

### Next steps to end rough sleeping for good after COVID-19: Homelessness services

**This briefing aims to inform the work of the Government's new taskforce and local areas as we enter the next phase of the response to COVID-19. It outlines steps to prevent a 'cliff-edge' of provision for those currently in emergency COVID-19 accommodation, along with measures to tackle the underlying reasons why so many people have needed this emergency response in the first place: unless action is taken on wider forms of homelessness, any success we see now cannot be sustained.**

People experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping continue to be at increased risk of COVID-19, due to poor underlying health and the difficulties self-isolating should they contract the virus. On 26 March 2020, MHCLG issued the ['Everybody In' directive](#), instructing local authorities to accommodate everyone who was rough sleeping, living in night shelters or in hostels where they couldn't self-isolate, in emergency self-contained accommodation. Since then an estimated 5,400 people have been offered emergency accommodation, like hotels and B&Bs.

This decisive action from local and national government undoubtedly saved lives. However, the current emergency measures are only a temporary fix and are by no means perfect. There are widespread reports of newly homeless people being turned away by local authorities and increasing numbers sleeping rough without an offer of support, despite the acute threat to individual and public health this poses.

For that reason, we welcomed the [Government announcement](#) on 2 May of a new government taskforce to advise local authorities on plans to support rough sleepers into long-term accommodation once lockdown is lifted. This commitment to finding long-term post-lockdown housing solutions, accompanied by support, is crucial to fulfilling the existing Government objective to end rough sleeping.

Plans must ensure that those in emergency accommodation do not face a 'cliff-edge' of provision. Local authorities and the wider health and care system must also have the power and resource to support those not currently accommodated. This is especially important given the many people who have been driven on to the streets for the first time as a result of the pandemic, including people fleeing domestic violence and abuse made worse by lockdown and people who lost low-paid jobs and can no longer afford their accommodation.

The directive to bring 'everybody in' has paved the way for unprecedented local partnership working, community innovation and the successful engagement of many individuals facing multiple disadvantage for the very first time. There is an opportunity to ensure that this progress is not wasted. To do so, and to deliver on promises to end rough sleeping, we must re-think some of the previous systems and processes.

**A successful transition and recovery must be guided by a shared acceptance and understanding of the following three core principles:**

### **1. Nobody returns or is new to the street.**

Everybody who entered emergency COVID-19 accommodation must have somewhere suitable to live when they leave. At the same time, nobody who finds themselves newly homeless should go without assistance.

This will require investment in genuinely affordable housing, increased access to existing accommodation, expansion of approaches like Housing First and additional funding to ensure local authorities can fulfil their duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Local areas must continue to provide suitable emergency accommodation to everyone without alternatives.

To prevent a catastrophic spike in homelessness in the fall-out from the current crisis, measures such as an additional uplift in the Local Housing Allowance rate, and an end to the benefit cap will also be crucial.

### **2. Everybody receives the support they need to keep their accommodation.**

Without adequate and appropriate support, many of those currently in hotels will struggle to maintain their accommodation. Many will need longer term help to manage their tenancy and meet their ongoing health and wellbeing needs.

Government must commit to long-term revenue funding for the homelessness sector so that an appropriate mix of support, ranging from Housing First, housing related support to floating support, is available depending on what is needed. Safe and targeted pathways for women and young people will be particularly crucial.

### **3. No return to business as usual**

The interdependence of public and individual health, and of health and homelessness, has never been clearer. Unprecedented multi-agency collaboration has shown how crucial integrated working is to tackling homelessness. We need to transform funding and commissioning to produce a truly integrated health, care and homelessness system, with increased public health and clinical input.

Accountability must be shared across local authorities, the NHS and other relevant agencies, and backed up by cross-departmental commitment at the national level.

# What needs to happen?

## Key steps at the national level

While we welcome the measures taken so far, national government must take the following steps in order to not only support everybody from emergency accommodation into appropriate long-term housing, but improve provision for people experiencing homelessness across the board. Addressing root causes will be crucial to ensuring services can cope with the economic and social fall-out of COVID-19.

### Recommendations for national government

1. Invest in long-term funding for homelessness services
2. Invest to increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing that meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.
3. Continue to provide suitable emergency accommodation to people without alternatives.
4. Ensure that people have the financial support they need to live safely.
5. Provide coordination and accountability to support good practice in local areas.
6. Support women and young people with appropriate, safe and targeted pathways to housing and support.
7. Establish cross-departmental buy-in and accountability to improve provision for people experiencing homelessness.

### **Invest in long-term funding for homelessness services.**

[Short term funding announced on 7 May](#) to help homelessness services, is welcomed and will go some way to alleviate [the heavy losses and increased operational costs](#) created by the COVID-19 crisis.

However, the sector already faced a [shortfall of £1 billion](#) before the COVID-19 crisis. Government must think beyond this immediate period and deliver a long-term strategy for funding housing related support and accommodation services for people experiencing homelessness. Any future capital programmes must be integrated with long term and sustainable revenue funding and be based on the principles of psychologically informed environments.

### **Invest to increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing that meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.**

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed long-standing failures in housing supply, with many forced to self-isolate in poor quality shared, temporary or other emergency accommodation. Government must increase the supply of social housing and increase access to the private rented sector by:

- Working with the sector to accelerate the roll-out of 6,000 move-on accommodation units with support announced in the March 11 budget. This must be accompanied by revenue funding to cover the costs of providing support to those who need it.
- Support Housing Associations use their existing stock to support people experiencing homelessness, for example by utilising voids and switching tenure on shared ownership properties. Provide financial support and coordination to enable Housing Associations to map and release additional accommodation quickly.

- Kick-start a sustained programme to build more social homes. [Research commissioned by Crisis and the National Housing Federation](#) shows that we need to build 90,000 social rent homes per year in England for the next 15 years to end homelessness.

**Continue to provide of suitable emergency accommodation to people without alternatives.**

Support local authorities to continue to provide suitable emergency accommodation to all those who need and provide financial backing to allow them to do so.

Our members report that significant proportions of those housed in hotel accommodation have NRPF, ranging from 25% to 70% in some areas, but that uncertainty is widespread about what happens next for this group. We need clear messaging from Government that health comes first:

- Suspend the NRPF condition to avoid a potentially catastrophic cliff-edge in provision and ensure access to employment and education support or independent immigration advice, where appropriate.
- Work with the Home Office to ensure that housing and support duties to asylum seekers are fulfilled.
- Ensure access to the EU Settlement Scheme for EEA nationals in emergency accommodation.

**Ensure that people have the financial support they need to live safely.**

Make an immediate commitment to increase Local Housing Allowance (LHA) to cover the 50th percentile of rents during the pandemic. Make a further commitment to maintain LHA at a rate that covers a minimum of 30th percentile of rents beyond the 12-month period announced on 20 March 2020. In addition, lift the benefit cap to enable everybody to benefit from the full housing costs to which they are entitled.

Provide Universal Credit (UC) advances as grants, not loans; maintain the increase in UC beyond the pandemic and suspend all UC deductions and sanctions. Given the current risks associated with work-related activities, all UC conditionality should be suspended for the duration of the crisis. In line with the FCA repayments freeze, all deductions from welfare benefits should also be suspended.

Raise the asylum allowance by £20 per week, in line with the uplift in Universal Credit, so that asylum seekers no longer have to choose between eating and other essentials.

**Provide coordination and accountability to support good practice in local areas.**

Require every area to develop a costed transition strategy and allocate targeted funds to support implementation. This must include clear expectations that anybody accommodated during the COVID-19 lockdown receives a suitable accommodation and support and that local authorities fulfil their prevention and relief duties under the HRA. It must also ensure that multi-agency working is at the core of all future responses to homelessness.

Commission a stronger mix of support provision according to level of need, making the most of the dynamic role supported housing can play to help keep people off the streets. Expanding availability of appropriate support, from floating support to Housing First, is essential to helping people move on from hostels and free up vital places for those in hotels or still on the streets.

Support local areas to scale up Housing First provision for people facing multiple disadvantage, many of whom have been amongst the hardest hit by the fallout from COVID-19. Everyone in hotel accommodation with the most complex needs should be offered Housing First, and should continue to be accommodated until suitable housing is secured.

## **Support women and young people with appropriate, safe and targeted pathways to housing and support.**

The current crisis is having a particularly detrimental impact on women and young people, increasing risks of homelessness and exploitation and leaving survivors of sexual and domestic violence isolated and fearful. Government should work with local authorities to make safe, women-only housing available for women who need it, including survivors of abuse.

Government must fund dedicated pathways out of homelessness for young people to address the disruption to emergency hosting schemes and overall shortage of supported accommodation for young people. In addition, it should further invest in housing solutions that recognise the diversity of young peoples' needs, including 'staying put' schemes for care leavers and Housing First.

## **Establish cross-departmental buy-in and accountability to improve provision for people experiencing homelessness.**

Develop a cross-departmental action plan to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, as part of a renewed strategy to end rough sleeping. This must place accountability on all relevant departments to work together to ensure that every local area can deliver an integrated, effective multi-agency response for people experiencing homelessness.

## **Key steps at the local level**

The following actions should inform the development of any local area's transition strategy. While the viability of many of these actions will depend on national funding allocations and investment in social housing, there is much that can be achieved locally to renew and transform local homelessness systems for the better.

### **Recommendations for local areas**

1. Develop a full costed transition plan which considers demand and availability of housing and support pathways.
2. Maintain the momentum of multi-agency collaboration.
3. Ensure nobody leaves emergency accommodation without personalised support in place.
4. Ensure Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA17) duties are fully met.
5. Provide everyone in emergency accommodation with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) with appropriate advice and support.
6. Support community-based services to re-establish their provision.

**Develop a fully costed transition plan** with relevant partners across housing, health and care and people experiencing homelessness, drawing on the strengths of each. Supported by the national Taskforce, this should consider:

- Mapping of current and projected demand for accommodation, considering the needs of those at risk of rough sleeping as well as those currently in COVID-19 sites or other temporary accommodation. This should also consider the needs of particular groups, such as women and young people.
- Multi-agency approaches to support people off the streets quickly and safely, especially while night shelters and assessment hubs remain closed.

- The full range of housing pathways available, including independent accommodation (PRS and social housing); floating support; staffed supported housing/hostels; and Housing First for people facing the most complex multiple disadvantage.
- A rapid review of the quality, capacity and accessibility of health, social care and housing related-support services, including new and emerging needs resulting from COVID-19. Local areas should not revert to 'business as usual' and should take the opportunity to encourage creativity and innovation in their post-crisis commissioning.
- Measures to acquire new, genuinely affordable units and increase access to existing accommodation. This should include expansion of help to rent schemes, increasing capacity of existing Housing First provision and working with social landlords to fill voids and release additional units, where possible.

**Maintain the momentum of multi-agency collaboration.** Embed multi agency working arrangements during and beyond the transition period. Ensure shared oversight and accountability of how support is provided across health, social care, homelessness, substance misuse and other relevant sectors for those who remain in or have left COVID-19 sites.

**Ensure nobody leaves emergency accommodation without personalised support in place,** including:

- A personalised plan based on an assessment of their housing and support needs, taking account of the individual's strengths, aspirations and wishes.
- A named key worker to act as a single point of contact throughout transition.
- Setting up their benefits, GP registration and ID documents, as needed.
- Access to drug and alcohol and/or mental health support, as needed.
- A clear understanding of their rights and entitlements regarding benefits, healthcare, housing, support and other public services.

**Ensure Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA17) duties are fully met.** At a time when more people are finding themselves in housing need, it is vital every local authority strengthens the advice and assistance they provide under the HRA17 and provides accommodation for everyone who is eligible. Local authorities must fulfil their duties and press Government for the additional resources they need to do so. This is vital so that those suffering most from the social and economic fall-out of COVID-19 are not left vulnerable and exposed during the ongoing pandemic.

**Provide everyone in emergency accommodation with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) with appropriate advice and support to resolve their legal status before leaving.** With support from national government, extend the circumvention of NRPF conditions to ensure that everyone who needs it is provided with accommodation. To ensure that fear doesn't prevent vulnerable people seeking help, local authorities and NHS trusts should also suspend all data-sharing with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration enforcement.

**Support community-based services to re-establish their provision,** much of which has been disrupted and suspended. The impact of day service closures on access to advice and support should be considered alongside new and emerging needs, to inform how they can best support local recovery.

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