

Housing, Coronavirus, and our Clients



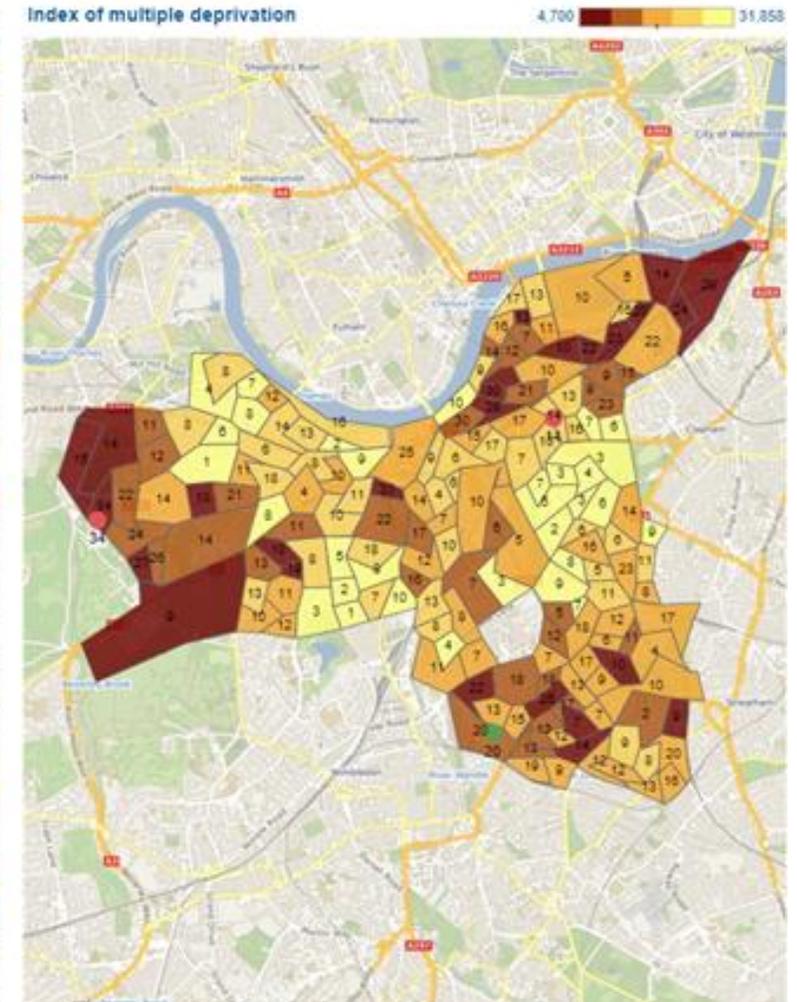
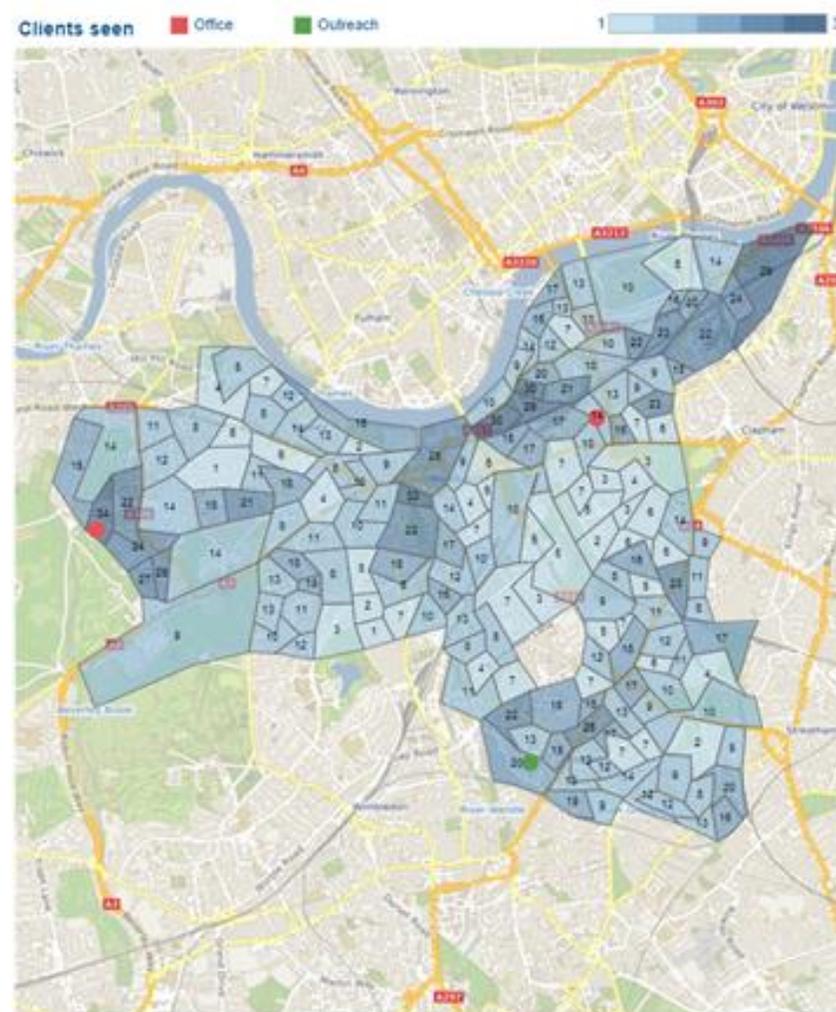
Wandsworth

25th May 2021

Client Profile & Geography

Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, we advised **2180** Wandsworth residents about **4667** housing issues.

An increase of **34%** on the previous year

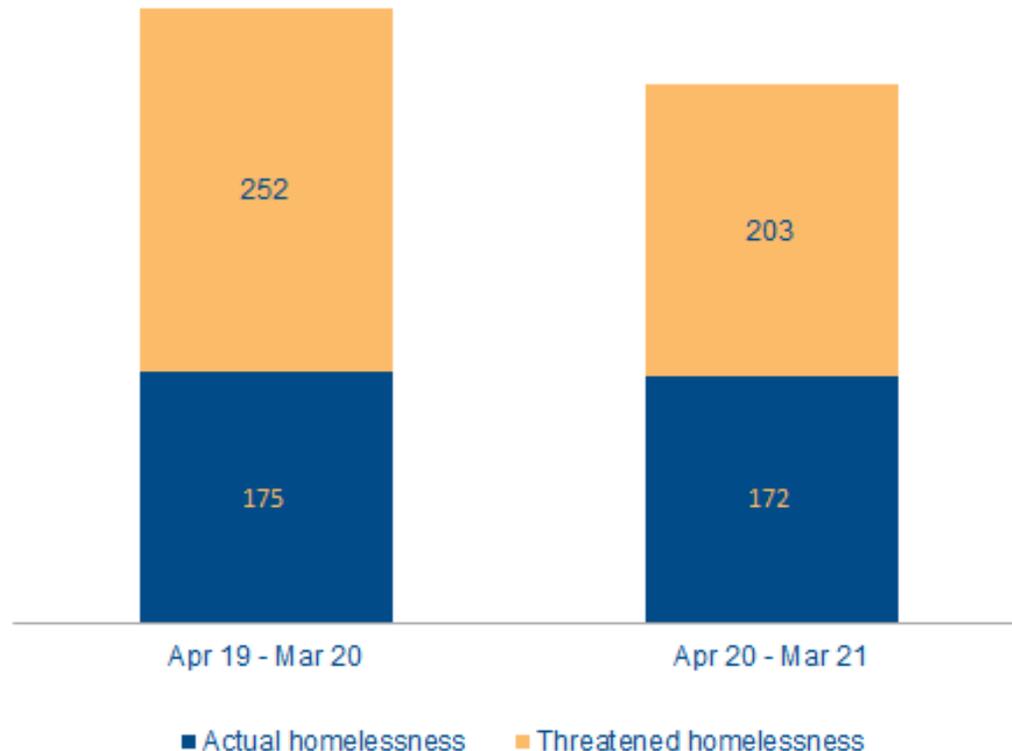


The darker colours on the IMD map show higher levels of deprivation

April 2020 – March 2021

Housing

Although we saw more housing issues in the last year, we saw fewer cases of actual and threatened homelessness due to the eviction ban and the Everyone In Initiative.



553 more clients have come to us about housing

Private sector rented property issues have increased by **66%**

32% reduction in owner occupier property issues



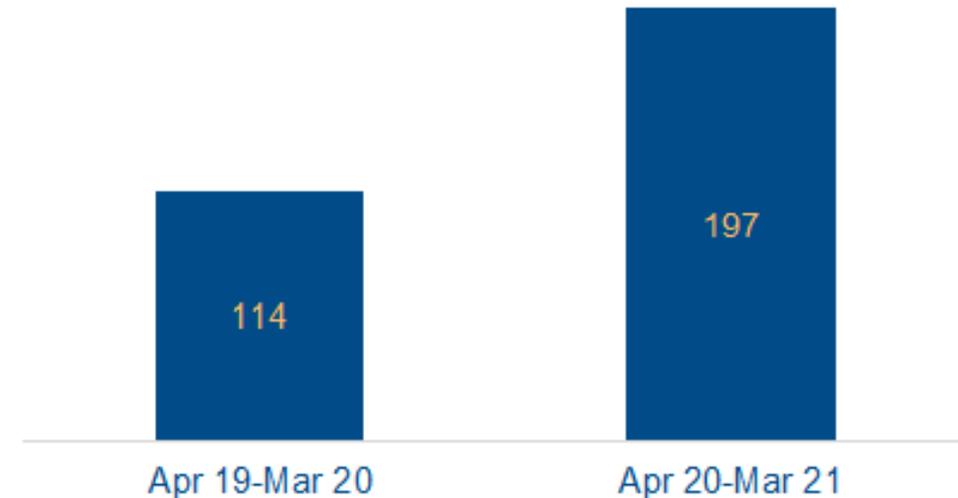
Housing Allocations

More clients have come to us about allocations as tenants have grown frustrated about being stuck in unsuitable housing over the last year.

71% increase in clients coming to us about allocations

Anika lives with her partner, two children, and her adult autistic son in a 2 bed council flat. The property is overcrowded, and damp is worsening her health issues. Anika urgently needs to move to a more suitable property. However, it's been difficult to get through to her housing officer to find out how long it will take to be housed.

Sinead and her newborn baby live in temporary accommodation while they wait to be rehoused. But Sinead feels that the harassment she's faced in the neighborhood, social isolation, and issues with heating have negatively impacted her mental health. She desperately wants to be rehoused soon.



Issues for landlords

During the last 12 months we have been contacted by several landlords impacted by the drop-in income of their tenants.

With the ban on evictions, suspension of court proceedings, and the growing backlog of cases it has become increasingly difficult to proceed with repossessions, which has left some landlords experiencing hardship.

Ben rented out his home to a family for 5 years while he moved abroad for work. Despite giving advance warning of his family's return to the country, the tenants refused to move out and could no longer afford to pay rent.

Ben tried to resolve the situation by offering payment plans, mediation, and to waive the rent if the family moved out. However, these options were refused and Ben's relationship with the tenants quickly deteriorated.

Despite receiving no rent, Ben still had to pay his mortgage, housing costs, and tax as well as rent for a second property. However, it could be months before Ben can regain possession of his home.

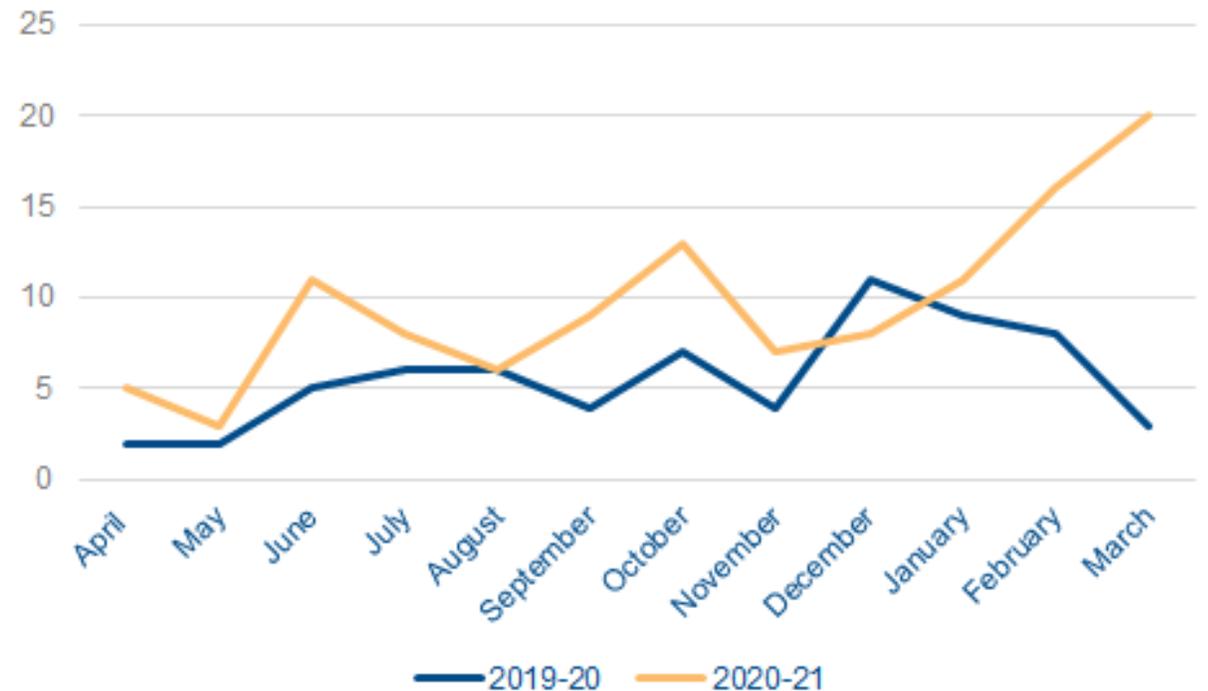
Rent arrears

Nationally, rent arrears have increased over the course of the pandemic. An estimated 750,000 families were behind on their housing payments in January.¹

In line with national figures, we have seen an increase in the number of clients seeking advice about rent arrears to private landlords over the last year. Many clients have lost work due to the pandemic and have fallen behind on rent payments, leading to accumulated debt.

Cases about rent arrears to private landlords have **doubled**

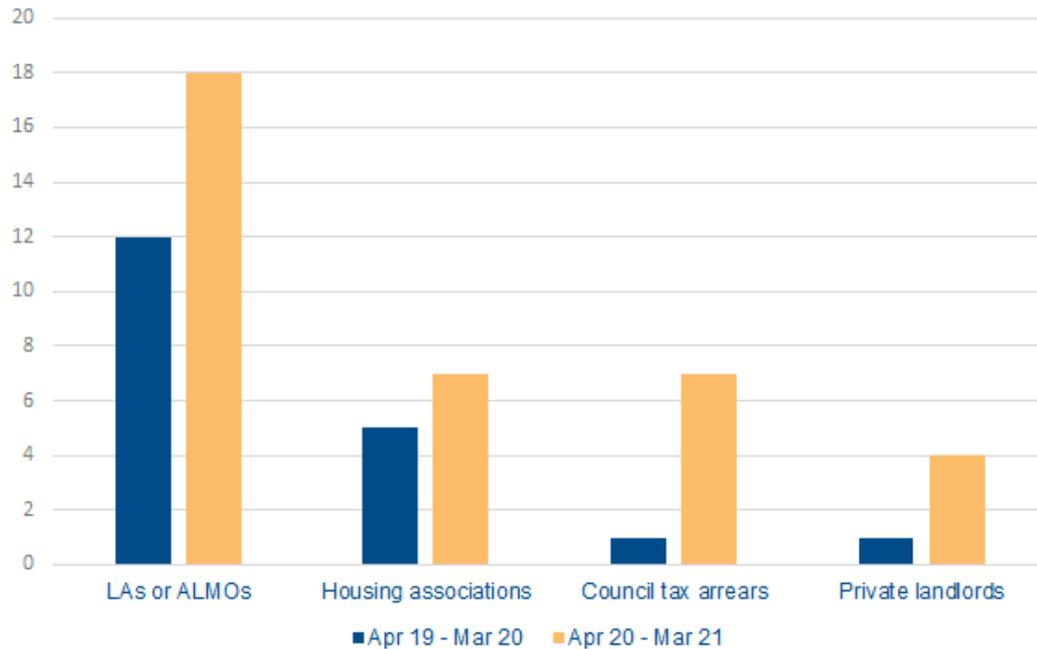
Tony lost his job as a waiter in March and was unable to pay his rent. Although Tony negotiated a rent reduction, benefit payments could not cover all his living costs and his rent arrears increased. We advised Tony to apply for the Council's **Discretionary Housing Payment scheme**.



Rent arrears and benefit deductions

For many clients, benefits and Universal Credit do not cover their rent. There has been a large increase in clients' rent and rent arrears being directly deducted from their benefits which for many clients has led to extreme financial hardship.

The number of clients we've advised about discretionary housing payments has **tripled**

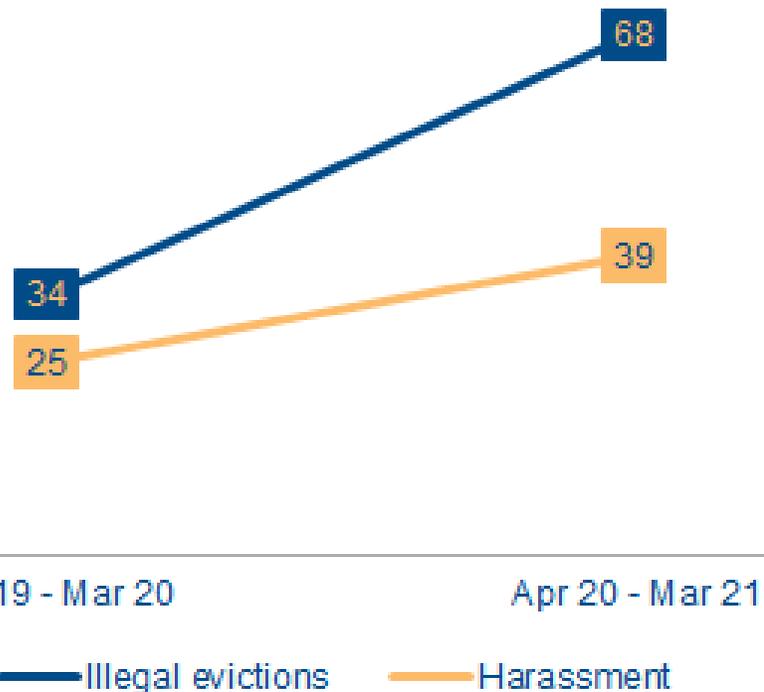


Eduardo lost his job due to the pandemic and accumulated rent arrears. With rent and rent arrears directly deducted from his Universal Credit, Eduardo had to seek support from a local foodbank and apply for a discretionary crisis payment.

Aisha has mental health problems and physical disabilities and she lives in privately rented accommodation. Discretionary Housing Payments help Aisha make ends meet, however once the award period ends Aisha is back to experiencing severe hardship (relying on food banks and crisis payments) as her circumstances don't change. We've helped her reapply for a DHP six times.

Illegal evictions and harassment

We have seen a sharp increase in cases of private landlords unlawfully evicting tenants. More clients have also come to us about landlord harassment.



Joe was told to leave his property because his landlord wanted it vacated due to Coronavirus. The landlord cut off utility supplies and verbally threatened Joe to force him into leaving. However, Joe has no deposit to find alternative housing.

During lockdown, Mei's landlord demanded that she leave the property within a month. When Mei refused, her landlord sent people around to the house to harass and intimidate her. Mei is frightened and fears she will be made homeless.

Exploitative agency landlords

In the last 12 months **seven** clients have approached us in severe hardship and described being exploited by landlords in similar ways. The landlords have different names, but the same business model [Fresh Start, Apollo, Omnia, Assured properties].

Circumstances

Each client was homeless, several had additional vulnerabilities. None could afford a deposit or rent in advance, and accepted the offer of housing as an alternative to rough-sleeping.

Experience

The clients told us that they:

- Signed tenancy agreements for exclusive use of two rooms [when they were, in fact, provided with a single room],
- Were asked to hand over their UC login details – for the landlord to apply on their behalf.
- Because the cost of rent charged equals the local housing allowance their entire UC payment is paid directly to the organisation for rent –leaving them with no income for other living costs.

Exploitative agency landlords: case study

Anna was made homeless when she lost her job during the pandemic.

She was referred to xxx housing where she rents one room in shared accommodation. However, the cost of rent is equal to the local housing allowance. This means that each month after her rent is directly deducted from her benefits, there is no money left over. Consequently, Anna has had to rely on a Foodbank and Discretionary crisis payments to survive.

Anna is aware that her rent is roughly double the market rate but cannot afford to move anywhere else because she cannot save up the deposit.

Anna was denied support under the homelessness reduction act despite the unaffordability of her rent.

Recommendations

We ask WBC to consider addressing the issues we've raised:

1. Rent arrears

- a. Protect private sector tenants who are at risk of eviction because of rent arrears by offering a scheme of grants and loans to repay their housing debt.
- b. Continue to take a sensitive approach when dealing with social housing rent arrears, and recovery action for council tax.

2. Hardship

- a. Better publicise the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme so that more Wandsworth residents facing financial hardship can be provided with vital support with their housing payments.
- b. Offer extended Discretionary Housing Payment award periods so that residents in severe hardship don't have to continually reapply.
- c. Continue to strengthen and invest in the Discretionary Social Fund
- d. JCP and WBC to offer more flexibility in the application of third party deductions to minimise the number of tenants with rent arrears experiencing hardship.

3. Issues with private landlords.

- Introduce a landlord accreditation scheme.
 - Re-instate a tenant's champion role to liaise with private sector landlords, reduce landlord-tenant issues, and help protect tenants from poor practice.
 - Introduce a rent-deposit scheme; giving homeless people in hardship the option to find suitable accommodation.
- b. Provide homelessness support to people who are experiencing severe hardship as a result of the practice of exploitative landlords e.g. rent in advance/deposit and list of landlords willing to take benefit claimants).
- c. **Job Centre Plus** and **other local agencies**: remove disreputable and exploitative landlords from their signposting/referral lists.

4. Issues with allocations

Build an online system to improve communication about waiting times for housing

References

1. L. Judge, Getting ahead on falling behind: Tackling the UK's building arrears crisis, Resolution Foundation, February 2021

Thank you

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