**Crisis submission to the Centre for Social Justice roundtable: ‘Next steps for Universal Support in Universal Credit’**

*April 2016*

Crisis is pleased to submit a written response in advance of the Centre for Social Justice roundtable ‘Next steps for Universal Support in Universal Credit’ on Tuesday 19 April.

We believe Universal Support provides a useful opportunity for Government to work across departments to support Universal Credit claimants with complex barriers to work. Crisis has considerable expertise in supporting people with current or past experience of homelessness into employment. Crisis Skylight centres offer employment services and learning opportunities embedded within a holistic model that offers support across a whole range of issues, including support to address housing need. In 2015 we supported 557 people into work through this model, giving our employment services a success rate of 28 per cent.

This response focuses on question 3, where we have the most relevant expertise.

**3. Should the successor to the *Universal Support Delivered Locally* trials expand the current approach to help identify and tackle additional complex personal barriers to employment?**

* **Barriers to work might include:**
  + **Addiction;**
  + **Educational failure;**
  + **Mental ill-health;**
  + **English language skills;**
  + **Homelessness and insecure or unsuitable housing;**
  + **Complex personal relationships/ relationship instability;**
  + **Any other similar barriers.**

Homeless people and those at risk of homelessness have an overwhelming motivation to work, despite them having high support needs; a recent report commissioned by Crisis found that 88 per cent said they wanted a job now or in the future.[[1]](#footnote-1) However very few are in work. Just two per cent of Crisis’ clients are in full time work and five per cent are in part time work.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Crisis believes that, for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness to be effectively supported into work, support must be provided to address their housing need. Without such support, housing need will continue to act as a barrier to finding and sustaining work. Universal Support may offer a useful framework through which to deliver such wrap-around support.

Crisis wishes to see support provided to address all forms of homelessness, not just rough sleeping, as well as to those at risk of losing their accommodation. This should include people living in hostels, supported housing projects, shelters or refuges, as well as those sleeping on friends’ or family’s floors, squatting or living in Temporary Accommodation.

Crisis would also support proposals to address other barriers to work through Universal Support that relate to or are exacerbated by homelessness, including mental ill health, low skills and substance misuse. 30 per cent of Crisis clients in 2012/13 had experience of poor mental health and 27 per cent had a history of drug or alcohol issues.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is important that such support is delivered holistically, where possible, with joined up working between multiple agencies– supported by data sharing agreements– where they are commissioned to provide specialist support to the same individual.

**If so, what might be an appropriate and effective way to identify and engage claimants through Universal Credit with regards to each barrier you deem appropriate?**

Crisis would wish to see homelessness incorporated into an official assessment framework, used by Jobcentre Plus on day one of an individual’s claim, so that housing needs are addressed as quickly as possible. This will require regular reviews to ensure that people’s support needs are met as they change over time.

Such an assessment process will be reliant on highly trained assessors who are able to recognise vulnerability and encourage disclosure. Assessors should undertake specific training in order to develop the skills needed to identify housing support requirements. Not all jobseekers are able or willing to reveal their housing situation and many may not self-identify as homeless if they are not sleeping rough. People may also be reluctant to disclose their situation due to the stigma associated with homelessness and a lack of trust in officials.

It’s important that third parties can also make referrals to Universal Support where they identify that a claimant has particular support needs, including voluntary agencies that are already working with the individual. Claimants themselves should be informed upfront of the support available through Universal Support in the local area, and have the option of taking this up voluntarily if they feel they may benefit from it.

**Once identified, what might be an appropriate service for claimants to help them overcome such challenges?**

Crisis believes the support provided must involve more than simply signposting participants to existing statutory support, given that local authorities have few legal duties towards single homeless people. Most single homeless people are not considered to be a ‘priority’ in England, meaning that their council has no legal duty to find them housing. Mystery shopping research conducted by Crisis found that in 29 visits out of 87, single people presenting to their council as homeless were simply turned away without any help or the opportunity to speak to a housing advisor.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Universal Support must therefore include support to access and sustain accommodation, as well as prevention work for those at risk of homelessness. This might include support with rent deposits or bond guarantees, help finding accommodation, pre-tenancy training and wrap-around support to maintain a tenancy. Local authorities should be responsible for mapping what support exists in the local area and commissioning support on that basis*.* Likely partners include voluntary organisations working with homeless people, housing associations and private rented sector access schemes.

Between 2010 and 2014 Crisis received funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government to support access schemes to help single homeless people find and sustain good quality accommodation in the private rented sector. Such access schemes not only provide help with deposits to access accommodation but also wrap-around support to find accommodation and sustain a tenancy. The programme created over 8,000 tenancies, with 90 per cent of tenancies sustained for six months or more.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Crisis believes the Government should continue to provide funding for such schemes and should underwrite a national rent deposit guarantee scheme to help secure accommodation for homeless people in place of a cash deposit. Some of this funding could be channelled through Universal Support to ensure that Universal Credit claimants who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can be supported to rebuild their lives and make progress towards the labour market.

Crisis believes there is a role for local authority homelessness and housing options teams in delivering support as part of the Universal Support framework, but this requires a change to the law in order for the support available for single, homeless people to be meaningful. Crisis is calling on the Government to place a much stronger duty on local authorities in England to help to prevent homelessness, similar to the prevention duty introduced in Wales in 2015.

As outlined above, Crisis believes it is important that the Universal Support framework is holistic and provides wrap-around support for those with multiple, complex barriers to work. Local authorities should look to specialist delivery partners such as specialist drug and alcohol or specialist mental health services, including those that work with particular client groups. This is also a useful opportunity for local authorities to better integrate a range of services that they are responsible for delivering and/ or commissioning.

It’s vital that claimants have a central point of contact who is accountable for them accessing the range of support on offer and managing their journey towards work. Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches are well placed to manage this journey, but this will require adequate training to ensure they are equipped to support the most vulnerable. It’s also important that this does not create perverse incentives, given that Work Coaches are also responsible for administering the conditionality and sanctions regime. In order for a broader model of Universal Support to be effective, claimants must not be threatened with financial sanctions if they do not engage with the support offered.

**What might be the cost implications of such services?**

The cost savings of preventing homelessness are likely to significantly outweigh any upfront costs of support. Research commissioned by Crisis has found that tackling homelessness early could save the Government between £3,000 and £18,000 for every person helped.[[6]](#footnote-6)

While Crisis believes that more investment is needed upfront for homelessness prevention, there is funding available which could be drawn on to deliver this model through Universal Support. This includes the Homelessness Prevention Grant, which has been recently protected, and Discretionary Housing Payments. We believe these funding streams could be used more efficiently end effectively if combined into an integrated model, where possible and at the discretion of local authorities.

**How might the impact of interventions be best measured? What would ‘success’ look like?**

Success should be measured according to movement into work amongst those identified as being homeless or at risk of homelessness, as well as by movement into accommodation and tenancy sustainment, given that these will be significant milestones on the journey towards employment.

In order for this to be accurately measured for those engaging with Jobcentre Plus only, and not receiving more intensive support from commissioned support such as the Work and Health Programme, it will be necessary for the Department for Work and Pensions to collect data on movement into work amongst this cohort and monitor Jobcentre Plus performance against this data.

**For further information, please contact:**

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2. Pleace, N. & Bretherton, J. (2014) [*Crisis Skylight, An Evaluation: Year One Interim Report*](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/SkylightEvaluation_FINAL_email.pdf)*.* London: Crisis [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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