A proposed definition for ending homelessness

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1.   Context

Crisis is one of a number of homelessness organisations that has long advocated an end to homelessness, and is also one of myriad organisations that have a track record in resolving the homelessness of individual clients using our services.

As Crisis launches its 50th anniversary year we are embarking on a significant project to research and evidence the long-term solutions to homelessness in Britain. Our aim is to publish this plan for ending homelessness at the end of our anniversary year in 2018.

Perhaps the first and most important question to address in any plan for ending homelessness is what exactly do we mean by 'ending' it? How do we define that aim and its component parts?

This paper sets out why a definition matters and how it might be used; it details the factors to consider when drafting a definition; and the paper outlines the definition Crisis is proposing, with detailed explanation for each element.

We would be delighted to hear any feedback on this proposed definition. Please email matthew.downie@crisis.org.uk

2.   Why a definition matters

In a British context there are many definitions of what homelessness is[123], but no consistent or recognised definition of what an end to homelessness looks like. Between any two homelessness charities, or local authority housing teams, or even between the three national governments, you will not find a consistent definition of the aims that the different funding, interventions or policy frameworks are striving for.

There are a number of benefits to an approach that does use an agreed and consistent definition. These might include:

Shared ambition – raising our sights to consider a future where homelessness is ended (however that is defined) would allow all those participating in efforts to tackle homelessness to share a vision, and to see their component activity as part of that ambition.

Data – Setting goals to achieve the different elements of ending homelessness allows and promotes data collection against those elements. Current data collection on homelessness is inconsistent at best. An agreed definition would necessitate an agreed data and reporting framework not only of top-level targets but also of indicators of success towards them.

Efficiency – an agreed focus on the outcomes we are all working towards would reduce the time spent on activities outside those aims, and would allow for an audit of the existing and planned policies and activities set out to achieve our aims. It would also focus resources on commissioning effective and targeted solutions to achieving these goal at a national and local level.

Challenge – testing existing efforts to tackle homelessness against a defined aim to end it allows us to ask difficult questions about how successful those efforts are, or to challenge accepted norms in policy and practice.

Political ownership – a definition of ending homelessness that is agreed with and promoted by governments in each nation would be powerful. It would allow for scrutiny of existing policy and development of new policy. It would legitimise the involvement of a wider set of government departments and initiatives towards that definition. It would also provide a framework of success that government budgets are directed towards.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-data-notes-and-definitions
[2] https://sheltercymru.org.uk/get-advice/homelessness/help-from-the-council/what-will-the-council-check/what-is-the-legal-definition-of-homelessness/
[3]http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/homelessness/help_from_the_councils_housing_department/the_councils_homelessness_tests/are_you_homeless

3.   Factors to consider in a proposed definition

Any definition will have to reflect the circumstances of the jurisdictions in which it operates. Below are some key factors to consider, particularly within our context of England, Scotland and Wales.

Existing systems and context – Homelessness is not a uniform experience across jurisdictions, and neither is it experienced in the same ways for the same cohorts of people. For example, the North American rough sleeping and hostel/night shelter populations contain a high proportion of people who are armed forces veterans, whereas in Britain this issue has largely been redressed.[4] Consequently in North America, both strategies to end homelessness involved definitions and targets that recognise this homeless population.[5]

In the British context there are some well-defined cohorts of homeless people that exist alongside and sometimes because of the systems that define them. For example, the term 'statutory homeless' defines a group of people who have met an arbitrary set of legal tests set down in England and Wales.

The significant differences in context therefore mean that the definition of ending homelessness must resonate with the way homelessness is understood where the definition applies. It is also relevant in our context that the hostel system is very well developed and a frequent part of the experience of people through homelessness.

Political audience – If we are aiming to build consensus for a goal of ending homelessness amongst decision makers it is crucial that we understand whether the parameters of a definition for ending homelessness will influence their decisions.

Some politicians may not subscribe to a definition that fails to include an end to wide structural causes of homelessness such as low wages, unemployment, or lack of affordable house-building. Other politicians may only subscribe to a goal of ending homelessness if the definition is restricted to a discreet cohort that offers a shorter-term prospect of success and/or doesn't imply a need for a

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[4] Jones A, Quilgars D, O'Malley L, Rhodes D, Bevan M and Pleace N, Meeting the Housing and Support Needs of Single Veterans in Great Britain, York: University of York, 2008.
[5] http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/veterans_overview

greater welfare safety-net. Indeed, some have gone further and described attempts to recognise wider definitions of homelessness as 'self-serving'.[6]

This is a difficult balancing act but it is crucial that the decision-maker audience is taken into account if political and government ownership of the goal to end homelessness is an aim.

Framing the issue – Associated to the issues to consider for political audiences will be how the definition of ending homelessness works as a communication tool for wider audiences. The general public and specific groups within that will have assumptions and viewpoints about what homelessness is (and isn't). We also know for example that there is a general public cynicism about whether homelessness can be ended.[7]

The way we communicate about homelessness does impact on public opinions about what it is, and whether it can be solved.[8]

It is therefore important that the definition *and* how that definition is communicated more widely is known to have a productive impact on the general public support for the aim itself of ending homelessness.

The reality of life for homeless people – Definitions of 'homelessness ended' cannot be an academic exercise. They must reflect the views and experiences of people with lived experience of the issue, and even the views of people who may not consider their experience as such. For example, people living in overcrowded accommodation may not consider themselves to be homeless or for that homelessness to be ended when living somewhere less crowded. If these questions are not addressed as part of the definition process, it is likely that the definition will be compromised at a later stage.

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[6] http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/ihstory.aspx?storycode=446007
[7] Frameworks Institute, 2017 (published May 2017)
[8] Ibid

4.   Functional Zero and Absolute Zero

The definition of ending homelessness is in many ways a choice made about the scale of ambition we seek. Within homelessness academia there is a debate about how best to define this ambition, and indeed what the terminology represents. Without wishing to replay that debate here, there is a common discussion about whether to aim for 'Functional Zero' or Absolute Zero'[9] that usefully informs our decisions about definitions.

Functional Zero usually refers to ending or managing down the most acute forms of homelessness. The original version of Functional Zero in the US was described as:

> *"At any point in time, the number of Veterans experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness will be no greater than the current monthly housing placement rate for Veterans experiencing homelessness."*[10]

Notwithstanding the Veterans focus this restricts the definition of ending homelessness to a situation where numbers of 'sheltered and unsheltered' people are not going up.

The Functional Zero concept has since developed to one where rough sleeping and long-term homelessness has been addressed. An often-cited example is the Canadian city of Medicine Hat, which declared in 2015 that it had ended homelessness.[11] What this actually meant was that nobody was sleeping rough and that the time people spent in night shelters was going down.[12] It did not mean that other forms of homelessness were addressed, and crucially was not about reducing the flow of people onto the streets or into night shelters.

In the UK context the nearest we may have come in recent times to Functional Zero would be the success of the Rough Sleepers Initiative in reducing the number of people sleeping rough by two-thirds.[13]

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[9] http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/Absolute-Zero-Turner-Albanese-Pakeman_0.pdf
[10] https://www.community.solutions/sites/default/files/final_zero_2016_metrics.pdf
[11] http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-thursday-edition-1.3074402/medicine-hat-becomes-the-first-city-in-canada-to-eliminate-homelessness-1.3074742
[12] http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/medicine-hat-homeless-free-update-1.3949030
[13] http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN02007/SN02007.pdf

Most recently, the concept of Functional Zero has been developed further to include the idea that demand for homelessness services should be reduced, either by working upstream with existing homeless people to rapidly rehouse them, or by identifying people at acute risk and preventing their homelessness.[14]

Absolute Zero refers to a utopian end to homelessness where everybody has access to housing and support and nobody is even at risk of homelessness.

This implies the kind of wider structural and societal shifts that are usually outside the purview of homelessness policy, but it is nevertheless useful to consider the broad areas involved. The evidence for housing and welfare policy impacting homelessness is well made across the UK[15]and so it cannot be exclusive to pure vision of Absolute Zero to consider the positive impact of a shift in these policy areas.

In a British context the polar opposites of Functional and Absolute Zero are unlikely to be sufficiently either aspirational or realistic, but is it instructive to assess where a definition for ending homelessness might fit along the line between these extremes.

A useful way forward that might use strengths from both definitions/approaches is to see Functional Zero as a staging post of progress towards Absolute Zero.[16]

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[14] http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/Ending_Homelessness_Definition.pdf
[15] http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html
[16] http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/Ending_Homelessness_Definition.pdf

5.   Consulting with experts

In reaching a definition, it was important that we consulted and tested our proposed definition. This ensured that those with lived and professional experience of homelessness were able to shape the definition, drawing on their knowledge and understanding of the issue. As part of this process, Crisis undertook 21 workshops with over 400 people across England, Scotland and Wales to engage a wide set of views and to ensure that the definition work in a variety of contexts.

The outcomes from the sessions were analysed by the Crisis research team and used to further develop and improve the definition. This process ensured that a workable and shared definition for what ending homelessness looks like has been produced. A final version is outlined below and the considerations which were discussed as part of the consultation are examined in more detail in the table at the end of this report.

6. The proposed definition

Following the consultation process the definition for ending homelessness, outlined below, has been developed:

- **No one sleeping rough**

- **No one forced to live in transient or dangerous accommodation such as tents, squats and non-residential buildings**

- **No one living in emergency accommodation such as shelters and hostels without a plan for rapid rehousing into affordable, secure and decent accommodation**

- **No one homeless as a result of leaving a state institution such as prison or the care system**

- **Everyone at immediate risk of homelessness gets the help they need that prevents it happening**

Further details of each of these four elements are given below, but in general terms this definition is written to reflect the following factors:

A bold vision – This is a definition that moves some way forward from Functional Zero. Not only does it aspire to an end to different forms of homelessness, but it also assumes it is reasonable to aspire to breakthrough success in different forms of homeless prevention. We can have this confidence because we know there are effective and evidence-based approaches available to tackle each element of homelessness identified.

Political consideration – The definition does however stop short of defining an end to homelessness in its broadest sense, so for example it does not address sub-standard accommodation, nor does it contain an end to temporary accommodation. This is not to say that these and issues are not real or important, but that they would restrict or stop political buy-in because the scope of the strategies necessary for achieving the aim would be more complex.

7.   Explaining the definition

The following table gives further details about what is meant by each individual element, and the considerations made during the consultation period.

Definition	Explanation	Consideration
No one sleeping rough	As stated	This moves on from the No Second Night Out approach where people get help once they have been verified as rough sleepers, and aims for a complete and total end to the most dangerous form of homelessness.
No one forced to live in transient or dangerous accommodation such as tents, squats and non-residential buildings	This refers to people who are living in vulnerable housing situations outside of the homelessness system. This will include people who are squatting, living in cars, tents, non-residential buildings, etc. but also includes the 'sofa surfing' group.	This is about the group of people who are outside the homelessness system but not recognised as rough sleeping, and who have no choice but to live in this situation. Transient also refers to people forced to live in other people's accommodation – otherwise known as 'sofa-surfing'.
No one living in emergency accommodation such as shelters and hostels without a plan for rapid rehousing into affordable, secure and decent accommodation	'Shelters and hostels' refer to those which are specifically homelessness provision. Other forms of emergency accommodation include bed and breakfasts, nightly paid temporary accommodation, those waiting for a homelessness decision to be made and other forms of short-term housing. It does not refer to the wider group of people in general temporary	This is not about aspiring to having no more hostels or night shelters, but it does imply a significantly reduced demand for them over time, and an increase in permanent housing approaches to address homelessness. It has been difficult to define the concept of successful and rapid move-on. This reflects the problem that there are many people with

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	accommodation such as statutory homeless people who have been placed in social housing on a short-term basis. The 'plan' refers to real and urgent move-on arrangements from these forms of emergency accommodation, and nobody whose plan for moving on cannot be delivered. 'Affordable, secure and decent' refers to the range of elements that will make for a successful move-on from emergency accommodation. It has not been possible to define exactly the length of time that 'rapid' rehousing refers to, given that this will depend on what is appropriate for different people and cohorts of homelessness. It should however directly include statutory limits for households in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, and other such regulations.	move-on plans in place who nevertheless remain in emergency accommodation because of other factors.
No one homeless as a result of leaving a state institution such as prison or the care system	This refers to successful homeless prevention for people who have been responsibility of the state. This includes previously looked after children and people who have been released from prison, but should include other groups too, such as the armed forces, people who have been in NHS care, people who have been the responsibility of the asylum and immigration system, etc.	It is important to note that this is about the transition from state institutions and not about all those who have ever been in care, prison, etc. That transition is the opportunity for successful prevention. Also important to note that those who fall within definition 4 could also fall within definition 5, however as there is over representation of people who are homeless as

		a result of leaving care, prison etc. this group should be pulled out separately from the wider 'at immediate risk' groups
Everyone at immediate risk of homelessness gets the help that prevents it happening	This is restricted to those who are at most acute risk, and require a homelessness prevention intervention.	It is not possible to define every situation whereby someone might be at immediate risk, but there are reasonable tests of risk that are developed and used, not least in the legal prevention duties for Wales and England which restricts this to a time limit of 'within 56 days'.

Appendix A – comparison of definitions

Organisation/Place	Definition
FEANTSA www.feantsa.org	- No one sleeping rough - No one living in emergency accommodation for longer than is an 'emergency' - No one living in transitional accommodation longer than is required for successful move-on - No one leaving an institution without housing options - No young people becoming homeless as a result of the transition to independent living
Sweden	- All people shall be granted roofs over their heads and be offered continued coordinated interventions according to their needs. - The number of women and men staying in prisons, treatment units and supported housing with no housing arranged at the time for their discharge shall be reduced. - Access to the regular housing market shall be facilitated for women and men, respectively, who reside in housing staircases, training flats or other forms of housing supplied by the social services. - The number of evictions shall be reduced and no children shall be evicted
Ireland	- eliminating long-term occupation of emergency homeless facilities - eliminating the need to sleep rough; and - preventing the occurrence of homelessness as far as possible
Denmark	- No citizens should live a life on the street. - Young people should not stay at homeless hostels, but must be offered alternative solutions. - Periods of accommodation in care homes or shelters should last no longer than three to four months for citizens who are prepared to move into their own homes with the necessary support. - Release from prison or discharge from courses of treatment or hospitals must presuppose that an accommodation solution is in place