

Temporary solution

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Over-stretched accommodation and rising rents in London are leading to councils considering temporary homes as a potential fix. *Kate Youde* finds out more



When it comes to housing [homeless](#) families in temporary accommodation, councils are increasingly turning to temporary structures. Enfield Council's cabinet late last month agreed the principle of providing "flexible, quick-build" housing - temporary, factory-built units that can be moved between sites - as a "cost-effective alternative" to nightly-paid accommodation.

A [policy](#) blog from the charity Shelter last year referred to pop-up housing as a "drastic measure for a desperate time". So what are the circumstances under which the [London](#) borough has taken this step?

At the end of September 2015, Enfield had 2,930 families in temporary accommodation - the fifth-highest level in England according to a report that went to the council's cabinet. Two and three-bedroom units accounted for two-thirds of total demand. Of the 2,930 families, 1,414 were being housed in nightly-paid accommodation in the private sector, the most expensive form of temporary accommodation.

Although the council expects the number of homeless applications to drop slightly this year - from 1,501 in 2014/15 to a predicted 1,427 in 2015/16 - total acceptances are forecast to more than double over the same period, from 639 to 1,324.

The borough has introduced a number of initiatives to respond to the pressure on local [housing supply](#) in recent years. These include the launch in 2014 of Housing Gateway, a council-owned company which has bought and renovated 138 existing homes to provide sub-market accommodation

the local authority can use to discharge its statutory homeless duties. In its first year, estimated savings compared with nightly-paid accommodation were more than £500,000.

Budget pressure

However, as demand for temporary accommodation is increasing, Enfield Council faces an estimated budget pressure of £5.3m in the next [financial](#) year, rising to £13.2m in 2017/18 - and, in the words of the report to the cabinet, "additional urgent action" is required.

To that end, the cabinet has agreed to the principle of the council providing "flexible" accommodation - often modular units built offsite and so constructed more quickly than traditional methods - to deliver "greater [value for money](#) from temporary accommodation", although no figures are specified. Other [benefits](#) of this approach include the ability to change the size or location of units, or even stack them, to meet changing housing needs or site requirements.

Y:Cube modular units

Room sizes tend to be smaller in temporary structures, however, and proposed sites will need to have access for large delivery vehicles and be close to local amenities and transport links. Although temporary, the homes will require [planning permission](#).

Under the proposals, the council could lease units to use as temporary accommodation directly or Housing Gateway could lease or purchase units which the council could then use to discharge its statutory homeless duties or lease from the property company for temporary accommodation. Initial financial modelling suggests the most financially viable option is for Housing Gateway to buy units.

Ahmet Oykener, cabinet member for housing and housing regeneration at the Labour-controlled council, says the cabinet's decision comes against a backdrop of reduced council stock due to the [Right to Buy](#), rising [homelessness](#), increasing private rents and changes to the housing [benefit](#) cap, which have made inner London unaffordable and put pressure on outer London boroughs. As demand rises, [private landlords](#) are charging more to house people in need.

Without enough long-lease properties available to the local authority to house homeless families, it has to enter nightly-paid accommodation agreements with agencies and private landlords. "It is extraordinary expensive and the quality, at times, is very questionable," says Mr Oykener. "So I thought we should look at modular housing because of, first, the

better quality and, second, the speed of being able to come up with these units." He adds that one of the companies with which the council has had informal discussions has suggested homes could be delivered within 12 weeks.



Reasonable approach

Mr Oyken says some temporary modular units he has seen "tick all the boxes" in terms of quality, energy efficiency, speed of delivery and financial savings. The number of units built will depend on viability: the cabinet has commissioned work to compare the cost of nightly-paid accommodation against flexible housing systems.



Their interior

Enfield is not the first local authority to look to temporary structures. Last year, Ealing Council selected Mears Group and Snoozebox to provide modular units to enable homeless families to leave unsuitable and costly bed and breakfast accommodation. Lewisham Council is providing temporary homes for 24 homeless families in what it describes as the "UK's first 'pop-up village'". The homes are due to be ready for occupation in April or May and stay on site for a maximum of four years, after which they will be taken down.

Faye Greaves, policy and practice officer at the Chartered Institute of Housing, expects more councils to consider using temporary, flexible housing for temporary accommodation. "In terms of providing a temporary solution [to homelessness] in a statutory sense, it is a reasonable approach to meeting that need. However, councils still need to have ways of fulfilling long-term duties. There needs to be enough suitable housing options out there, freeing up these temporary homes for other people to move into."

Sir Steve Bullock, London Councils' executive member for housing and elected mayor of Lewisham, said in a statement that London boroughs were under "severe pressure" to meet high demand. "Ultimately more needs to be done to increase affordable housing supply, which will reduce use of temporary housing in the first place," he said.

"However, with current levels of demand, innovative and effective approaches such as flexible housing schemes will be needed in the meantime."

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