

Inquiry into Scotland's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic – Crisis response to Aims and Principles Document



Crisis in Scotland

Crisis is the national charity for people facing homelessness. We know that homelessness is not inevitable, and we know that together, we can end it. Crisis is dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Every year we work directly with thousands of people experiencing homelessness in 11 areas across England, Scotland and Wales. We provide vital help so that people can rebuild their lives and are supported out of homelessness for good. We offer one to one support, advice and courses according to individual needs. We use research to find out how best to improve our services, but also to find wider solutions to end homelessness.

Which areas of the handling of COVID-19 in Scotland do you think deserve particular scrutiny?

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted rapid shifts in responses to homelessness in Scotland, including in relation to rough sleeping, wider homelessness and housing responses, and social housing allocations. It is Crisis' view that the response of services to **protect those experiencing homelessness and ensure people had a safe place to stay during the public health emergency**, should be a theme considered by the Public Inquiry.

Similar to the *Everyone In* policy in England, Scottish Government, Local Authorities and third sector partners took decisive action to accommodate rough sleepers in emergency accommodation (hotels) when the pandemic hit in March 2020.

It would be valuable for the Public Inquiry to consider:

1. Whether the changes to homelessness services introduced in response to the pandemic – such as the emergency hotels and Rapid Rehousing Welcome Centres – helped to protect people during the public health emergency and provide accommodation to a particularly vulnerable section of the population at a time when it was needed most. As part of this, the Inquiry should give particular attention to the **extent to which those rough sleeping were provided with accommodation quickly and effectively**, the support provided and the **safety and wellbeing of individuals housed in emergency accommodation** especially given the reports early on in the pandemic of deaths having occurred in this type of accommodation in Glasgow. The Inquiry should also consider **how quickly people were supported to move on** from these forms of emergency accommodation to settled housing options.
2. The Public Inquiry should consider the **success of the vaccination programme in terms of reaching out to vulnerable or marginalised groups**, and ensuring that those without a permanent address (such as those in temporary accommodation) were supported to access the vaccine.
3. The extension of the **Unsuitable Accommodation Order**, which ensures that no homeless households can be placed in temporary accommodation that is unsuitable for more than seven days, was delayed by several months as a result of the pandemic and the challenges certain local authorities will face in meeting this new statutory duty. It would be valuable for

the Inquiry to consider whether the delay was reasonable, and the ways in which the pandemic presented unforeseen challenges, such as through increased numbers in temporary accommodation.

Are there areas in which you think Scotland would benefit particularly from drawing lessons learned?

There were some major successes achieved in changes to homelessness policy made during the pandemic. The key question is how we embed those new ways of working, and make the positive changes to policy and practice permanent, following the pandemic.

Particular areas it would be useful to consider are:

- **Support for those with No Recourse to Public Funds:** The emergency accommodation funding and response was explicitly inclusive of those experiencing homelessness with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) who had previously not been entitled to assistance under Scottish homelessness legislation. The guidance from COSLA and emergency legislation seeking to ensure that those with NRPF had access to support and healthcare during the pandemic. This enabled services to engage those with long histories of homelessness and complex needs.
- **No return to the use of Hostels and Night Shelters:** the pandemic acted as a catalyst for a political commitment and cultural shift away from the use of congregate accommodation and night shelters, as recommended by the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG). The Everyone Home Collective, a group of third sector and academic organisations established during the pandemic, have developed a routemap charting an end to the need for night-shelter and hotel provision as a response to homelessness, an ambition now committed to by the Scottish Government.
- **Dramatically reduced numbers of rough sleeping:** There is evidence to suggest that rough sleeping in Scotland's major cities was reduced to an all-time low during 2020, through offering accommodation to rough sleepers as swiftly as possible. The Inquiry should look at how these gains can be made permanent, with no return to the levels of rough sleeping that were seen prior to the pandemic.
- **Support for tenants facing eviction:** the factors contributing to statutory homelessness changed during the pandemic. The number of households presenting as homeless due to the loss of rental tenancies fell by 57% in 2020/21 compared to the previous year, as the Scottish Government acted to protect tenants from eviction during the pandemic. There are now concerns however, that there might be an increase in homeless applications caused by eviction due to rent arrears, as the furlough scheme ends. The Scottish Government is currently consulting on plans to make permanent the discretionary grounds for eviction and the pre-action requirements in the PRS. The Inquiry should look at how measures introduced during the pandemic helped to prevent homelessness, and how these can be made permanent.

Is there any type of evidence that you think is essential for the inquiry to obtain?

In looking at the topics outlined above, it is essential to get input from those who experienced homelessness during the pandemic, and those providing frontline services including local authority and housing association staff, as well as those working in third sector organisations.

Some research reports which would be valuable to consider in relation to the topics outlined include:

- The Homelessness Monitor Scotland, 2021: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/scotland/the-homelessness-monitor-scotland-2021/>
- The impact of Covid-19 on people facing homelessness across GB (2020): <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/services-and-interventions/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-people-facing-homelessness-and-service-provision-across-great-britain-2020/>
- Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/homelessness-monitor-england-2020-covid-19-crisis-response-briefing/>
- Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans, temporary accommodation and housing options: a survey of Scotland's local authorities: <https://www.cih.org/media/yviejzuu/rapid-rehousing-transition-plans-research-2021.pdf>

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