

In a year in which housing was never far from national headlines, Martin's exclusive stories written in compelling style set him apart from the pack.

His first piece, [Housing's most important job](#), saw him beat national newspapers to land the first interview with Maxine Holdsworth, the woman charged with rehousing people who had lost their homes and family members in the Grenfell Tower fire. Ms Holdsworth had never previously spoken about her role – she was drafted in to take charge after the fire. The interview provided readers with the first insight into the planned approach to rehousing residents – a huge technical and ethical housing management challenge.

His questioning saw her admit there hadn't been enough staff initially to meet need and that residents' experience of rehousing had been chaotic. The sensitively written piece addressed national concerns about the rate of progress but also passed on learning to readers about emergency planning. The Guardian later interviewed Ms Holdsworth, but Martin beat them by two months <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/11/homeless-because-of-a-tragedy-struggle-to-rehouse-grenfell-survivors-continues>

Martin's second piece, [Disguised by luxury](#), was again focused on the most important housing story of the year – Grenfell. His detailed investigation uncovered evidence that challenged a controversial statement made by government in the aftermath of Grenfell that implied a similar fire would have been less likely in a privately owned block of flats. This was an issue of national importance, because the statement implied that there might not be a system-wide problem with building regulations. If such thinking informed policy decisions it would have widespread implications for health and safety that would affect residents and managers of all tower blocks. Martin trawled through every enforcement notice issued on high rise blocks by the London Fire Brigade since January 2015 and found that 87 had been issued to the owners of privately owned blocks, compared to 62 for social blocks. He also pulled together evidence of wider concerns about fire safety in privately owned blocks – including councils' struggles to engage with owners where there were worries about fire risk.

His final article, [The Hidden Households](#), demonstrates Martin's versatility as a writer. The brilliantly written colour piece provided readers with a shocking insight into a secret world. He visited numerous concealed encampments of migrant workers to expose the fact that they have quietly become a secret fixture of London. Scrambling through undergrowth in the dead of night he met migrants living in shacks and tents because housing was either too expensive or difficult to obtain. His piece also examined efforts by a homelessness charity to find different housing solutions for this group.

Martin's journalism demonstrated excellence in style combined with in-depth, investigative journalism in 2017. It is for that reason he would be worthy winner.



HOUSING'S

MOST

IMPORTANT

JOB



In July, Maxine Holdsworth took on responsibility for rehousing people who lost their homes in the Grenfell Tower tragedy. In her first interview, she opens up to *Martin Hilditch* about the rate of progress

Right now Maxine Holdsworth has the most important job in housing. Four months ago she was director of housing needs and strategy at Islington Council. Now she's responsible for rehousing families and individuals who lost homes and loved ones in the Grenfell Tower fire. She initially got involved in helping out 10 days after the fire, as housing staff from across London were drafted in to belatedly

improve Kensington and Chelsea Council's slow response to the tragedy. At the start of July she was placed in charge of the rehousing operation. In effect, her job is to sort a crisis on a scale that no living UK housing professional has ever had to deal with. Her task involves everything from quickly sourcing hundreds of new homes, to working with traumatised residents and attempting to rebuild trust with a community that has been so badly failed. ►

“Some people are still living in hotels. It is not what we want, it is not what the residents want either.”



Today she's giving her first interview since she moved into post. It comes at a tricky time. More than 200 families required rehousing following the terrible fire. We speak just before the four-month anniversary and at the time of going to press just 14 households have moved into permanent accommodation - although 56 offers of permanent housing have been accepted. A further 178 offers have been made for temporary accommodation, of which 59 have been accepted and 45 households have moved in. There has been much criticism about the pace of progress - and by any calculation there is still a huge task ahead.

Inside Housing wants to find out how Ms Holdsworth is planning to deliver, what she thinks of the progress so far and what lessons housing professionals need to learn.

Unprecedented tragedy

Ms Holdsworth comes across as a thoughtful but straight talker. She admits that she felt “humbled but also daunted” when she was asked to take charge of the rehousing of Grenfell Tower residents. “It’s an unprecedented tragedy, so I just didn’t know what I was going into.”

Ten days after the tragedy, when she first got involved, Ms Holdsworth admits there probably weren’t enough staff to cope with the “huge logistical challenge” of sourcing large amounts of housing and working with the families. “There weren’t enough of us in the early days and it had to be scaled up.”

What about today? “At this point, where we are today, yes, there are enough people and it is much easier to plan.”

Today, the number of staff working in the housing allocations team has quadrupled from the five who worked for the council before Grenfell. Each allocations officer works with a small caseload of 10 to 15 families with the intention of making sure that residents get face-to-face contact when they need it.

While things have improved, looking back does Ms Holdsworth think the criticism levelled at the council in those early days was justified?

“However hard people might have been working, the residents’ experience was chaotic and frightening,” she says. “So we all have to accept that there is a huge amount to be learned.”

This learning is for councils across London as well as Kensington and

Chelsea Council, she feels. Up until Grenfell, plans for emergency responses involving joint working between councils “had been reserved for terrorist incidents and that kind of thing”, she states. “So I think many boroughs are reviewing their emergency planning procedures.”

While the number of staff in place might now be adequate, clearly there is still a big job to be done, with many residents yet to accept offers of temporary accommodation, never mind permanent housing. Has the criticism of the pace of progress been fair?

“We are four months on from the fire and... some people are still living in hotels,” she says. “It is not what we want, it is not what the residents want either and we are really keen to get people moving. So in terms of priorities for me it is supply, supply, supply.”

That task involves finding many more homes than there are households waiting to be rehoused, she states. “We need to be able to give

people a choice. So we don’t just need 200 properties, we need to make sure that we have got more than that so people are able to choose the home that they want.”

So far this work has involved acquiring 105 newly built homes in the local area. Ms Holdsworth states that the majority of Grenfell residents spoken to by the allocations team “want to stay in the local area”. Fewer than 20 households want to move somewhere else entirely. Because the numbers are small this has been an easier process to manage and Ms Holdsworth says “some of the people who have moved into their new homes are some of the people who are living in other areas”. Nonetheless, she has “no doubt” that the council will meet its commitment to make a permanent offer of rehousing to all households within 12 months. If households turn offers down? “We’ll make them another. And another.”

Clearly there are challenges. More homes are needed in North Kensing-

ton for starters, “so people who want to stay in that area can have that choice”. While a number of homes have been acquired, the majority of them are in one or two locations (68 flats on the Kensington Row development and 31 on Hortensia Road). “We have got quite a number of three-bedroom properties at the moment but they are all in one location,” Ms Holdsworth says. “So if you are a three-bedroom family but you don’t want to live in that location - which is fair enough - there will be a bit of a wait until we manage to get hold of another property that meets your needs. We’ll do this either through arrangements with registered providers as stock becomes available or we will do it by buying properties on the open market if we have got a gap.”

Tenancy worries

As *Inside Housing* reported last week, there has also been concern from some tenants that their secure council tenancies would be changed to assured tenancies were they to accept an offer of housing from a local housing association. In order to alleviate the worries, tenancy addendums are being added, stating “your additional rights” such as lifetime tenancies and rent levels. Housing associations are also removing additional grounds for possession they have in assured tenancies, Ms Holdsworth says.

Probably the most difficult job of all, however, is rebuilding the trust of traumatised residents.

“It’s a hard job and it is not going to happen overnight,” Ms Holdsworth admits. “The residents from the area and particularly the residents who were in the fire have a lack of trust in a whole range of institutions that they feel failed them.”

The solution? Ms Holdsworth says the allocations team will be judged on its outcomes. “However many offers of accommodation might have been made, if not many people have moved in we need to do something more, different, better.”

There is still a lot of work to be done. Ms Holdsworth says she is driven by the need to improve performance and most importantly the end result for Grenfell families.

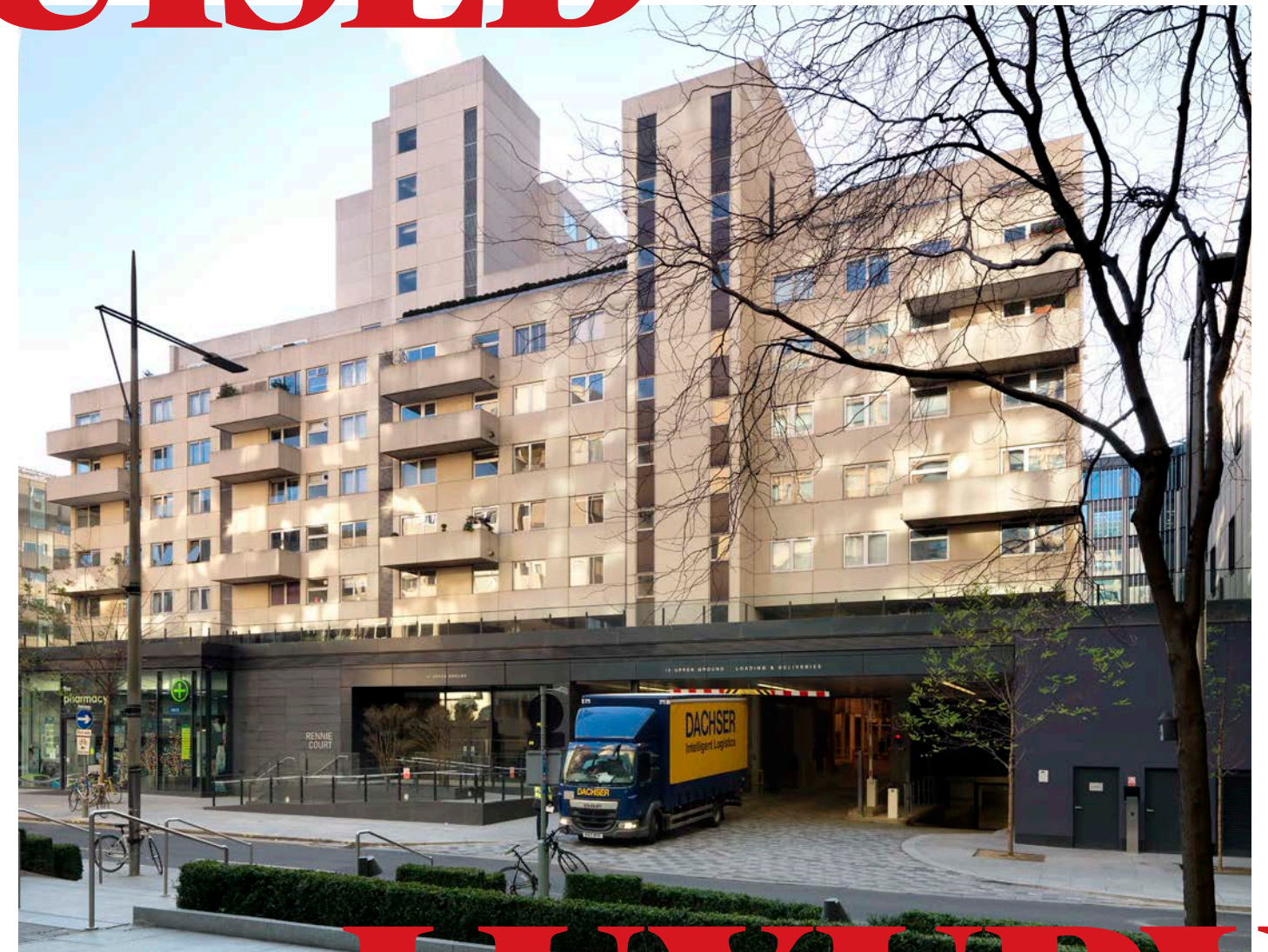
“We are constantly, every day, every week, looking at what we are doing and the progress, and saying ‘is it good enough?’” she adds. “So we do loads and loads of analysis to try and really understand what people want and if we are not getting it right, what we need to do.” ■



DISGUISED

BY

RENNIE COURT



LUXURY

An *Inside Housing* investigation reveals fire safety flaws in private tower blocks. *Martin Hilditch* finds out what can be done to make sure systematic failures are uncovered - and fixed

Three months after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, communities secretary Sajid Javid (right) took to the stage at the National Housing Federation's annual conference to deliver one of the most important speeches of his career.

His purpose was to outline how the tragedy had prompted the government to launch a nationwide conversation about social housing. He told the packed audience of social housing professionals that since Grenfell, there was one question that "I keep coming back to".

"In one of the richest, most privileged corners of the UK - the world, even - would a fire like this have happened in a privately owned block of luxury flats?" Mr Javid asked.

"If you believe the answer is no, even if you think it was simply less likely, then it's clear that we need a fundamental rethink of social housing in this country."

It was a major statement for the secretary of state to make. After all, any suggestion that a fire like Grenfell would be impossible or "less likely" in a privately owned block of flats has potentially large ramifications for approaches to tackling fire safety in towers. It implies that there might not be system-wide problems, for example, with building regulations or industry-wide practices in construction, management and maintenance. If such a theory were to guide policy responses to Grenfell, it would have implications for health and safety that would affect all residents, private or social.

Inside Housing set out to provide some answers to Mr Javid's question in an attempt to inform future thinking in this area. Our investigation has uncovered significant gaps in knowledge across the country six months on from Grenfell, which could be placing lives at risk. It raises questions for the government about why progress has been so slow in identifying the level of risk across the private sector - and what more can be done to speed up progress.

Where else could the investigation start, though, other than with a privately owned block of luxury flats?

Multiple failures

Rennie Court (pictured on p18, p19 and p23) stands in one of the most desirable locations in London. Residents are just a 20-second walk from the south bank of the Thames, near Blackfriars Bridge in Southwark. The upmarket Mondrian Hotel, which has its own cinema and views out over St Paul's Cathedral, stands on the opposite side of the road and the high-profile 274-apartment One Blackfriars development is being built next door.

A large one-bedroom apartment in the block was recently on the market

for £625,000 and a one-bedroom flat was offered for rent on Rightmove for £450 a week. A vast lobby contains numerous comfy chairs and leather sofas, a several-foot tall vase full of flowers and pictures on the walls with views of the nearby Thames.

Despite the luxury, in August this year the London Fire Brigade (LFB) found fault with Rennie Court, issuing it with an enforcement notice. The notice outlined a number of issues, including a failure to review the block's fire risk assessment, failure in the effective management of the preventive and protective measures in the block, and a failure to provide and/or maintain adequate and clearly indicated emergency routes and exits that led to a place of safety.

It also outlined a failure to ensure the premises and any facilities, equipment and devices for use by or protection of fire fighters are maintained in an efficient state, in effective working order and in good repair.

Rennie Court is in no way an exception. Research by *Inside Housing* has found that since January 2015 the LFB has issued 87 enforcement notices on privately owned blocks of flats (although not all of them are as luxurious as Rennie Court). Over the same period it has issued 62 enforcement notices on blocks owned by social landlords. The enforcement notices on private blocks flag up a variety of issues. In Islington, north London, an enforcement notice served on Flats 1-27 Vista House, Stroud Green Road, found a failure to take general fire precautions to ensure the safety of persons on the premises, a failure to

review the risk assessment and failure to provide a suitable method of giving warning in case of fire.

Across London, enforcement notices on private blocks flag up problems ranging from lack of up-to-date fire risk assessments to potential breaches in compartmentation in buildings (meaning fire could spread quickly).

Nadeem Ghouse-Chaudary, property services manager at Kings Reach Flats Management, the organisation on which the LFB served the enforcement notice for Rennie Court, says it has now either resolved or is in the process of resolving all the matters contained in the LFB notice. He says the block does now have an up-to-date fire risk assessment.

"Would a fire like this have happened in a privately owned block of luxury flats?"

He adds that he thinks enforcement notices served since Grenfell may also reflect a change in approach from the LFB - meaning notices are likely to be issued in situations where they would not have been before the Grenfell tragedy.

"What we have learned is that post-Grenfell, the LFB has considerably tightened up its procedures," Mr Ghouse-Chaudary says. "We have had previous inspections with the LFB and the last one was 2016 which was passed with a clean bill of health."

There are other indicators outside

of enforcement notices that also give cause for concern. Freedom of Information Act requests by *Inside Housing* found that out of 53 councils with more than one privately owned tower block, 16 - or 30% - did not have information about the cladding installed on all of those blocks.

This is something that is of huge concern to some senior council figures. At the end of November, Nick Forbes, leader of Newcastle City Council and senior vice-chair of the Local Government Association, told a Treasury select committee that an issue that "really horrified me was that we knew the situation with the tower blocks that the council owns but we didn't know the situation with the other tower blocks in the city because we have a deregulated building inspection process which meant that, not only did we not have oversight of them, we had no records of them".

Mr Forbes told the committee that as a result "I was unable as a local authority leader in my area to give guarantees about public safety and that really, really worried me - that we had no ability to guarantee that we at least understood the position and know what to put right".

Mr Forbes added that in the majority of cases it had been private developments "where we had building inspection issues because we just didn't know what the situation was". It had been difficult to arrange inspection of privately owned blocks in some cases because the owners were not based in the UK, he added.

He also raised the subject in his ►





response to the independent review of building regulations and fire safety being carried out by Dame Judith Hackitt.

In a letter to the review, Mr Forbes said the council tried to use building regulation records to identify high-rise buildings in the city.

“It quickly became apparent that in many locations developers have been able to build properties without local authority oversight of building regulations,” he wrote. “In some cases these buildings have been using materials that have since been found to pose a risk, but there has never been any requirement of the developers to register this information with the local authority. The privatisation of fire safety rules must now be reviewed.”

A spokesperson for Newcastle Council says it did not previously maintain a list of privately owned tall buildings within its borders as there is no requirement to do so. It has now identified 60 privately owned residential buildings taller than 18 metres.

It has not yet identified the owners of all these buildings as “the priority has been to engage with owners of those buildings where the local authority considers the owner should be making further investigations of external cladding”.

Not all councils are keen to talk about this issue. Richmond upon Thames Council, for example, turned

down an information request for a list of privately owned blocks and whether or not they had cladding, stating that identifying buildings with an issue “could cause widespread public panic”.

The LFB has also been worried about the broader issue. At a meeting of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority on 23 November, LFB commissioner Dany Cotton said that it had conducted 458 initial inspections to check general fire precautions in blocks of all ownership types with aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding.

But she added: “While engagement with responsible persons at the affected premises we have been notified of has generally improved, officers remain concerned that there is still potentially a large number of privately owned residential premises that have yet to engage with the testing process.”

Higher risk?

Far from being safer than blocks owned by councils and social landlords, it may even be the case that privately owned blocks are proportionally more risky.

A briefing issued last month by the LGA’s Fire Services Management Committee suggests: “From what we have heard from the construction industry, it seems ACM cladding has been more widely used on private high-rise residential buildings than

on social housing tower blocks. The proportion of private high-rise residential buildings with ACM cladding that needs to be removed may well be greater than in council and housing association buildings.”

It added that the number of affected council blocks amounted to no more than 3% of the total number of council-owned blocks.

“It seems ACM cladding has been more widely used on private high-rise buildings than on social housing tower blocks.”

“If the number of private residential buildings with ACM cladding is higher than in the social housing sector this will have significant resource implications,” the briefing reads.

Inside Housing understands that work to identify the locations of privately owned blocks across England has largely been completed.

But six months on from Grenfell, the ownership status of many of these blocks has yet to be established, along with whether or not they have ACM cladding.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has

appointed relationship managers to help the seven councils with the largest number of private high-rise residential buildings.

A spokesperson for the DCLG said it has been “working with councils and private residential landlords across the country to identify buildings that might be at risk and ensure action is taken to make them safe”.

So, what about Mr Javid’s big question? The evidence seems to suggest that problems with cladding and fire safety in privately owned blocks exist on a similar - or possibly greater - scale to those in the social sector. Worse, council leaders in a number of areas are as yet unable to guarantee the safety of all their citizens as a result of a lack of historic information and complicated ownership arrangements.

As to the future? A spokesperson for the LFB states: “Every building owner, regardless of whether they are in the public or private sector, should engage with the DCLG’s programme of cladding testing and review their fire risk assessments accordingly.”

A spokesperson for Newcastle Council says it would be “wrong to presume” that fire safety was any less of an issue in private than social blocks.

While a conversation about social housing in the UK is clearly needed, it should not distract from systemic safety issues that have the potential to affect all high-rise residents. ■

THE HIDDEN HOUSEHOLDS

Encampments of Romanian rough sleepers have become a long-term part of urban life. *Martin Hilditch* meets some inhabitants of a secret London

HIDDEN



Hidden away in a patch of dense scrub in north London lies a parody of a home. Cobbled together from planks of wood and tarpaulin, the main structure is part tent, part shed.

To the left of this shack, a beaten-up leather sofa and coffee table sit on the muddy ground, protected from the elements by more tarpaulin and the overhanging branches of a tree. Next to them lies a plastic clothes horse, with a pair of trousers and various tops hanging from it. Behind the settee, a grill pan balances across a rectangular arrangement of bricks and concrete to create a rudimentary barbecue.

Inside Housing is here in the pitch dark with outreach workers Ben Sebok and Elisa Del Chierico from homelessness charity Thames Reach's Targeted Rapid Intervention Outreach team. Sadly, the team is proving that such encampments are easy to find if you know where to look. Tonight, in the space of little more than an hour, we find five within a stone's throw of each other - three relatively small sites, like this one, and two larger tented communities.

This isn't a story exposing the existence of such encampments - homelessness charities have known about them for years. Instead, it is a tale about how they have quietly become a secret fixture of the city, concealed

"I have a family. [I'm] coming here for the work, that's it."

from the view of most residents. It's about how organisations like Thames Reach are agonising over what to do now. And, most importantly, it is the story of the people living in these makeshift shelters.

The shack we are now standing in front of would certainly be tricky to find if you didn't know what you were looking for. Concealed in a remote corner of a large area of wooded scrubland, we reach it after scrambling up a small, muddy bank and stumbling past (and occasionally into) branches and bushes. The team shines torches into the undergrowth as we go, on the lookout for tents and shacks concealed, as far as possible, from any passers-by.

Building a life

When we reach the shack there are young men sitting on beds just inside the doorway. The younger of the two says he is 20 and his friend says he is 30. Both are dark haired and stubbled. Mr Sebok and Ms Del Chierico approach, asking the men if they speak English and explaining that they are from a charity and want to find out a bit about them. The men, who confirm they are both from ►



Top: outreach worker Ben Sebok at an encampment in north London
Bottom: a look inside one of the makeshift homes

Romania, eye the outreach workers with suspicion and initially the conversation is fairly one-sided.

“Problem?” the elder of the two asks. “We go now.” A few seconds later he adds: “You scare me now. Maybe we go.” He explains that he is suspicious of them because “I don’t know you, understand? You’re coming here at night.”

After an initially edgy encounter, explanations are made and the two men open up, although neither wants to give his name. The elder of the two is particularly keen to stress that both of them are in employment.

“Me working,” he says. “This guy working, too.” “Look at the drier here,” he adds, gesturing at the clothes horse where their work clothes are hanging. “We’re working.”

He says he is working cash in hand in the construction industry because he doesn’t have a National Insurance number that would allow him to be employed legally. They have been staying in the woods for three days

“Most have constant jobs. They are working long hours.”

but he says he has been in the country longer, initially paying £60 a week to sleep four to a room in a flat in Edmonton Green. The older man is a father of two, with another child on the way, and says he is working in order to send money home and maybe to save for a property in England.

“Every week I send money,” he says. “I have a family. Coming here for the work, that’s it. Maybe take a house and bring my family here.”

Streets before scrubland

The younger of the two men says he is single – “a girlfriend is too expensive”, he says with a smile – and that his plan is to save money in England before returning home. They both slept on the streets for two days after arriving in the country, before moving into the flat in order to obtain “papers” like a National Insurance number.

But he says the address proved useless because the friend who let them stay there was claiming benefits;

because they were not meant to be there, they were unable to use it for any official purposes. Another friend told them about the scrubland where they are currently living and they moved here a few days ago. He says that four people live in two shacks in the immediate area. “We have one friend who is staying here for a long time,” he states.

“We just came to make money, like everyone,” he states. He refers to the shack with a sense of pride, saying it is warm and dry. “We make it good. It’s an excellent construction.” The aim is to stay here for a while, “make some money and get our house”, he adds. Both say they knew exactly what conditions they were coming to stay in – and that the advantage is the accommodation is “free”.

The two men present in many ways a typical story of this hidden community. Earlier this year a research report, commissioned by Thames Reach and funded by Commonweal Housing, looked into the lives of Romanian migrants sleeping rough

in encampments around London. Researchers Becky Rice and Thames Reach’s Mr Sebok (below left) spoke to 21 people – 19 men and 2 women, all of whom were Romanian – living in basic, unsanitary conditions on encampments. All of them were in regular, “physically demanding” work, had few support needs and “appeared to have a good level of physical health”.

They said they had not paid anyone to stay on the encampments, and like the two men we speak to tonight, they said they had found out about where to stay from friends and family who had already lived there. While more than half of those interviewed had experienced an encampment being closed down by councils or immigration officials, usually this just meant they set up somewhere else.

Most of those interviewed were working cash in hand in construction for between £40 and £60 a day. Apart from the low pay, many of those working cash in hand had been exploited by not being paid the agreed amount on at least one occasion. Over a three-month period, most people had saved enough to send £500 home – with two having sent home more than £1,000.

All of the people interviewed said they would welcome support to find housing, legal work or to access bank accounts and National Insurance numbers. If they were working, they said they would be prepared to pay between £200 and £300 a month including bills for accommodation (equivalent to £7-£10 a night).

The report recommends that homelessness services should look at how they could assist the groups to access basic housing and move away from the informal labour market. It says that creative, new accommodation solutions would be needed – with housing paid for nightly or weekly and costing about £8 a night. Where enforcement action is taken, this should be co-ordinated rather than



Key facts

Romania joined the European Union in 2007. Transitional arrangements were lifted in 2013 – from which point Romanian nationals were free to come and work in the UK.

In 2015/16, 1,545 Romanian rough sleepers were contacted in London, compared with 496 in 2012/13.

Source: Thames Reach; the Combined Homelessness and Information Network

just resulting in the encampment shifting elsewhere, the report adds.

We leave the two men to sleep after the team has given them a card and suggested they drop in during the day to help them sort out National Insurance numbers and help them find legal work. Mr Sebok isn’t optimistic, though. He says many of the people they speak to struggle to make the time to start the process of obtaining legal documents or opening bank accounts.

“Most of them have constant jobs. They are working long hours, to 6/7pm, and after they have finished they try to come back to have a rest.”

This is one of the reasons that the encampments have become something of a fixture. The fact people are often working for less than the minimum wage means it is tricky for them to obtain a permanent address and documentation (and they want to maximise the amount of money they can send home).

They are also often working long

hours, which makes it harder for homelessness charities to help them find alternative solutions or for them to take part in training that would enable them to land other work. All of this coupled with a lack of central resourcing or attention has reinforced the problem.

Unsanitary living

The outreach team moves to another encampment, this time containing 10 or 11 tents in a crescent of land close to a roundabout. A mountain of plastic bottles and discarded packaging sits in a corner.

It’s not a sanitary environment, and obviously there are few safeguards in place if anyone does fall ill. Mr Sebok describes finding a body “decomposed, under a tent” at another site. “Nobody called the police and everybody disappeared from the site,” he states.

In an attempt to deal with such concerns – and picking up on the recommendations from the aforementioned research report – Commonweal Housing launched a design competition in May 2017. The aim was to find a viable and deliverable model for reusable temporary housing options, which could be deployed within existing buildings.

The competition brief emphasised that it wasn’t looking for medium to long-term options but cheap, short-term alternatives to rough sleeping which people could use as a base from which to obtain appropriate documentation and identify better housing options.

Solutions included low-tech pods (the winning entry). Discussions about possible next steps were due to take place this week with some of the winning designers to see if a viable final model could be developed before being rolled out as a potential pilot.

It’s progress, but clearly there is much work to be done. Any solutions have to provide accommodation that is affordable for people who are currently staying in encampments or for future users, while also helping them quickly access training and documentation that will enable them to land better-paid or more secure work.

There is also a lot to be done building trust with people who may fear deportation and be suspicious about engaging with charities in the first place. It is telling that the men we speak to on the night discuss moving after being spooked by the initial contact from Thames Reach.

These are all vital issues that need to be worked through if we are to bring an end to the unhealthy and unsanitary encampments that have sprung up. Quietly these strange, unsafe homes have become a long-term, if hidden, part of urban life. That needs to change. ■

