



# NO ONE'S PRIORITY

## The treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services

Briefing on the findings of a mystery shopping research project into local authority homelessness services

July 2009

*"It felt a bit like a computer game where you had to get to the different levels and you get through to the second level and you might get through to the third level but ultimately, on a number of occasions, I've been able to get up a few levels but you still can't get any kind of help"*<sup>1</sup>

## Executive Summary

This briefing gives an overview of a homelessness mystery shopping research project, captured through the eyes of people with similar life experience to real service users, and is a representation of what happens to single people who become homeless and approach their local authority for help. Nine mystery shoppers with a range of different background stories each visited five different local authorities across London, two inner and three outer boroughs, conducting 45 visits in total over a three-week period.

The findings support evidence that Crisis and others have gathered in the past, indicating that single homeless people often receive low levels of assistance when approaching their local authority for help. But in many respects the service our mystery shoppers received on their visits was far worse than we had expected, with councils consistently failing even to fulfil their statutory duty towards individuals, never mind take a proactive approach to preventing their homelessness.

### What should happen when people approach their local authority for help?

In England and Wales, all households which are officially recognised as homeless are legally entitled to advice and assistance from their local authority. However, a household is only entitled to accommodation if they are classified as 'unintentionally homeless', in 'priority need', and with a 'local connection'. Households are classified as in 'priority need' either if they have dependent children or if they are classified as 'vulnerable'.<sup>2</sup> The majority of single homeless people will not meet these tests.

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1 All quotes are from mystery shoppers (May 2009)

2 CLG (2006) *Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities*. Part 7 of The Housing Act 1996. The Homelessness Act 2002

All applicants should be properly assessed to establish whether or not they are in 'priority need'. If they are not, they should still receive wide-ranging and effective advice and support to prevent their homelessness, address the reasons for them becoming homeless or to help them find accommodation for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The Government's homelessness prevention agenda has also emphasised that local authorities should be working to prevent the homelessness of all people with less distinction in the service provided to applicants in relation to their 'priority need' status. Homelessness prevention guidance recommends that staff should see their role as primarily assisting clients to avoid homelessness rather than rationing social housing.<sup>4</sup>

## What did happen?

Whilst there were some advisors who made real efforts to assist people, our mystery shoppers' experiences were overwhelmingly negative. In particular, the following areas were identified as being in urgent need of reform.

- **Dignity, respect, empathy:** The standard of customer service was variable between and within local authorities but was generally poor with mystery shoppers feeling that they were treated like 'second class citizens'. In particular, there was often no attempt made to understand or empathise with someone's situation, staff were rude and dismissive and individuals were too often treated without even a basic level of customer service.
- **Burden of proof:** Mystery shoppers were often treated with suspicion and mistrust and asked for an unreasonable amount of proof of their situation. The large amounts of information required seemed at times to be more about trying to 'catch people out' and prove they did not meet the criteria for assistance rather than to be able to understand their situation and provide them with assistance to resolve their situation.
- **Information, advice and assistance:** Frequently the authority's homelessness services were not accessible to homeless people, with receptionists acting as 'gate keepers', and even where the mystery shoppers did see a housing officer they rarely received any meaningful help. They were often given little or misleading advice, signposting to other agencies was poor and they left with no solution to their housing need.
- **Application of the homelessness legislation:** Mystery shoppers were repeatedly deterred from making homelessness applications and did not receive the statutory assistance to which they were entitled. Often only a cursory assessment was made that they were not 'in priority', sometimes by reception staff, and they were then turned away. None of our mystery shoppers' visits would have appeared in the local authorities' or Government's headline official homelessness statistics.

Overwhelmingly, the mystery shoppers felt that they had wasted their time in asking the local authority for assistance and actually left the homelessness services in a worse situation than when they arrived, feeling depressed and disheartened by the way they had been treated.

These findings should come as a wake up call to local authorities and the Government. Local authorities are hugely important in preventing and solving homelessness and are often the first point of contact when a person finds themselves facing a crisis. Homeless people do not necessarily need or want a social tenancy for life and in many cases some appropriate short-term emergency accommodation and

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3 Ibid

4 CLG (2006) *Homelessness prevention: A guide to good practice*

assistance will be enough to resolve their situation. As a minimum, on approaching a local authority they expect understanding to be shown of their situation and appropriate referrals and signposting to be given.

In a time of recession with more people losing their jobs and homes and more people likely to face homelessness, the lessons from this project are more relevant than ever. At its worst the lack of assistance provided to single homeless people could lead to an increase in those who are left with no alternative but to sleep rough. Whilst the project was London-based, the report has wider relevance and we urge both local authorities and the Government to act upon the findings without delay.

## Recommendations

### **1. Improve the existing system: ensure all homeless people are treated in accordance with the law and Code of Guidance**

There needs to be a comprehensive culture change in local authorities' homelessness services. The level and standard of advice and assistance provided needs vast improvement. All people who approach their local authority as homeless should have the opportunity to make a homelessness application and should have the process clearly explained to them. Local authorities must fulfil their statutory duties under the current legislation. Furthermore meaningful homelessness prevention and housing options should be provided for all who are in housing need, not just those deemed in 'priority' need.

### **2. Reform the homelessness legislation: widen the safety net**

The Government has undertaken to review the homelessness legislation<sup>5</sup> and they must now deliver on this commitment. We want to see an expansion of the homelessness safety net so that real help is available to all those who need it, when they need it. The Government should introduce a new duty on local authorities to prevent the homelessness of all who approach them and to offer emergency accommodation to those who need it whilst providing meaningful advice and assistance to address their housing need.

### **3. Properly resource local authorities' homelessness units and ensure that funding is available for work with all homeless people**

Crisis recognises the funding constraints local authorities face and the competing demands on their limited resources. We would like therefore to see an increase in the funding available for authorities to provide high quality advice to all homeless people whether or not they are in 'priority need'. Local authorities' existing resources for homelessness prevention must be used to work with single homeless people on a proactive basis through providing high quality advice and assistance and housing options, such as private rented sector access schemes. If authorities fail to address someone's housing need at an early stage, there is a risk the individual will end up rough sleeping and/or developing greater support needs, ultimately costing the authority and the public purse more.

*Crisis is calling on the Government to act upon these recommendations and to review and monitor the performance of local authorities to ensure they do the same.*

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5 CLG (2008) *No One Left Out – Communities ending Rough Sleeping*

## Background: The research process

The mystery shopping project aimed to establish what advice and assistance is provided to single people who approach homelessness services in housing need. Crisis has much previous research and anecdotal evidence about the quality of assistance individuals have received from local authorities' homelessness services, including a consultation of its clients with experience of rough sleeping which found that the biggest barrier for most participants to seeking help was having little or no success when approaching their local authority.<sup>6</sup> This project was therefore undertaken to supplement Crisis' existing knowledge base by gathering harder and more immediate evidence about service levels and service user experience.

The project was undertaken by a respected peer research organisation which has done a number of other mystery shopping projects at the invitation of local authorities themselves so the research followed all appropriate guidelines. It provides a unique insight into the advice given and the action taken by front line staff responding to contact from those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. All the mystery shoppers who took part have had experience of homelessness and were involved in developing the background stories they presented to homelessness services, which, in so far as possible, were similar to their own real life experiences.

This report therefore captures the experience through the eyes of homeless or formerly homeless people rather than through the eyes of housing professionals or general mystery shoppers. The scenarios were developed to appear realistic and to reflect real customer interaction and very typical situations with which people might present.

They covered a range of housing needs and issues and the level of urgency and appropriate forms of action to be taken by the council adviser differed within each case. Some of our mystery shoppers should have been deemed to be in 'priority need' for example a pregnant woman. Some, such as those with mental health issues, could have been assessed to be 'priority need' and other cases required a range of advice and assistance. (See Annex for full details of the scenarios, how each of the five local authorities responded to them and the expected outcome they should have received).

All of the shoppers were trained in advance and were provided with a level of documentation commensurate with the circumstances and scenario with which they were presenting. Additional support was provided to back-up the scenarios, such as researchers acting as a landlord or relative. It is important to note however, that the nature of a mystery shopping exercise makes it difficult to test the whole process of making a homelessness application but rather can ascertain whether mystery shoppers were invited or likely to be invited to make a homelessness application and the advice and assistance they were offered.

Following each visit, the mystery shoppers completed feedback forms, independently recording all aspects of their experience, and were then interviewed by the peer research organisation. They also took part in a roundtable feedback session with Crisis.

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6 Crisis undertook a consultation of people with experience of rough sleeping in May 2008

## Key findings

### 1. Dignity, respect, empathy

#### What should happen?

Crisis believes that people approaching their local authority for assistance have a right to expect similar basic levels of customer service to those any of us would hope for from public services. Frontline staff, both receptionists and officers, should treat applicants with dignity, respect and empathy.

#### What did happen?

Whilst one local authority fared slightly better than the rest, the mystery shoppers felt that, in many of their visits, they were treated like “second class citizens”. The degree to which they felt staff were interested in their individual circumstances varied widely and was generally dependent on the individual member of staff seen rather than the local authority or the mystery shopper’s situation. With some exceptions however, staff showed little sensitivity or empathy towards the shoppers’ situations and treated them without even a basic level of customer service, respect and courtesy. Indeed staff were at times rude and unhelpful.

*“I think there’s a total lack of sympathy or empathy or anything. .... to be treated like you’re a second class citizen from the minute you walk in that office is just disgraceful actually.”*

*“He asked in such an aggressive way... I just found it really hard ultimately, why was he treating me badly? Just because I had nowhere to live, it’s as simple as that.”*

The mystery shoppers often felt that not enough time was spent with them or that staff made only limited enquiries into their circumstances. Some of the mystery shoppers did not get to see an advisor at all, either being interviewed over an internal phone, being told there were no appointments available or being advised they were not eligible for help and turned away at reception. Often shoppers felt that they were being pushed from pillar to post. Several of the mystery shoppers were advised to call back after the office had closed on their ‘emergency out of hours number’.

There was rarely any privacy whilst personal and sensitive interviews were being conducted. Mystery shoppers were often interviewed in the reception area and sometimes interviewed whilst standing in a queue.

*“I then had to go back to the main reception and queue up again to stand up, very publicly, in a line. A lot of places I can understand, but when you’re being interviewed and you’re having to stand up and you’ve got people either side of you and you have to reveal private and personal information, that’s wrong.”*

Staff were frequently insensitive to an individual’s situation and not accommodating of their needs. For example, one of our female mystery shoppers with a background of domestic violence was refused her request to see a female officer. The mystery shoppers with limited English were often not provided with a translator. There was rarely any explanation of the process of assessment or assistance.

Waiting times varied, but some mystery shoppers had to wait several hours to see an officer or were asked to come back on another occasion. The physical standards of the buildings also varied. In many instances they were difficult to locate and had little information on display.

## 2. Burden of proof

### What should happen?

The homelessness code of guidance states that an authority must provide housing assistance if they have 'reason to believe', rather than are certain, that an applicant may be eligible. Local authorities must then make enquiries to establish what duty is owed to an individual and to identify what assistance they may require.<sup>7</sup>

### What did happen?

All too often, our mystery shoppers were treated with suspicion and mistrust, often being told outright that the officer didn't believe their story or that they were homeless. Shoppers were asked to explain themselves 'time and time again' sometimes repeating their story to a number of different members of staff. However, this seemed to be in order to establish that they were not in 'priority need' rather than an attempt to understand their situation. In fact, mystery shoppers were repeatedly told that they were not a priority and often felt that advisors were trying to catch them out. When people approach their local authorities for help in a crisis, they are already facing a stressful situation and our shoppers felt that being asked to answer a lot of probing questions repeatedly was unreasonable.

*"Traditionally speaking or in a court of law you're supposed to be innocent until proven guilty but you're treated like you're guilty... until you can prove yourself innocent"*

*"It's still distressing if you're treated badly, you're questioned, you're in a state of shock, you might not have slept the night before, you might not have eaten and you're expected to answer these questions and fill out these forms.....I'm sure he's doing his job and parts of you start feeling guilty for them, you know, but the fact is he was trying to catch me out and that was what was wrong."*

Shoppers were also repeatedly asked for extensive documentation sometimes including six months of bank statements and five years' worth of addresses before any help was offered. Whilst this level of information might be hard for anyone to provide, for people who are homeless, vulnerable or lead chaotic lifestyles it can be impossible. Often little understanding was shown to mystery shoppers who were unable to access documentation because they had, for example, been evicted from their flat. Furthermore, the level of documentation required ranged not only from authority to authority but also from advisor to advisor.

Without this proof of their circumstances, shoppers were often advised that they could not make a homelessness application or receive any assistance.

*"They won't accept a doctor's letter to confirm who you are so ... if you haven't got a passport or a driving licence, you don't exist basically."*

*"When they find out you haven't got any paperwork they can't help you. I didn't have any paperwork because it was all in my flat and, of course, I couldn't get into my flat."*

## 3. Information, advice & assistance

### What should happen?

Local authorities must provide advice and assistance to all homeless households in their district whether or not they are in 'priority need'. This should include a proper assessment of their housing needs and information about where they are likely to find suitable accommodation. The advice and assistance

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7 CLG (2006) *Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities*

provided should be up-to-date and robust and cover the broad range of factors that can contribute to homelessness. The advice provided should also signpost people to other more specialist advice where appropriate.

As part of the Government's homelessness prevention agenda, it is emphasised that the role of homelessness staff should primarily be about assisting clients to avoid homelessness and should be focussed on 'how can we help?' rather than 'who can we help?'<sup>8</sup>

### What did happen?

The level of information, advice and assistance provided varied greatly both between and within local authorities, suggesting that this depends on who you see, where and on what day but tellingly none of our mystery shoppers left with an immediate resolution to their housing need. It also appeared that very few of them would eventually have been helped to any meaningful resolution even with further visits. Whilst some advisors were helpful, advocating on behalf of the shoppers and providing a range of information, too many of our shoppers received little or no advice and assistance.

*"There's no signposting whatsoever. I know about day centres and I know about night shelters and things like that and there was no advice"*

Sometimes mystery shoppers received no advice or assistance whatsoever. Sometimes the advice given was so limited as to be meaningless, such as information about hostels in a completely different area. Commonly, the mystery shoppers were only provided with the contact details of one other agency which might or might not be able to help. Frequently no written documents were given detailing the further help available. Rarely was assistance with filling in the necessary forms provided.

*"Nowhere that I've been to offered any help to fill in the forms."*

There was little focus on preventing people's homelessness and the level of advice and assistance given seemed to be dependent on the individual advisor or on a shopper's ability to advocate for themselves rather than being responsive to their needs.

Even more worryingly, in many cases the information or advice given was misleading, wrong or totally inappropriate. For example, one mystery shopper was incorrectly advised that he could not be evicted from his property. Another mystery shopper with a background of domestic violence was told by one authority to try neighboring boroughs to which she had no 'local connection', with no explanation of why they might be better placed to help her. Another authority gave her information on reporting hate crimes, an inappropriate and inadequate response. Where support was offered to enable people to stay in their own home, this was often misdirected and inappropriate. A-17-year old mystery shopper was told to return to her family home even though she told them she was at risk of sexual assault by her mother's partner.

In some instances advisors failed to follow through on what they had undertaken to do, for example, not calling the mystery shoppers when they said they would.

*"If you think, all together you've probably done about 15 visits in total and only one of them have actually called you back, that's terrible"*

Occasionally some wider advice was given, for example to attend Jobcentre Plus or speak to Citizens Advice. However, this was limited and links both with other council departments and with external agencies such as hostel providers were often poor.

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8 CLG (2006) *Homelessness prevention: A guide to good practice*

## 4. Application of the homelessness legislation

### What should happen?

Local authorities are obliged to give proper consideration to all applications for housing assistance.

If the authority has reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness, they must make inquiries to see whether they owe them any duty. Authorities must also decide if there is reason to believe that the applicant may have a priority need for accommodation. If there is reason to believe the applicant meets these criteria, the housing authority has an immediate duty to ensure that suitable accommodation is available until they complete their inquiries.

Priority need groups include pregnant women, people with dependent children, people vulnerable due to old age, mental illness, physical or mental disability or any other reason, 16 and 17-year-olds, care leavers under the age of 21, people vulnerable as a result of violence or threats of violence, people who are vulnerable as a result of a prison, armed forces or care background.

### What did happen?

Mystery shoppers were frequently deterred from even making a homelessness application, instead being told that they were not in 'priority need' or not eligible to apply for an assessment.

Dissuading or not allowing people to make an application means that they will not show up in the local authorities' homelessness figures and, in many cases, it appears that mystery shoppers' visits were not recorded or logged at all. None of the visits carried out by our shoppers would appear in either local authorities' or the Government's headline official homelessness statistics.<sup>9</sup>

Many were dealt with and sent away by receptionists 'gate-keeping', through providing misleading advice or by preventing shoppers from seeing a housing officer.

*"At least when you see a housing officer you at least get some idea but the person at reception isn't necessarily fully trained in the housing thing and they're just there to fob you off."*

Often the shoppers seemed to be met by a culture of trying to establish that they was not eligible for any housing assistance, rather than a focus on what could be done to help them or proactively resolve their circumstances. The assessment process, 'priority need' and homelessness were frequently not mentioned at all or not explained. When explanations were given, they were often misleading or unclear. Shoppers were frequently advised that they were not in 'priority need' as they did not have children, ignoring any potential vulnerability they might have.

Two of our scenarios should have been considered in 'priority need' due to age or pregnancy. A further three were borderline in that they could have been deemed vulnerable as a result of mental health problems or domestic violence, but this was down to the local authorities' discretion. However, the local authorities consistently failed to ensure that any of our mystery shoppers in these categories received their statutory entitlement to emergency accommodation while their circumstances were investigated and did not even appear to consider this as an option. In one instance, our 'pregnant' mystery shopper was told to return with evidence of her pregnancy in four weeks' time.

Assessments to determine whether or not a person was vulnerable were poor and little consideration was given to determining whether the discretionary cases were in 'priority need'. Hardly any attention was paid to individuals' vulnerability as a result of mental health problems despite the fact some of our mystery shoppers were rough sleeping. The mystery shopper with a background of fleeing domestic

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9 CLG releases national statistics on Statutory Homelessness on a quarterly basis

violence was not properly assessed to see whether this might make her vulnerable and in 'priority need', despite the fact that she raised concerns that her life was at risk. Vulnerability assessments were often insufficient and in one local authority were conducted over the phone.

*"I've got the mental health background and previous drug issues thing, it was just he had no understanding about those issues at all."*

## Conclusion

For many homeless people, local authorities will be their first point of contact when they look for help and it cannot be acceptable that they are being so completely let down. Furthermore, if people are consistently experiencing such poor levels of service, they are likely to advise their peers not to even attempt approaching a local authority for assistance.

This report highlights an inadequate system and poor level of service which is failing some of the most vulnerable people in society and urgently needs reform. Vulnerable people are being turned away from local authorities with no solution to their housing need and it is clear that the current legislation and its application is not covering all those who need it.

Whilst some rough sleepers and single homeless people have high needs, not all do – some just have a housing need and the failure to address this can be what causes them then to fall into rough sleeping and a situation where other issues, such as mental health or alcohol abuse, develop. By local authorities not addressing someone's housing need at an early stage, the individual can develop these further problems and greater support needs and end up being a much higher cost to the state. What's more, if Government is to meet its target of ending rough sleeping by 2012, it is crucial that we get local authority homelessness assistance right.

*“When people go to local authorities, it's usually the first place they go because they're thinking something's happened to me, local authority's supposed to help me, let's go and find out. So they're right at the start of their journey but then they get sent away and they have to fend for themselves.”*

In recent years the Government's own homelessness prevention agenda has emphasised that local authorities should focus on offering services to prevent and resolve homelessness and not just on statutory homelessness. This research, however, would support evidence from elsewhere that local authorities are in fact engaged in a process of 'gate-keeping' and that the provision of advice and assistance is still based on whether or not someone qualifies for the main housing duty, rather than on a proactive attempt to prevent homelessness and/or resolve someone's situation.

It should be emphasised that generally it is not individual advisors, who often have very high workloads, who are to blame for these failings (in fact our shoppers had a lot of empathy with the staff although this empathy was rarely returned). It is rather the system which desperately needs reform.

Homeless people do not necessarily want a council house nor might it always be the most appropriate option for them, they 'just need a place to stay' and meaningful help and advice with their housing crisis. Preoccupation with whether or not someone is entitled to the main homelessness duty is driving the behaviour of local authorities and determining whether or not they play any role in assisting an individual.

This all or nothing approach – either someone is entitled to the main homelessness duty and housing assistance or they receive no or little assistance at all – urgently needs reviewing.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this mystery shopping project and previous research, Crisis believes that the existing system of homelessness assistance needs immediate overhauling and that the standards of services delivered to homeless people need dramatic improvement. At the same time we believe that many of the problems with the application of the existing guidance stem from the current legislation, which we would like to see reviewed and the homelessness safety net expanded.

We would like to see the following reforms implemented with a matter of urgency.

### 1. Improve the existing system: ensure all homeless people are treated in accordance with the law and Code of Guidance

a) **Culture change:** There needs to be a comprehensive culture change in local authorities' homelessness services. We want to see the levels of customer service improved across the board and homeless people treated with courtesy, respect and empathy. The attitude and approach of frontline staff should change from one of attempting to establish that people are not eligible for assistance to one of understanding and then determining how best they can be helped and their housing need addressed. Such a culture change will require determined effort from senior management and investment in staff training. There should be engagement with service users to better understand their experience of the Homeless Persons Unit and how this could be improved. This could, for example, include customer feedback and regular mystery shopping exercises.

**b) Better advice and assistance:** The level and standard of advice and assistance provided to customers needs vast improvement. Homeless people should always be allowed to see a housing officer who must be sufficiently trained to be able to provide meaningful advice and assistance.

Both reception staff and homelessness officers should not provide advice on issues about which they are not clear or are beyond the scope of their training. Rather they should in these instances connect individuals with agencies that can provide accurate information. This should come through better links with other council departments and external agencies. Local authorities should learn from examples of best practice and provide a decent, relevant and up-to-date information, advice and assistance service to people in housing need. The assistance provided to individuals should be responsive to their need and should aim to find a resolution to their housing crisis.

**c) Proper application of existing legislation:** Local authorities must fulfil their statutory duties under the current legislation. All people who approach their local authority as homeless should have the opportunity to make a homelessness application and should have the process clearly explained to them. Staff need training in order to better understand their statutory duties including the duty to provide advice and assistance to all. Government should review the operation of the current vulnerability criteria and assessment process.

Furthermore, homelessness prevention and housing options should be meaningful for all who are in housing need, not just a different way of authorities responding to those who they already have statutory duties to assist i.e. mainly those with dependent children.

### 2. Reform the homelessness legislation: widen the safety net

Ultimately, Crisis believes that many of the problems our mystery shoppers faced stem from the legislation which causes confusion and is inconsistently applied. Even if the current guidance were fully implemented, some homeless people would still not get the help they need.

This research has shown that staff often interpret the statutory duty as meaning that only those people who are in non-discretionary 'priority need' groups are entitled to housing assistance. This is either due to a lack of understanding or a culture which encourages staff to turn away all those to whom there is no absolute duty to house.

The Government itself has recognised the role of the local authority homelessness function in preventing and resolving homelessness and particularly rough sleeping and has undertaken to review the homelessness legislation<sup>10</sup> to this effect. They must now deliver on this commitment.

We want to see an expansion of the homelessness safety net so that real help is available to all those who need it, when they need it. The Government should introduce a new duty on local authorities to prevent the homelessness of all who approach them and to offer emergency accommodation to those who need it whilst providing meaningful advice and assistance to address their housing need. This could mean social housing for some but could also be, for example, mediation or relationship support, assistance accessing the private rented sector, a hostel place or supported accommodation. Introducing a new statutory duty would set a standard of minimum help and assistance to which people know they are entitled and would help drive a different culture in local authorities.

### **3. Properly resource local authorities' homelessness units and ensure that funding is available for work with all homeless people**

Crisis recognises the funding constraints local authorities face and the competing demands on their limited resources. We would like therefore to see an increase in the funding available for local authorities to provide high quality advice to all homeless people whether or not they are in 'priority need'.

It is also important that local authorities use existing funding to work with all homeless people to prevent and resolve their homelessness. Crisis understands the pressures on social housing and hence the temptation for local authorities to alleviate these by using homelessness prevention resources only to work with those who would be deemed in 'priority need'. However, it is also important that funding is used to work with single homeless people on a proactive basis through providing high quality advice and assistance and housing options such as private rented sector access schemes.

As well as the obvious importance to the individual of investing in these kind of services, if authorities fail to address someone's housing need at an early stage, there is a risk the individual will end up rough sleeping and/or developing greater support needs, ultimately costing the authority and the public purse more.

*Crisis is calling on the Government to act upon these recommendations and to review and monitor the performance of local authorities to ensure they do the same.*

*In 21st century Britain it cannot be acceptable that people are provided with such poor levels of service, left with no resolution to their circumstances and in some instances are left with no choice but to sleep rough. We urge the Government to take action without delay.*

# Annex: Overview of Mystery Shopping Visits

Mystery Shopper (MS) scenario	Inner London Borough A	Inner London Borough B	Outer London Borough C	Outer London Borough D	Outer London Borough E	What should happen <sup>1</sup>
1. 18-year-old man. Homeless due to being thrown out of family home. Has been sofa surfing but now has nowhere to go.	Assessed as not in 'priority'. Given some information on emergency accommodation and benefits.	Turned away by reception.	Three-minute interview. Informed not in 'priority'. Given very limited information sheet.	Interviewed over internal phone. Told not eligible for assessment. Given telephone number of a local charity.	Informed not in 'priority'. Given some information on benefits and ways of getting accommodation.	Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance.
2. 17-year-old woman. Thrown out of family home because she complained about unwanted sexual attention from mother's partner. Sofa surfing.	Staff told her that social services need to be involved and that she should return home. Staff advised on Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA).	Seen by receptionist who explained the assessment process. Advised Social Services needed to be involved. Given phone number for Domestic Violence helpline and hostels (numbers unavailable). Told to report situation to the police.	Priority need was not mentioned. Informed officer would contact social services. MS given incorrect information and told to return home.	Officer called MS's 'mother' to establish that she could not return home. Priority need not mentioned. Advised social worker would call her but didn't receive a call. Told about EMA.	Receptionist told MS that social services must be involved and that she should come back the following day. MS not called back as undertaken. No discussion about assessment. No signposting.	Priority need for accommodation. Local authority has an immediate duty to ensure that suitable accommodation is available.
3. Man in his 40s. Homeless due to illegal eviction following death of his mother. Mental health problems, self neglect. Rough sleeping.	Assessment process explained. Information given and told officer would try and find him a place in the hostel the following day.	Not logged on system. Told not priority as he did not have children and that he should come back at a later date. Given a list of hostels.	Told by receptionist that not in 'priority need'. Some signposting housing advice agency.	Spoke to someone on the internal phone who explained priority need and asked questions to establish if he was vulnerable. Officer called 'landlady' a number of times to advocate on MS's behalf.	Told no local authority had a duty towards him. Given a list of hostels.	Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance. Potentially priority need for accommodation.

<sup>11</sup> According to CLG (2006) Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities and relevant homelessness legislation: Part 7 of The Housing Act 1996. The Homelessness Act 2002

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<p>4. Woman in her 30s. Mild learning difficulties. Involved in drugs and prostitution. Sofa surfing/squatting/sleeping rough.</p>	<p>Explanation of priority need but told nothing could be done until she brings further (extensive) ID. Was not called back, as promised.</p>	<p>MS was told over the phone that no appointments were available. Asked to see an officer and told again that she should come back. Told to call emergency out-of-hours number and given an information pack.</p>	<p>Some explanation of priority need. Asked questions to establish if she was vulnerable. Told to go to a third sector homelessness organisation, but not given their contact details.</p>	<p>Was seen by an officer who she felt was trying to 'catch her out'. Told to bring extensive documentation however, further appointment not made.</p>	<p>Receptionist told her to come back with further ID. No advice.</p>	<p>Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance. Potentially priority need for accommodation.</p>
<p>5. Female refugee in her 20s/30s. Limited English. Pregnant. Staying with friends but has to leave.</p>	<p>Told she needed more (extensive) documentation. Officer called 'friend' and left message.</p>	<p>Refused an interpreter. She was told that she needed further (extensive) evidence and they could not help her until then. Told to attend appointment four weeks later.</p>	<p>Told she needed to bring in further evidence and would then be offered accommodation.</p>	<p>Refused an interpreter. Officer called 'friend' and asked to discuss MS's situation. MS given church homelessness group number and told to return in a week with proof of pregnancy and other extensive information.</p>	<p>Told to come back with proof of pregnancy.</p>	<p>Priority need for accommodation due to pregnancy. Local authority has an immediate duty to ensure that suitable accommodation is available.</p>
<p>6. Man in his 30s. Immigrant. Recourse to public funds. Little English. Rough sleeping.</p>	<p>Officer told MS to go to other agencies for help with benefits. Given limited information.</p>	<p>Told not in 'priority need'. Advice about hostels, night shelters and day centres. Told to call emergency out-of-hours number and to come back the following day if he didn't get any accommodation. Felt case was dealt with sensitively.</p>	<p>Told not a 'priority' and given a list of day centres.</p>	<p>Request for interpreter ignored. Told to come back in a week with extensive documentation. Given church homelessness group details.</p>	<p>Told to come back next day but chose to wait for over an hour for an interview. Told couldn't help because MS couldn't give details of previous addresses. Some signposting and information.</p>	<p>Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance.</p>

<p>7. Woman in her 20s. Fled domestic violence. Staying at sister's but under pressure to leave. From outside borough.</p>	<p>Officer didn't write down her details. MS felt that the officer didn't care. Told to come back with 'proof' of domestic violence. No information or signposting.</p>	<p>Told to come back with crime reference number the following day.</p>	<p>Waited a long time to be seen by a female officer. Felt her problems were seriously considered. Given phone numbers for refugees and told to come back the next day if they couldn't help.</p>	<p>Spoke to a male officer over the phone (despite asking for a female). Officer was not sympathetic and told her they couldn't help. Given details of other borough's homeless teams. MS tried to complain about the officer but was told that no one by that name worked there.</p>	<p>Told couldn't be helped as she doesn't have children. Told to contact Hate Crime reporting centre who could give her a list of hostels.</p>	<p>Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance. Potentially priority need for accommodation.</p>
<p>8. Young couple, in their 20s/30s. Have received a notice seeking possession as landlord has not paid rent.</p>	<p>Told not 'priority need'. Given incorrect advice about possession process. Some signposting.</p>	<p>Told to come back next day or call out-of-hours number.</p>	<p>Told to go to a third sector homelessness organisation.</p>	<p>Interviewed over phone. Given incorrect information about possession proceedings. Given church homelessness group phone number.</p>	<p>Given incorrect advice about court proceedings. Very limited information sheet given.</p>	<p>Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance.</p>
<p>9. Man in his 30s.. Recently made redundant, now rough sleeping.</p>	<p>Told that he needs to sign on before can be helped. Limited information given, including on hostels in a different borough.</p>	<p>Receptionist gave MS information on homelessness and housing options. Appointment not available.</p>	<p>Advised that there were no hostels in the borough. Told not a priority. Limited information.</p>	<p>Told to sign on in order to get a hostel. Given church homelessness group phone number.</p>	<p>Receptionist advised him to come back next day. Very poor signposting.</p>	<p>Proper assessment of housing need and advice and assistance.</p>



### **About Crisis**

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

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**Homelessness ends here**