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# Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing

Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Beth Watts & Rhiannon Sims

July 2020





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# Contents

<i>COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing</i>	vi	
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>	
<b>2. What went well</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>3. Challenges and shortcomings</b>	<b>9</b>	
<b>4. Exiting the COVID-19 Crisis: Future opportunities and 'Building Back Better'</b>	<b>13</b>	
<b>5. Conclusions</b>	<b>17</b>	

# COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing

COVID-19 has prompted a radical and rapid nation-wide shift in responses to some of the most extreme forms of homelessness. With government financial support and guidance, local authorities have sought to get 'Everyone In' as rough sleeping in England has been reframed as an urgent public health issue, and emergency measures have sought to prevent other forms of homelessness as well. This Briefing reflects on the early lessons from the crisis response, and looks ahead to the exit strategy. We found that:

- Levels of infection seem very low amongst homeless people accommodated under the *Everyone In* initiative, indicating a relatively successful public health strategy with regards to this vulnerable population.
- 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 on the medium to longer-term response to populations accommodated under 'Everyone In', especially non-UK nationals ineligible for housing benefit, became a matter of acute concern amongst local authorities and their third sector partners. Highly ambivalent, and changing, signals from central Government about the application of the usual homelessness eligibility and entitlement criteria during the pandemic were identified as especially problematic.

- Whilst an increase in Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates was warmly welcomed, many stakeholders noted that the continuance of the overall Benefit Cap severely compromised the positive benefit of this LHA enhancement for larger families in particular, especially those living in higher housing market pressure parts of the country.
- The effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' response appears to have been somewhat uneven across the country, influenced by a range of factors including local governance structures, pre-existing partnerships, and the availability of self-contained accommodation, including hotel rooms. The level of support offered to those staying in emergency accommodation was likewise variable.
- One striking point was the extent to which dormitory-style accommodation is still used in at least some parts of England. A decisive shift away from these communal forms of sleeping provision was a positive outcome sought by some of those we spoke to, as well as more broadly a direction of travel that encompassed less emphasis on hostels with shared facilities.
- Across England, there appears to have been little deployment of overt enforcement measures as a means of implementing 'Everyone In', with the police generally reported to have been supportive partners.
- Some voluntary and statutory sector stakeholders see the changed environment in city centres during the pandemic as an opportunity to challenge some sections of the public's support of damaging street-based lifestyles, e.g. via direct giving to people who beg to support addiction issues.
- The (understandable) emphasis given to immediate crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic has squeezed out prevention activity at many levels, and a 'spike' in family homelessness in particular is expected as the evictions ban and furlough schemes come to an end.

# Introduction

*The Homelessness Monitor* is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of economic and policy change, with parallel reports published for all four UK jurisdictions. Drawing together a wide array of statistical, survey and qualitative data, the ninth annual *Homelessness Monitor England* is due for publication towards the end of 2020.

However, given the unprecedented nature of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extraordinary speed with which events are unfolding, we felt that it would be helpful to publish an early stage briefing based on the qualitative work undertaken to date for this year's Monitor, in association with our colleagues at the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE).<sup>1</sup>

This report therefore draws on our analysis of policy developments and senior key informant testimony (with interviewees drawn from across the statutory and voluntary sectors, and from diverse parts of England, n=15), to reflect on: what seems to have gone well with respect to the crisis response to COVID-19; the challenges and shortcomings associated with this crisis response; and the opportunities to 'build back better' post-pandemic.

<sup>1</sup> UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) (2020) *New project: housing policies and the COVID-19 pandemic*, Online: CaCHE. <https://housingevidence.ac.uk/new-project-housing-policies-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

# What went well

On 26th March, a letter was sent by Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to all local authorities in England instructing them to move everyone sleeping rough and in communal shelters into a safe place, ideally in self-contained accommodation, over the following two days.<sup>2</sup> This 'Everyone In' initiative was backed by £3.2 million targeted funding to local authorities, alongside £3.2 billion overall for councils to assist people classed as vulnerable. Government has reported that nearly 15,000 people who were sleeping rough or at risk of doing so have subsequently been assisted into self-contained emergency accommodation in commercial hotels, B&Bs, and hostels,<sup>3</sup> and estimates that over 90% of rough sleepers known to councils at the beginning of the crisis have been offered accommodation.<sup>4</sup>

A new Taskforce announced on 2nd May, and headed by Dame Louise Casey, will work with councils "to ensure rough sleepers can move into long-term, safe accommodation once the immediate crisis is over – ensuring as few people as possible return to life on the streets".<sup>5</sup> On 24th May the

Government revealed that it is bringing forward £160million out of an (increased) £433million four-year budget to provide 6,000 new supported housing units for ex-rough sleepers, with 3,300 of these units becoming available over the next 12 months.<sup>6</sup> A month later, on 24th

2 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>

3 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020), *Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: May 2020*, Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-covid-19-rough-sleeper-accommodation-survey-data-may-2020>

4 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Dame Louise Casey to spearhead government taskforce on rough sleeping during pandemic*, Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dame-louise-casey-to-spearhead-government-taskforce-on-rough-sleeping-during-pandemic>

5 *ibid*

6 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>

June, an additional £105 million was announced to support rough sleepers into new tenancies<sup>7</sup> alongside a commitment to provide councils in England with £63 million in additional local welfare assistance funding.<sup>8</sup>

Other important early steps taken by Government during the pandemic included a halt on evictions from both the social and private rented sectors, initially announced for a three-month period till 25th June 2020,<sup>9</sup> and later extended to at least 23rd August 2020.<sup>10</sup> There was also a suspension of evictions from asylum accommodation across the UK for three months from 27th March,<sup>11</sup> and the Government has suspended an EU derogation relating to freedom of movement, to allow local authorities to house EEA nationals who are not in employment. In 2019 this suspension was applied in areas of the country with high levels of EEA migrant homelessness and is now being extended nationally as of 24th June 2020.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, there have been significant enhancements of welfare protections prompted by the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates have been realigned to cover the bottom third of rents, and there has been an increase of £20 per week in the Universal Credit (UC) standard allowance for a 12-month period.<sup>13</sup> There has also been a pause in benefit sanctions and a brief suspension of direct deductions from benefit to repay third party debts,<sup>14</sup> and overpayments,<sup>15</sup> although advance payments of Universal Credit are excluded.

Key informants were united in praising the clarity and swiftness of the communication and actions from central Government early in the crisis. In particular, the instruction in the 26th March letter from MHCLG<sup>16</sup> to get 'Everyone In', by that very weekend, was a bold and unprecedented move that inspired confidence on the part of both local authorities and their voluntary sector partners that they had the Government's backing to take decisive action:

- 7 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>
- 8 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *£63 million for local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials*, Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/63-million-for-local-authorities-to-assist-those-struggling-to-afford-food-and-other-essentials>
- 9 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Government support available for landlords and renters reflecting the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak*, Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/government-support-available-for-landlords-and-renters-reflecting-the-current-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>
- 10 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Ban on evictions extended by 2 months to further protect renters*, Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ban-on-evictions-extended-by-2-months-to-further-protect-renters>
- 11 On 27th March 2020, the Home Office Minister Chris Philp sent a Letter to the British Red Cross announcing that for the next three months people will not be asked to leave their asylum accommodation. <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/27.03.20-Chris-Philp-Letter.pdf>
- 12 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>
- 13 Social Security (Coronavirus) (Further Measures) Regulations 2020 (SI.No.371/2020). [www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/371/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/371/made)
- 14 UK Parliament (2020) *Social Security Benefits: Coronavirus: Written Question – 30856*. Online: Parliament.UK. [www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-03-17/30856/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-03-17/30856/)
- 15 Department for Work and Pensions (2020) *Recovery of Benefit Overpayment Suspended*. Online: DWP. [www.gov.uk/government/news/recovery-of-benefit-overpayment-suspended](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/recovery-of-benefit-overpayment-suspended)
- 16 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-sleepers>

**"I think the fact that there was a clear directive was helpful in the first place, because at least it gave a very clear message to local authorities. Thinking about what was achieved in terms of accommodating people in a very short space of time, I think having that visible political leadership was important..."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

It was also particularly appreciated that the signal from MHCLG, at least initially, was unequivocal in really meaning 'Everyone In', with the usual barriers associated with eligibility for public funds and/or entitlements under the homelessness legislation set aside in favour of an inclusive public health-driven strategy:

**"...the speed around the resourcing, the relaxation of benefits... and the kind of help to local authorities, the focus on no recourse to public funds and easing on that is absolutely... That's been really good, and there's been a real relaxation, of just let's get the job done whatever it takes."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

In parallel, the halt on evictions was credited with holding levels of family homelessness to unprecedentedly low levels:

**"...there are very, very few presentations of family homelessness ... I think it's really helpful to just make it ...clear... that there won't be any court proceedings happening around evictions. I think that's just taking a huge, immediate chunk of work away from the whole door of homelessness, so I think that's**

**got to be very welcome. To have announced that so quickly."**

(Independent stakeholder)

The 'firm grip' that MHCLG took during the early stages of the pandemic was notable for its sharp contrast with the hands-off 'Localist' approach on homelessness that has dominated for most of the 'austerity' period since 2010,<sup>17</sup> particularly under the 2010-15 Coalition Government:

**"...the level of contact between central and local government has been really, really high... We've got... advisors that I speak with... maybe three times a week... that kind of early response was good in terms of the contact that we got, the information that we got. Very clear."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

**"...in terms of the day-to-day advice and day-to-day support, it's been first rate, we've been given by the Ministry of Housing."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

The COVID-19 related enhancements to welfare benefits were warmly welcomed, particularly the increase in maximum LHA rates, a policy change that had been the focus of intense lobbying efforts by homelessness charities and others:

17 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Watts, B. (2020) *Localism and homelessness: a decade of disaster in England*, Online: LSE British Politics and Policy. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/localism-and-homelessness/>

**"...stakeholders have been publicly campaigning... that the LHA was insufficient and had been too severely eroded, and the massive shortfalls and people weren't able to access property....the circumstances of COVID, the time is right to do that. I believe that homelessness was one of the factors which was quite important in Ministers' mind in making that decision."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

That said, it was pointed out by many stakeholders that the continuance of the overall Benefit Cap severely compromised the positive benefit of this LHA enhancement for larger families in particular, especially those living in higher pressure parts of the country.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside acknowledgment of the decisive leadership shown by central Government during the early stage of the crisis, there was also praise for the remarkable effort made by local authorities and the third sector across England to rise to a unique implementation challenge, with the number of people accommodated safely and quickly a source of justifiable pride.

**"I think local authorities played a blinder.... most local authorities were phenomenal."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

**"...every day I'm talking to people in the city council in some kind of way... and they're absolutely thrilled about how we responded... In four days we got the shelter moved from its location and everybody into the hotel. It was very, very fast."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

**"'Everyone In' did something which probably would have been thought impossible. It got very large numbers of people off the street."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Groups assisted extended beyond those sleeping rough and staying in night shelters, to include 'hidden homeless' people 'squeezed out' of where they were, with friends, family or acquaintances no longer able or willing to accommodate during the crisis period. Some interesting and complex dynamics were identified in terms of who came forward for, and accepted, help under 'Everyone In', including with respect to the interrelationship with begging/street lifestyles, and modern slavery and exploitation:

**"... lack of footfall, the closures in the city centres...The potential to generate income disappeared so there was a lot of changes really. Some people who wouldn't come in before were then prepared to come in. People who had been hidden, so we've seen quite a significant increase in people with no recourse to public funds. People that had perhaps been exploited, and through modern slavery, or even trafficking, who'd been hidden."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

Crucially, the 'Everyone In' efforts seem to have been successful in keeping COVID-19 infection rates very low amongst homeless people:

**"What we're hearing... disproportionately low levels of symptomatic people who have come from rough sleeping in the streets. Now, as a public health phenomenon I think that's really interesting... because...some of the most vulnerable health-wise**

<sup>18</sup> The Guardian (2020) 'Universal Credit's Two-child Limit and the Benefit Cap must end now', *The Guardian Newspaper*, 21 April [Online]. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/21/universal-credit-two-child-limit-and-the-benefit-cap-must-end-now>

**would be, seem to be [exhibiting] incredibly low level[s], of any kind of symptoms."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

This is in stark contrast to the position in parts of the US, for example, where it is reported that up to two-thirds of the shelter residents in some cities have been infected during the pandemic.<sup>19</sup>

The quality of the 'offer' being made within the 'Everyone In' programme, with commercial hotel rooms requisitioned for use by homeless people in many areas, was emphasised by a number of interviewees:

**"...there is an offer for everybody, and it's not a shelter offer... There is very little shared. Most authorities have taken over quite large swathes of decent quality hotels, so that people are getting a room, en-suite, three meals a day, somewhere to bathe, and there is some support there as well."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

That said, the use of hotel rooms was noted to be far less feasible outside of the main urban centres, leading to some geographical displacement towards the cities:

**"So COVID. Everybody In. Right [X, Y, Z rural authorities], they don't have masses of hotels in their community, and the hotels they probably do are maybe 25-bedroom type places, so they're not suitable. So [what] do they do [sic]. They've got to put them in the cities."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

Moreover, while the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic made hotel rooms a more

affordable option than would normally be the case, they remained relatively expensive, and were acknowledged to be far from ideal in other ways, especially when insufficient support was available for residents (see further below):

**"We don't want to have anybody in hotels... we've put people in council tenancies, hostels, or private-rented sector tenancies with Housing First support..."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

**"[Hotels] had a really, really high number of evictions early on... it was a quick turnaround, quick mobilisation. We didn't have the support in place mostly around drug and alcohol ...you're the hotel manager or you're the staff, and you've got these guys coming in off the streets in states that you've never seen before."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

**"...their ability to deal with challenging behaviour in these big, big hotels where you've got hundreds of people, there is going to be a much, much lower threshold than you would have in a high-needs hostel for example, where a lot of inventive, creative work goes on to keep people in. There are people with complex needs, and this isn't a suitable place for them."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

More generally, there was acknowledged to be significant geographical variation in the effectiveness of the crisis response, with some areas struggling more than others for reasons associated with the strength of existing multi-agency working, as well as the accessibility of affordable self-contained accommodation at short notice:

19 Mosites E, Parker EM, Clarke KE, et al. (2020) *Assessment of SARS-CoV-2 Infection Prevalence in Homeless Shelters – Four U.S. Cities, March 27–April 15, 2020*. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:521–522. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6917e1>

**"Where a local authority already had a good relationship in place with local, private landlords and registered providers, I think they've been able to build on those relationships... I think relationships have, also, been really important in terms of health provision. Obviously, the test-triage-cohort approach to the 'Everyone In' initiative is necessarily going to be really reliant on good input from Public Health and also good input from local NHS [National Health Service]."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Certainly, some parts of the country seem to have faced particular challenges in accommodating all those sleeping rough or at risk, and also in supporting individuals accommodated under 'Everyone In' to remain 'inside':

**"...there was probably about six seconds in London where you had almost everybody in... Now those numbers are back to around 500 across London, of people who are thought to be sleeping rough, which is a mix of entrenched rough sleepers who have left hotel accommodation...and new flow... so that's a mix of EEA [European Economic Area] nationals who haven't got settled status, and people who are genuinely NRPF [No Recourse to Public Funds]."**  
(Statutory key informant, the South)

**"...we've provided accommodation to everybody, but they've gone back to the streets for four nights, five nights, during that week, to beg or to socialise or whatever..... Some of these were the most hardened rough sleepers, out sleeping for ten, 15 years... To try and get them in accommodation was bloody**

**difficult...[and] they don't sleep there all of the time, they'll go back to the streets."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Early evidence on the adequacy of support for those housed in emergency accommodation suggests that access to nutritious food and support for existing physical and mental health conditions has been lacking in some areas.<sup>20</sup> Research by Making Every Adult Matter concludes that services which focused on addressing the full range of complex needs beyond homelessness led to better support for individuals facing multiple disadvantage.<sup>21</sup> There was evidence of this variability in support levels in our interviews too, but also that needs-based allocation of this emergency provision was helping to manage the consequences in at least some cases:

**"...so there's staffing on site...They manage the environment, they manage the space, but without a focus on true support, just with a focus on safeguarding. Keeping the meals coming in; making sure the building's safe; providing contact to the allocations team that want to know how many voids you've got and who they can send and what that risk assessment looks like. Really just stripping it back to its bare minimum."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

**"None of the high-need cases are going into these hotels, it's mainly the recent entrants to the streets or the people that have been on the streets a short period of time. The entrenched rough sleepers haven't gone into really any of those... units. Supporting the units are very,**

20 Groundswell (2020) Monitoring the Impact of Covid-19: Fortnightly Homelessness Briefing 2. Online: Groundswell. <https://groundswell.org.uk/coronavirus/>

21 Making Every Adult Matter (2020) *Flexible Responses During the Coronavirus Crisis: Rapid Evidence Gathering*. Online: MEAM. <http://meam.org.uk/2020/06/11/flexible-responses-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

**it's not great, it's really more of a concierge or a security support."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

There was some suggestion that the complexity of multi-tier responsibilities in some city-regions had made swift and effective action more difficult during the pandemic:

**"I think Manchester and Greater Manchester around homelessness is a really confusing picture. It's a bit like the GLA [Greater London Authority] and the boroughs, so where you have an additional tier, who's responsible? Is it Greater Manchester?...Is it Manchester [City Council].... London is a mess because London has the GLA, then it has London councils, now it has a LA Gold<sup>22</sup>."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Interestingly, there seemed to be little use of enforcement interventions to put pressure on people to 'come inside', possibly reflecting less need for such 'hard' social control<sup>23</sup> measures given the high-quality accommodation offers being made in many instances, alongside health fears associated with the pandemic. Where such measures were mentioned, this tended to be on a relatively softly-softly basis:

**"Enforce[ment] has been very light touch, and it's more been about operating alongside the engagement to try and get them in."**  
(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

**"X police have been really brilliant with us. They haven't arrested anybody, they've been assisting us to get people off the streets by telling us where people are sleeping rough, so that's been really, really positive... but when they knew they was accommodated, they went to them and said, 'Look, you've got accommodation to go back to, stop taking the mickey out of the community about funding, etc.'"**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

22 The crisis coordination group for local authorities in London.

23 Johnsen, S, Fitzpatrick, S & Watts, B 2018, 'Homelessness and social control: a typology', *Housing Studies*, 33(7): 1106-1126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2017.1421912>

# Challenges and shortcomings

Key informants were also clear and consistent about what they viewed as the main weaknesses in the crisis response thus far. Top of the list was perceived 'mixed messages' from MHCLG following the initial clarity of the 'Everyone In' letter from MHCLG on 26th March. A subsequent letter sent to councils on 28th May asked that they start planning how to support people to move on from emergency accommodation and stated that local authorities should "use their judgement" in assessing what support they could give those with NRPF.<sup>24</sup> There was also profound disappointment across both statutory and voluntary sectors about a perceived Governmental retreat over 'full cost recovery' for local authorities accommodating people whom they wouldn't normally have a duty to rehouse:

**"We've had a very productive early relationship, which was saying, 'Full-cost recovery. Do what you need to do. Spend what you need to spend, etc., etc.' Only for that to now be clarified as, 'Yes, we've told you to submit to us your costs, but actually we've already paid you the money and it came out in that £1.6 billion to local authorities."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

This was linked to what was viewed as highly ambivalent, and changing, signals about the application of the usual homelessness eligibility and entitlement criteria during the pandemic:

**"...initially it was almost like, 'Ignore priority need, ignore the legal test, it doesn't apply, we have to get everybody in,' and now that's starting to change ....Officially the line is still, 'Get everybody in, it doesn't matter,' so there's a sort of**

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): letter sent on 28 May 2020 to councils about accommodating rough sleepers*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-letter-sent-on-28-may-2020-to-councils-about-accommodating-rough-sleepers>

**tension, I think, and that's where we feel there needs to be a clear message from government now... Government has kind of gone very quiet..."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

Thus there was a sense that Government was now reverting back to a more passive stance, characteristic of the 'Localist' approach that has predominated over the last decade,<sup>25</sup> leaving local authorities to muddle through as best they can:

**"...although there was that very decisive initial response from MCHLG around the 'Everyone In' message, it almost feels now that there's been a step back from national government and very much like, 'Over to your local areas to now do it'... local authorities left to work out what to do with people who ordinarily they wouldn't be accommodating, so largely people with no local connection, people with no recourse to public funds."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

Interviewed in late April till late May, so before the 24th June additional spending announcement,<sup>26</sup> and in the context of this sense of evaporating central Government support, many were concerned about the immediate post-lockdown position for those accommodated under 'Everyone In':

**"Look, what is going to happen when lockdown finishes, because hotels won't be viable, because they'll want to go back into business. They can't go back into the shelter, so what on earth are we going to do."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

Interviewees tended to segment those assisted under 'Everyone In' into three key groups: non-UK nationals who lack access to welfare benefits; UK nationals with low support needs; and UK nationals with high support needs. Greatest concern focussed on the first of these groups:

**"...at least 20 per cent of the cohort have no eligibility for Housing Benefit, so that's a mix of EEA nationals who haven't got settled status, and people who are genuinely NRPF... Politically, it leaves [local authorities] in a very difficult position, because either it's seen to be local authorities who are pushing clients, some of whom are extremely vulnerable, out the door... or we're accommodating them at considerable cost. "**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

**"[Government has said] 'You get on with it, but we're not going to give you any more guidance, there's no more money coming,' and now we've suddenly got hundreds of people who we don't know what to do with because they actually aren't entitled to any public funds."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

In contrast, the prospects for resettling UK nationals with lower-level support needs were viewed much more favourably, so long as current welfare benefit enhancements remained in place:

**"Interestingly, we're seeing, it's easier to get PRS [Private Rented Sector] than it has been... If people are low support need, so they're able to sustain a tenancy, and they have access to housing benefits,**

25 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Watts, B. (2020) *Localism and homelessness: a decade of disaster in England*, Online: LSE British Politics and Policy. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/localism-and-homelessness/>

26 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>

**there are a lot of people who we can move on."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

For the UK nationals with higher needs, concerns centred on viable options that not only fulfilled social distancing requirements, but also met their support needs:

**"...because a lot of the hostel pathway does rely on some shared sleeping space, what can be put in place around that, do we have enough floating support, do we have enough support workers... It's been a huge effort from charities and others in doing the supporting bit, with this huge cohort, and is that going to be sustainable, and even for people who do have HB [Housing Benefit] access, how are we going to make sure that they get the support that they need?"**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Some very unattractive options were being considered in locations where the requirement to 'de-concentrate' congregate facilities was putting severe strain on the supply of temporary accommodation:

**"That's where you get into your church halls and schools and facilities and things. Again, not ideal, not permanent, but provide an immediate step down. I think there's a very clear awareness that we're going to go through multiple phases of transition with this, but that is only going to be possible with increased funding."**

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

Moreover, as was widely noted, even if appropriate step-down housing is found for all those accommodated under 'Everyone In' – which is far from certain at present, notwithstanding the establishment of the new Task Force,<sup>27</sup> and the additional funding announcements noted above<sup>28</sup> – rough sleeping will not thereby be 'ended'. Effective prevention measures will need to be in place to prevent new people coming onto the streets:

**"I think the main weakness has been that... the government have given no indication that they understood in their response that just getting all the people that are now off the streets was going to be enough because obviously people are coming onto the streets all the time."**

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

Another key challenge going forward was an anticipated surge in family homelessness once the evictions hiatus ended (currently scheduled for end August 2020), compounded by the winding down of the COVID-19 Job Retention Scheme:<sup>29</sup>

**"...as we start to release some of the measures of lockdown, then I guess you'll start to then get people evicted, more people in rent arrears, because of the [impacts on] on the economy. That's storing up those family exclusion cases that then suddenly come through in one big glut."**

(Independent stakeholder)

- 27 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Dame Louise Casey to spearhead government taskforce on rough sleeping during pandemic*, Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dame-louise-casey-to-spearhead-government-taskforce-on-rough-sleeping-during-pandemic>
- 28 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>; 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>
- 29 HM Revenue and Customs (2020) *Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme*. Online: HMRC. [www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme)

“...obviously they’re trying to make it so it’s basically impossible to evict anybody at the moment, which we really support, but ... We’re actually anticipating a huge spike in priority need and family homelessness at the end of the lockdown.”

(Statutory stakeholder, the South)

It was also feared that this expected spike in demand may coincide with a contraction in local authorities’ ability to cope, given a context of sharply declining council revenues:

“...we’re going to go into a situation where homelessness is going to increase...more people losing their jobs, more people having a situation where they’ve got nowhere else to go, and what do we do with that cohort, particularly when local government is going to be in itself in a financially reduced position because of business rates.”

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

There was acknowledgment that the crisis imperative had drawn local authorities and their partners away from wider prevention activities, including their duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA):

“...people ...clearly aren’t getting at the moment what they should be under the HRA. I guess because a lot of the advice capacity has been reduced... You can’t get, or much reduced face-to-face contact, so everything that the HRA was trying to do in terms of that front-facing contact has been massively hit by COVID.”

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

“...the biggest losers from all of this are the people who might have been supported through prevention and relief duties in normal circumstances... People who are, perhaps, sofa-surfing or in unsatisfactory, home arrangements.

Hopefully, I think domestic abuse is excluded from that, because I think there’s been a bit of a push around domestic abuse.”

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Nonetheless, some felt that the existence of the HRA had helped enhance the effectiveness of the crisis response towards single homeless people in particular, though others disagreed:

“...those singles, are much more in plain sight, than they ever would have been had there been no HRA. I think that that will have helped.”

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

“I think it [HRA] largely just became irrelevant. There are some [local authorities] who have tried to move everybody through prevention, relief, etc., but a lot of others who have just... found the paperwork just really difficult... It’s actively unhelpful in terms of giving [local authorities] all of this rigmarole when they were just under this huge pressure to get ‘Everyone In!’”

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

# Exiting the COVID-19 Crisis: Future opportunities and 'Building Back Better'

The massive disruption occasioned by the COVID-19 crisis also provides a window to reflect on the shape of homelessness services in the future. One striking point that came to light during the 'Everyone In' initiative was the extent to which dormitory-style accommodation<sup>30</sup> is still used in at least some parts of England. A decisive shift away from these communal forms of sleeping provision was a positive outcome sought by some of those we spoke to, as well as more broadly a direction of travel that encompassed less emphasis on hostels with shared facilities:<sup>31</sup>

30 Dormitory style accommodation includes accommodation offering a basic place to stay at night only with dormitory beds in shared rooms, or other communal homelessness accommodation where people are sharing bedrooms.

31 McMordie, L. (2020) *Why some homeless people prefer sleeping rough to hostels or hotels*, Online: The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/why-some-homeless-people-prefer-sleeping-rough-to-hostels-or-hotels-139414>

**"...is this an opportunity to push more for a Housing First model with really good support and look at shifting away from night shelter, too much overreliance on the hostel system as we know it?"**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

**"We've got this ambition to have nobody living in shared hostels by the end of June ...I think what's likely to happen going forward, in [X local authority], is those shared hostels will not be reused. They will be knocked down and rebuilt, or they will be remodelled to provide self-contained accommodation, probably not hostel-style living."**  
(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

Others feared, however, that the opposite may happen:

**"...we're stuck in a position between what we would like to happen versus what we fear is the reality... so should we be having communal living, for example? Shouldn't every supported accommodation have self-contained units? ...Obviously it's also an opportunity to... look at Housing First, how we can accelerate some of that work. In reality, we know we've got a government that is still very committed to ending rough sleeping, so there is a risk of... [not] moving in the direction we would want. I guess the obvious example being that we'll expand shelter provision... we would argue that is a backwards step."**  
(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the South)

Of relevance to these concerns, Sadiq Khan has committed £40million to remodelling hostels and refuges in London into self-contained units,<sup>32</sup> albeit that these units will presumably remain congregated together in specific buildings, rather than offering the dispersed accommodation in ordinary communities associated with Housing First.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the funding brought forward to provide 6,000 new 'supported housing' units for ex-rough sleepers,<sup>34</sup> whilst welcome, makes no explicit reference to Housing First-style provision, though there are indications that this could be in scope.<sup>35</sup>

Some interviewees hoped that the acute support needs of the most vulnerable people sleeping rough would be recognised as a primarily a social care, rather than housing, responsibility:

**"A lot of people who are rough sleeping, have not been getting services from adult social care, when arguably they should. ... So adult social care do need to step up now... In an ideal world [this] would be a... catalyst ...to better partnership working moving forward between hospitals, social care and homelessness services."**  
(Independent stakeholder)

Encouragingly, in some locations, it was reported that much closer relationships had been forged between the homelessness sector and local Public Health and NHS colleagues during the COVID-19 crisis:

- 32 Mayor of London (2020) *Mayor offers funding to make homeless hostels Covid19 safe*, Online: Greater London Authority. <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayor-offers-funding-to-make-hostels-covid-safe>
- 33 Mackie, P., Johnsen, S., Wood, J. (2017) *Ending Rough Sleeping: What Works? An International Evidence Review*, London: Crisis. [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238368/ending\\_rough\\_sleeping\\_what\\_works\\_2017.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238368/ending_rough_sleeping_what_works_2017.pdf)
- 34 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>
- 35 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>

"I think one of the strengths is the fact that health have been working with us, so ...it's been fantastic in terms of being able to get people full health assessments... working with public health and with the NHS directly I think has been fantastic, and sets the ground for housing and health to come together much more."

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the South)

But other interviewees close to the frontline sounded a very pessimistic note:

"The opportunity for positive impacts are minimal... This over-obsession with the NHS frontline, I think, is in some way targeted and signalling that the NHS might come out of this better funded and more valued, but no other areas of public service will."

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

Another opportunity identified by a range of stakeholders was the chance to challenge public perceptions about the link between begging and rough sleeping, and in so doing helpfully disrupt damaging street lifestyles:

"It's the fact that you can't get any money on the street anyway [during lockdown]...It's the fact the public are not doing stupid things which perpetuate it... People who would never take scripts, for example, because they didn't have to, because they were earning enough money to have their substance of choice, are now taking scripts. So there are good things that have happened as a result of this."

(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

"If we're talking about opportunities going forwards... there should be a deal - Housing First, support, pathways out - for anyone that has to sleep rough. We have to also use this as the opportunity to have a more honest conversation about the difference between begging on the streets and street activity, and rough sleeping. That's not to say there aren't some people begging on the streets and street activity who are rough sleeping, but they are [only a] proportion of those who are engaged in street activity."

(Independent stakeholder)

Linked with this was the potential opportunity to overcome the difficulties created in many city centres by well-meaning but naïve 'pop up' groups providing food:

"...when the decision to ask all of the groups that do soup runs and provide food in town to close - which came from the council and the police... mainly on a public health basis... that seemed to correlate as well [with] the mixing up of homelessness and begging. Groups of people coming together and then leading, perhaps, what's called street lifestyles... that's gone...it's looking for that opportunity...to support people in their homes and not make people come into the middle of town and be served soup by people in yellow jackets and high-viz."

(Statutory sector stakeholder, the North)

The final word on opportunities to 'build back better' should go perhaps to this exasperated, long-term service provider whose comments captured several key themes on what we know 'works'<sup>36</sup> in addressing rough sleeping, as illuminated and reinforced by the COVID-19 experience, namely: firm

36 Mackie, P., Johnsen, S., Wood, J. (2017) *Ending Rough Sleeping: What Works? An International Evidence Review*, London: Crisis. [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238368/ending\\_rough\\_sleeping\\_what\\_works\\_2017.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238368/ending_rough_sleeping_what_works_2017.pdf)

leadership by central government;<sup>37</sup> appropriate levels of funding and guidance to local government, health and third sector partners to enable effective implementation; an adequate welfare safety net; and a decent and affordable offer of accommodation, such that the rest of us might be willing to live in it too:

**“Solving homeless is not complicated... we can see that providing people with a stable, clean, warm accommodation makes a massive contribution to helping people then progress out of homelessness. The evidence is there. The only question then is, is whether national government are prepared to pay for it. ...If national government don't pay for it, the local community will pay for it, but in the most horrible way.”**  
(Voluntary sector stakeholder, the North)

37 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Watts, B. (2020) *Localism and homelessness: a decade of disaster in England*, Online: LSE British Politics and Policy. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/localism-and-homelessness/>

# Conclusions

These reflections on COVID-19 and homelessness represent a snapshot in time, mid crisis, in the context of an unfolding policy picture and successive funding announcements. But they give a contemporaneous flavour of the pressures, and the hopes, that senior stakeholder across the statutory and voluntary sectors, and in different parts of England, felt while grappling with this unprecedented public health emergency. Pride, even amazement, at the swift and effective efforts to get 'Everyone In', is balanced against disappointment at the subsequent perceived backtracking by Government on promises to fully fund an inclusive approach. Hopes of 'building back better', by holding the line on 'no return to the streets', and making a decisive break away from communal and inappropriate forms of homelessness provision, was accompanied by acute concern about a potential 'spike' in family homelessness in particular.

In the main *Homelessness Monitor England 2020* report published later in the year we will return to these themes, updating experiences as the post-COVID-19 exit strategy unfolds, and incorporating statistical analysis and the perspectives of local authorities, alongside key informant testimony, on the homelessness impacts of this most extraordinary and harrowing of years. The repercussions for homeless people, both positive and negative, will be felt for many years to come.



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