

A photograph of a person sleeping on a sidewalk in front of a brick wall covered in graffiti. The person is lying on their side, wrapped in a dark blue blanket. The graffiti on the wall includes large, stylized letters and abstract shapes in various colors like purple, black, and white. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an urban environment at night or in low light.

Turned Away

The treatment of single homeless
people by local authority
homelessness services in England

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Executive Summary

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. Our purpose is to end homelessness.

Homelessness is devastating, leaving people vulnerable and isolated. We believe everyone deserves a place to call home and the chance to live a fulfilled and active life.

Crisis helps people rebuild their lives through housing, health, education and employment services. We work with thousands of homeless people across the UK and have ambitious plans to work with many more.

We are also determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and to change the way society and government thinks and acts towards homeless people

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Cover image posed by model. Image: Sam Mellish

Executive summary

Key points

- Eight aspiring actors with previous experiences of homelessness mystery shopped 16 local authorities to examine the quality of advice and assistance they provide to single homeless people
- Each mystery shopper took the role of a particular character to explain why they needed help with their housing. These were based around one of four characters which were drawn from real life situations that may cause an individual to become homeless: someone who has been forced to sleep rough after losing their job, a young person who had been thrown out of the family home, a victim of domestic violence, and a very vulnerable person with learning difficulties
- In 37 out of the 87 visits, local authorities made arrangements to accommodate mystery shoppers that evening, either through the provision of emergency accommodation or because they had negotiated for them to return to their previous address
- In the remaining 50 visits, most of which were at London boroughs, they received inadequate or insufficient help. It was common for mystery shoppers to simply be signposted to written information about renting privately or even turned away without any help or the opportunity to speak to a Housing Advisor
- Elsewhere in England, and one borough in London, mystery shoppers always saw a Housing Advisor and were generally given more time to discuss their circumstances. Staff were also more proactive in trying to find options for mystery shoppers and consistently demonstrated a greater degree of empathy
- In a significant number of visits (29) mystery shoppers did not receive an assessment and were not given the opportunity to make a homelessness application
- On a number of occasions, mystery shoppers – some of whom played very vulnerable characters – were denied any type of help until they could prove that they were homeless and eligible for assistance, whilst the local authorities in question made no effort to make inquiries themselves or provide temporary accommodation in the interim
- A number of factors had a marked impact on mystery shoppers' experiences of the visits: lack of privacy, interactions with staff, the office environment, and waiting times – all had a profound impact and often compounded feelings of anxiety, stigma and shame
- The regional disparity in the results suggests housing pressures in London are having a significant effect, and visible and hidden forms of homelessness have risen significantly in recent years. However, there were some examples of better performance in London suggesting that the culture, training and resources in Housing Options and homelessness services is also playing a role
- Homelessness is devastating and should not happen to anyone and a strong safety net to provide meaningful assistance is therefore crucial. This research has highlighted that too many homeless people are turned away from help. The consequences of local authorities failing to intervene early can be devastating and can trap people in homelessness for a far longer time – at great personal cost to the individual and huge expense to the public purse

Background

Between February and April 2014 Crisis mystery shopped the Housing Options and homelessness services of 16 local authorities across England to examine the quality of advice and assistance provided to single homeless people (i.e. those without dependent children). Eight mystery shoppers made a total of 87 visits to 16 local authorities across England – 7 in London and 9 in the South East, Midlands and North of England.

The project was undertaken by Crisis researchers in close collaboration with a group of aspiring actors who were currently engaging with Crisis or Cardboard Citizens. They had all previously been homeless and approached a local authority for help. Consequently they were keen to take part in the research to help highlight the experiences of people who had fallen through the safety net and hope the project will improve the support being offered. The findings were therefore captured through the eyes of individuals who had similar life experiences to those of real applicants, and provide a good snapshot of the treatment single homeless people receive from local authorities.

The mystery shoppers were heavily involved in the development of the characters they played throughout the project, and in most cases had some similarities to their own life experiences. The four characters were developed to appear as realistic as possible and covered a range of housing needs, personal circumstances and support needs.

Local authorities are crucial in preventing and alleviating homelessness and have a duty to provide everyone who approaches for help with up-to-date advice and information that is appropriate to their needs. However Crisis has long been concerned that single homeless people are being failed by the current homelessness legislation because the way it is implemented means that too often homeless people are not getting the help they require.

Seeking help from the local authority

The effectiveness of the initial contact between local authorities and people seeking help is an important factor in determining the quality of information they receive, what action follows and what outcome is achieved. It is crucial that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is adequately assessed so that opportunities to solve or prevent homelessness are not missed.

At the majority of visits (58 out of 87) mystery shoppers received a brief initial interview with customer services staff, followed by an in-depth assessment with a Housing Advisor. All local authorities outside the capital assessed mystery shoppers in this way, but in London this was significantly less common - LA4¹ was the only local authority that ensured all applicants received an in-depth assessment with a Housing Advisor.

In 29 visits, gatekeeping practices prevented mystery shoppers from receiving an adequate assessment. This was because staff told them one of two things: that they could not see a Housing Advisor because they were not in priority need, or that they would not receive an assessment until they could prove that they were homeless and eligible for assistance. (It is also worth noting that all the mystery shoppers were British born and English was their first language.)

Five out of the seven London boroughs turned mystery shoppers away until they could supply proof of identity and other paperwork, despite the fact their characters had nowhere to stay that night.

“I was told that if I did not have a letter from my dad saying that I was homeless they would not proceed with an interview or provide me with information and assistance as I could not prove I was homeless.”
Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA7

¹ Throughout this report, local authorities are referred to as LA1 through to LA16.

The brevity of these visits meant they did not have an opportunity to discuss their circumstances and support needs. In some cases their initial interviews – the only contact they had with staff – lasted between just five and ten minutes. Consequently only a very superficial assessment of people's circumstances and support needs took place and mystery shoppers felt that the focus of their conversations had been on trying to demonstrate that they did not have a priority need for assistance rather than focusing on what could be done to help them.

"I feel angry as I was not questioned more about my circumstances. How can they make decisions if they don't know the full story?"

Learning difficulties (male) shopper, LA1

Even where mystery shoppers received a comprehensive assessment of their circumstances it is worth noting that they all found the process extremely confusing. Staff rarely explained how the process worked and how decisions would be taken or what options were available to them.

The majority of mystery shoppers were not told about the opportunity to make a homelessness application (despite the fact the characters they played were street or hidden homeless). In only 3 out of 87 visits (all at LA13), were mystery shoppers given a Section 184 notification, confirming the outcome of their homelessness application, the reasons for the decision, and how to appeal the decision. It is also good practice to provide applicants with a summary of what happened and what should happen next, but only a minority of local authorities (5 out of 16) did this.

Regardless of whether they got to see a Housing Advisor, mystery shoppers often had to wait for long periods of time to speak to someone. These waiting times varied considerably from ten minutes to three hours. Where the waiting times were exceptionally

long this created anxiety, particularly as in most cases no indication was given of how long they would have to wait. Mystery shoppers rarely received apologies about long waiting times and they saw this as a sign that local authority staff thought that their time was somehow less valuable than their own. It was also particularly frustrating and unsettling if after waiting for long periods of time they were then only seen for a short time.

All initial interviews were conducted at reception desks which were situated in full view and hearing range of the waiting area where other applicants were waiting to be seen and whilst people either side of them were also being interviewed. This also caused mystery shoppers to feel unsettled and compounded feelings of anxiety and shame.

"It was embarrassing having to explain everything in front of all the other waiting people and then be told that I could not get any help. It was not nice. The place was small and cramped... Felt claustrophobic. There was no privacy."

Young person (male) shopper, LA7

In addition, mystery shoppers reflected on how this would negatively impact on real applicants' ability to explain their circumstances, which in turn would affect the outcome of the visit.

Partly because of their own experiences of seeking help from local authorities when they were homeless, mystery shoppers had low expectations of how staff would treat them and in the majority of visits they reported that staff had done 'ok'. However, on a number of visits mystery shoppers described them as 'robotic' and 'emotionless'.

"I was heartbroken, if I actually... again from my personal experience, if I got treated like that then I probably would have become very suicidal or depressed, because these are the people that are supposed to help you and they could see

I was worked up... They had no empathy whatsoever."

Domestic violence (female) shopper, LA1

Mystery shoppers found this lack of empathy deeply upsetting, and often talked about feeling treated 'like a number' and not as a person. It is worth emphasising, however, that mystery shoppers were much less likely to report negative experiences in this respect outside the capital. The only exception to this rule was a single local authority where interactions with staff were consistently better.

Where mystery shoppers felt they had been 'treated well' this lessened the impact of other negative elements of the visit such as the lack of privacy or waiting times. Examples of this included where mystery shoppers felt staff had been non-judgemental and empathetic to their circumstances.

"I felt safe in her hands... If I was [a real case], I'd actually have a lot of faith in her to actually look after me. When I was going, she goes, 'look after yourself George and get back to me as soon as you can'. I said, 'thank you, you're very kind', and she goes, 'no, no, no that's my job'."

Learning difficulties (male) shopper, LA4

Finally, the physical layout and atmosphere of the office also influenced how at ease mystery shoppers felt about the visits. It is important that service users' views are taken into account in the design of public spaces because the layout and how it is used is more likely to have an impact on groups that experience exclusion in other walks of life.² The use of surveillance techniques in local authority offices is a good example of this: the presence of security guards and CCTV cameras was

common, but instead of making mystery shoppers feel safe, this often had the opposite effect.

"I figured out that they had 23 CCTV cameras pointing at me [whilst in the queue for reception] which I thought was a bit astonishing, where am I? Is this a prison?"

Domestic violence (female) shopper, LA3

Security guards were present at 12 of the 16 local authorities visited, and were heavily used in London where they featured in all but one of the seven boroughs. At some visits mystery shoppers noted that they had been friendly and helpful in directing them to the correct queue, however it was also sometimes the case that they were intimidating.

Outcomes of the visits

It is important that local authorities meet their duties to provide meaningful advice and assistance to prevent individuals from entering a downward spiral of homelessness and the associated impacts on wellbeing, which are even more difficult and costly to treat. The Code of Guidance makes clear that everyone should receive a proper assessment of their housing needs and information about where they are likely to find suitable accommodation.³ All mystery shoppers required urgent support – none of the characters they were playing had a place to stay that evening.

In 37 visits mystery shoppers received meaningful support and would have been accommodated that evening. This was either because emergency accommodation was arranged (though the mystery shopping methodology does not allow for the whole service to be assessed⁴), or because local authorities used mediation to attempt to resolve the relationship breakdown between family members or friends. Mediation happened in a minority of cases (10) but meant that mystery shoppers could return to the property they had last been staying at until longer-term accommodation could be arranged.

At 20 of these visits mystery shoppers were deemed to be in priority need. Although it should be noted that mystery shoppers who were deemed to be in priority need by some local authorities were not when they visited others, demonstrating inconsistency of approach across the country.

In the remaining 50 visits mystery shoppers received limited support making it difficult for them to improve their situation. In 29 of these visits, gatekeeping practices prevented mystery shoppers from receiving adequate assessments. Generally they were told one of two things: that they could not see a Housing Advisor because they were not in priority need, or that the assessment could not take place until sufficient proof of identity and other paperwork was submitted, i.e. until they could prove that they were homeless and eligible for assistance.

“She wished me luck... but they just can’t help a single homeless man with no mental health or physical needs.”

Rough sleeper (male) shopper, LA11

“When I asked where I would sleep tonight she explained that under the legalisation they had no duty to help me as a single young person...”

Young person (male) shopper, LA13

The most common type of help mystery shoppers received was written information, though a minority of local authorities (5 out of 16) provided information packs. These could be useful if staff spent time talking mystery shoppers through the contents such as explaining the process of finding a tenancy in the private rented sector and the support available to do this which was more likely to happen during interviews with Housing Advisors outside London. However, it was more often the case that staff did not actively work to achieve an outcome for the mystery shoppers and relied on signposting as well as individuals achieving the outcome for themselves.⁵ Mystery shoppers were typically

³ DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG.

⁴ It is important to note that a growing number of statutory homeless families are living in temporary accommodation: 59,710 according to the most recent statistics, a 5-year high. Recent analyses by Shelter (2014) shows that over one in three statutory homelessness families in London have been stuck in temporary housing for two years or more (see http://england.shelter.org.uk/news/august_2014/over_1_in_3_homeless_families_in_london_stuck_in_temporary_housing_for_more_than_2_years). In London a growing number of boroughs will house people ‘out of borough’, away from their social networks – some as far as Birmingham, Hastings and Manchester. See also Peaker, G. (2014) “The way we live now.” *Nearly Legal*, 23 September 2014. <http://nearlylegal.co.uk/blog/2014/09/way-live-now/>

⁵ Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry*. Glasgow: SRH. Available from: www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Housing%20Options%20Report%20-%20Web%20Version.pdf

signposted to third sector organisations, e.g. day centres, shelters, hostels or food banks. Generally speaking, staff would just say X or Y organisation/place ‘may be able to help’ and hand out some minimal and generic information about it.

The level of information, advice and assistance provided also varied considerably both between and within local authorities. The mystery shoppers expressed concern at the fact that there does not appear to be an agreed standard of service with quality measures in place.

In addition, the advice and support the mystery shoppers received was often too generic to be in any way useful. For instance, the mystery shoppers playing the rough sleeper character were often just advised to go to the Job Centre and start claiming housing benefit before looking for accommodation on websites such as Gumtree and Rightmove. Furthermore, the advice mystery shoppers received was not always correct. For instance, the mystery shoppers playing the domestic violence characters had not gone to their nearest local authority because they wanted to leave the area in which their violent ex-partner or stepdad was living. The Code of Guidance makes clear that where an applicant is at risk of violence they should be able to access help in a different area. Despite this, on some visits they were pushed back to the authority they had most recently been residing in.

All mystery shoppers reported better outcomes in the visits outside the capital, though it is worth emphasising that this view was driven by how negative their experiences had been in six out of seven London boroughs, rather than the fact that the outcomes of the visits had been significantly better elsewhere. Also crucial in this respect were their interactions with staff and the opportunity to see a Housing Advisor.

“... with the little bits of information she did help me. I left there with some hope.”
Rough sleeper (male) shopper, LA8

Elsewhere in England and at LA4 in London staff showed greater empathy and were often more proactive, e.g. trying to use mediation to resolve relationship breakdown, securing hostel places, or making referrals to outreach teams. By and large, the support mystery shoppers received was limited to a narrow range of options, which generally focused on signposting, finding accommodation in the private rented sector and returning to their previous address.

Staff in London boroughs relied more heavily on signposting and on applicants achieving outcomes for themselves – no matter how unlikely this would be.

Conclusions

The characters played by the mystery shoppers were in crisis situations and urgently needed help. Yet in over half of the visits local authorities turned them away with little or no support, therefore leaving them in very vulnerable situations and the prospect of sleeping on the streets. The consequences of local authorities failing to intervene early can be devastating and can trap people in homelessness for a far longer time – contributing significantly to the worsening or development of support needs and forcing homeless people to engage in risk-taking behaviours to survive.⁶ It also discourages some people from seeking help from their local authority again or only once their situation has significantly deteriorated (making it a lot harder – and more costly – to support them to move out of homelessness longer term).

There was an inconsistency in the treatment of mystery shoppers both within and between local authorities. The assistance provided to those who were considered to have a priority need was significantly better, and how mystery shoppers were assessed had a significant impact on the outcome of their visit. Where they were able to have a detailed discussion about their circumstances with a Housing Advisor, the help they received was more meaningful and they were more likely to feel that they had been treated with empathy. However, even outside London the assistance was fairly limited and commonly focused on signposting to information about how to access privately rented accommodation.

Also of concern were the numerous examples where local authorities had not followed the legislation and the Homeless Code of Guidance correctly. Mystery shoppers often had to prove they were entitled to support

by providing various documents, rather than the local authorities taking steps to make inquiries themselves and provide temporary accommodation in the interim. Moreover, although everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness in the next 28 days is entitled to make a homelessness application, only a minority of mystery shoppers were given the opportunity to do so.

The regional disparity in the results suggests that housing pressures in London are playing a crucial underlying role. Both visible and hidden forms of homelessness have risen significantly in London over recent years, whereas elsewhere in England the picture is more mixed. The use of temporary accommodation and ‘out of district’ placements is also concentrated in London.⁷ Yet the fact that there were some examples of better performance in London implies other factors – such as culture, training and resources – may also be playing a role.

Homelessness is devastating and a strong safety net to provide meaningful assistance is therefore crucial. While local authorities themselves can do much to improve their individual responses to homeless people, central Government must improve the framework of legislation, oversight and resourcing that stands in the way of people getting the help they need.

⁶ The result is higher costs to the public purse as it often drives people, for instance, to attend accident and emergency services or to commit crime in an effort to seek shelter. See Reeve, K. (2011) *The hidden truth about homelessness*. London: Crisis, CRESR.

⁷ See S. Fitzpatrick, et al (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013*. London: Crisis and JRF.

Recommendations

For local authorities

1. All homeless people should receive a basic level of customer service

People who approach Housing Options and homelessness services should be listened to and treated with courtesy, respect and due sensitivity. Rather than attempting to establish that people are not eligible for assistance, all frontline staff should seek to understand applicants' circumstances and focus on addressing their housing need.

Consideration should be given to the physical environment of Housing Options and homelessness services to ensure they are not overly hostile to visitors. Any use of technology in the assessment process must not create barriers to vulnerable people accessing help.

Local authorities should be engaged with applicants to better understand their experiences of Housing Options and homelessness services and how these could be improved.

2. Statutory duties under the homelessness legislation must be fulfilled

All people who approach their local authority as homeless must be given the opportunity to make a homelessness application and should have the process clearly explained to them. It is the local authority's responsibility to carry out adequate investigations to ascertain whether an applicant is owed the main homelessness duty, the burden of proof should not sit with the applicant.

All homeless households, whether or not they are deemed to have a priority need must be provided with meaningful advice and assistance.

3. Better advice and assistance must be provided

The level and standard of advice and assistance provided needs vast improvement. Homeless people should always be allowed to see a Housing Advisor who must be sufficiently trained to make an assessment of someone's situation and provide them with meaningful advice and assistance. Customer service staff and Housing Advisors 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 applicants with agencies that can provide accurate information. There should be better links with other local authority departments and external agencies.

Local authorities should learn from examples of best practice and provide a minimum standard of information, advice and assistance to people in housing need.

Any written information provided must be up-to-date, relevant and detailed enough to really help those in housing need.

All applicants should be provided with a letter summarising the outcome of their visit, including the result of any homelessness application and how it can be appealed; what advice they have been given and next steps to be taken by them and the authority.

For the Government

1. The existing legislation should be properly enforced

The Government must monitor the performance of local authorities by introducing an inspection regime to ensure that they are complying with the homelessness legislation.

2. Government should improve the collection of data around homelessness

Authorities should be required to record and provide information on all those who approach them as homeless as well as the outcomes of these visits.

3. Adequate funding must be made available for local authorities to work with all homeless people

The Government should review funding to local authorities to ensure that homelessness services are adequately funded and the distribution of the preventing homelessness grant should be linked to levels of need.

4. The support given to single people under the homelessness legislation in England should be reviewed so that no one is forced to sleep rough and so all homeless people get the help they need

Ultimately Crisis believes that many of the problems our mystery shoppers faced stem from the current legislation, which causes confusion and creates barriers to homeless people accessing help.

The law is being used by some authorities as a way of gatekeeping, with staff trying to prove people are *not* in priority need and *not* eligible for the main homelessness duty rather than focussing on assisting them to resolve their housing need. This is either due to a lack of understanding or a culture which encourages staff to turn away all those who do not immediately appear to be in priority need.

It is clear that the current law and its application is not enabling single homeless people get the help they need. We therefore believe the support given to single people under the homelessness legislation must be comprehensively reviewed. The review should focus on the

current assistance available to non-priority homeless people and the lessons that can be learnt from the diverging legislative frameworks in Scotland and Wales.



Homeless people seeking help from their councils are being turned away with no choice but to sleep on the streets.

This report is in support of the Crisis No One Turned Away campaign, which calls for the Government to review the law so that no one is forced to sleep rough.

www.crisis.org.uk/nooneturnedaway

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Homelessness ends here