humanitarian assistance rather than (or in addition to) providing emergency accommodation. Hence a strong link between Housing Directors and those leading the provision of humanitarian assistance is vital.

## Communication and public relations

Protocols should be in place for both internal and external communication as part of wider emergency planning. Communication is particularly important between boroughs and RP partners, as well as with press media, staff, residents, relatives and the wider community. Evidence suggests that even basic emergency contact details may not currently be kept up-to-date consistently between boroughs and RPs across London. Improving and sustaining these relationships must be a priority for preparedness action by Housing Directors.

## **Role of elected members**

Residents look to local politicians to provide reassurance and leadership in emergencies. Where respective officer and elected member roles have not been established, or agreed roles are exceeded or disregarded, then the coherence of the borough's position is undermined. It is vital to avoid issuing contradictory or unconfirmed information to the media or the public, to avoid duplication of effort and prevent unnecessary additional workload for those responding to the incident. Similar considerations apply to RP board members in ensuring a coherent response from social housing providers working alongside boroughs.

## **Mutual aid**

There are existing agreements between London boroughs to provide mutual aid when requested by an authority that is struggling to respond to an emergency in its area. Specific to housing services, there are sub-regional partnership arrangements in some parts of London and the London Housing Directors Group provides a network for sharing and coordinating responses across the capital. Boroughs can also seek assistance from the GLA, both in terms of access to grant funding and direct staffing input.

Although there are no formalised mutual aid arrangements in place between RPs, it is clear that they already collaborate extensively at a number of levels – for example the groupings known as G15 (large London RPs), L12 (medium sized London RPs), and G320 (smaller London RPs), and through the National Housing Federation. There are also specialist RP groupings related to supported housing and hostels for homeless people. London Councils can provide contact details and assist boroughs in approaching RPs for practical help.

It is recommended that London Housing Directors Group seek to broker a Pan-London agreement or protocol between RPs to provide mutual aid to each other, as local authorities do, in large-scale emergency rehousing scenarios.

# Housing resilience: The Recovery Period

In some scenarios, the response period ends quickly and the recovery period is equally fast – for example, typically an unexploded bomb that necessitates an evacuation can be defused and removed within 24 hours, allowing residents to quickly return to their homes, most likely after only one night away from home, if not on the same day. Similarly, a smaller or well-contained fire in a block may well allow neighbouring residents to return within a few days, once the block has been confirmed safe and any minor damage to communal areas has been rectified.

A longer term recovery period lasting weeks or months (even into years) is likely to be required where homes have been substantially damaged or destroyed so that major repairs or reconstruction are needed, meaning residents must stay in temporary accommodation for a much longer period or may even prefer to move permanently to new homes elsewhere.

Recovery should be seen as more than simply returning to the way things were – it is often a complex social and developmental process, restoring and rehabilitating the community, taking into account the humanitarian, economic, infrastructure and environmental impacts. Recovery is best achieved when the affected community is able to exercise a high degree of self-determination, managing its own recovery. It is important to recognise that the needs of affected individuals, families and groups will change over time. Recovery doesn't just happen after the response period has ended – it should start as soon as the emergency has happened. A good recovery needs to be built into the thinking and approach adopted to the immediate response.

In relation to providing emergency accommodation, Housing Directors need to consider how to meet immediate needs, provide longer term temporary accommodation where needed, and enable residents to settle back into stable, permanent homes as soon as possible.

## Hotel stays

When it is clear that displaced residents will need more than a few nights in a hotel, then the emphasis must be on providing self-contained temporary accommodation on a longer-term basis. However, in some cases, it makes sense for people to stay in hotels until appropriate temporary accommodation is available or when a move back into their permanent home is within sight. The emphasis then should be on quality, location and continuity of hotel accommodation, avoiding repeated moves between different hotels. Boroughs or landlords should liaise closely with insurers and hotel providers to ensure bookings can be extended easily without needing to relocate people. Of course, relocation may be desirable where the initial placement was poorly located (e.g. in relation to work, school or health facilities). The decision to relocate should be needs-led, not purely financially determined. Where possible, it is good to accommodate a group of displaced residents who want to stay together in a single hotel to offer mutual support to each other during the recovery period.

## Unsuitability of hotels

There is good research evidence to show that staying long term in a hotel, typically well below residential space standards and without household cooking facilities, is detrimental to good health, physical and mental well-being, educational attainment and positive family relationships. Avoid creating a situation where displaced residents prefer to stay in hotels rather than move onto self-contained temporary accommodation or back into permanent homes. It is important to communicate to residents at the outset of an emergency that any hotel stay is intended to be short term, with self-contained accommodation being preferable.

## **Longer term temporary accommodation**

As with hotels, moving on into self-contained homes that are available temporarily depends on providing good quality homes, in the right location and ensuring continuity of availability. Most boroughs have established arrangements for providing temporary accommodation for homeless households, procuring a range of properties whether nightly paid or leased from private owners, as well as properties purchased by councils directly and by their arms-length companies. Given the housing market pressures in London, many boroughs are reluctantly forced to provide temporary accommodation outside their own borough area. However, these existing supplies of temporary accommodation may not always be suitable in responding to and recovering from a large-scale emergency, depending on location, cost and quality.

## **Use of vacant social housing**

Following an emergency incident, where a substantial increase in temporary accommodation is needed for an extended period, boroughs may find it difficult to simply procure more properties through their existing arrangements. On a time-limited basis, an alternative approach is to make use of vacancies within the permanent supply of social housing.

Each borough and RP has separate tracking arrangements for the availability of vacant homes (usually called “voids”). This system, often coordinated by the local council, should capture how many social rented homes are currently vacant and whether they are available to let now, under offer or will be available soon. In an emergency, boroughs and RPs can agree to switch these vacant permanent homes to be used as temporary accommodation.

### **ACTION**

**Develop and agree clear local protocols for emergency availability of vacancies, including to residents of other social landlords and other boroughs.**

## **Returning home and those who cannot return**

In most cases, the housing goal of the recovery process will be for residents to return to their permanent homes, once any remedial work has been done to make them safe to occupy, potentially even demolition and reconstruction of homes that are beyond repair. However, in some cases there will be strong reasons to consider rehousing residents permanently in a different property, for example where the psychological and emotional impact of trauma associated with the original home and the emergency incident makes returning too painful.

This is a difficult judgement to make, and clear boundaries need to be in place when dealing with an understandable reluctance to return to affected homes once physically remediated. It is critical to avoid creating perverse incentives for displaced residents to stay in temporary accommodation – for example, the danger that they become dependent on generous subsistence payments which will no longer be payable when they return home.

## **Accessing and recovering belongings**

Depending on the type of incident, the speed of evacuation and the condition of the home afterwards, it is often the case that displaced residents are separated from some or most of their belongings and will want access to them sooner or later. This can be very difficult both practically and emotionally, particularly where personal items have been damaged, lost or destroyed. Lucy Easthope, an expert in disaster recovery, highlights “the meaning of things” and the importance of personal belongings in the process of coming to terms with and moving on from a traumatic emergency. Housing staff need to be aware of these issues and sensitive to the needs of displaced residents. Sometimes discovering or accessing belongings long after the emergency incident can bring back memories and emotional reactions can resurface in a powerful way.

## **NRPF cases**

People with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) are not entitled to local authority assistance under statutory homelessness duties (although this constraint was lifted by the government during the Covid-19 pandemic). Where ongoing accommodation is needed and a household is ineligible for publicly funded support, boroughs can work with charitable or voluntary sector partners to provide temporary accommodation while seeking to resolve NRPF status.

# Case studies

This section summarises some relevant incidents from recent years:

## Grenfell Tower fire, RB Kensington & Chelsea, 2017

This tragedy resulted in 72 deaths and is regarded as a national disaster. There has been very extensive reporting and commentary about the fire, the immediate response and the recovery process. At the time of writing, phase two of the public inquiry is in progress, with full findings and recommendations relating to the response and recovery process unlikely to be published until at least 2021.

Key learning points relevant to future large-scale emergency rehousing scenarios:

- Hotels are not suitable, healthy homes for longer term temporary accommodation, especially for families.
- However, where there is intensive political and public scrutiny, as well as a high risk of legal challenge, then setting effective parameters that incentivise move on into more settled accommodation can be extremely difficult to put into place and hold consistently.
- Balancing the use of discretion to meet specific needs with the principle of fairness is key to decision-making and accountability.
- There are a range of different staff skill sets needed – empathy and a problem-solving outlook is vital for initial responders; negotiation nous is critical to those securing accommodation to ensure quality and value for money.
- A distinct senior management role should be appointed to coordinate staff from other boroughs providing mutual aid so that these resources can be effectively used.
- Ongoing close liaison between housing and social care staff is essential to meet the full range of mental and emotional well-being impacts of traumatic emergencies.

## The Chalcots building safety, LB Camden, 2017

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, the London Fire Brigade began inspecting all high-rise blocks with similar cladding systems. At the Chalcots estate, LFB found significant fire safety deficiencies within four blocks, housing more than 2,000 people in over 600 households. LFB advised the council to evacuate the blocks or risk an Article 31 prohibition order. Over 500 households were rehoused in hotels and other temporary accommodation, although some refused to leave their homes despite the risk. The council discovered vulnerable residents in need of care and support who were not previously known to or receiving social services. The evacuation was widely reported and the council commissioned an independent review to learn lessons from the incident.

Key learning points relevant to future large-scale emergency rehousing scenarios:

- In considering evacuation of a residential building, it is important to assess the risk of adverse impact on the health and well-being of vulnerable residents and weigh these risks against the issues requiring the evacuation.
- Communication with residents is paramount, in particular providing accurate advice about their legal rights to remain where the landlord has not obtained a court order requiring evacuation of the homes.
- It is also vital to record adequate information on the size and composition of resident households as they vacate their homes and access rest centres and temporary accommodation. A standard template form should be ready in advance as part of local emergency planning documentation and data collected electronically wherever possible.
- Coordination of hotel room booking at such a significant scale is critical. Corporate credit card

limits were rapidly exhausted so senior finance and audit involvement is important to ensure a large-scale response can be effectively funded without losing bookings.

- The review recommended that London Resilience broker arrangements with hotel chains across London to better coordinate booking and allocation of rooms at scale in future.
- Social care involvement is essential for vulnerable residents and landlords should anticipate discovering people needing support who have not accessed care before.
- Providing generous cash subsistence payments while living in hotels can result in a perverse incentive to remain in less suitable temporary accommodation rather than return home when works have been completed.

## **Samuel Garside fire, LB Barking & Dagenham, 2019**

This widely reported fire spread up the outside of a block between timber balconies and then into several flats. Four blocks were evacuated, two were ready for re-occupation quickly, the other residents had to be housed in temporary accommodation during reinstatement works.

The key issues around the emergency accommodation related to:

- Coordination of housing needs assessment.
- Dealing with insurers and the negative impact of people being moved between hotels when short-term bookings expired.
- Some residents were unwilling to return to their homes due to wider fire safety fears.
- New build homes nearby were made available to some residents as an alternative to temporary accommodation and then returning to the blocks.

## **Harry Zeital fire, LB Hackney, 2019**

Another fire that spread up balconies and timber cladding, although on this occasion not entering and damaging other flats badly. Residents self-evacuated before LFB and borough emergency response staff arrived on the scene. RPs and council housing staff provided temporary accommodation. Residents returned within a few days.

Key learning points:

- The main initial issue was confusion over the ownership and management of the building, one of several adjacent blocks owned and managed by different RP landlords and a private managing agent. Boroughs and LFB need to ensure they have up-to-date information on block ownership and management contact details for emergency response.
- There was also confusion over the identity of residents and several fraudulent applications for temporary accommodation were made to the council, which diverted already stretched staff resources.

## **Worcester Park fire, LB Sutton, 2019**

This fire spread rapidly between shared ownership flats in a low-rise timber-frame building, part of a mixed tenure estate comprising other blocks with a similar construction type. The adjacent affordable rented block was also evacuated. The estate community centre was quickly established as a rest centre and communication hub for residents. The shared ownership block would need completely reconstructing, raising complex legal and financial issues for the RP landlord and the shared owners.

Key learning points:

- Expectations of the RP and the borough regarding provision of emergency accommodation were not aligned. Given a lack of RP voids nearby, hotels were used to provide more local temporary accommodation.
- Recording and tracking of residents needing rehousing and the initial shared ownership advice and support offer were insufficient.
- Communication issues regarding insurance arrangements and cover were symptomatic of wider resident distrust and uncertainty. RPs need to ensure clarity of insurance cover in planning for future emergency events.
- Psychological trauma and emotional well-being support service commissioning and referral issues. Boroughs should plan to have mental health support available quickly in future emergencies.
- Some difficulties with recovery of possessions which can add to psychological sensitivities.
- The borough acted quickly to cancel Council Tax liabilities for shared owners who had lost their homes.

## **WWII UXB, RB Kingston upon Thmaes, 2019**

This incident involved discovery of a large unexploded WWII bomb on a building site in the centre of Kingston, close to University of Kingston student accommodation blocks. It coincided with a local election, which put an additional strain on the council's ability to respond, with many staff resources and senior managers already deployed away from business as usual activities. The bomb was unusually difficult to defuse and eventually a controlled explosion was necessary. An added complication was a gas main crossing the building site where the bomb was unearthed. As a result, residents were out of their homes for several days. Mutual aid from neighbouring Sutton Council was important in fielding sufficient staff to respond to residents and resource rest centre facilities.

## **Canterbury Villages earthquake recovery, New Zealand, 2011**

Following two major earthquakes in and around Christchurch, the government set up a service to procure and provide accommodation in the Canterbury Temporary Villages to house displaced residents whose properties needed to be reconstructed. An evaluation report in 2013 highlighted a number of relevant issues that have informed this guidance, in particular relating to longer term "temporary" housing where reinstatement works can exceed two years and residents may begin to put down roots or seek more permanency.

## Hull flooding 2007

The UK quarterly rainfall for May to July 2007 was the highest since records began in 1766, resulting in severe flooding from surface water and rivers in many areas. In the City of Hull, the sewerage and drainage system was overwhelmed resulting in 6,000 residents being evacuated from their homes to stay with friends, relatives or in rest centres and temporary accommodation. The scale was so significant that the army was deployed to assist in the evacuation and the City Hall was used as a rest centre (the original designated rest centre was also flooded). Some people spent several nights sleeping in a rest centre. A University of Hull hall of residence was used as emergency accommodation. The scale of the disaster required many staff and services to operate completely differently from business as usual.

## Covid-19 pandemic housing response, London 2020

At the start of the coronavirus lockdown period in March 2020, the UK government wrote to local authorities asking them to use their discretion to provide emergency accommodation to everyone sleeping rough or threatened with immediate homelessness, commonly known as the “Everyone In” initiative. In London, boroughs worked in parallel with the GLA to book hotel rooms and other temporary accommodation for over 5,000 single homeless people. Many had been sleeping rough, while others were “hidden homeless” people, sleeping on friends’ sofas or floors and so unable to self-isolate if needed. Many hotels had been closed to other business as part of the lockdown measures and so were repurposed as temporary accommodation for single homeless people, often with additional support and security staff as well as councils organising delivery of meals and arranging laundry services.

In some areas, boroughs worked together to coordinate hotel bookings and allocation of rooms to single homeless people. For example, Hounslow Council in West London acted as the lead borough procuring and allocating hotel rooms for several neighbouring boroughs, after agreeing a simple Memorandum of Understanding between them.

At the time of writing this guidance, with lockdown measures partially relaxed, the focus was moving to the exit strategy, following the “In For Good” principle and finding people move-on accommodation, mostly in private rented and supported housing. Government funding is available to assist with ongoing revenue costs and capital grant towards securing move-on.

The key issue for London Resilience, as previously raised in the Chalcots evacuation, is the disparate and uncoordinated nature of the London hotel sector, with most hotels operated effectively as independent businesses, even when part of a branded chain or group. This means that where there is a large scale need for emergency accommodation, particularly where other hotel demand remains strong, the use of normal booking systems (websites and telephone booking of individual rooms) is slow, fails to prioritise based on need and risks simply forcing up prices through competition for limited spaces.

Even though it hasn’t been possible to broker an emergency arrangement with hotel chains across London so far, this issue is now being actively explored by Dame Louise Casey and MHCLG as part of the Government response to COVID and improving preparedness for potential future waves of the pandemic or other large scale emergency housing needs.

# References and further reading

Emergency Response and Recovery (2013) – MHCLG

Evacuation and Shelter Guidance (2014) - MHCLG

Civil Contingencies Act (2004) - MHCLG

Homelessness Act (1996) – MHCLG

Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order (2005) – MHCLG

Resilience in Higher Education 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (2019) - AUCSO

Evaluation of the Canterbury Temporary Villages (2013) - NZ Government

The Recovery Myth (2018) Lucy Easthope

The June 2007 Floods in Hull (2007) – Prof. Tom Coulthard et al.

Tackling Homelessness Post-COVID (2020) – Melanie Rees, CIH

London Councils  
59½ Southwark Street  
London SE1 0AL  
[www.londoncouncils.gov.uk](http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk)

© This guidance was researched and written for London Housing  
Directors' Group by housing and regeneration consultant Mark Baigent  
[www.markbaigentconsulting.co.uk](http://www.markbaigentconsulting.co.uk)

Publication date: October 2020