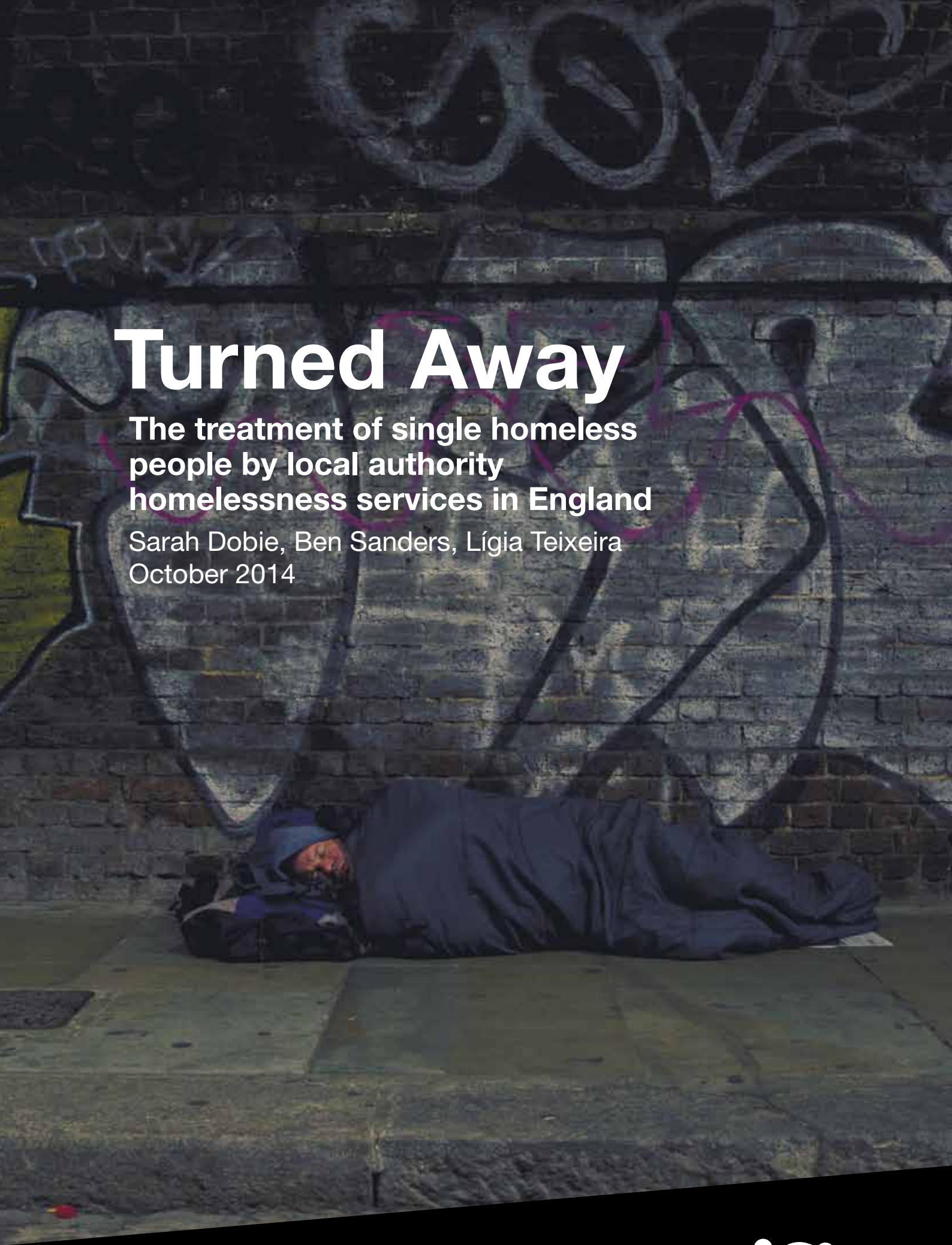

Turned Away

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

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Crisis

Contents

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Foreword

Homelessness is devastating. Here at Crisis we see the effects every day – problems with mental and physical health, ruined confidence and social isolation. Put simply, the experience shatters lives, and it takes a lot of time and work to put the pieces back together. It would be far better – and more cost-effective for the public purse – if no one ever had to go through it in the first place.

Yet the shocking truth is that even in the 21st century, in one of the richest countries in the world, homeless people who ask their local authorities for help are being turned away to sleep on the streets – cold, desperate and forgotten. This is nothing short of a scandal.

Turned Away gets to the very heart of the problem by investigating the help local authorities offer to single homeless people. Mystery shoppers with experience of homelessness visited 16 local authorities across England, each presenting with a typical homeless scenario informed by their past experience.

The resulting report offers a powerful insight into the problems people face when approaching their local authority. It shows that too many homeless people get little or no help because they are not deemed to be in 'priority need' – meaning the local authority has no legal duty to house them. In many cases even those with learning difficulties or victims of domestic violence are being turned away without help.

This is a long-standing issue in England. In 1977 the UK homelessness legislation was a major step forward, but it did little for single homeless people. Local authorities now have a legal duty to house families, but it is much harder for single people, who only qualify for housing if they are particularly 'vulnerable'. In practice this is incredibly difficult to prove, as this report clearly shows.

At Crisis we believe that everyone deserves a second chance, yet too often the door is slammed in people's faces, leaving them with nowhere else to turn.

We hope this report will be a spur to action. There are important lessons here for local authorities, but we need central Government to back them up – first by ensuring the legislation is properly enforced, and second by reviewing funding to ensure all councils are able to run effective homelessness prevention services.

Yet as vital as it is to spread best practice, this report shows that more far-reaching change is needed if we are to fix England's approach to homelessness.

That is why we are calling on all political parties to make a manifesto commitment to review the law on homelessness. Scotland and Wales have already taken steps to change the law and expand housing help for homeless people. It is time that England followed suit.

In this day and age, no one should be abandoned to the streets.

Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Crisis

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 Adviser
- Elsewhere in England, and one borough in London, mystery shoppers always saw a Housing Adviser 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; 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

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The aim of this research was to examine the quality of advice and assistance provided to single homeless people by local authorities' Housing Options and homelessness services in England. In order to achieve this, up to eight mystery shoppers with previous experience of homelessness visited 16 local authorities, seven in London and nine across the rest of England.

Local authorities are crucial in preventing and alleviating homelessness and therefore provide an important safety net for some of the most vulnerable people in society. However, almost 40 years since the homelessness legislation was first introduced in 1977, single homelessness remains a long-standing and persistent issue in England. Crisis has long been concerned that single homeless people (i.e. those without dependent children) are being failed by the current homelessness legislation which does not provide most single homeless people with rights to housing, and has also sought to highlight that the way it is implemented means that too often homeless people are not getting the help they need. It is hoped that this report will add to the weight of evidence that suggests homeless people are being regularly turned away from local authorities without adequate assistance in order to improve their situation and may consequently be forced to sleep on the streets, 'sofa surf' or live in squats in order to survive.[1]

Preceding this research was *No One's Priority,*[2] a similar project commissioned by Crisis in 2009, where five London boroughs were mystery shopped. We found that the standard of customer service and advice was poor, that 'gatekeeping' by customer services staff was common, and that the legislation was interpreted in a way that deterred mystery shoppers from making homelessness applications. Five years on Crisis wanted to find out whether the performance of local authorities had improved, and extend the project to cover a number of different areas in England in order to examine if there were any regional differences. The research took place during a particularly challenging period for local authorities and their homelessness and housing services, which are facing an increase in demand amid diminishing resources.[3]

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 all had previously been homeless and approached a local authority for help. As a result 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.

1 Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry*. Glasgow: SHR; Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis; Reeve, K., Casey R., and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless women: still being failed yet surviving to survive*. London: Crisis; Anderson, I. and Thomson, S. (2005) *More priority needed: The impact of legislative change on young people's access to housing and support*. London: Shelter and the University of Stirling.

2 Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis.

3 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. and Watts, B. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013*. London: Crisis and JRF. Available from: http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/HomelessnessMonitorEngland2013.pdf

1.2 Homelessness policy in England

The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act was a landmark piece of legislation which for the first time made an attempt to define homelessness, outlined the assistance that homeless people should receive and transferred the responsibility from social services to local authorities where it still sits today. This has been a transformative legal change for many homeless people, particularly those with dependent children, but has also created a distinction between homeless families and single homeless people.

Everyone who approaches their local authority for help as homeless should be provided with meaningful advice and assistance that is appropriate to their needs. In addition, local authorities have a responsibility to provide housing to those who are 'unintentionally homeless' (i.e. through no fault of their own) and are considered to have a 'priority need'.[4] Local authorities can house individuals found not to have a priority need for assistance, but given the resource constraints this seldom happens in practice.

In order to decide what duties they must fulfil, local authorities are required to go through a five-stage, detailed assessment process for everyone who applies as homeless. Firstly they must establish if the applicant is eligible for assistance (i.e. that they are a British citizen or 'habitually resident'), and that the applicant is homeless or threatened with homelessness within the next 28 days. Secondly, the local authority should then investigate whether the individual falls into one of the below priority need categories (or shares a household with someone that does):[5]

- Pregnant or responsible for dependent children
- Homeless as a consequence of flood, fire or other disaster
- Aged between 16 and 17 and not currently housed by social services
- Aged between 18 and 20 and were 'looked after' by social services when they were aged between16 and 17
- A 'vulnerable' person, as a result of: a mental health problem; a physical or learning disability; old age; leaving prison or the Armed Forces; being in care; because they are at risk of violence (or threats of violence); or other special reasons.[6]

It is up to local authorities to decide if an individual is vulnerable on the basis of whether when homeless, the applicant would be less able to fend for him/herself than an ordinary homeless person so that he or she would suffer injury or detriment, in circumstances where a less vulnerable person would be able to cope without harmful effects.[7] However, the broad nature of this definition means it is very difficult to apply consistently, particularly without further explanation of what an ordinary homeless person is.

If an individual is found to be eligible, homeless and in priority need then the local authority has a responsibility to provide interim accommodation before they complete the rest of their inquiries (stages four and five outlined in the following paragraph). Similarly, if the local authority has reason to believe the individual has a priority need (which the

4 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG.
5 Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000-2010.* London: Crisis, p. 10.
6 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG, p. 91.
7 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG; Audit Commission (2003) *Homelessness Responding to the new agenda*. London: Audit Commission, p. 85.

Guidance notes is a lower test than 'being satisfied'[8]), interim accommodation should also be provided until they are able to make a decision.

The final two stages are to check that the homeless applicant is unintentionally homeless (i.e. that they became homeless through no fault of their own[9]) and establish whether they have a local connection to the area in which they are accessing help. This is defined as being a resident for a considerable period of time (at least six months in the area during the previous 12 months, or for not less than 3 years during the previous five-year period), working in the area (where that employment is not of a casual nature), and/or having close family there.[10] However, anyone who is at risk of violence is exempt from the local connection criteria given that it may be unsafe for them to remain in the same areas as perpetrator(s) of violence.

The local authority has to provide suitable settled accommodation to everyone who applies as homeless and meets all the criteria outlined above – this is referred to as the 'main homelessness duty'. As mentioned earlier, if settled accommodation is unavailable at that time the local authority must arrange for them to be temporarily housed until settled accommodation becomes available. They do not owe the main homelessness duty to households who are considered intentionally homeless but if they meet all of the other criteria they will be entitled to short-term temporary accommodation to give them time to find alternative housing.

Limiting access to housing to unintentionally homeless and priority need households intends to assist the most 'deserving' of help – those considered vulnerable and victims of circumstances beyond their control.[11] However, the priority need criteria set in the legislation means that significant numbers of homeless applicants have no rights to accommodation. Between 2013 and 2014 less than half (47%) of the households that made a homeless application in England were considered unintentionally homeless and in priority need (see Table 1), and of those, almost two thirds (65%) qualified as such because they had children (see Table 2).[12] Consequently, most single homeless people are unlikely to be considered a priority for assistance and are only likely to qualify if they can demonstrate that they are more vulnerable than an ordinary homeless person.[13]

8 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.* London: DCLG, p. 58.
9 The Code of Guidance provides a number of examples of intentional homelessness including leaving "reasonable" accommodation or not paying rent when they were in a financial position to do so causing them to fall into rent arrears and be evicted. DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.* London: DCLG, p. 96.
10 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities.* London: DCLG; Audit Commission (2003) *Homelessness Responding to the new agenda.* London: Audit Commission, p. 231.
11 Audit Commission (2003) *Homelessness Responding to the new agenda.* London: Audit Commission, p. 6.
12 DCLG (2014) Table 770, statutory homelessness statistics.
13 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG.

Table 1.1 Homeless applications in England 2013-2014, by decision made

Outcome of homeless applications	Number	Per-centage
Unintentionally homeless and in priority need (accepted applications)	52,270	47
Homeless and not in priority need	21,070	19
Intentionally homeless and in priority need	8,540	8
Not homeless	30,080	27
Total number of applications	**111,960**	**100**

Source: DCLG (2014) Statutory homelessness statistics, Table 770

Table 1.2 Reasons applicants were deemed unintentionally homeless and in priority need 2013-2014

Reason	Number	Per-centage
Households with dependent children	33,960	65
Households with a vulnerable member	13,970	27
Household member pregnant	4,140	8
Homeless in emergency	210	0
Total number of applicants unintentionally homeless and in priority need	**52,270**	**100**

Source: DCLG (2014) Statutory homelessness statistics, Table 773

However, making a decision about whether a person is vulnerable is problematic, because defining vulnerability as a comparison to an ordinary homeless person is incredibly difficult to apply consistently (perhaps impossible). Related to this, the concern is that it is applied in a way that is driven by resources,[14] and that it creates a perverse incentive in that respect as legal entitlement is difficult to establish.

The limited support available to single homeless people is believed to significantly contribute to the high prevalence of hidden homelessness where people are forced to sleep rough, sofa surf or survive in squats,[15] and is also thought to deter them from trying to access help. In a survey of 437 homeless people conducted for Crisis, more than one quarter had not approached their local authority, and a common reason for not doing so was low expectations of what the outcome would be.[16]

Hidden homelessness is likely to have serious consequences for an individual's physical and mental health and increase the costs of homelessness to the Government (which already total anything up to £1 billion per year).[17]

In response to the lack of statutory support, services for single homeless people have developed outside of the legislative framework and are largely delivered by third sector organisations, though these have also been instigated and funded by the Government, e.g. the Rough Sleepers Initiative, The Homelessness Transition Fund, The Private Renting Access Development Programme and No Second Night Out.[18] Whilst these non-statutory services made a positive impact, existing evidence suggests

14 These are concerns Shelter also shares; see Shelter (2007) *Rights and wrongs. The homelessness safety net 30 years on*. London: Shelter.
15 Reeve, K. (2011) *The hidden truth about homelessness*. London: Crisis, CRESR.
16 Ibid.
17 DCLG (2012) *Evidence review of the costs of homelessness*. London: DCLG. www.gov.uk/government/publications/costs-of-homelessness-evidence-review
18 Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013.* London: Crisis and JRF.

that many single homeless people are nevertheless unable to access the assistance they require.[19]

Concern that not all homeless people are being adequately assisted by local authorities has triggered a significant divergence in the legislation among the UK nations in recent years.[20] In Scotland, since 2002, all homeless households have been entitled to temporary accommodation; and in 2012 the priority need category was abolished, ensuring that all unintentionally homeless households have a right to settled accommodation.[21] This Scottish 'rights-based' approach has been praised for strengthening the safety net for homeless people.[22] More recently the Welsh Government has also reformed the legislation by introducing a new duty which requires local authorities to 'help to secure accommodation' for those not in priority need.[23] A forthcoming study for Crisis by Peter Mackie et al (2014) at the University of Cardiff will explore the complex range of statutory and non-statutory interventions now being delivered across Great Britain, with variations in the services available to single homeless people likely to reflect national and local authority boundaries.

1.3 Housing Options and homelessness services

All local authorities are required to have Housing Options and homelessness services for the provision of advice and assistance to people who approach them for help. These services are expected to operate according to the Homelessness Code of Guidance[24] which outlines recommendations for how the homelessness legislation should be implemented, though how local authorities deliver the service is left up to their discretion.[25]

As explained earlier, local authorities have to provide advice and assistance to everyone who asks for help. However, they also have a duty to provide settled accommodation to those assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need.[26] Furthermore, if it is not possible to immediately house someone local authorities must provide temporary accommodation such as hostels and bed and breakfasts until settled accommodation becomes available.[27] It is also important to note that this temporary accommodation could be placed in another local authority, as was the case for 22 per cent of the 58,440 households in temporary accommodation at the end of March 2014.[28] Moreover, severe housing shortages in London mean that a growing number of homeless households are 'stuck' in temporary accommodation for over two years,[29] and some are being rehoused huge distances away in other English cities.[30]

19 Kenway, P. and Palmer, G. (2003) *How many, how much? Single homelessness and the question of numbers and cost*. London: Crisis and NPI; DCLG (2012) *Evidence review of the costs of homelessness*. London: DCLG.
20 See Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013.* London: Crisis and JRF.
21 Scottish Government (2012) *Final Business Regulatory Impact Assessment - The Homelessness (Abolition of Priority Need) (Scotland) Order 2012*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
22 Watts, B. (2013) "Rights, Needs and Stigma: A Comparison of Homelessness Policy in Scotland and Ireland." *European Journal of Homelessness* 7 (1): 41–68.
23 *Housing (Wales) Act.* 2014 Cardiff: National Assembly for Wales.
24 DCLG (2006), *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG
25 Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013.* London: Crisis and JRF.
26 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG
27 *Housing Act 1996* (c. 52). London: HMSO
28 Wilson, W. (2014) *Homeless households in temporary accommodation* (England). SN/SP/2110. London: House of Commons Library (see www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN02110/homeless-households-in-temporary-accommodation-england).
29 Dugan, E. (2014) 'Housing shortage leaves homeless families 'stuck' in hostels for two years.' *The Independent*, 6 August 2014.
30 For a discussion of the issues faced by single mothers in East London who have been faced with moving to the Midlands and North of England, miles away from family and friends see: Butler, P (2014) 'Young mothers evicted from London hostel may be rehoused 200 miles away.' *The Guardian, 14 October 2014* (www.theguardian.com/society/2013/oct/14/young-single-mothers-focus-e15-newham-rehoused).

The 2002 Homeless Act placed greater emphasis on the role of Housing Options and homelessness services in preventing homelessness, rather than waiting up until the point that an individual becomes homeless to accommodate them. At the crux of this policy has been the introduction of a 'housing options' approach where those approaching a local authority for help should be given an interview in order to inform them about the different means which could address their housing problems 'in tune with the consumerist ethic of empowering citizens'.[31] Consequently there are now two routes that local authorities can take in order to provide assistance:

- Statutory homeless route: where individuals who make a homelessness application and are accepted as homeless are directly housed by the local authority

- The alternative prevention or 'housing options' route: where, during a formal interview, a broad range of options are suggested to an individual which include ways they can be helped to remain in their current accommodation, delaying their move out of their current accommodation so alternatives can be arranged, or helping them to find alternative accommodation.[32] More specifically this can include family mediation and help accessing accommodation in the private rented sector.

It is important that local authorities consider both routes when assessing homeless applicants so that they are "not forced to go down one route or another from the outset".[33] However, there is evidence that homelessness prevention is being used to prevent individuals from making a homeless application due to gatekeeping.[34] Whilst 'housing options' can in principle generate positive outcomes for those who are unlikely to be housed by their local authority because they do not meet the criteria for statutory homelessness, the concern is that it is being used to reduce the number of people accepted as homeless.

Following an increase in the number of households accepted as homeless (unintentionally homeless households with a priority need) between the late 1990s and early 2000s, after 2003 the figures show a sharp decline.[35] It is likely that this decrease to some extent reflects an overall reduction in homelessness but also that a significant part of the fall can be explained by homelessness prevention policies being used as a gatekeeping mechanism.[36]

Limited data is available on the outcomes of households who are assisted by Housing Options and homelessness services nationally. Therefore it is difficult to assess how effective Housing Options and homelessness services are in the long term in preventing homelessness.[37]

Moreover, there is no compulsory and audited quality framework or inspection regime for Housing Options and homelessness services to ensure they meet their responsibilities

31 Pawson, H. and Davidson, E. (2008) 'Radically divergent? Homelessness policy and practice in post-devolution Scotland', *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 8 (1): 39-60, p. 48.
32 Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000-2010.* London: Crisis.
33 Shelter Scotland (2011) *Housing Options in Scotland*, p.9. Available at: http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/366607/Shelter_Scotland_Housing_Options_Paper_FINAL_July_2011.pdf
34 Pawson, H. and Davidson, E. (2006) 'Fit for purpose? Official measures of homelessness in the era of the activist state', Radical Statistics, 9 (3): 7-29; and Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000-2010*. London: Crisis.
35 Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013.* London: Crisis and JRF.
36 Pawson, H. and Davidson, E. (2008) 'Radically divergent? Homelessness policy and practice in post-devolution Scotland', *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 8 (1): 39-60, p. 48.
37 In Scotland the Scottish Government has recently introduced mandatory data collection to monitor housing options outcomes – a positive step in evaluating the effectiveness of the service (Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry*. Glasgow: SHR).

as outlined in legislation and the Code of Guidance or that they are delivered consistently across all local authorities. In Scotland, the Scottish Housing Regulator has the responsibility to undertake inspections of Housing Options and homelessness services, but no equivalent exists in England or Wales.

In April 2013 the Government introduced the new Gold Standard for homelessness services initiative, which aimed to support local authorities to improve the quality of their services.[38] However, the programme is not compulsory (the only incentive is achieving the 'Gold Standard status') meaning that the local authorities that engage in this process are likely to be the better performing authorities anyway.

1.4 Research questions

The research questions addressed by this study fall into two key areas, preventing homelessness and providing a safety net, and are outlined below. They have been adapted from the recommendations outlined by the Audit Commission following their research on homelessness and housing advice services in England and Wales, and aim to provide a broad view of the standards of service currently being provided by local authorities.[39] Additionally, the study also took into account the published Government guidelines which specify what support local authorities are required to provide.[40]

Preventing homelessness

- Are the services easily accessible? In particular, how easily do mystery shoppers access the service and get help with their housing problems?
- Do mystery shoppers feel that staff are interested in their individual circumstances and take into account their specific needs and situations (including mental health problems and experience of domestic violence)?
- Are mystery shoppers offered information, advice and advocacy if needed on housing and related issues, and is this information clear and reasonably up-to-date?

Providing a safety net

- Are mystery shoppers given an adequate assessment to determine whether a priority need exists?
- Are the mystery shoppers given the opportunity to submit a homelessness application?
- Are the mystery shoppers offered or referred to suitable emergency or temporary accommodation where this is needed?

38 For more information please see: http://home.practitionersupport.org/.
39 Audit Commission (2003) *Homelessness Responding to the new agenda*. London: Audit Commission.
40 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG; DCLG (2006) *Homeless prevention: a guide to good practice.* London: DCLG.

1.5 Methodology

Mystery shopping is a research approach that is regularly used to gauge service quality in the public sector[41] and was used to provide an insight into what applicants to Housing Options and homelessness services experience when they present themselves as homeless.

The fieldwork took place between 24 February and 11 April 2014, and the eight mystery shoppers who participated in the study made contact with 16 local authorities. Before the fieldwork was undertaken Crisis developed four different stories or characters based on real-life situations that may cause an individual to become homelessness. To ensure they were realistic, these were refined with the help of the mystery shoppers (who themselves had experienced homelessness) and colleagues within Crisis. Each mystery shopper then played one of the 'characters' (this is how the mystery shoppers, most of whom were aspiring actors, liked to refer to them) outlined below at the local authorities they visited:

- **Learning difficulties:** a person in their thirties with a learning disability living with a family member on whom they were very dependent, but who had recently died. This bereavement had led to mental health issues which were further compounded when their landlord sold the property they were renting and the new landlord changed the locks. This person had subsequently been forced to stay with a friend in the area and was now being asked to leave.

- **Domestic violence:** a person in their 20s became homeless after being violently attacked by their ex-partner (in the case of the female shopper) or step-father (in the case of the male shopper). Since then they had been staying with other relatives but this has now become untenable and they needed to leave. They are concerned for their safety and do not wish to remain in the same area so were approaching a different local authority to the one they are currently living in for help.

- **Rough sleeper:** a person in their 30s who had been sleeping rough for three weeks. They had recently lost their job, and after struggling to cover their rent had given up the tenancy on their private rented flat. For a little while they had sofa surfed but that was no longer an option so had been rough sleeping. They were not currently claiming benefits and were visiting the local authority as a last resort.

- **Young person:** a 19 year old who has been forced to leave their parents' home due to overcrowding and because they are unemployed and therefore unable to contribute to the household financially. They had been sofa surfing but run out of friends who could accommodate them and had nowhere to stay that evening.

These characters were designed to include a mix of cases, some of which had elements, which if sufficiently probed, may have suggested they had a priority need.

The local authorities that we mystery shopped (see Table 1.3) were selected on the basis of three criteria:

- Relatively high homelessness application rates and therefore a large volume of visitors to the office (so that Crisis' mystery shoppers were undetected)

- Located across different regions in England (and different areas of London)

- Mix of local authorities under different political control

41 Wilson, A. M. (1998). 'The role of mystery shopping in the measurement of service performance', *Managing Service Quality*, 8 (6): 414-420.

Local authorities were all contacted prior to the research and informed that they would be visited by mystery shoppers within the next month. After the visits were completed Crisis got in touch with each local authority again to ask for the details of each mystery shopper to be removed from their systems because they were not real cases.

Throughout the report particular local authorities are referred to by number. Local authorities 1-7 were located in London and local authorities 8-16 were located in the South East, Midlands, and North.

Table 1.3: Local authorities visited by mystery shoppers between February and April 2014

LA1	Local authority in outer London
LA2	Local authority in outer London
LA3	Local authority in outer London
LA4	Local authority in inner London
LA5	Local authority in outer London
LA6	Local authority in inner London
LA7	Local authority in outer London
LA8	Local authority in the South East
LA9	Local authority in the Midlands
LA10	Local authority in the East
LA11	Local authority in the North
LA12	Local authority in the North
LA13	Local authority in the North
LA14	Local authority in the North
LA15	Local authority in the North
LA16	Local authority in the North

In five of these locations the Housing Options and homelessness services were delivered in partnership with, or solely by, housing associations.

Where possible each of the four characters were tested twice face-to-face – once with a male mystery shopper and once with a female shopper (there were eight shoppers in total).[42] This was to examine whether there were any differences in the experience of mystery shoppers by gender, and also provide an opportunity to present the scenario more than once to see whether the outcome of the visit was consistent.

42 In the first phase of fieldwork seven local authorities were visited by all eight mystery shoppers. However, the project was later extended to cover a further nine local authorities and due to their smaller size fewer visits (by five mystery shoppers) were conducted to minimize the impact on local authority resources. Here, the characters presented were: both domestic violence scenarios, both learning difficulties scenarios and the male rough sleeper scenario.

Mystery shoppers were provided with supporting documents to give to local authority staff; for instance letters from 'parents' stating they could no longer live in the family home or from 'landlords' claiming they were going to change the locks. On the occasions where a staff member wanted to talk to a parent, landlord or friend to verify the story, the contact details of a Crisis researcher was provided (as they would answer any calls and pretend to be the mystery shoppers' relative, landlord, or friend).

Before undertaking the research the mystery shoppers attended a three-day training session run by Lift. During this time they were introduced to mystery shopping as a research methodology and given the time to tailor and develop their characters.

After each visit, mystery shoppers were asked to complete a feedback form about their experience and met with a Crisis researcher for an interview about what happened, the data from which forms the basis of this report.

1.6 Report structure

The report explores the research findings in two key areas: mystery shoppers' experiences of visiting local authorities for help, including the assessment process and the treatment they received (Chapter 2); the outcome of their visits, including what support, if any, they were offered and the effectiveness of this assistance in resolving their situation (Chapter 3). The report concludes with Crisis' recommendations for local authorities and central Government. Throughout, verbatim comments from the mystery shoppers are used to demonstrate how they felt about the visits in their own words.

2. 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 actions follow and what outcome is achieved.[43] It is crucial that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is adequately assessed, least crucial opportunities to solve or prevent homelessness are missed.

Homelessness costs the Government anything up to a £1 billion annually[44] and over the five years of the current parliament, spending by local authorities on housing-related services will have fallen in real terms by a third.[45] Failing to invest in services for people who fall through the safety net will not make the problem disappear. In fact, it will simply make it a much more expensive problem to solve longer term.

In addition to the structure of the assessment process itself, it is imperative that people seeking help feel they are in a safe environment and are not looked down upon or treated with suspicion. Recent research into poverty and stigma has shown that the treatment people received in public services often compounds their sense of shame and contributes to feelings of guilt and powerlessness, undermining attempts to escape poverty.[46] It is therefore important that staff show empathy, reception areas are well-designed (with private meeting rooms), and that waiting times are kept to a minimum – so that a more conducive atmosphere is created.[47]

This chapter begins by outlining how the mystery shoppers were assessed by local authorities and how detailed this process was. It then moves on to consider other factors which had an impact on the mystery shoppers' experiences of the visits: lack of privacy, interactions with staff, the office environment, and waiting times.

43 Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry.* Glasgow: SHR.
44 DCLG (2012) *Evidence review of the costs of homelessness*. London: DCLG.
45 This was what many warned would happen when the Government lifted the ring-fence that protected Supporting People funds. Perry, J. (2014) *"Local Government Cuts: Housing Services Hit the Hardest". The Guardian*, 17 September 2014 (http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2014/sep/17/housing-spending-cuts-local-government-welfare?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter&commentpage=1)
46 Chase, E. and Walker, R. (2013) *"The co-construction of shame in the context of poverty: beyond a threat to the social bond" Sociology*, 47(4): 739-754.
47 Audit Commission (2003) *Homelessness Responding to the new agenda*. London: Audit Commission.

2.1 Overview

A housing options interview is vital to provide meaningful assistance to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in order to identify the particular help they require and ways their housing need can be addressed. There are two main routes in which a person can access help from a local authority: the homeless application route (where those who are owed the main housing duty will be accommodated by the local authority), or the prevention route. The second option stems from the Government's increased focus on prevention and intends to focus less on someone's right to settled accommodation and more on all of their 'housing options' – this may include a range of services, such as family mediation, rent deposit provision, tenancy sustainment services, and sanctuary schemes – and the approach is designed to prevent the need to make a statutory homeless application (see Chapter 1).[48]

All individuals who approach their local authority for assistance with housing should be given a formal interview offering advice on all the various means by which their housing problems could be resolved, and those who present as homeless should also be able to make a homelessness application. The Government's guide to good practice in homelessness prevention recommends that housing options and the prevention route should be explored first but also specifies that this should never be used in place of a homelessness application where an individual is homeless or threatened with homelessness.[49] The majority of local authorities employ a triage system in order to do this whereby all who present at Housing Options and homelessness services receive an initial assessment of their needs in order to ascertain why they are seeking help and the urgency of their case. This conversation tends to take place with customer services staff, some of whom may be receptionists, who then refer people who are eligible for assistance to see a Housing Advisor (though this was not always the case during our fieldwork, as demonstrated later in the chapter). The aim of the second interview is to explore the reasons why the individual was homeless, understand what their options were and to find a solution to their housing need through either route for assistance.

The introduction of this housing options approach has changed the way local authorities deliver homelessness services and has also led to concerns about 'gatekeeping'[50] by local authorities.[51] As mentioned in Section 1.3, it has been suggested that the decline in statutory homelessness applications can partly be linked to people automatically being taken down the prevention route without an opportunity to make a homelessness application.[52]

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48 Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000-2010.* London: Crisis.

49 DCLG (2006) *Homeless prevention: a guide to good practice*. London: DCLG. In terms of good practice, the Scottish Code of Guidance makes clear that "if the applicant is homeless at the time of interview or threatened with homelessness within two months, a homelessness application should also be completed. Efforts to prevent homelessness should then progress alongside the routine administration of the homelessness application, particularly where a diagnostic assessment indicates that a real opportunity exists to prevent it." Scottish Government and COSLA (2009) *Prevention of Homelessness Guidance*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government, p. 17.

50 Gatekeeping refers to the practice whereby individuals are prevented or deterred from making a homeless application so that the local authority avoids any duty to provide temporary or permanent accommodation.

51 Pawson, H. and Davidson, E. (2006) 'Fit for purpose? Official measures of homelessness in the era of the activist state', *Radical Statistics,* 93: 7-29.

52 Pawson, H. and Davidson, E. (2006) 'Fit for purpose? Official measures of homelessness in the era of the activist state', *Radical Statistics,* 93: 7-29. and Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000-2010.* London: Crisis.

2.2 The assessment process

At the majority of visits (58 out of 87) mystery shoppers experienced the assessment process described above: an initial interview followed by an in-depth assessment with a Housing Advisor about their housing options.

The initial interview took the form of a check box exercise, where mystery shoppers were required to provide simple 'yes' or 'no' answers to a series of questions which focused on ascertaining whether they had a priority need for assistance.

- Are you single?
- Do you have any mental health issues?
- Do you have any children?
- (And if they were female), are you pregnant?

"I was told straight away that I was not a priority because I was single with no children and no medical problems or vulnerabilities"
Rough sleeper (male) shopper, LA2

These questions were either asked face-to-face via a questionnaire visitors were asked to complete (on paper or online), or over the phone.

All mystery shoppers received an assessment with a Housing Advisor in their visits outside the capital (41 visits in total), but this was significantly less common in London and took place in just 17 out of the 46 visits. Moreover, only a single local authority in London consistently assessed mystery shoppers in this way.

At all 87 visits, regardless of how comprehensive the assessment had been, mystery shoppers found the process itself extremely confusing ('Kafkaesque' as one put it). After long waiting times, they would be seen by staff who rarely introduced themselves or took the time to talk them through the process and what to expect. In the majority of cases the mystery shoppers were uncertain as to whether they had been 'helped' via the prevention route or the homelessness one – perhaps unsurprisingly given that they were rarely told what their options were. Only three mystery shoppers were given written confirmation that they had made an application (see Chapter 3), and the opportunity to make a homelessness application was only mentioned eight times – in most cases because the assessment had been postponed.[53]

In 29 visits (all in London), gatekeeping practices prevented mystery shoppers from receiving adequate assessments. The Local Government Ombudsman has highlighted that gatekeeping contravenes the homelessness legislation and the Code of Guidance.[54] Generally mystery shoppers were told one of two things: that they could not see a Housing Advisor because they were not in priority need,[55] 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. (It is also worth noting that all the mystery shoppers were British born and English was their first language.)

In many cases mystery shoppers noted that staff had not taken down any personal details from them, suggesting that a record of their

53 In two of these cases local authorities also contravened the Code of Guidance by predicting the outcome of the application before it had been made and mystery shoppers were discouraged from making an application in the future after being told they were unlikely to meet the priority need criteria.

54 Local Government Ombudsman (2011) *Homelessness: How councils can ensure justice for homeless people*. London: LGO.

55 Shelter Cymru have previously conducted mystery shopping of Housing Options and homelessness services in Wales via telephone and also found that some local authorities made quick decisions about mystery shoppers' priority need statuses even though they had only briefly discussed their situation over the phone; see Shelter Cymru (2003) *Return Call*. Swansea: Shelter.

visit had not been made. As a result, if these had been real cases[56] they would not appear in the local authorities' or Government's homelessness statistics,[57] further evidencing that gatekeeping has led to an under-reporting of homelessness in official statistics.[58]

> *"They did not take my details or anything. Felt like I was buying something in a shop."*
> Young person (male) shopper, LA1

Being refused any type of help until they supplied both proof of identification and/or their homelessness happened across all local authorities visited, though it was a lot more common in London, where five out of seven boroughs visited consistently turned people away[59] despite the fact that none of the characters played by the mystery shoppers had a place to stay that night.

> *"The only thing he said to me was that being a British citizen entitles you a decision about whether they can help me or not. It's all down to the information I give them. He said 'we'd need to speak to the people at my friend's house to verify I have been staying there for a few weeks and that anyone can come off the street and say that they are homeless but you need to prove it'… I can imagine some people could be offended by that."*
> Young person (female) shopper, LA4

The absence of an adequate assessment process was particularly evident at LA3 where the local authority had replaced the initial face-to-face interview with a self-completion online questionnaire. There was no support available to help people to complete the questionnaire, so the onus was exclusively on the mystery shoppers to interpret the questions and provide the information correctly, regardless of their literacy or computer skills. This is problematic given that many homeless people who seek help may have learning difficulties or other vulnerabilities that makes it likely misunderstandings will occur. Recent research by St Mungo's Broadway has shown 51 per cent of homeless people lack basic English skills and 39 per cent of the organisation's clients are unable to complete an online form.[60]

Our mystery shoppers found that even if it was clear that the individual they portrayed was vulnerable and would not be able to complete the questionnaire correctly on their own, no extra support was arranged. For example, a mystery shopper who was playing a character who was illiterate and had learning difficulties told the member of staff directing him towards a computer that he could not read or write. The response he received was that he would need to return with someone who could assist him (despite the fact that his character had no friends or family):

> *"They just said I needed to go away and get a friend to come and help fill in the form… I thought that somebody might take the cue then to say, well look, this is what we do, or this is what we suggest with people who can't read and write, but there was no, there was no plan B, so that's what I was disappointed about really. And I left there feeling rather angry because there was no help."*
> Learning difficulties (male) shopper, LA13

Unlike an initial face-to-face interview, the online assessment questionnaire meant that mystery shoppers could not ask for clarification whenever they did not understand a question which could result in mistakes being made. After completing an online questionnaire, a mystery shopper who

56 All local authorities were contacted by Crisis at the end of the mystery shopping to notify them about who had visited so that any records of the mystery shoppers could be removed from their systems.
57 Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis.
58 Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry*. Glasgow: SHR.
59 Postponing the assessment was particularly common at LA7 where five of the eight shoppers were turned away.
60 St Mungo's Broadway (2014) *Reading counts: why English and maths skills matter in tackling homelessness*. London: St Mungo's Broadway.

was playing the character of a rough sleeper noticed to his surprise that it had concluded he was 'not in threat of being homeless within the next 28 days or presently homeless'. A member of staff simply told him that nothing could be done about it – once answers were submitted they could not be changed.

The result of the questionnaire also determined next steps – he was offered an appointment with a Housing Advisor in a month's time but nothing else (not even leaflets or information sheets) (see also Chapter 3). However, delays to the assessment process place vulnerable people at risk, and may deter them from seeking further assistance.

The brevity of the 29 visits in London where mystery shoppers did not see a Housing Advisor meant they did not have a detailed discussion about their circumstances and support needs – vitally important for the effectiveness of the assessment.[61]

> *"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

In some cases the initial interviews lasted between just five and ten minutes, when the mystery shoppers may have waited for up to three hours to be seen. This imbalance was extremely frustrating:

> *"I waited for two hours 20 minutes but left after two hours 30 minutes. Seeing advisor [customer services staff] was only ten minutes."*
> Learning difficulties (male) shopper, LA7

As a result – mirroring the findings of Crisis' 2009 research – only a very superficial assessment of people's circumstances and support needs ever took place.[62] For example, one of the mystery shoppers who was playing the young person character had been thrown out of the family home due to behaviour issues as well as the fact that the household was struggling financially and he could not contribute. Yet at a particular local authority he was immediately and repeatedly told to go back to his family and no questions at all were asked about the circumstances that had led up to him being thrown out or his support needs.

> *"The [customer services staff] did not enquire about whether I had any mental health problems or other health issues. Nor did he ask me if I had been in care."*
> Young person (male) shopper, LA1

The member of staff also showed no interest in the letter he was given by the mystery shopper, which was from his character's parents and explained that they were no longer willing or able to accommodate him. The experience also left the mystery shopper very upset because the member of staff "just didn't seem to care."

People who are homeless or vulnerably housed are likely to be discouraged from seeking help if they feel their case is not going to be properly considered. However, when describing the assessment process in these 29 visits, mystery shoppers reported that the focus of the conversation had been on trying to demonstrate that they did not have a priority need. As with Crisis' research in 2009, mystery shoppers seemed to be met by a culture of trying to establish that they were not eligible for any housing assistance, rather than a focus on what could be done

61 This was also a frequent issue in the Scottish Housing Regulator's research: Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry*. Glasgow: SHR.

62 Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis.

to help them or proactively resolve their circumstances.[63]

On the basis of such limited information it would be very difficult to provide someone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness with meaningful advice and support, let alone assess someone's vulnerability and make a decision on their priority need status. Making a decision about whether a person is vulnerable is problematic at the best of times. Defining vulnerability as a comparison to the 'average homeless person' is incredibly difficult to apply consistently (perhaps impossible). Related to this, the concern is that it is applied in a way that is driven by resources,[64] and that it creates a perverse incentive in that respect as legal entitlement is difficult to establish. (The mystery shoppers were a lot more likely to be deemed in priority need outside London which suggests the concerns are justified.)

2.3 Waiting times

Whether people ever got to see a Housing Advisor or not, they often had to wait for long periods of time to speak to someone, albeit these could vary considerably. At LA8 in the South East and LA13 in the North waiting times between entering the office and receiving an initial assessment were as little as a matter of minutes, but took over an hour in LA5 and over two hours in LA4 and LA7). As with all public services mystery shoppers expected that they would need to wait to be seen and recognised that many of the offices were under significant pressure, but where the waiting times were exceptionally long this created anxiety and caused mystery shoppers to feel that they were not in control of the situation.

> *"Got a ticket and waited for hour for a receptionist…and I waited for another hour [to see a Housing Advisor] – a painful wait in a loud and unpleasant waiting area… She asked my basic questions about my situation and quickly came to the conclusion that they didn't have a responsibility to me. I was not happy about having to have waited all this time to be told that."*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA6

Mystery shoppers were very rarely given an indication of how long they would have to wait (only one local authority provided an estimated wait time with the ticket). It was also uncommon to receive an apology or explanation about the wait and this lack of courtesy was often interpreted by mystery shoppers as a sign they were seen as unimportant, that their time was somehow less valuable than the staff's. It was also very frustrating and unsettling to wait for long periods of time if they were then only seen for up to ten or 15 minutes and were never given the opportunity to see a Housing

63 Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis.
64 These are concerns Shelter also shares; see Shelter (2007) *Rights and wrongs. The homelessness safety net 30 years on*. London: Shelter.

Advisor or told they would have to go to a different office (as frequently happened to the mystery shoppers playing the young person character).

> *"It was annoying because I didn't get any assistance in there … when I was asked to go and complete the online form another staff member said it would be pointless because of my age and then they suggested I go to the other place."*
> Young person (female) shopper, LA3

The lack of effective signposting about which office to visit made mystery shoppers feel their time had been wasted and – importantly – also meant that they had to incur additional travel costs which is especially problematic when you consider people applying for help are also likely to be struggling with their finances.

In a small number of instances mystery shoppers reported that, whilst waiting to be seen, they had witnessed staff being disrespectful to other applicants, and described how this had made them worry about how they themselves would be treated.

> *"They were really rude to people before I was seen, unnecessarily rude…Telling people 'Am I speaking in a different language. Do I not speak English?...I was just taken aback by all the staff in there, and if I was in need how desperate I would feel."*
> Learning difficulties (female) shopper, LA6

2.4 Privacy

All initial interviews were conducted at reception desks that were situated in full view and hearing range of the waiting area where other applicants were waiting to be seen. It was also often the case that three or four other people would also be having interviews conducted at the same time, so mystery shoppers were aware of people either side of them being able to clearly hear the conversation they were having.

> *"You can hear everything, I said my mum died and everyone went quiet"*
> Learning difficulties (female) shopper, LA2

The mystery shoppers found the lack of privacy very unsettling – it made the experience all the more stressful 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

Mystery shoppers also reflected on how this would negatively impact on people's ability to explain their circumstances, which in turn would affect the outcome of the visit. The lack of privacy was particularly problematic for the woman who played the domestic violence character. Sharing a personal experience of domestic violence with a professional is difficult enough, but having to also do so in front of a crowd of strangers is all the more challenging.

It was very rare for the initial interview to be conducted in private, even where meeting rooms were available and not being used – some mystery shoppers specifically asked when this happened but were refused.

2.5 Interactions with staff

Walker and Chase (2013) explored the concept of poverty-related shame and found that feelings of shame and stigma are reinforced by the treatment of individuals by public services. They describe how "feeling degraded, looked down on, judged and not listened to were ubiquitous in people's accounts of their interactions with welfare institutions".[65] These findings echo the experiences of our own mystery shoppers, both during this project as well as when they were homeless themselves. It is also worth noting that, because of their own experiences of seeking help from local authorities when they were homeless, they all had low expectations of staff and of how they would be treated.

In the majority of visits mystery shoppers felt staff had done 'ok', and in a few cases exceptionally well. However, on a number of visits mystery shoppers reported feeling 'let down' – because they had been 'robotic' and 'emotionless' or showed no true concern for their circumstances.

> *"I felt he had zero sympathy for my situation…I wouldn't go back there I'd just try something else… It feels like a really humiliating feeling."*
> Young person (male) shopper, LA7

> *"There was very little sensitivity or sympathy towards my situation and I had to keep repeating myself to stress the desperate situation I was in. I felt distressed coming out of there. There was no real concern there. I could have walked out and been hit by a bus and they wouldn't have cared. I wouldn't have cared. That's how I was feeling."*
> Rough sleeper (male) shopper, LA12

Mystery shoppers found such lack of interest and empathy deeply upsetting:

> *"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

On a number of occasions mystery shoppers' interviews were interrupted by another staff member with no apology (or if one was given it was directed not at the mystery shopper but at the colleague), usually to discuss the details of someone else's case.

> *"In the middle of my very public interview another female member of staff interrupted our conversation, discussed another case and sat down on his computer delaying my whole interview. She apologised to her colleague but not to me, very disrespectful and treated me like I was invisible."*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA7

The mystery shopper found this episode – small as it may appear to some – very upsetting and interpreted what happened as demonstrating that the member of staff felt he was not worth acknowledging as a human being. In these situations they often described feeling as though they had been treated like a number rather than a human being, and similarly in the 2009 research mystery shoppers recounted being made to feel like second class citizens.[66]

It is worth emphasising that mystery shoppers were much less likely to report negative experiences outside the capital. The only exception to this rule was a single local authority (LA4) where interactions with staff were consistently better.

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65 Chase, E. and Walker, R. (2013) *"The co-construction of shame in the context of poverty: beyond a threat to the social bond" Sociology*, 47(4): 739-754, p. 746.

66 Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis.

Where mystery shoppers reported they were 'treated well' this lessened the impact of other negative elements of the visit such as the lack of privacy or waiting times. Key to this was feeling that staff had taken an interest in them as individuals and had been sympathetic to their circumstances.

> *"She gave me sympathy... She said things like 'you've really got to help yourself, stay positive, it sounds like you've been through quite a trauma."*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA8

> *"She didn't seem judgemental… I was like yeah, I see you understand, it kind of gave me some reassurance that it wasn't my fault that I'd been kicked out."*
> Young person (female) shopper, LA13

The empathy shown by these staff members reassured mystery shoppers that they would not be treated as just another number. It also meant that, had they been real cases, they would have been much more likely to engage with the service.

> *"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

Mystery shoppers also felt it was important staff introduced themselves and described their role at the start of an interview. A few described how there was something dehumanising about having to describe sensitive personal circumstances to someone whose name they did not know. Equally important to mystery shoppers was when staff referred to them by name:

> *"He conveyed empathy, he didn't make me feel like I was just someone else coming in by calling me by my first name."*
> Learning difficulties (female) shopper, LA11

2.6 Office environment

Finally the physical layout of the office, along with the atmosphere, was integral to how at ease mystery shoppers felt about the visits. Existing evidence into the design of public waiting areas has shown that people experience the built environment differently according to who they are – their social, cultural and economic background and that the full diversity of this experience needs to be considered if all users are to be comfortable and feel that a particular space or place belongs to them.[67] The quality of the waiting environment makes a significant difference to how individuals feel about themselves and how they behave and can also help to lessen perceived waiting times.[68] It is important that the views of service users are taken into account in the design of the space 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.[69]

The majority of offices mystery shoppers visited were described as clean and well presented, with some employing 'greeters' to direct visitors to the appropriate section and all but one of the authorities outside of London were described positively. This was due to their 'vibrant' and modern feel (LA8 in the South East) and because they had a 'relaxed atmosphere' (LA12 in the North).

London offices were generally perceived as much more chaotic, partly because of the high volume of visitors there, but also because they seemed to be less well organised.[70] For example, on a number of occasions mystery shoppers joined what turned out to be the wrong queue for significant periods of time due to a lack of clear signposts. This could be frustrating for the mystery shoppers:

> *"Having got a ticket [after spending an hour in the wrong queue because of a lack of signposting] I had a two hour wait to see an advisor [customer services staff] at the receptionist desk. When I did, I was then told I was too late for a personal interview and that I would have to come back tomorrow for that."*
> Rough sleeper (female) shopper, LA7

> *"Cluttered, felt grubby and empty even though it was full of people…really badly organised. No-one on main reception. People didn't know what to do."*
> Rough sleeper (male) shopper, LA7

Mystery shoppers regularly complained that there were not enough seats for the volume of visitors, or that the ones provided were uncomfortable. The seating available was usually formed from a series of metal benches bolted to the floor and meant visitors had to sit at close proximity with each other.[71] When combined with a lack of privacy and long waiting times, this resulted in mystery shoppers reporting that they had been treated without dignity.

> *"Two mega CCTV cameras and anti-climb metal things around them. Metal shutters over the windows to prevent them getting smashed. It felt very intimidating."*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA6

However, a less than positive office

67 Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2008) *Inclusion by design. Equality, diversity and the built environment*. London: CABE, p. 4.

68 Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2008) *Inclusion by design. Equality, diversity and the built environment*. London: CABE, p. 4. See also Becker, F. and Douglass, S. (2008). The ecology of the patient visit: Physical attractiveness, waiting times and perceived quality of care. *Journal of Ambulatory Care Management*, 31 (2): 128-141; ODPM (2005) *Hostel Capital Improvement Programme* (HCIP): London. ODPM; SEE Platform (2013) *Design for Public Good*. London: Design Council.

69 Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2008) *Inclusion by design. Equality, diversity and the built environment*. London: CABE, p. 4.

70 The one exception to this was LA4 in West London where shoppers praised the layout for creating a more informal atmosphere due to the comfy and colourful seating and the fact that enough chairs had been provided for the visitors.

71 This was in direct contrast to local authorities outside London (and LA4) where sofas were usually provided.

environment did not necessarily mean that the service received was bad. For example, the Midlands office (LA9) was described as '*horrible, dingy, old fashioned',* but all the mystery shoppers felt that this was outweighed by the positive treatment they received from staff.

In recent years the use of surveillance techniques has become more prevalent across a range of public services and homelessness services are no exception to this trend. However, surveillance is likely to disproportionately affect vulnerable people, as it may reinforce a person's sense of shame and stigma. For instance, 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

This was not the only instance where a local authority was likened to feeling like a prison. In a few offices the excessive use of surveillance caused mystery shoppers to feel that local authorities treated visitors suspiciously or that they were not to be trusted.

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.[72] Whilst in some cases security guards were viewed as friendly and helpful (because they acted as ad-hoc housing staff, directing visitors to ticket machines or the appropriate queue), some mystery shoppers reported instances where they felt intimidated by them and likened them to 'bouncers'.

This type of surveillance in public places creates anxiety,[73] and consequently the offices sometimes felt unwelcoming and created feelings of apprehension; heightening people's stress and feelings of vulnerability which in turn affected their ability to present their case in full.

72 Of the four local authorities without security guards, one was at Outer London borough (LA7), and the remainder were located outside of London (LA9, LA13 and LA14).

73 Minton, A and Aked, J. (2012). 'Fortress Britain': High Security, Insecurity and the Challenge of Preventing Harm. *Working Paper. NEF*. Available at: http://www.annaminton.com/fortress_britain_web.pdf

2.7 Conclusions

- In two thirds of the visits (58) mystery shoppers received an in-depth assessment with a Housing Advisor, but in the remainder (29 visits) they were denied a full assessment

- There were marked regional differences in how assessments were carried out. In all LAs outside the capital and LA4 in London mystery shoppers received an initial interview followed by an assessment with a Housing Advisor. In contrast, in the other six London boroughs they were either incorrectly prevented from seeing an Advisor because the decision had quickly been made that they were not in priority need, or because they were told they could not be assessed until they supplied further documentation

- At all of the local authorities mystery shoppers were not afforded adequate privacy to be able to discuss their circumstances fully. The lack of privacy is likely to result in individuals presenting as homeless withholding important information

- Interactions with staff during the assessment process had a significant effect on how mystery shoppers felt and how easy it was for them to present their case. Sometimes they were met with little empathy and were made to feel like a number rather than a person

- Where shoppers reported better experiences with staff this was largely because they had the opportunity to discuss their situation with a Housing Advisor who they felt had taken an interest in their situation, was non-judgemental and empathetic

- The office environment is likely to have a significant impact on vulnerable people. The heavy presence of security guards and CCTV cameras in these services caused mystery shoppers to feel unsafe or intimidated and enhanced feelings of stigma and shame

3. Outcomes of the visits

Local authorities only have a statutory duty to provide settled accommodation to homeless households deemed to be in priority need and unintentionally homeless, though they also have to arrange interim accommodation for groups that they have a reason to believe will fall into these categories whilst they complete their inquiries (see Section 1.2 in Chapter 1). If people are homeless but do not have a priority need, the local authority must ensure that they are provided with advice and assistance to help them find accommodation for themselves. The Code of Guidance is clear that this must include 'a proper assessment of their housing needs and information about where they are likely to find suitable accommodation'. It also emphasises that it is crucial the advice and assistance is effective and up to date – covering not only housing options but also the broad range of factors that can contribute to homelessness. The advice provided should also act as a signpost to other, more specialist advice such as debt management, health care and coping with drug and alcohol misuse, where this is needed.[74]

In addition, the Code of Guidance makes reference to the homelessness prevention agenda, which operates alongside the legislation and prioritises early intervention to enable people to remain in their homes or find suitable alternative accommodation. Homelessness prevention is vitally important and when individuals approach their local authority for help this first contact really needs to count in order to prevent any further deterioration in their housing situation. The role of local authority staff should primarily be about assisting applicants to avoid homelessness and should be focussed on '*how* can we help?' rather than '*who* can we help?'[75]

A recent study on homelessness and multiple exclusion, the majority of rough sleepers started staying with their friends or relatives because they had no home of their own at a median age of 20 – six years before they started sleeping rough. In this intervening period they encountered risks and challenges such as heavy drinking, hard drug use, becoming a victim of violent crime, going to prison and experienced anxiety and depression.[76] Due to the lack of statutory support, single homeless people often access expensive emergency services to meet basic needs. For instance, rough sleepers disproportionately use health services through the ambulance service and admissions to Accident and Emergency.[77] Providing a strong safety net that works for all affected by homelessness is therefore both the right thing to do as well as the most cost-effective solution to single homelessness.

However, to understand the effectiveness of services for people who fall through the safety net, it is vitally important to have good monitoring data and currently no nation-wide statistics exist on the outcomes that people achieve through Housing Options and homelessness services (as the Government did not introduce a monitoring framework to support the implementation of the Code of Guidance). This is problematic because it makes it difficult to evaluate these services – locally as well as at national level.

This chapter begins with an overview of how often the mystery shoppers were assisted and the outcomes of their visits. It then goes on to outline the main types of advice and assistance the mystery shoppers received and the impact that the practice of gatekeeping had. The chapter ends by describing the regional disparity in the findings.

74 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG, p. 10-11.
75 Crisis (2009) *No one's priority: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services*. London: Crisis, p.7; DCLG (2012) *Making every contact count. A joint approach to preventing homelessness*. London: DCLG.
76 Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, B. and Johnsen, S. (2013) "Pathways into multiple exclusion homelessness in seven UK cities." *Urban Studies*, 50(1): 148-168.
77 CLG (2010) *Ending rough sleeping making the business case*, presentation, unpublished.

3.1 Overview

Meaningful advice and assistance significantly lowers the risk of individuals entering a downward spiral of homelessness and the associated impacts on individual wellbeing, which are even more difficult and costly to resolve. All the mystery shoppers required urgent support – none of the characters they were playing had a place to stay that evening, either because they had already been sleeping rough, could no longer be accommodated by friends or parents, or could not return home because they feared for their safety.

In a minority of visits (37), the mystery shoppers received meaningful support and would have been accommodated that evening. This was most commonly arranged (in 27 visits) through the provision of temporary accommodation[78]. In 20 of the visits mystery shoppers were told they had a priority need. In 10 cases staff used mediation approaches to ensure the mystery shoppers could return to the family home or their friends' place that night (until temporary accommodation could be arranged).[79]

However, in more than half of the visits (50) mystery shoppers received limited or no support. (in all of these instances they were not considered a priority need). It was common for mystery shoppers to simply be given a selection of information sheets and signposted to advice (as discussed in Section 3.3.1). Rather than staff actively working to achieve an outcome for them, the emphasis was often placed for mystery shoppers to achieve the outcome themselves.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there were 29 visits where mystery shoppers were prevented from speaking to a Housing Advisor and in all of these cases they left local authorities without receiving any help at all. The focus of these visits was on quickly establishing whether a homelessness duty was owed rather than focusing on what could be done to help the mystery shoppers.

> *"It's about just processing people and getting them seen and then out of the door. They don't realise it's their job to help you."*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper

At these 29 visits, interviews were quickly brought to an end. This was for one of two reasons: a) staff told mystery shoppers there was nothing the local authority would do to help – despite the fact that an assessment was not carried out (contravening the legislation), or b) mystery shoppers were told that they would need to 'prove' that they were homeless and eligible for assistance by providing various documents (see Section 3.3.2).

> *"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

Particularly frustrating and unsettling for the mystery shoppers was where they had waited for long periods of time only to be told – after a brief interview – that there was nothing the local authority would do for them because they were not in priority need or because they did not have all the documents the local authority deemed necessary in order to make an assessment.

78 Mystery shoppers were instructed to reveal that they were taking part in the research before local authorities went ahead with booking temporary accommodation to avoid any costs being incurred as a result.

79 It is important to note that because the mystery shopping research methodology does not allow for the whole service to be assessed, it is impossible to evaluate what would have happened after this point (see Section 3.2).

Furthermore, at a few local authorities, some of the mystery shoppers faced significant delays before the offer of help would be available. For example, at LA3 appointments were made for them to see a Housing Advisor in four weeks' time, but were offered no support in the intervening time. This was disheartening for the mystery shoppers:

> *"It is so discouraging going in for help and not being given somewhere to stay that night because I'm deemed fit and healthy… The information [about the outreach teams, night shelters and day centres] is not readily available."*
> Rough sleeper (male) shopper, LA3

They also warned such practices 'put many real people off' from ever returning, as they 'lose faith in the system'.

3.2 Where mystery shoppers were housed that evening

Local authorities took steps to secure emergency accommodation for the mystery shoppers in just 37 out of 87 visits. In the majority of these visits (20) mystery shoppers were considered to have a priority need, and Housing Advisors generally offered mystery shoppers a more comprehensive range of support altogether, suggesting that most single homeless people are being neglected under the current system.

> *They explained that I was vulnerable and that they would use find somewhere to stay and that I needed someone to support and look after me. She said that they would get me a social worker."*
> Learning difficulties (female) shopper, LA12

> *"He showed me a list of Bed and Breakfasts, hostels and rooms with limited availability. He asked whether I'd like to live closely. He then rang about one of the rooms that I said I'd like to live in and he said that it was available…"*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA9

At LA9, an advisor from a housing association was present and provided information about the housing options available and assisted in completing the necessary paperwork.

Given the limitations of the research, however, it is not possible to say whether the outcomes of these visits would have been positive in the longer-term, which is vitally important if recurrent homelessness is to be prevented. In fact, existing evidence suggests that the (increasingly weaker) safety net in England is failing a growing number of people – the majority of whom are single homeless people, but also growing numbers of statutorily homeless households.[80]

In addition, some local authorities used mediation to attempt to resolve the

80 Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013*. London: Crisis and JRF; Peaker, G. (2014) "The way we live now." *Nearly Legal*, 23 September 2014. Available at http://nearlylegal.co.uk/blog/2014/09/way-live-now/.

relationship breakdown between family members or friends so mystery shoppers could return to the property they had last been staying at, though this happened in just ten visits.

Mediation approaches were also used to ensure the mystery shoppers had somewhere to stay that evening until temporary accommodation was arranged. It was most commonly used for the mystery shoppers playing the young people character, who had been asked to leave the family home due to relationship breakdown and the fact that they were not able to contribute financially to the household. For instance, a Housing Advisor at LA13 called the young mystery shopper's parents and tried to negotiate a temporary return home until the local authority could provide accommodation:

> *"She told me to give this [letter] to my mum as evidence that I'd been to see the council and wrote her number at the top in case my mum wanted to call."*
> Young person (female) shopper, LA13

3.3 Advice and assistance

As explained earlier, the Code of Guidance makes clear that local authorities must provide settled accommodation for homeless households deemed to be in priority need and unintentionally homeless and the advice and assistance provided must be up to date and robust if it is to be effective and prevent homelessness.[81] However, the Government did not introduce a monitoring framework to support the implementation of the Code of Guidance and no inspections of these services are currently carried out. As a result, no nation-wide, and publicly available, statistics exist on the outcomes that people achieve through Housing Options and homelessness services. The absence of data makes it very difficult to evaluate these services – locally as well as at national level.[82] If local authorities are to understand the effectiveness of their Housing Options and homelessness services, it is vitally important they know what outcomes have been achieved. These outcomes should be appropriate to an individual's circumstances and sustainable in the longer term to avoid the recurrence of homelessness and housing difficulties.

The Code of Guidance also makes clear that local authorities should complete a homeless assessment for any person who is homeless or threatened with homelessness and that that should progress alongside efforts to prevent homelessness. As mentioned earlier there were numerous examples of mystery shoppers not being given the opportunity to make a homelessness application and more generally in the majority of visits they felt the options available to them had not been explained. The fact that some mystery shoppers were told after a quick interview that they were not in priority despite the fact they never received an assessment by a

81 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG p.9.
82 The Scottish Housing Regulator have reached a similar conclusion about services in Scotland, albeit the data there is a lot more comprehensive. (Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) *Housing Options in Scotland a thematic inquiry*. Glasgow: SHR).

Housing Advisor only added to the confusion they felt about 'how the system works'.

The advice and support the mystery shoppers received – particularly in London – was often not meaningful and on some occasions also incorrect. Advice was also often too generic for it to be in any way useful to the mystery shoppers. For example, the most common advice given to the mystery shoppers playing the character of rough sleeper was that they should submit a housing benefit claim before looking for accommodation in the private rented sector and to visit the nearest Job Centre.[83]

Mystery shoppers also reported that staff used a lot of jargon and that what they told them was often difficult to follow.

> *"[T]hey don't explain what's going on, they talk about this stuff using jargon they just say it and expect you to understand…"*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA8

There did not appear to be a clear structure to the interviews and a lot of the time they felt the onus was on them to share as much information as possible about their case (which had they been real cases they may have been less likely to do).

3.3.1 Signposting and information

The most common type of help the mystery shoppers were given was signposting and information leaflets (of varying quality). Mystery shoppers frequently reported feeling they had been quickly 'dismissed' with a selection of leaflets and information sheets. It was also common for them to be given maps that were impossible to comprehend. The information was more often than not too generic to be of any value to someone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness. For example, LA7 handed out mystery shoppers a sheet of A4 with the web addresses of Gumtree and Rightmove printed on it. When they asked for more detail, mystery shoppers were told that if they looked up those websites they would be able to find private rented accommodation. Clearly this is very far from the truth – the lack of accessible and affordable accommodation in the private rented sector for vulnerable groups is a well known problem, particularly since recent changes and cuts to housing benefit.[84]

In a small number of instances mystery shoppers were given information about local day centres and where to find free or cheap meals locally.

> *"She gave me a place called XX, where I'll get a sleeping bag and some food, she gave me details for a XY Daycentre, that's open on Monday, she gave me information about bed and breakfast and to get some money, just to pay towards that, and she explained how the council pay for it, also where to eat food, also the XZ hostel accommodation, try that on Monday."*
> Young person (male) shopper, LA8

Whilst this may have helped to ease their immediate basic needs, this information did not address their housing need or any other underlying issues. In a number of instances the information provided was out of date; for example, at one local authority mystery shoppers were given a list of hostels that was over a year old.

A minority of local authorities (5 out 16)

83 Some 'enhanced' Housing Options Services include a Job Centre adviser on site in order to assist individuals with their benefits. None of the local authorities visited for this research had these links with a Job Centre, however it is clear that the ability to refer an individual to this kind of service would help in ensuring they get the assistance they require.

84 Crisis (2012) *No Room Available: study of the availability of shared accommodation*. London: Crisis; Crisis (2012) *Hitting Home: Access schemes and changes to the Local Housing Allowance*. London: Crisis. See also Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2013*. London: Crisis and JRF.

provided information packs. These could be useful where staff spent time talking mystery shoppers through the contents such as explaining the process of finding a tenancy in the private rented sector and as well as what support might be available from the local authority to do this, e.g. a Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme. This was something that was more likely to happen during interviews with Housing Advisors outside London but was not consistently done across all visits.

Only in a minority of visits did the interview go beyond looking at immediate housing need to take into account any issues that may have helped mystery shoppers to sustain accommodation in the future. At LA13 in the North for instance, one of the shoppers playing the rough sleeping character was asked about her employment status (she was unemployed) and what type of jobs she was interested in. After the mystery shopper explained she would like to work in computer design but lacked the required qualifications, the Housing Advisor spent some time looking up courses at local colleges which she might be able to attend.

3.3.2 Gatekeeping

The burden of proof placed on mystery shoppers at a number of the visits was unrealistic, should not have happened and acted as a gatekeeping mechanism (see Chapter 2). The Code of Guidance makes clear that an individual does not have to prove that they are homeless in order to receive help, and that local authorities have a responsibility to carry out investigations themselves.[85]

> *"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

> *"They did not ask my name. Just asked factual questions and due to lack of ID refused to help me."*
> Domestic violence (male) shopper, LA1

A large variety of documents were requested as proof of eligibility of assistance or proof of homelessness, and what constituted sufficient proof – and the exact number of documents required – was not consistent between local authorities. Generally it included a mix of the following:

- Proof of ID (birth certificate or passport)
- Proof of all addresses over the last five years
- Bank statements for the last three months
- Proof of income or benefit details
- GP details
- Letters from friends they had been staying with (to confirm the dates in which this arrangement took place, and the date from which they could no longer accommodate them)
- Letters from parents stating that they were homeless and the date from which they could no longer accommodate them
- Proof of domestic violence e.g. crime reference numbers
- Copy of tenancy agreement of friends they were staying with, plus a photocopy of their friend's ID

Providing proof of all previous addresses over the last five years (including where they had been sofa-surfing) would be difficult for many people but more so for those who are homeless or vulnerably housed. In a number of visits this was not acknowledged at all and

85 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG. p. 60.

people were instead treated with suspicion.

In virtually all cases where assessments were deferred, mystery shoppers were not given an appointment to come back (only one person received a reference number to quote). This meant that, had they been a real case, they would have had to go through the whole process again. The danger is that postponing assessments can leave vulnerable homeless people without any assistance or route to assistance to explore their accommodation options.[86]

It is worth emphasising that even those playing the most vulnerable characters were denied any type of help until they could provide personal identification and other paperwork to 'prove' that they were homeless and entitled to support. For example, the male shopper who played a character with learning difficulties explained to staff he had spent the previous night sleeping out, because he could not open the door to his aunt's home, where he also lived ('the key won't work'), and all his belongings were inside. The aunt was his carer and had recently died (at which point he had stopped taking his medication). A letter he handed out to staff revealed that his landlord had changed the locks (the mystery shopper himself was illiterate and had not realised what had happened). Despite the fact that the mystery shopper was visibly disturbed and had no relatives or friends who could help, in some visits he was not assessed or offered any help whatsoever. He was just told to return once he managed to get hold of proof of identification and other paperwork. When the mystery shopper asked how he would get into his flat he was simply told to 'try to find someone who will help you'. When the mystery shopper responded – 'I was told you would help?', staff said that there is nothing the local authority could do until all the required documentation is produced and quickly ended the interview. Had the case been real, such a vulnerable individual would in all likelihood have continued to sleep rough.

At another local authority the same mystery shopper was asked upon arrival to complete an online tool, but when he asked for support was told that he would have to come back with a friend (when he had already explained he no longer had any he could rely on), because staff were not supposed not help. In the visits where this mystery shopper was not turned away empty handed, the support he received was nevertheless very poor. At LA1, for example, he was signposted to a night shelter and given a leaflet by a local third sector agency, which they said might be able to provide housing advice:

> *"I said that I was not good at reading but they didn't explain what I'd been given and said to go to one of the other agencies who would be able to explain the things."*
> Learning difficulties (male) shopper, LA1

The third sector agency was about two miles away and the character had no money for travel but the mystery shopper was offered no other help. The experience left him very disheartened:

> *"No real advice given, I felt as though I was on a conveyor belt to be dealt with as soon as possible"*
> Learning difficulties (male) shopper, LA1

More generally, it is also worth noting that despite presenting as particularly vulnerable the mystery shopper playing this character was never deemed as having a priority need – in marked contrast to what happened in many of the visits his female equivalent undertook (out of all the shoppers, she was the one most frequently deemed to be in priority need).

86 Shelter Cymru (2003) *Return Call*. Swansea: Shelter.

Another example is the treatment the mystery shopper who played the domestic violence character received at many of her visits. She was seeking help to move to a new area because her ex-partner, who was abusive, had found out where she was staying (and therefore she no longer felt safe there). The mystery shopper, who had been through a similar experience in the past, explained how in some of the visits there was little sympathy for her situation.

> *"That's not the kind of situation you want to be facing if you're fleeing from domestic violence and you're terrified."*
> Domestic violence (female) shopper, LA7

In some local authorities the member of staff quickly ended the initial interview by just saying that the local authority would not help her because she 'did not have children', despite the fact experiencing domestic violence is a priority need in itself.[87] So the mystery shopper was being given a decision despite the fact that she had not been given the opportunity to make a homelessness application. Moreover, despite being in a lot of distress and reiterating that she felt unsafe, in some visits the mystery shopper was offered no meaningful support to find accommodation. In fact, the opposite is true – in one case she was just given an A4 sheet with the website address for Gumtree (which has free classified adverts for rented properties):

> *"She gave me this, this was her advice, she gave me a sheet of paper and I asked her what the paper was and what it's all about and then she said 'just read it, have it. She wouldn't explain nothing and said I could go on this website [Gumtree]… but then I told her I have no money [for a deposit] and she told me to borrow money from my friends."*
> Domestic violence (female) shopper, LA7

Being told to borrow money from friends is clearly not appropriate advice to get from a local authority and the staff member had no other suggestions to put to the mystery shopper (or for that matter asked any other questions about her financial situation or employment status). The mystery shopper reflected that, had this been a real visit, the person would be left in despair as well as at serious risk of harm.

It was common for the mystery shoppers to be asked whether they could seek help from family or friends (either in terms of whether they could accommodate them or help them out financially). Whilst this is in principle a reasonable thing to do as the starting point to an assessment, the opposite is true if posited as the only solutions to an applicant's problems. Moreover, given that by the time people approach a local authority they are likely to have exhausted or near-exhausted those informal sources of support, they should not in any event be regarded as viable long-term solutions to an individual's housing problems.

The requirements around having a local connection were not always followed correctly – the mystery shoppers playing the domestic violence character had not gone to their nearest local authority for the very good reason that they were trying to escape from their abusive partner or stepdad there. But despite the fact that the Code of Guidance makes clear that where an applicant is at risk of violence they can access housing assistance at any authority, on some visits the local authority tried to push shoppers back to the authority they had most recently been residing in to access assistance (LA1, LA4, LA6, all in London, and LA10 in the East).

> *"He said, 'do you have connections in X?' I went no, this is why I'm here, no. 'Well I can't help you, you don't have children so we can't help you because you're not*

87 *Housing Act 1996* (c. 52). London: HMSO

priority'. I just felt defeated as soon as, I just knew there was nothing else I could do there. I don't think they understand the housing laws properly."
Domestic violence (female) shopper, LA1

3.3.3 Interview letters or plans

At the end of the visit, it is good practice for local authorities to provide individuals with a summary of what happened and what should happen next, but this was only actually done by a small minority of local authorities visited (5 out of 16) and not in all visits (in fact, none of the local authorities consistently provided all of the mystery shoppers with a summary document). Also, no local authority provided a document, which combined a summary of the conversation and what the next steps were.

The mystery shoppers found this type of paperwork very useful and something they would like to see done across the board. As well as acting as a reminder of the visit it serves as a summary to show to other professionals who may be working with the individual such as key workers and staff at third sector organisations so that they do not have try and recall, and repeat, what happened:[88]

"When you've been sitting around and waiting, and particularly if you haven't had lunch or you haven't had anything to drink and you're just sitting down, when they start talking to you and giving you too much information you do reach a point where it's easy to… you're not on the ball. So, and particularly if you're distressed, it's actually really good for them to write it down for you."
Rough sleeper (female) shopper, LA13

Moreover mystery shoppers very rarely (3 out of 87 visits) were notified about the outcome of their homelessness application. All local authorities are required to notify the applicant in writing of its decision on the case. Where the decision is against the applicant's interests, e.g. a decision that he or she is ineligible for assistance, not homeless, not in priority need or homeless intentionally, the notification must explain clearly and fully the reasons for the decision.[89] This letter is known as a Section 184 notification and is supposed to outline an individual's priority need status, the reasons why they were found not to have a priority need, and how they can appeal the decision. This further contributed to the confusion around how often mystery shoppers had made a homeless application.

88 In some cases this summary also included a case number so that, should the person return, it would be easily found in the system.
89 DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: DCLG, p. 65.

3.4 Regional divergence

It is important to emphasise that the mystery shoppers generally received considerably better support outside the capital. Outside London staff in most local authorities were generally more proactive at looking at a few different options to address their housing needs, whilst only one of the seven London boroughs (LA4) did so. For instance, the mystery shoppers with the rough sleeper character found that staff spent a significant amount of time trying to find spare hostel beds or arranging referrals to outreach teams so that they would not have to sleep out.

> *"The interview must have been about an hour and a quarter because she went off to make a few different phone calls because she was trying to help me. She apologised for keeping me waiting. She was trying to find hostels for me, obviously I wasn't priority [need] but she was trying to see if there was anywhere I could get in."*
> Rough sleeper (female) shopper, LA13

In contrast, in London boroughs only those who had been deemed as being in priority need (which very rarely happened) were found temporary accommodation. Local authorities relied much more heavily on signposting and on applicants – no matter how unlikely – achieving outcomes for themselves. One London borough explicitly told the mystery shoppers playing the character of the rough sleeper that they would not refer them to outreach services.

> *"I was told to go to a callbox that night and call London street rescue to tell them where I'd be sleeping so that they could come and find me and help me."*
> Rough sleeper (female) shopper, LA7

All mystery shoppers reported better experiences outside the capital.

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

The only exception to this rule was borough LA4 in London. But even outside London mystery shoppers did not always have the opportunity to make a homelessness application and were commonly just offered signposting, most of it focused on how to access privately rented accommodation. Having the opportunity to discuss their circumstances with a Housing Advisor and feeling treated with empathy and as an individual was crucial to whether the visit was regarded in a positive light (see Chapter 2).

The marked regional differences in the findings suggest that housing pressures in London are playing a crucial underlying role. Both visible and hidden forms of homelessness have risen considerably in London over recent years, whereas in other parts of England the picture is more mixed. The use of temporary accommodation and 'out of district' placements is also overwhelmingly concentrated in London.[90] The fact that one of the London boroughs was different and stood out in comparison to other London boroughs implies other factors – such as culture and training – may also be important in improving responses to homeless people.

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

3.5 Conclusions

- Despite the broad range of options for assistance available from local authorities, mystery shoppers generally received very low levels of help which tended to be limited to looking at the private rented sector

- At just 37 visits staff made arrangements for mystery shoppers so that they would have somewhere to stay that night, either in temporary accommodation or by negotiating for them to return to their previous address via mediation

- In 50 visits mystery shoppers received inadequate or insufficient help to address their situation, and the prevalence of gatekeeping often meant that mystery shoppers were refused any kind of help

- The most common types of assistance were receiving written information and verbal advice, though in the majority of cases this was not adequate

- Outside London and at LA4 in London mystery shoppers were more likely to feel that the outcome of their visit had been a positive one because they had been able to discuss their situation with a Housing Advisor and were treated with more empathy, however the housing options they were offered were still relatively narrow

- There is a real concern that the prevalence of gatekeeping and lack of adequate assistance meant the mystery shoppers would fall through the safety net

- It is more cost effective to provide meaningful support at first contact with a local authority than to delay any assistance until an individual has developed more complex support needs as a result of their homelessness

4. Conclusions

The characters played by the mystery shoppers were in crisis situations and urgently needed help. Yet there were numerous examples of local authorities turning them away with little or no support. Given that all mystery shoppers were homeless and had exhausted informal sources of support, if they had been real cases they would have been left in very vulnerable situations. As a consequence, homeless people are often forced to sleep rough, or to engage in risk-taking behaviours to survive.[91]

The most important element of the visits, as it heavily influenced outcomes, was how mystery shoppers were assessed. Particularly important in this respect was whether they had the opportunity to see a Housing Advisor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in local authorities where mystery shoppers had an in-depth discussion about their circumstances, the support they received was consistently better, in the sense that it was more meaningful and relevant to their specific circumstances.

However, there was a considerable inconsistency in the treatment of mystery shoppers both within and between local authorities. Where advice was received it was often too generic for it to be helpful for someone who is homeless and who may be feeling very anxious. It was also clear that the advice and assistance provided to people deemed to have a priority need was significantly better.

Another issue was that there were numerous examples where local authorities had not followed the legislation and the Homeless Code of Guidance correctly. It was common for mystery shoppers to be denied an assessment or any type of help because they lacked sufficient proof of identification or specific paperwork to demonstrate that they were homeless and eligible for assistance. In those visits the onus was on the mystery shopper to 'prove' they were entitled to support, rather than the local authorities taking steps to make inquiries themselves and provide temporary accommodation in the interim. Moreover, though 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.

It is important to emphasise that there were considerable regional differences in the findings. Outside London mystery shoppers invariably had better experiences, primarily because the interactions with staff had been much more positive, according to the mystery shoppers staff were more likely to be non-judgemental and empathetic as well as use a more pro-active approach. The advice and support mystery shoppers received in local authorities outside London was, therefore, a lot better. The only exception to this rule was borough LA4 in London.

However, even outside London mystery shoppers did not always have the opportunity to make a homelessness application and were commonly just offered signposting, most of it focused on how to access privately rented accommodation. Having the opportunity to discuss their circumstances with a Housing Advisor and feeling treated with empathy and as an individual was crucial to whether the visit was regarded in a positive light.

The regional disparity in the results suggests that housing pressure in London are playing a crucial underlying role. Both visible and hidden forms of homelessness

91 Reeve, K. and Batty, E. (2011) *The hidden truth about homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England*. London: Crisis, CRESR

have risen significantly in London in over recent years, whereas elsewhere in England the picture is more mixed. The use of temporary accommodation and 'out of district' placements is also overwhelmingly concentrated in London.[92] The fact that one of the London boroughs was different and stood out in comparison to other London boroughs implies other factors – such as culture, training and resources – may also be playing a role.

Providing a strong safety net that works for all affected by homelessness is both the right thing to do as well as the most cost-effective solution to single homelessness. However, there is no monitoring framework to support the implementation of the Code of Guidance and currently no nation-wide statistics exist on the outcomes that people achieve through Housing Options and homelessness services. Similarly, since the closure of the Audit Commission there has been no body to inspect Housing Options and homelessness services and no specialist advisors to review how they are working in practice. Both of these issues make it difficult to evaluate these services – locally as well as at national level.

4.1 Recommendations

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.

For local authorities

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

   People who approach a Housing Options and homelessness service 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.

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

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. Both 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 prevention 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.

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About Crisis

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

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 think and act towards homeless people.

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