



SENT BY EMAIL

18 January 2024

Dear Ministers,

As Co-Chairs, cross-party members and parliamentary supporters of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Ending Homelessness, we are writing to raise our concerns about the worrying issue of homelessness amongst people discharged or released from our public services, such as hospitals, prisons, and asylum accommodation.

The APPG recently held a meeting to discuss this deeply concerning issue, which we were delighted to have the Minister for Homelessness and Housing attend. We heard from several charity representatives across the homelessness sector, as well as a clinician working in our healthcare system. The panellists told us of the growing number of people becoming homeless following interactions with public institutions, with many of them being forced to sleep on the streets. This presents particular dangers in the winter months, when we know that the risks for people sleeping rough are more acute, and already struggling public services like the NHS, face even greater pressures.

We also had the privilege of hearing from three panellists who had direct experience of homelessness after being under the care of a public institution. One panellist told us he came out of prison without a “roof over his head,” and became trapped in a “cycle of homelessness,” unable to access the help he needed to rebuild his life. Another described the “cliff-edge of support” asylum seekers experience after receiving a decision on their status regardless of the outcome, and how homelessness becomes an additional and yet avoidable trauma for people seeking refuge from traumatic experiences. Another panellist spoke about his experiences looking for help both inside and outside of prison to treat his mental ill-health but described such provision as “non-existent.” All three spoke of the acute pain and trauma that homelessness had caused them as well as the importance of simply seeing people as human beings and supporting them to navigate complex systems on discharge from a public institution.

We believe that public services can and should play a greater and more effective role towards our shared goal of the prevention and ending of homelessness.

We welcome the recognition in the Government’s Rough Sleeping Strategy’s of the role of prevention. The strategy explicitly references a need to “*ensure that those leaving a public institution – whether it’s prison, hospital or care – don’t find themselves out on the streets with no place to go,*” and its commitment to “*fully embed the Homelessness Reduction Act.*” The Act introduced the Duty to Refer, a legal duty on some public organisations such as hospitals, and prisons and probation services to refer people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to the local authority. However, this doesn’t apply to all public institutions, and evidence from the frontline demonstrates it is not working in practice as robustly as it should be, leaving people falling through the gaps of support.

For example, we know that people facing or experiencing homelessness access hospitals disproportionately – six times more often than the mainstream population – due to their difficulty in

accessing primary care and other services. Evidence also shows that this number is rising – the number of presentations at a hospital from people with no fixed abode has increased 37% in four years. Hospital presentations therefore provide an important window of opportunity to engage with them and for the intervention of vital support services needed to end their homelessness. However, despite hospitals being bound by the Duty of Refer, Homeless Link's Health Needs Audit found that 24% of respondents who had had contact with a hospital were discharged onto the streets. Similarly, a recent joint study by Pathway and Crisis found that 30% of mainstream healthcare professionals surveyed had never heard of the Duty to Refer, and a further 15% said they had no to little understanding of it.

We welcome Government's action to end unplanned Friday releases. We know that people leaving prison are too often released into homelessness, with the Ministry of Justice's statistics recording that out of the 50,000 people released from prison each year, 1 in 3 are released into homelessness or unknown circumstances. Indeed in 2021, more than half of prison leavers were released without access to settled accommodation. The cost of this to the individuals and to wider society is immense – people who are released from prison without somewhere safe to stay are around 50% more likely to reoffend, often as a means of avoiding homelessness. Reoffending costs the public purse £18 billion per year, putting pressure on other public services, as well as prison capacity. A National Resettlement Framework with minimum standards of support for people leaving prison is needed, as well as effective collaboration between local authorities, probation services and charities to ensure housing solutions are implemented in a consistent way.

Further, people in asylum accommodation are especially vulnerable as they often are forced to leave accommodation at short notice, without the financial means to support themselves or anywhere safe to go. This had been made more difficult by Home Office practice changes last year that resulted in people who had received an asylum decision being given as little as a week before they are evicted from asylum accommodation. We heard at the APPG meeting that these changes placed an additional burden on local public services and the third sector in responding to the huge numbers of people being put at risk of homelessness. We are therefore extremely pleased that since the APPG meeting, the Government has listened and has reversed these changes, though we know that more can be done to reduce the risk of homelessness further.

This is all happening within the context of record levels of homelessness. According to the national homelessness charity Crisis around 242,000 households are currently facing the worst forms of homelessness across England and Government figures show that rough sleeping rose by 26% in 2022, the biggest year on year rise since 2015. Our public services face severe financial constraints in their efforts to deliver critical support to people facing homelessness, including through the Duty to Refer, resulting in a postcode lottery. The effectiveness of these measures are held back by a numbers of factors, for example, a lack of affordable housing options available and absence of genuine integration across services and departments.

To guarantee that public services are playing their full role in homelessness prevention, the Government should build on its commitment in the Rough Sleeping Strategy to break the link between rough sleeping and discharge from a public institution by:

1. Committing that no one will be discharged from hospital onto the streets, by making sure that hospitals and housing services work together to secure a housing outcome upon discharge and utilising multi-disciplinary health teams to do so.
2. Adopting a resettlement framework for that no one is released from prison without safe and settled accommodation to go to. This framework should include minimum standards of support for each prison leaver and ensure that local authorities, probation services and

charities are working effectively in a multi-agency capacity to implement housing solutions in a consistent way.

3. Further preventing homelessness among people leaving the asylum system by committing that refugees receive all necessary documentation at once, including the Notice to Quit and Biometric Residence Permit, and ensuring accommodation providers are informing local authorities within two working days where there is cessation of support. In the long-term Government should allow 56 days following an asylum decision before the cessation of support and accommodation, and extend the Duty to Refer to Home Office asylum accommodation.

We urge you to accept the APPG's invitation that they facilitate a cross-departmental roundtable on the solutions to the issues raised.

We are sending this letter to your colleagues across the relevant Departments: Minister for Housing and Homelessness; Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work; Minister of State for Prisons, Parole and Probation; Minister for Health and Social Care; Minister for Legal Migration and the Border, and Minister for Countering Illegal Migration.

Yours sincerely,



Paula Barker MP



Bob Blackman MP

Co-Chairs of the APPG for Ending Homelessness

Signatories

The Lord Best OBE DL, Vice-Chair of the APPG for Ending Homelessness

The Baroness Lister of Burtsett CBE, Member of the APPG for Ending Homelessness

Kim Johnson MP, Member of the APPG for Ending Homelessness

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Debbie Abrahams MP

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The Rt Hon. the Baroness Armstrong

Richard Bacon MP

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