

Romford Recorder

Havering's hidden homeless problem

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by Sam Blewett



Stacey Muskett and Steve Moody have lived in the hostel with their two young children for four months. Picture: Sam Blewett

You may see the odd person begging in South Street but you may not realise that nearly every other day a household is made homeless in

Havering but it's kept well hidden because people are "deeply embarrassed".

In parks across the borough rough sleepers lie down in sleeping bags and pitch tents. Others sleep in their cars.



Vicky Jarvis is now living in shared accommodation

But they may not appear to passers-by to be homeless, according to Kim Merry, chief executive of charity Hope4Havering (H4H). She points out that many have access to showers

and washing facilities at places such as the Salvation Army and keep their situation hidden from family and friends because of the stigma that comes with homelessness.

The council does a great deal of work trying to house those they have a “duty of care” to provide support – that is they lack a home, have a priority housing need (such as ill-health) and have a local connection with Havering.

Pick up the phone if you see a rough sleeper

If you spot someone sleeping rough, contact the council on 01708 432824 or charity No Second Night Out on 0300 500 0914 who will work with the council to find a solution.

But the council claims that there were only 11 rough sleepers in the year 2013/14 – a figure that Mrs Merry “confidently” refutes.

H4H opens churches for the homeless to sleep in, helping 11 people to bed down this week. This is less than half of the figure Mrs Merry sees in the winter.

But Sue Witherspoon, Havering’s head of housing, says there is no evidence that there is a problem of rough sleeping in Romford and Havering’s homelessness manager Lorrita Johnson says many who H4H accommodate do not have a local connection – something the charity disputes.

In 2013/14 779 families and individuals contacted the council. It investigated every case and determined that in 163 cases it had a statutory duty to house them.

Hostels managed by the council are the first port of call and are at capacity. Havering has three hostels that house 279 people. A bed will rarely go unslept in at Abercrombie House, Bridgewater Road, Harold Hill, and manager Tracey Bagwell admitted that the “majority” of those in her hostel are young families.

The rooms are basic and contain the essentials. There are shared kitchens for the families to cook in.

It is tough for families to live there but it is a “temporary” solution before being moved on to a social or council-managed private property.

Havering’s housing needs manager Jonathan Geall says that people stay in them for “less than three months”.

However, some of the tenants don’t see it this way.

Steve Moody, 22, and Stacey Muskett, 21, moved to the hostel four months ago with their baby and two-year-old toddler because of a lack of space in their parents’ homes.

While Stacey looks after the children, Steve tries to find work but says “there is nothing out there”.

They hate having to bring up their children in a hostel with no communal area to play and complain that others use drugs in their rooms.

“All you need is flaps in the doors and meals to be served under them and you’d be in prison,” says Steve.

But 18-year-old Vicky Jarvis, who has spent the past three years sleeping on friend’s and family’s sofas, has finally got a permanent roof over her head thanks to the council.

“The people are really nice and I’ve got my own bed and somewhere to put my clothes rather than keep them in plastic bags,” she says of the shared accommodation in Rainham she has just moved to.

The council’s resources are stretched and bed and breakfasts are used when the hostels are full but as long as people are made homeless there is work to be done and the borough’s housing manager vows help is at hand.

H4H is always looking for support. If you can donate money, your time, or clothing, please get in touch with Mrs Merry on 07894 448 729.