



Together
we will end
homelessness

The homelessness monitor: England 2021

**Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Beth Watts, Hal Pawson,
Glen Bramley, Jenny Wood, Mark Stephens & Janice
Blenkinsopp.** Institute for Social Policy, Housing and
Equalities Research (I-SPHERE), Heriot-Watt University;
City Futures Research Centre, University of New South
Wales; School of Social and Political Sciences, University
of Glasgow

March 2021
Executive Summary

The homelessness monitor

The homelessness monitor is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments across the United Kingdom. Separate reports are produced for each of the United Kingdom nations.

This ninth annual report updates our account of how homelessness stands in England in 2020, or as close to 2020 as data availability allows. It also highlights emerging trends and forecasts some of the likely future changes, identifying the developments likely to have the most significant impacts on homelessness.

The homelessness monitor: England 2021

Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Beth Watts, Hal Pawson, Glen Bramley, Jenny Wood, Mark Stephens & Janice Blenkinsopp. Institute for Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research (I-SPHERE), Heriot-Watt University; City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales; School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow

March 2021

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We help people directly out of homelessness, and campaign for the social changes needed to solve it altogether. We know that together we can end homelessness.

About the authors

Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Dr Beth Watts, Professor Glen Bramley, Dr Jenny Wood and Dr Janice Blenkinsopp are all based at the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, and Equalities Research (I-SPHERE). Professor Hal Pawson is based at the City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Professor Mark Stephens is based at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow.

Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned and funded by Crisis, and our thanks go to Sophie Boobis, Dr Francesca Albanese and Matthew Downie at Crisis for all of their support with this work. In addition, we are extremely grateful to all of the key informants from the statutory and voluntary sector organisations across England who found time amid the COVID-19-related pressures to help us with this, and likewise to all 148 local authorities who completed the online questionnaire despite the extraordinary strain they were under as a result of the pandemic. We would like to record our sincere appreciation for Rhiannon Sims' excellent analysis of social security and housing policy developments that we were able to draw on in preparing Chapter 2 of this report. We would also like to thank Dr Filip Sosenko for his assistance in setting up the survey, Jill McIntyre for all her help with chasing survey responses and with the overall logistics of the project, and Lynne McMordie for undertaking the formatting and proofing tasks (all I-SPHERE).

Disclaimer: All views and any errors contained in this report are the responsibility of the authors. The views expressed should not be assumed to be those of Crisis or any of the key informants who assisted with this work.

Crisis head office

66 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT
Tel: 0300 636 1967
Fax: 0300 636 2012
www.crisis.org.uk
© Crisis 2021

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis).
Registered Charity Numbers:

E&W1082947, SC040094.
Company Number: 4024938

Executive summary

The Homelessness Monitor series is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments in England and elsewhere in the United Kingdom.¹ This ninth annual Homelessness Monitor England updates our account of how homelessness stands in 2020, or as close to 2020 as data availability allows, and covers a year dominated by the twin major events of the COVID-19 pandemic² and Brexit. It is also the first Monitor in which a comprehensive analysis of Homelessness Reduction Act processes and outcomes is included and we offer detailed modelling estimates and forward projections of extreme forms of 'core' homelessness.

Key points to emerge from our latest analysis are as follows:

- Some 305,000 single people, couples and families registered homelessness applications with local authorities in 2019/20. Of these, 289,000 (95%) were judged as homeless or threatened with homelessness.
- Amongst those threatened with homelessness and entitled to a 'prevention' duty half (49%) are single adults and amongst those actually homeless and entitled to a relief duty almost three-quarters (72%) are single people. This is in stark contrast to the pre-Homelessness Reduction Act era when the key headline statistic – households 'accepted' by local authorities as in 'priority need' – comprised only around one-third single people.
- Nonetheless substantial numbers of (mainly single) homeless applicants still reach the end of the post- Homelessness Reduction Act operational procedures without having secured settled accommodation, or even having had such accommodation offered to them (around 20,000 households in 2019/20).
- Some 48 per cent of all 2019/20 'owed a duty' applicants were judged as having some form of support need, and in 23 per cent of (all 'owed a duty') cases, this was linked to a history of mental ill-health. Only a small proportion of applicants are subject to 'complex support needs' (e.g., 3 per cent of 'owed a duty' applicants in London had support needs associated with drug dependency; 7 per cent in rest of England).
- Temporary accommodation placements show a 91 per cent increase since 2011 (and 9 per cent in the 12 months to March 2020). Bed and Breakfast hotel placements have continued to increase at a rate exceeding that of all temporary accommodation – up by 17 per cent in the 12 months to March 2020, and by 299 per cent since 2010.
- Thanks to various temporary protective measures (especially income protection programmes and eviction moratoria), the COVID-19 pandemic triggered no immediate overall increase in homelessness applications. Indeed, the number judged as threatened with homelessness fell back significantly April-June 2020 (down 35 per cent on the previous quarter). But temporary accommodation placements surged, particularly of single homeless people, as a result of the emergency measures to protect people at risk of rough sleeping during the pandemic.
- 'Core homelessness' in England – a concept which captures the most severe and immediate forms of homelessness – is estimated to have totalled nearly 220,000 in 2019, having risen from about 187,000 in 2012. During 2020 these numbers dropped somewhat to around 200,000, mainly due to the effects of the Government's emergency measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 there were an estimated 10,500 people currently sleeping rough on any given night which had dropped by a third on the previous year.
- The largest element of core homelessness in 2018-19 was its least visible manifestation, sofa surfing, accounting for more than half (110,000 households or individuals). Next in numerical importance was hostel and similar accommodation (42,000), followed by unsuitable temporary accommodation and other unconventional accommodation, at around 19,000 each. The least numerous group were those actually sleeping rough at a point in time, which we estimate at 13,600.
- It is predicted that the economic aftermath of COVID-19 risks a substantial rise in core homelessness, including rough sleeping, unless the Government implements a range of housing and welfare mitigation interventions, including continuing with emergency accommodation measures for those at risk of rough sleeping.
- In the longer term, the largest projected impact on reducing core homelessness would result from a large expansion of total and social housing supply and consistent, large-scale application of Housing First accompanied by appropriate support for mental health and substance misuse issues, alongside the raising of the Local Housing Allowance. A meaningful levelling up of economic performance across the English regions would also contribute to the reduction of core homelessness.
- Levels of infection and COVID-related deaths have been low amongst homeless people in England, indicating an effective public health strategy with regards to this vulnerable population. Critical

1 Parallel Homelessness Monitors are being published for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All of the UK Homelessness Monitor reports are available from <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>
 2 Fitzpatrick, S., Watts, B. & Sims, R. (2020) *Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing*. London: Crisis. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/homelessness-monitor-england-2020-covid-19-crisis-response-briefing/>

to this successful outcome was the national 'Everyone In' emergency accommodation initiative for people sleeping rough and those at risk; around 30,000 people in total had been assisted under these arrangements by autumn 2020.

- The speed and clarity of the early central Government response on rapidly accommodating people sleeping rough, eliminating the use of communal shelters, enhancing welfare benefits, and halting evictions, was widely welcomed, with local authorities and homelessness charities also praised for rapidly rising to an unprecedented challenge.
- However, subsequent 'mixed messages' from central Government, particularly on assistance to non-United Kingdom nationals ineligible for benefits and on the continuation of Everyone In, became a matter of acute concern amongst local authorities and their third sector partners as the crisis progressed.
- Many local authorities offered an upbeat assessment of their own performance in response to the homelessness consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and initial lockdown period, though it was clear that the resilience of both staff and resources had been severely tested, with many local authorities surprised by the sheer scale of need that the emergency measures uncovered.
- While acknowledging the large amount of homelessness emergency funding made available by central Government during the pandemic, other stakeholders criticised the proliferation of highly specified, short-term funding pots, focused overwhelmingly on rough sleeping, as well as the apparently 'transitional' nature of the accommodation to be provided under the Next Steps programme
- Local authorities expressed qualified approval for the role played by the Homelessness Reduction Act legal framework in facilitating their responses to homelessness during the early pandemic period. Councils more critical of the Act dislike what they perceive as the excessive bureaucracy associated with it.
- Key changes to local authority working practices prompted by the COVID-19 emergency include a shift to remote/online working with service users, which was viewed as having been largely successful. Some Councils intend to make a decisive shift away from communal forms of sleeping provision for homeless people post-pandemic, though others feel that financial and legal constraints make the use of night shelters unavoidable.
- While the COVID-19-prompted £20 weekly enhancement to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits have been widely welcomed, at the time of writing the Government planned to withdraw these uplifts from April 2021. There is also no indication that they will be extended to legacy benefits. The restoration of the Local Housing Allowance maxima to cover 30 per cent of private sector rents was especially beneficial in the context of managing homelessness risks, but Government plans to refreeze these rates from April 2021 will cause dismay.
- COVID-19 has inflicted extensive damage on the economy and on the public finances. There is acute concern about a potential tidal wave of 'new' homelessness as the COVID-19-induced recession takes hold, Brexit causes disruption to trade and various temporary labour market, welfare and housing protections are scaled back or ended during 2021.

Trends in homelessness Statutory homelessness

This year's Monitor was the first where the analysis of statutory homelessness trends was substantially based on the operation of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and its associated (H-CLIC) administrative dataset. Some 305,000 households registered homelessness applications with local authorities in 2019/20. Of these, 289,000 (95%) were judged as homeless or threatened with homelessness. This is slightly higher than the 272,000 'local authority case actions' as estimated for 2017/18, the last year of the 'old regime'.³

By comparison with the Housing Act 1996 regime, a much-increased proportion of those seeking help under the Homelessness Reduction Act are being formally assisted under prevention or relief duties, with the result that far fewer applicants/applications are 'progressing' through the system as far as being assessed as owed a main statutory rehousing duty. This traditional headline indicator of homelessness demand – at 40,000 in 2019/20 – was well below the 57,000 recorded in 2017/18.

A substantial proportion of 2019/20 prevention and relief actions ended with accommodation having been secured. Thus, households have been enabled to retain existing – or to obtain new – accommodation. This was the outcome for most prevention duty cases ended during the year (58%), with the equivalent figure for relief cases ended being 40 per cent. Assisting an applicant to obtain a new place to live (rather than to retain existing housing) was, by definition, the 'accommodation secured' result for all of the 2019/20 relief cases with this outcome, as well as for 51,490 (63%) of

the 81,500 prevention cases logged as 'duty ended' during the year.

While fundamental changes to the legal framework for homelessness application assessment under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 have made 'new homelessness' trend over time comparisons more difficult, temporary accommodation placements, which can be legitimately graphed over a long time series, show a 91 per cent increase since 2011 (and 9 per cent in the 12 months to March 2020).⁴ Bed and Breakfast hotel placements have continued to increase at a rate exceeding that of all temporary accommodation – up by 17 per cent in the 12 months to March 2020, and by 299 per cent since 2010.

The increased 'visibility' of single adults in the official homelessness statistics is one of the most striking changes brought about by the new legislative framework. This group accounted almost three-quarters (72%) of all of those assessed as homeless and entitled to the 'relief' duty, and half (49%) of those threatened with homelessness and entitled to a 'prevention' duty. This is in stark contrast to the pre- Homelessness Reduction Act era when the key headline statistic – households 'accepted' as owed the main duty – comprised only around one-third single people.

Also notable is the emerging intelligence from H-CLIC on the profile of support needs in the statutory homeless population. While almost half (48%) of all households assessed as owed a homelessness prevention or relief duty are recorded as having a relevant support need, these needs were highly diverse in nature. Far from being dominated by complex

³ See Figure 4.11 in: Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wood, J., Watts, B., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2019) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2019*. London: Crisis. Local authority case actions' in this context refers to the households subject to Housing 1996 main duty decisions plus those assisted by local authorities via informal prevention or relief in that year (2017/18).

⁴ That is, at the effective start of the COVID-19 pandemic, largely preceding the impact of the Everyone In programme.

support needs associated with drug or alcohol problems, offending or rough sleeping histories, as some might assume, mental or physical ill-health problems, and experience of domestic violence, were more prominent. In fact, only a small proportion of applicants are subject to 'complex support needs' (e.g. 3 per cent of 'owed a duty' applicants in London had support needs associated with drug dependency; 7 per cent in rest of England).

Other key points to flag from analysis of these first two years of the Homelessness Reduction Act operation include some positive signs that may allay initial concerns about certain aspects of the legislation (e.g., discharge of duty on grounds of 'non-cooperation' is rarely recorded in practice), but also its limitations. Principal amongst these limitations is that substantial numbers of (mainly single) homeless applicants still reach the end of the post- Homelessness Reduction Act operational procedures without having secured settled accommodation, or even having had such accommodation offered to them (around 20,000 households in 2019/20).

Thanks to various temporary protective measures (especially eviction moratoria, see below), the COVID-19 pandemic triggered no immediate overall increase in homelessness applications. However, temporary accommodation placements surged in Q2 2020. By quarter end, the overall national total was more than 6,000 higher than at the start, with additional Bed and Breakfast hotel placement accounting for half of this change. The latter, therefore, rose from some 8,000 to some 11,000 over the period – a 40 per cent increase.

Significantly, virtually all of this increase resulted from growth in single adult placements (especially single men) – most probably associated with the Everyone In emergency rough sleeper temporary housing initiative launched in March 2020, as discussed further below.

Core homelessness

For the first time in this year's Monitor, we present quantitative analysis of 'core homelessness', which captures some of the most severe and immediate forms of homelessness.⁵

The key categories captured by core homelessness include people sleeping rough, staying in places not intended as residential accommodation (e.g. cars, tents, boats, sheds, etc.), living in homeless hostels, refuges and shelters, placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation (e.g. Bed and Breakfast hotels, Out of Area Placements, etc.), and sofa surfing (i.e., staying with non-family, on a short-term basis, in overcrowded conditions).

We estimate core homelessness in England to have totalled nearly 220,000 in 2019, having risen from about 187,000 in 2012. During 2020 these numbers dropped somewhat to around 200,000, including a drop in rough sleeping by a third mainly due to the effects of the emergency COVID-19 'Everyone In' programme aimed at those at risk of rough sleeping (see further below).

The largest element of core homelessness in 2018-19 was its least visible manifestation, sofa surfing, accounting for more than half (110,000 households or individuals). Next in numerical importance was hostel and similar accommodation (42,000), followed by unsuitable

temporary accommodation and other unconventional accommodation, at around 19,000 each. The least numerous group were those actually sleeping rough at a point in time, which we estimate at 13,600.

The gradual increase in overall numbers from 2012 to 2019 concealed wide differences between different categories, with hostel placements declining by 13 per cent, and sofa surfers and other unconventional increasing by 16 per cent and 13 per cent, while rough sleeping virtually doubled (99%) and unsuitable temporary accommodation rose by 171 per cent.

Our predictions indicate that the economic aftermath of COVID-19 risks a substantial rise in core homelessness unless the Government implements a range of housing and welfare mitigation interventions. This should include continuing with emergency accommodation measures for those at risk of rough sleeping on a substantial scale, maximising targeted homelessness prevention measures, ensuring social rehousing quotas for homeless people, placing limits on evictions, and implementing key welfare changes (especially raising the level of Local Housing Allowance to the level of median actual rents (and maintaining that level).

In the medium term, the most effective policies for reducing core homelessness would be large increases in welfare benefit levels and associated measures to reduce destitution, including raising the level of Local Housing Allowance as just noted. In the longer term, the largest projected impact on reducing core homelessness would result from a large expansion of total and social housing supply (accompanied by the maintenance of social housing quotas for core homeless households), the

national application of Housing First, and increased rates of Local Housing Allowance). A successful levelling up of economic performance across the English regions would also contribute to the reduction of core homelessness.

Economic, policy and COVID-19 impacts on homelessness

Going into COVID-19, the United Kingdom had experienced a decade of austerity, which included public expenditure constraints affecting public services and social security benefits. In 2018/19, 17 per cent of individuals in the United Kingdom lived in households whose income before housing costs (adjusted for household composition) fell below the relative poverty threshold. Research conducted by Heriot-Watt University for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicated that some 2.4 million people, including 550,000 children, experienced destitution at some point in 2019.⁶ The survey also found that the extent of destitution had grown, with the numbers of adults and children affected rising by more than half since 2017. Consequently, the relatively stable overall poverty rate over the past 15 years seems to disguise increases in very extreme experiences of hardship that reflect the impacts of labour market and social security change.

COVID-19 has caused the most dramatic shrinkage of the economy ever experienced and in any other circumstances such as massive contraction of the economy would have resulted in mass unemployment. But lockdown was accompanied by unprecedented peacetime levels of economic stimulation and, notably, the various job 'furlough' schemes. The first Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, introduced in April 2020, met 80 per cent of a furloughed employee's salary up to £2,500 per month (with the Government funding

⁵ The core homelessness concept was introduced in research undertaken with Crisis in 2017 and updated in 2018, with this Monitor representing a further major update. Bramley, G. (2017) *Homelessness Projections: Core homelessness in Great Britain. Summary Report*. London: Crisis. https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237582/crisis_homelessness_projections_2017.pdf; and Bramley, G. (2019) *Housing Supply Requirements across Great Britain for Low-Income Households and Homeless People: Research for Crisis and the National Housing Federation; Main Technical Report*. Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University. <https://doi.org/10.17861/bramley.2019.04>

⁶ See Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G., Blenkinsopp, J., Wood, J., Sosenko, F., Littlewood, M., Johnsen, S., Watts, B., Treanor, M., & McIntyre, J. (2020) *Destitution in the UK 2020*. York: JRF. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2020>

75 per cent of this cost). The scheme was extended until the end of March, and then, in December, the Chancellor announced a further extension until the end of April 2021. By the end of October, the scheme had supported almost 10 million (9.9 m) jobs at a cost of £46.4 billion.⁷ The initial furlough scheme was also, according to our local authority survey, crucial in mitigating homelessness risks during the COVID-19 crisis: 80 per cent of respondents considered it 'very' or 'somewhat' important in this regard.

Lockdown brought the housing market to a halt, whilst the wider economic dislocation brought fears of mass evictions and mortgage possessions. The Government acted to protect tenants and mortgaged owners from eviction during the pandemic by introducing compulsory and blanket forbearance on the part of landlords and mortgage lenders. For renters, forbearance relied on two main mechanisms. First, legal proceedings were halted and sometimes enforcement action suspended. Second, notice periods have been extended to six months until at least the end of March 2021 in the majority of cases (with exceptions for anti-social behaviour and fraud). In this year's national online survey, 87 per cent of responding Councils considered the evictions moratorium to have been 'very important' in preventing or minimising homelessness in their area.

Notably, however, the Chancellor chose not to increase the supply of new affordable housing as part of the Government's COVID-19 stimulus package, in contrast to the response to the 2008 financial crisis, with his

2020 Summer Statement reaffirming planned housing investment as announced earlier in the year. The Affordable Homes Programme will be worth £12.2 billion over the five years to 2025/26, with annual spending rising by a quarter from £1.95 billion in 2020/21 to an average of £2.44 billion.⁸ However, the new Affordable Housing Programme differs from its predecessors in some important ways: in particular, it shifts funding away from renting and towards ownership by reverting to a roughly 50:50 split between these tenures.⁹

Access to long-term housing was the capacity challenge most widely seen as having been posed (or emphasised) by the pandemic by local authorities in our national online survey. Some 61 per cent of local authority respondents considered that their authority was poorly or otherwise inadequately equipped to deal with the crisis in this respect. Among the minority of authorities where it became easier to access social rental tenancies during the pandemic, explanatory responses related in the main to amended housing association or council allocation policies that gave increased or overwhelming priority to homeless households, usually for a time limited period.

As reported in the *Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing*,¹⁰ (July 2020), the pandemic prompted a radical and rapid nation-wide shift in responses to some of the most extreme forms of homelessness with a remarkable degree of success and speed.¹¹ On 26th March, a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

letter instructed all local authorities in England to move everyone sleeping rough and in communal shelters into a safe place, ideally in self-contained accommodation, over the following two days.¹² Over 90 per cent of people sleeping rough known to Councils at the beginning of the crisis were reported to have been offered accommodation in commercial hotels, Bed and Breakfasts, holiday lets, university accommodation or housing association stock, many of whom had been sleeping on the streets for years. By autumn 2020, around 33,000 people had been assisted under these 'Everyone In' arrangements.¹³

This Everyone In initiative was preceded by £3.2 million targeted funding to local authorities to support people sleeping rough and those at risk, alongside £4.6 billion un-ringfenced funds¹⁴ to help councils cope with the overall financial pressures of the pandemic.¹⁵ On 24th May the Government announced that it was to bring forward £161 million out of an (increased) £433 million four-year budget to provide 6,000 new supported housing units for ex-rough sleepers, with 3,300 of these units to become available over the next 12 months.¹⁶ On 24th June, it was announced that £105 million would be made available for interim accommodation to ensure that those currently being assisted

under Everyone In did not return to the streets in winter.¹⁷ Various other smaller pots of funding targeted at rough sleeping were announced over the course of the year, to operate alongside pre-existing funding streams targeting homelessness, including the third year of the Rough Sleepers Initiative programme, amounting to £112million in 2020/21. In the Spending Review on 25th November, the Chancellor made available further new monies (£151 million) for local authorities to spend on rough sleeping in 2021-22.

Notable by its absence, at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, was any notion of a purely 'localist' approach to assisting the homeless population:¹⁸ instead, strong, decisive and hands-on leadership was offered by central Government and received and acted upon by Councils and other local stakeholders with a sense of urgency and collective endeavour. While this weakened over time, as discussed below, homeless people were, by and large, kept safe in in the early stages of the pandemic. Levels of infection and COVID-related deaths have been kept low amongst this highly vulnerable population, so far at least, indicating a successful public health strategy.¹⁹

Other crucial factors in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on homeless people included substantial additional resources, radically improved

7 Gov.UK (2020) *HMRC Coronavirus (COVID-19) statistics, last updated 17 December*. Online: Gov.UK <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-december-2020>

8 Perry, J. (2020) 'Building back better? Post-Covid housing programmes', in Stephens, M. et. al. (eds) *UK Housing Review Autumn Briefing*. Coventry: CIH

9 Ibid.

10 Fitzpatrick, S., Watts, B. & Sims, R. (2020) *Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing*. London: Crisis. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/homelessness-monitor-england-2020-covid-19-crisis-response-briefing/>

11 See also National Audit Office (2021) *Investigation into the Housing of Rough Sleepers During the Pandemic*. London: NAO

12 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Letter from Minister Hall to Local Authorities on Plans to Protect Rough Sleepers*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-minister-hall-to-local-authorities>

13 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Emergency Accommodation Survey Data: November 2020*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-emergency-accommodation-survey-data-november-2020>

14 As at October 2020 National Audit Office (2021) *Investigation into the Housing of Rough Sleepers During the Pandemic*. London: NAO

15 National Audit Office (2021) *Investigation into the Housing of Rough Sleepers During the Pandemic*. London: NAO

16 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *6,000 New Supported Homes as Part of Landmark Commitment to End Rough Sleeping*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/6000-new-supported-homes-as-part-of-landmark-commitment-to-end-rough-sleeping>

17 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *£105 Million to keep Rough Sleepers Safe and off the Streets During Coronavirus Pandemic*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/105-million-to-keep-rough-sleepers-safe-and-off-the-streets-during-coronavirus-pandemic>

18 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H. & Watts, B. (2020) 'The limits of localism: a decade of disaster on homelessness in England', *Policy and Politics*, 48(4), 541-561. <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557320X15857338944387>

19 Lewer, D., Braithwaite, I., Bullock, M., Eyre, M.T., White, P.J., Aldridge, R.W., Story, A. & Hayward, A.C. (2020) 'Covid amongst people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study', *The Lancet*, 8(12), 1181-1191. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30396-9/fulltext#seccetitle70](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30396-9/fulltext#seccetitle70)

collaborative working (especially between health and homelessness services), and a workforce that adapted swiftly to a wholly unprecedented challenge. While local authorities generally gave an upbeat assessment of their own performance in response to homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis, it was clear that the resilience of both staff and resources had been severely tested, with the National Audit Office remarking that many councils were surprised by the sheer scale of need that Everyone In uncovered. The large amount of emergency funding made available by central Government to respond to homelessness during the pandemic was widely acknowledged by key informants, but the proliferation of highly specified, short-term funding pots was viewed as less than strategic, with rapid turnaround bidding processes layering further stress onto struggling local authorities.

Supportive wider changes to welfare policy were also vital in protecting homeless people and other low-income groups during the crisis. In particular, the raising of the Local Housing Allowance maximum to cover the 30th percentile of private rents was considered 'very' or 'somewhat' important in mitigating homelessness risks by 82 per cent of local authorities in our national survey, while the corresponding percentage was almost as high (74%) with regard to the temporary suspension of benefit sanctions. Around two-thirds of all local authority respondents (66-68%) considered additional Local Welfare Assistance funding, enhancement of Universal Credit standard allowances (by £20 per week), and the temporary suspension of (most) debt-related benefit deductions, as likewise important in preventing or minimising homelessness in their area. However,

both local authorities and key informants raised concerns about the deleterious impacts on homelessness if enhancements to Local Housing Allowance and Universal Credit were not sustained in the longer-term, about the failure to uprate 'legacy' benefits such as Income Support,²⁰ and the offsetting effect of the Total Benefit Cap on the Local Housing Allowance uplift in particular.

Moreover, the official homelessness statistics for April-June 2020 capture the dramatic impact of the evictions ban, with the number of homeless households assisted as a result of the ending of private and social tenancies plummeting, while cases associated with family and friend exclusions or domestic violence remained steady. The suspension of evictions from asylum accommodation, and easing of restrictions on support for people originally from the European Economic Area who are not in employment,²¹ were humanitarian interventions that also likely saved lives, or at least immense suffering.

It is striking that, despite the scale and apparent success of the Everyone In initiative, enumerated levels of rough sleeping in London, as captured in the CHAIN dataset, did not alter much during 2020, with new rough sleepers even spiking during the most active phase of Everyone In (April-June 2020). However, the extent to which these statistics reflect 'real' patterns in levels of rough sleeping over the course of this extraordinary year, as opposed to variations in the intensity of outreach activity and data capture, is difficult to judge

However, subsequent 'mixed messages' from central Government, particularly with regard to the

accommodation of non-United Kingdom nationals ineligible for benefits and the continuation of Everyone In, became a matter of acute concern for Local Authorities and their third sector partners as the crisis progressed. It also resulted in growing variation in local authority practice across the country as the year progressed, notwithstanding a change in the Homelessness Code of Guidance advising local authorities to respond sympathetically to those made vulnerable as a result of the pandemic.²² The protections offered to those in asylum accommodation, for example, has also weakened in the second and third COVID lockdowns.

Key informants pointed to the strong foundations laid by the Rough Sleepers Initiative and the Homelessness Reduction Act in enabling a more effective response to COVID-19 than might otherwise have been the case, particularly with regards to single homeless people. That said, the Homelessness Reduction Act received only qualified endorsement from local authority respondents with regard to the role it played during the pandemic; those who were positive pointed to its pivot towards earlier forms of intervention, while the (very small) minority who were singularly critical flagged what they perceived as excessive bureaucracy associated with specified operational procedures and statistical monitoring.

One striking point to emerge during the pandemic was the extent to which dormitory-style shelters have continued in use to accommodate homeless people in at least some parts of England. Over half (52%) of local authorities reported at least some homelessness accommodation of this type in their area pre-pandemic, albeit often confined to winter or extreme weather conditions. A decisive shift away from the use of night shelters was, unsurprisingly, a priority of many

of the senior homelessness experts we interviewed mid-pandemic. Interestingly, the local authority survey also indicated that only a very small number of councils expected to continue to use dormitory-style provision post-pandemic. However, given the high-profile Government commitment to 'end' rough sleeping by 2024, fears were expressed by some key informants that communal shelter provision, or at least more congregate-style hostels, might be expanded to help meet this target. Furthermore, the speed with which the capital budget in the Next Steps programme was required to be spent was argued as undermining the ability to deploy these resources strategically and, potentially, opening up the danger of damaging new 'path dependencies' associated with hasty investments in inappropriate forms of accommodation.

Conclusion

The sharp disjuncture represented by the catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic opens up an opportunity to reflect on the shape of homelessness services in the future, and in particular the future role of congregate models of accommodation, especially that employing dormitory-style shared sleeping provision. On the more immediate horizon, a pressing priority remains effective move-on arrangements for people temporarily accommodated during the COVID-19 crisis, especially those with No Recourse to Public Funds who, by autumn 2020, comprised around half of the population accommodated in London under 'Everyone In'.

The 2022 Homelessness Monitor England will be able to assess the success or otherwise of efforts to resolve the predicament of these vulnerable migrants, as well as to stem the potential tidal wave of 'new' homelessness expected as the COVID-19-induced recession takes hold, Brexit causes disruption to trade and various

20 Child Poverty Action Group (2020) *Supporting Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Online: CPAG. <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/supporting-families-during-covid-19-pandemic>

21 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Letter from Minister for Rough Sleeping on Funding for Emergency Accommodation During the Pandemic, and Support for EEA Rough Sleepers*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-letter-from-minister-hall-to-local-authorities-on-funding-support-for-those-in-emergency-accommodation-and-eea-rough-sleepers>

22 See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/updates>

temporary labour market, welfare and housing protections are scaled back or ended. More positively, it should also enable reflection on the extent to which opportunities to 'build back better' are starting to materialise in the post-pandemic era.

Longer-term, a key factor in determining economic prospects and the level of social protection is whether the Government returns to a policy of austerity in order to reduce the levels of debt built up as a result of COVID-19. The lesson of the last 10 years is that this will be of fundamental importance to determining the context of homelessness over the next decade.

Crisis head office

66 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT
Tel: 0300 636 1967
Fax: 0300 636 2012
www.crisis.org.uk
© Crisis 2021

Crisis UK (trading as Crisis).
Registered Charity Numbers:

E&W1082947, SC040094.
Company Number: 4024938

