

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Impact of Covid-19 on homelessness and the private rented sector, HC 309

Thursday 17 December 2020

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Rachel Hopkins; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 187 - 244

Witnesses

I: Sam, Expert by Experience, NACCOM; Abeo, Expert by Experience, NACCOM; T, Expert by Experience, St Mungo's; Tracy, Expert by Experience, St Mungo's.

II: Fiona Colley, Director of Social Change, Homeless Link; Steve Douglas CBE, CEO, St Mungo's; Henry St Clair Miller, Head of NRPF, Refugee and Migrant Services, NRPF Network.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sam, Abeo, T and Tracy.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. This afternoon we are having a further evidence session looking at the important issues, particularly at this time of year, of homelessness, the private rented sector and the impact of Covid-19. We have two panels of witnesses this afternoon. Before I introduce in general terms the first panel, I just want members of the Committee to put on record any particular interests they may have that may be relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Bob Blackman: I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I employ a councillor in my parliamentary office.

Ian Byrne: I am a sitting councillor in Liverpool.

Rachel Hopkins: I am a councillor in Luton, I am a vice-president of the

LGA and I employ a councillor in my Luton office.

Q187 Chair: The Committee has put on record anything they may have as an interest that might influence them in looking at the evidence we are going to receive.

We have two panels of witnesses this afternoon. The first one is a slightly unusual one for the Committee. Rather than individuals representing national or local organisations, we have four witnesses who personally have experienced homelessness. They are here today to tell us their story.

Bob Blackman was just reminding us earlier than when he steered the Homelessness Reduction Act through Parliament we began by having evidence sessions at our Select Committee, and we had people before us then talking to us about their experiences of being homeless. That helped shape our input into that Act. At the end of the day, it made it a better Act because it actually related to the real-life experiences of people. That is what we want to talk about this afternoon to our four witnesses, who have come very kindly to talk about their experiences.

Clearly, they are going to talk about personal things. Therefore, three of the witnesses will not be using video, because they want to remain anonymous. It is absolutely right that we allow them, in this particular case and these circumstances, to do so. They will be careful about the particulars of personal details they give us, but those personal details and those personal experiences are really important to us and to everyone who is listening who wants to understand how homelessness impacts on individuals and what we should be doing to try to meet those challenges better as a society in the future.

If we could begin, as I say, three of our witnesses are not on camera, but they are able to hear us and to speak to us when we put our questions to them. I would just like to ask the four witnesses—perhaps we can begin first of all with Tracy, who is on camera—to tell us a little bit about your experiences of being homeless, so we can begin to understand a little bit about how it affected you and what happened.

Tracy: I was homeless for 18 years, living on the streets of north London mostly. During those 18 years, I was a heroin and crack-cocaine addict. I made my money by begging or sex work. I did not intend to become homeless. I just was led down the wrong path and unfortunately that was my way of life for 18 years.

Abeo: Good afternoon and thank you for having me here and letting me share my story. I came to the UK young, 20 years ago; I was 18. I joined my mother, who lives here. I started working immediately and then I put myself in trouble and got sent to prison.

My indefinite leave to remain has been revoked. A deportation order has been signed against me. Because of political reasons, I could not be deported back to my country. I got released from the detention centre and immigration put a restriction on me, saying that I am not allowed to work, claim benefits, study or travel. That made me become destitute

and homeless. I have been homeless for two years. Now, because of the coronavirus, I have been accommodated by the council.

Sam: My name is Sam. Thank you so much for having me today. I am a newly recognised refugee. I currently live in asylum accommodation. We are currently in tier 3 in my region. With the Christmas and new year period approaching, I am at risk of homelessness in 18 days, because I am being evicted from asylum accommodation.

I was previously homeless. I was sofa-surfing for over a year, trying to find accommodation. I really struggled to access services due to no recourse to public funds, and I ended up sleep-deprived for weeks in a fast-food restaurant. This period was really scary and a difficult time for me, and I remember asking myself, "Will I ever feel safe?"

Having lived this experience, I am now a community activist. I volunteer with local charities. I am here today to share my personal experience but also those of people in my community.

T: Good afternoon. I became homeless due to domestic violence, which was going on in my household that I was living in. My family were relocated out of London, so I was left by myself and tried to figure it out. I contacted my local council. Unfortunately, they were not able to facilitate my needs and what I needed at the time. Luckily for me, I was referred to St Mungo's, who then housed me. At the moment I am just here trying to get myself back together again and sort things out.

Q188 **Chair:** You mentioned there that you have been in touch with the local council, T. Have any of the other witnesses for us today been in touch with the council, had any support or refused any support from them? Abeo, were they able to help? Perhaps it was difficult in your particular case for them, with the rules. Have you been in touch with them at all?

Abeo: Yes. I will share with you what happened from the start. Before the pandemic, I had to live off begging and sleeping rough mostly. Some of my friends used to let me stay in their house, but since the pandemic no one wants to let me stay in their house.

Because I was scared, on 20 March I sent a desperate email to immigration seeking urgent accommodation so I could isolate myself, but they never replied to me. One day I was sitting on the street and the police came to me and they told me that I needed to call the number of a charity that was getting everyone off the street. I called the number and the charity organisation contacted my local council on behalf of me and they asked for urgent accommodation, and the council called me and interviewed me over the phone. They asked me to fill in a form. I filled in the form, and the next day they sent me an email saying, "Your application has been refused, because you have no recourse to public funds".

I called the council and asked them about it. The Government asked the councils to house all rough sleepers to tackle Covid-19. Because I have an underlying health condition, I need to be isolated. They said, "The

decision has been made and we cannot do anything for you". I could not win the case, so I carried on sleeping on the streets.

A few days later I contacted another charity called NACCOM, and NACCOM contacted a different nearby council on behalf of me. They asked for urgent accommodation, and that council agreed to put me in a B&B for the weekend but they did not give me any food or money. I ate only cornflakes for three days.

Three days later, the council interviewed me and they told me, "Your application has been refused and you have to leave the B&B". I told them, "I have an underlying health condition and I cannot be on the streets again. Can I stay here?" They said, "We cannot accommodate you for now because your last address belonged to a different borough, and for that reason your application has been refused". Because I was scared to sleep rough, I refused to leave the B&B. The council called the police on me, and the police took my B&B room key and put me on the streets.

I am back on the street again. NACCOM contacted the Public Interest Law Centre, and the Public Interest Law Centre wants to take legal action against the council. After a month and a half, the council accommodated me without any financial support.

Q189 **Chair:** That is an awful situation. We cannot begin to understand what it must have been like; we can just hear the story you have told us. Does Tracy or Sam want to add anything about your experiences with charities or councils?

Sam: I have been in touch with the local council. I made a homeless application. There is a delay in service due to the pandemic, because I only have 18 days to leave, because of the 28-day movement period for newly recognised refugees from asylum accommodation. I am not allowed to work and I do not have any savings. I applied for universal credit three weeks ago. I still do not have an appointment for universal credit. In 18 days, on 5 January, I have to leave my accommodation.

It is really difficult. As an asylum seeker, I was not allowed to work. I do not have savings. By the time you open a bank account and get universal credit, to try to find alternative accommodation is really difficult. I should be celebrating the fact that I have my leave to remain. I have been looking for a job; I have been doing job interviews. I should be focusing on that instead of doing homeless applications.

This has been a problem with the 28 days, especially during the pandemic. The holidays are coming up. I have 18 days to leave the property.

Q190 **Chair:** What are the council saying to you about that?

Sam: They have looked at my application, but they have not responded to it. I am still waiting. That is why I am saying there is a delay in services.

Chair: Yes, there seems to be.

Tracy: I am lucky enough; I am in supported housing. I live in a property that is called a clearing house, which means it is supposed to be only for three or four years but you get a support worker attached to it.

I am such a people person and I struggle with mental health issues. I am a recovering addict. In the early stages of my recovery, I had a few minor lapses. The struggle I have had is not actually with the council but with the support I have attached to my housing. I have not been able to have my support worker able to come and see me. She is an amazing worker. I cannot fault her one bit. She knows me personally. I can send an email and tell her everything is fine; I can send her a text and tell her everything is fine. She has to go by that, but, if she came and saw me in person, she would see that I was not fine. I lost my job at the beginning of the pandemic. I was a carer. I had no food, no money—nothing. I felt guilty reaching out to her and asking for help, because of the situations other people are in, as we have just listened to. I know there are other people out there who are in much worse conditions. It is just not right.

Every night when I go to bed I pray that I have a roof over my head, but I still do not have enough food in my cupboards. I struggle from month to month. I would just pray that I could just have that one meeting with my support worker where I could see her face to face. I am just struggling a little bit at the moment.

Q191 **Ian Byrne:** Thank you so far to the witnesses. You have all been excellent; you really have. It has been really heartfelt evidence so far. I am just going to touch on—Tracy and Abeo have touched on this as well—what your experiences have been like during the pandemic. How has it impacted your life? Importantly, what has your experience been of access to support, housing and advice? How have the agencies actually helped you through it all? Have they helped you through it? It will be extremely important, as we do the report, that we get the experiences that you have lived through. It is hugely important for this exercise.

T: My experience during the pandemic has been hit and miss, and the reason I say that is because I moved into this property in March, a week before we went into lockdown. I had not had a chance to meet the other people in my home. We were self-isolating. Someone had contracted the virus, so we were all staying in our rooms.

As you can imagine, I had just moved here. I was nervous; I did not want to use the facilities because I had not had the opportunity to meet everybody. I was not able to see my support worker as much as I was used to or as much as I thought I was going to be able to see her.

There were positives for me. During the time I had moved here, my local council called me and said, "Are you still homeless? We can help you". I was like, "Now? I have already sorted something out". I had to; otherwise I would have been on the street. That was really helpful.

During the time I have been in supported housing, my local council have given me food weekly, because I have underlying issues as well. They have offered me a food bank weekly, which has been really helpful. I did get offered an opportunity to go and isolate somewhere else outside of the house, which was really beneficial.

It just felt like there was so much support because of Covid, but prior to that there was no support. There was no one to help. It was just like, "Figure it out on your own". As soon as the pandemic happened, I was getting calls saying, "We are going to help you now".

Q192 Ian Byrne: To follow up on that, T, that is really positive to hear that experience and to hear the Government's Everyone In policy has actually helped you. That has been a real plus point of the response during the pandemic. It may get touched on later, but you just mentioned the lack of support before and now getting support during Covid. What we cannot do now is slip back to where you were with no support. What would your thoughts be on that issue?

T: I just feel as though it should not have had to take a pandemic to happen for me to get housed. They did not even know I was housed in supported housing. It should not have to take something like this to happen for people to make sure we are okay, make sure we can afford food and make sure we have access to these support systems. It should not have taken all of this to happen.

Q193 Ian Byrne: That is a brilliant answer. Thank you very much. Tracy, do you want to add something?

Tracy: Yes, there is something I am struggling with as well. I understand that no one has experienced something like this, and I understand the Prime Minister has a job on his hands to try to sort everybody out. This is not just about me but other people with mental health problems. We are getting told one week that we are in tier something.

He really needs to understand that I have not seen my support worker for five or six months. Like I keep saying, I am one of the lucky ones. I have my partner; I have friends I can speak to online. It is about still having that personal touch where I can actually see my support worker and tell her, "I am not feeling okay". It is so easy for me to send a text to say, "Hi, Christina. Everything is fine". It is simple. She takes that, reads it and says, "Okay". She ticks a box to say she has contacted Tracy and everything is fine. But, no, if she was able to come to my house, she would see I am not the happy-go-lucky Tracy who is always up for a laugh and always having a joke. She would see that in my fridge I hardly have any food.

I have not even been on a public bus since the pandemic, because I am scared. I have COPD and wearing a mask makes me panic. I was on a bus when I was a carer just before I lost my job. I coughed, and I literally got booted to get off the bus. Since then I have not even got on a bus. I am really struggling at the moment to comprehend how people

with mental health issues and homelessness have not really been accounted for.

Q194 **Ian Byrne:** That is a magnificent piece of evidence. On that, Tracy, you are texting your support worker. Is there any ability to use Zoom? Zoom is far from perfect, but do you have that ability to speak face to face even though it is on a screen? Has that happened?

Tracy: Now I am volunteering for St Mungo's, and we have been doing a lot of online meetings. Then again, this is people who do not really know me. It is only for an hour a week. Christina knows me. She knows when I am putting on a brave face. It is so different. I can still hide behind a screen, because it is only for an hour. I can say to myself in my head, "Come on, Trace. Put a smile on. You will be alright", just for that hour. If she was allowed to go to my house or I was allowed to go to the office, she would just know from my body language. It is just so different.

Ian Byrne: That lack of personal contact has been missed through the pandemic.

Sam: I was just going to mention that I know a lot of people during the pandemic have been forced to choose between food and data or credit so they can access services, especially people in the asylum system. I was in the asylum system only three weeks ago. We only live on £5.66, and you have to choose. It has been really difficult. Charities have done so much to support us on digital exclusion and through the pandemic.

When it comes to the Everyone In scheme, it has been really successful. It has not been perfect, though, and people have fallen through the cracks. Moving forward, when we say, "Everyone in", it should mean everyone. People have felt safe and secure during the pandemic. It has been their safety net.

I know people with no recourse to public funds, including my housemate. Everyone in this household has experienced homelessness. She had health issues—liver cancer—and she was due to be evicted just before the Covid lockdown happened. She was so grateful, because with Everyone In she was able to stay in her accommodation. She focused on her legal advice; she could get legal advice. I know a service user who told me that, because he has been housed, he can now focus on other aspects of his life, like his health, and also engage with other services. Having a home is so important. It is really important for people. I do not think it should take a pandemic to house people. It should be happening. People should have a home.

Q195 **Ian Byrne:** That is spot-on. Abeo, would you like to add anything? I know you touched on it before. Is there anything you would like to add, after listening to the evidence, on your experiences during the pandemic?

Abeo: During the pandemic, because I have no recourse to public funds, I could not get any help from the authorities. The councils, immigration and even the police were unable to help me.

Ian Byrne: Just on that, Mohammad is going to specifically ask about

that. Do you want to make sure you are the first port of call for Mohammad, Abeo? I will be taking everyone's questions. Is that okay? When Mohammad asks that specific question, you can come in, my friend, and you can outline your experiences.

Abeo: Yes, okay.

Q196 **Bob Blackman:** Thank you to our friends for coming to talk to us about their experiences. Of course, what it does is demonstrates that everyone's experience is unique and every case has to be dealt with uniquely as opposed to being a tick-box exercise, it is fair to say.

I just want to look at what is going to happen next for all of you. You have obviously had different experiences and you will have your hopes and dreams, but there are also the practical facts of what is going to happen next for you, particularly given that we have the holiday period and the fact the support networks may or may not be there. We have Covid and all these sorts of things coming along. What do you expect to happen over the next few days or next few weeks in terms of your case? Can I start with you, Tracy? You are in a slightly better and more settled position than our other friends.

Tracy: I really struggle when it comes to Christmas anyway, because it is a time for family. Unfortunately, my mum is no longer here. My dad lives in Gloucestershire and we are just getting our relationship back on track. This Christmas is going to be hard for me mental-health-wise, because I can feel, with the pandemic, my mental health has already taken a dip. I live on my own. I have my partner, who stays over three or four times a week. I am lucky. I have met some amazing friends online during this pandemic. Hopefully, I can spend Christmas with them, but it is not the same.

I do not have my support worker; I cannot call her and get her to come and see me, like I said in the other question I was asked. I know that personal touch would make a difference, if I could actually see her and sit down and tell her exactly how I am feeling, because I know myself. I am dreading it, to be honest. To me, all I can see is loneliness. Anybody who knows me knows I am always the party girl; I am always up for making people feel good about themselves. I boost people's confidence and I am always the last one to think about myself. This year just reminds me of spending those 18 Christmases on the street. I am not looking forward to it, to be honest. I am not.

Q197 **Bob Blackman:** Do you have anyone you can contact? Even if you cannot see them physically, are there people you can meet virtually, as we are doing now?

Tracy: Like I said, I have met some wonderful friends online. I joined a group that was made by Sam Bailey, who won "The X Factor". She made up a wonderful group online, and I have met some amazing friends. I turned 50 on 8 November, and I was dreading that. The postman brought me so many cards and gifts. My friends online, who I have met during

this crazy time, have promised me that I will not spend it alone. They said I could call them any time.

Like I said, everyone is going to struggle this year, not being able to see family and friends. I just do not think it is the same. Over the Christmas period I could go to Christina's office and sit down, have a cup of hot chocolate with her and have a laugh and a giggle. St Mungo's do some amazing things at Christmas; they really do. They get all the homeless people coming in to have lunch and nibbles at the offices, and unfortunately none of that is going to be going on. I do not know. I am just not looking forward to it. It is not the same as having that personal touch.

Q198 **Bob Blackman:** What do you hope for this time next year?

Tracy: I have been a support worker in the past. I will tell you the reason I left the support job. I joined as a support worker because of my past experience. I love to help people. I love to change people's views and opinions on homeless people.

I remember talking to someone on telly about it before. I said to them. "When you look at someone sitting on the street, do not look at them as a homeless guy or a homeless woman. I was that homeless person. I was someone's sister; I was someone's daughter. I was someone's auntie". I did not wake up one day and say, "I am going to become homeless and an addict". Unfortunately, I was led down a dark path. I was struggling with postnatal depression, which I did not know I had at the time. I applied for a support worker role, because that was what I wanted to do. Unfortunately, when I was in that role, it started changing. It was all about ticking boxes.

Like one of you mentioned earlier, everybody's journey is different. You cannot put a time on somebody's recovery process. If you do, you are going to fail them. It was all about ticking boxes for me, and I thought, "No, I have to take a step back", so I came out of the support worker role and I started to be a carer. Unfortunately, I lost my job as a carer when the pandemic broke, but my dream job is to get a paid support worker role in St Mungo's, hopefully next year. I am a volunteer at the moment, so that is my dream job.

Q199 **Bob Blackman:** Abeo, what does the immediate future hold for you? What is the plan over the next few days and weeks?

Abeo: I really do not know. First of all, when the council accommodated me, they only gave me temporary accommodation, and they have been telling me that if I do not sort out my housing benefit, I am going to lose my accommodation, because I have no recourse to public funds.

Q200 **Bob Blackman:** I am sorry to interrupt. Is someone helping you with that application to make sure it is being processed and that things are done? Are you being left by yourself?

Abeo: NACCOM, a charity organisation, and the Public Interest Law Centre are helping me with it. They are challenging the council to keep

me in accommodation. When they put me in the accommodation, for the first two months they put me in a different borough. After two months they brought me back into the borough. They did not pay for the first two months, and they sent me a letter saying, "You have to pay for your two months of accommodation". I do not have it. I am not allowed to work. I am not allowed to claim benefits. They sent my details to debt collectors. The debt collectors have been contacting me, sending me letters and texting me, saying, "You owe the council £1,160". I still could not get that off. I do not know.

Immigration are also not replying to me. I did a further submission three years ago, and they are not responding on that to me. I do not know my future.

Q201 **Bob Blackman:** Cast yourself forward to this time next year. If all this is resolved, what would you hope to do? What is your dream going forward for the future?

Abeo: My dream is to be a personal trainer. I would love to help people and show them how to live a healthy life. I have level 2 and level 3 personal training qualifications and I am a spinning class instructor. I have all three certificates. I love to train people. That is my dream, if everything was solved.

Bob Blackman: This Committee could do with some appropriate physical exercise at some time, so hopefully you might be able to train us in the future.

Abeo: I wish.

Q202 **Bob Blackman:** Can I move on to Sam? What does the immediate future hold for you?

Sam: I am hoping my homeless application will go through with the council. I am being supported by a charity to do this. At the same time, I actually had a job interview this morning and I have another job interview next week. I am looking for employment and I am hoping I will succeed in getting work.

It would have been so much easier for me to focus on applying for work and job interviews instead of worrying where I am going to sleep on 5 January. It would be nice to enjoy Christmas and not to have 18 days to worry. If I had a Christmas wish list, I would hope the 28 days would be extended. The Homelessness Reduction Act calls for 56 days before eviction. I do not know why we have been exempted from this, as newly recognised refugees.

In terms of next year, hopefully, fingers crossed, I get a job and I will start a new career in art and homelessness. I hope that I will be out of all this.

Q203 **Bob Blackman:** Are you managing this by yourself, or do you have representation?

Sam: I have representation.

Q204 **Bob Blackman:** That is good. Finally, T, what does the immediate future hold for you?

T: At the moment not much, really. I hope I can go and spend time with some family at Christmas or go into the new year with them, but at the moment we are not allowed people in our property, in our rooms. I am not sure how it is going to work around Christmas and whether we will be allowed to stay with or go to see family.

If not, hopefully me and my neighbours, my housemates, will spend time together. We will try to make it as positive as possible. We all suffer from mental health problems, so it is going to be hard for us anyway. We are just trying to stay positive.

Q205 **Bob Blackman:** I will ask you the same question I have asked others. Cast yourself forward a year. What is the dream that you would like to see happen for you?

T: It would probably be to have some form of secure housing and to start my career. I was in uni at one point, studying performing arts. I wanted to be a teacher, but circumstances happened where I had to end up dropping out of university because of the mental health and family problems that were going on. I just want to be able to get back to being stable a little bit so that those opportunities can arise again.

Bob Blackman: To all of our witnesses, I hope your dreams come true in a year's time.

Q206 **Rachel Hopkins:** Thank you everyone so far. It has been brilliant hearing from you. I know it has been really difficult, but I really appreciate the honesty with which you are talking. The question I want to ask—I am going to ask it to Sam initially—is about challenges for women who experience destitution. It sounds like you have had some tricky times when that has affected you. Do you want to tell us about that, as a woman?

Sam: For me, experiencing destitution especially has been really humiliating. I was left without financial support in a new city that I was displaced to. I did not know anybody and I was left without financial support. Food was not my priority at the time. I could not buy sanitary towels for myself, and I had to beg strangers for coins so that I could buy a packet of sanitary towels.

Rachel Hopkins: Thank you, Sam. Keep going. You are being really brave. I know it is very difficult.

Sam: Women become vulnerable and they are at risk of exploitation but also sexual abuse. I have seen women suffer a lot. There need to be policies in place to protect women who are experiencing destitution.

Rachel Hopkins: Thank you, Sam. You have hit the nail on the head. It is really brave of you. Take care.

Q207 **Mohammad Yasin:** I am very grateful to all the witnesses who have come out today. Despite the fact they are all suffering themselves at the moment, they are telling us their stories. I honestly salute their bravery, and I am very thankful to them for coming out and giving us their story and the real picture of what is happening outside the Parliament bubble.

My question is to Abeo. I understand you have no recourse to public funds. Could you tell us about how no recourse to public funds was applied to you?

Abeo: No recourse to public funds made me become destitute and homeless, and I have been homeless for the last two years. It is very hard to comply when you are not allowed to work or claim benefits. It is very hard to comply, and it is against human rights as well. It is like the Government telling you, "Just sit on the street. You are not allowed to eat; you are allowed to sleep in a house; just sit on the street and die". It is very difficult.

I have met so many people in prison, in detention centres and in reporting centres with the same restriction I have now. I know some of those people commit crimes just to support themselves, because they have no other way to get income. When they commit a crime, the public are the victims.

To be honest, I do not think the Government understand what the impact of putting the restriction of no recourse to public funds on people does. It makes people make the wrong choices and the wrong decisions.

Q208 **Mohammad Yasin:** Why was your indefinite leave to remain revoked?

Abeo: I committed a crime and I went to prison.

Q209 **Mohammad Yasin:** If anybody goes to prison, their visa will be cancelled.

Abeo: If you are imprisoned for more than 12 months, your visa will be revoked and a deportation order will be signed against you. You are liable to be deported. I could not be deported, because I have a political issue back in my country. That is why I have been released and why immigration could not deport me. That is why they released me and put a restriction on me. I do not know why. People must eat and must live in houses. You cannot just leave them on the street and expect them to die. Physically and mentally, it is impossible. No one is going to sit on the street and wait to die.

Q210 **Mohammad Yasin:** When you apply for housing, how does no recourse to public funds impact you when your application goes forward for housing?

Abeo: When I applied for a house in the council, they refused my application because I have no recourse to public funds. Even during the pandemic, even when the Government announced to house every single rough sleeper because of Covid-19, the council refused because I have no recourse to public funds.

The reason they accommodated me is because I contacted the Public Interest Law Centre and they wanted to press charges against the council. That is why. It took me a month and a half to get accommodated even with help from the Public Interest Law Centre and NACCOM. If I did not have them, I would still be on the street.

Q211 **Mohammad Yasin:** I understand you are in temporary accommodation at the moment. Have you been told how long you are going to be in temporary accommodation?

Abeo: On my tenancy agreement, it says, "This is temporary accommodation and we can tell you to leave whenever we want. You have no right on this property. If we ask you to leave, we will give you 24 hours and you must leave". That is what it says. The council have also been contacting me in the last two or three weeks to say, "Because you have no recourse to public funds and you do not get housing benefit, if you do not sort out your housing benefit, we will not be able to continue supporting you"—basically, "We will evict you".

Q212 **Mohammad Yasin:** Sam, you work as a volunteer for a charity helping people with poverty. I am sure you will be getting some people coming to you with no recourse to public funds. How is your charity able to help them?

Sam: With the charity I am involved in, because of the Everyone In scheme and the restrictions that are already in place, people have been able to stay in accommodation. Even my housemate is still here seeking additional support.

I know people are struggling, especially in terms of the messaging around Covid-19 and the guidelines. People are not sure in terms of hostels and temporary accommodation. It is so fast-paced and fast-moving; people are coming in and out. Maybe there needs to be more clear and consistent messaging when it comes to the scheme that is in place.

I think the Everyone In scheme should resume, because people with no recourse to public funds will be protected under the scheme, and people who have no support.

Q213 **Chair:** I will come to a bit of a conclusion now. Looking forward, the Minister will come to see us and we are eventually going to write a report and tell Government what we think ought to be done better and what could be done to improve the situation. What should we put in that report? What are one or two key things that you think could be done to improve the situation that people like yourselves have found themselves in?

T: Mine is not necessarily about everything we just spoke about; it is a bit different. It is more about what the priorities are for duty of care. That is a big question. When I approached my local council, I was leaving due to domestic violence so I thought that would be some sort of priority. The levels need to be determined on each person individually rather than just

with blanket guidelines or what ticks the boxes. It should not be discretion, but everyone has different circumstances and different situations, and sometimes that needs to be looked at a little more.

I feel very passionate about the fact that we should not be in this position where we are doing things to fix the problem just because there is a pandemic. It should have been happening before that.

Chair: Yes, and it should certainly happen afterwards as well.

T: Yes, and afterwards.

Sam: Something that can be made really different is, when the Department or the Government are looking at policies, just like today, they should involve people with lived experience when working on policies.

I also think that the 28-day move-on period should be extended for newly recognised refugees from asylum accommodation. That should be reviewed and extended so that it is the same as the Homelessness Reduction Act. Honestly, it will reduce so much pressure on local authorities and the charities that support us.

Lastly, no one should experience homelessness in the UK. The Government have shown they can resolve homelessness. The Everyone In scheme should be resumed.

Tracy: There is one thing I cannot get my head around. This is not about the pandemic; it is about when I was housed and how people are housed now. Take the pandemic out of it. The way the system was for me was that my homelessness was in north London, in the Tottenham area. When I was found by the homeless charity, I was taken from there and put into a hostel that was far away from there, which worked out amazingly for me, because I was then put on a script to help me with my heroin addiction. I was then moved to bed-and-breakfasts here and there, but they were far away from Tottenham.

When I went to go into my supported housing, I was placed right back in the middle of Tottenham. I asked them the reason. I said, "Why am I going back there?" and they said to me, "You have to go where you have a connection". Through these last 10 years of recovery, like I said before, I have been a support worker and I also know people who are homeless through my volunteering. It does not work. Touch wood, it worked for me, because I had a good support worker. In the area I was living in, I chose not to come out and go to the local town, which was only five minutes away. I used to take two buses to go and do my shopping, just so I did not have to bump into the drug dealers or the people who were using at that time when I was homeless.

It just does not make sense. I know plenty of people who have overdosed and unfortunately are not here to tell their story today.

Q214 **Chair:** Those circumstances should be taken account of. They clearly

were not in your case. Abeo, do you want to have the final word and tell us what you think?

Abeo: If immigration cannot deport someone, they must not restrict someone from accessing income, leave them on the street and let them make the wrong decisions. If you are a human being, you should be able to access your basic needs like food, cleaning yourself and staying in accommodation until your immigration status is solved. They should not put people on restrictions. That is it.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. On behalf of all the Committee, thank you very much to all four of you. I can tell that in parts of the session you have clearly been really exercised and upset about the experiences you have had, and you have been telling us about them in a very public way. We understand that and appreciate it. You have been really helpful to the Committee and really brave to come before us and tell us what your experiences have been, what you think has gone wrong and what you think now needs to be done to put that right.

We will be trying to reflect that when we come to write our report, as we do at the end of every inquiry we do. We write a report to try to say to Government what we think has gone wrong in general with the system and what we think they can do—because, in the end, Government can do this—to put it right. That has been really helpful to us. I can see from the nods around from all the Committee members that what you have done today is really appreciated.

Go away and have as good a Christmas as you can in your different circumstances, and let us hope that for all of you next year is better than this year has been. Thank you ever so much. Committee members are actually clapping, which is unusual and very specific to you. That is great.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fiona Colley, Steve Douglas and Henry St Clair Miller.

Q215 **Chair:** Moving on to the second panel of witnesses, could I ask you all to begin by introducing yourselves to the Committee and everyone listening? Fiona Colley, I will go to you first. Could you introduce yourself and say who you are?

Fiona Colley: I am Fiona Colley. I am the director of social change at Homeless Link. Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness charities and agencies. We have around 800 members up and down the country, large and small, and we work together to gather evidence and intelligence, improve services and campaign to ensure everybody has a place to call home.

Steve Douglas: I am Steve Douglas. I am chief executive of St Mungo's. You have heard from two of our clients. We are a leading homeless charity. We provide services to about 33,000 clients every year and some

3,000 every night. I will be talking about some of the experiences you have just heard in your earlier session.

Henry St Clair Miller: Good afternoon. I am the head of NRPF refugee and migrant services at Islington Council. My team covers the safety net support to vulnerable adults and families under social services legislation. In Islington, we have also been involved in the Covid-19 accommodation response. I am here to give evidence on behalf of my role for the NRPF Network. That involves providing advice and guidance on statutory duties for local authorities across the United Kingdom when dealing with the exclusions to housing and welfare benefits. That role also involves, to quite a considerable degree, partnership working with the Home Office to try to find routes off financial support for those that are owed that duty.

Q216 **Chair:** Thank you for coming. As we ask questions, we will probably indicate who we want to answer the question and bring you all in. If you agree with what someone else has said, you can just say you agree. If you disagree, you can explain why. I think everyone has accepted—MPs and organisations dealing with homeless people certainly have—that the Everyone In exercise was an absolute success. It set out a clear objective and delivered on it. Councils seemed clear about what they had to do at that point in time. Do you think things have changed since and councils are now more confused about whether Everyone In is still the policy and is still something they have to do or Government are actually wanting them to do something different?

Fiona Colley: I would agree that the picture that we are seeing across the country, particularly since August or September time, is that there is a real mixed bag of responses from local authorities. It is quite evident that Everyone In is simply not in effect as a national policy response anymore. Most plainly, we have picked that up in the West Midlands, where we have Stoke-on-Trent that effectively ended Everyone In at the end of August, while Coventry is still supporting people. In some instances in that region, local authorities are applying local connection conditions and others are not. It is very obvious that local authorities are unclear about what is expected of them and what they are supposed to be delivering now.

We are pleased to see most local authorities keeping on supporting people who they brought in initially, although that is not universally the case for people with no recourse to public funds in particular. We are not seeing that level of support being offered to people who have returned to the streets or who are new on the streets. The other thing we have picked up is that, in some cases, the gatekeeping is getting a little worse. Our members' perspective is that that is because of the financial pressures that local authorities are under. The sort of requirements they are having around local connection and verifying that people are rough sleeping are now greater than they were pre-pandemic. That is obviously a very distressing situation to be in now.

Steve Douglas: We have this conversation: "Everyone In was great. Everyone In has now finished. Nobody is quite clear on the guidance". We

managed 30 hotels during the pandemic. We are still managing hotels now as well. We get a little bit confused around the principles. If we go back to what the principles of Everyone In were, how they apply now and how they are being applied, the principles we saw in Everyone In were that it was what it said on the tin. There was no prior assessment before you were brought into accommodation. There was no expectation of whether you could pay or whether you had settled status. In our work, we saw that people were brought in. The triage function of identifying support, housing and health needs all happening in the same place worked. That undoubtedly saved lives. That was the principle. Though Government provided guidance, Government also provided the funding that was necessary.

Subsequently, we have seen the stepping back from the amount of funding that is available, though there is some funding that is available. There is the going back to some of the assessments and approaches that have been taken by certain agencies. That has then got us into a place of bureaucracy. We have seen it work really well. I will use London Councils as an example. You, as members of the Committee, will know from your local authority days that the pandemic brought about a gold response. We had all the right people in the room. As a housing provider of services, we were invited to the room to have the conversation around the solutions.

London Councils has continued that principle. It has invited Homeless Link in, with its members, and invited us to be part of that. It has public health in the room also, and housing and commissioners, and is thinking about long-term solutions. Yes, there is a question about exactly how much money is there and available, but it is thinking, "What is our long-term strategy?" We have seen that in Bristol equally. We have seen that in other areas we work in. For us, we need to apply the principles of Everyone In going forward and make sure we do not lose those.

Henry St Clair Miller: I would agree with those points. There is confusion in this area of work. We started off with a drive around a public health emergency. We were undertaking a universal approach to meet needs. We were doing this on a humanitarian basis. During that initial stage, organisations like the NRPF Network and plenty of other local authorities made a tonne of recommendations to central Government about some of the issues of working with no recourse to public funds cases and the need for easing some restrictions and having some guidance. Then, in May and August, I would start looking at some of the pushback when it came to no recourse to public funds.

Chair: We are going to talk about that issue specifically in a little while in some of our questions.

Henry St Clair Miller: If we are going to go on from there, the thing everyone is missing is that we are talking about principles, but you also have to remember that local authorities are statutory beasts. We need to know what powers or duties we are actually using. One of the most worrying trends at the moment is for reference to, for example, using the

Localism Act powers of competence. That is not available if someone has NRPF under current case law. It is excluded through the exclusions that already exist in relation to the Housing Act.

We also have an alarming situation where people are saying that local authorities can do whatever is necessary to avoid a breach of human rights. That is a little bit of a misunderstanding of the fact that we need a power in the first place in order to ensure we are enacting the human rights law correctly in relation to that power. We have asked for clarity from MHCLG about what that power is and that has not come. That is a concern in terms of confusion. You are allowing a situation to arise where individual frontline workers are trying to make decisions based on various semantics, principles, priorities and interpretations of the law. That is confusing.

Q217 **Chair:** Picking up on that point, it was said as well that the success of Everyone In was because there was a very clear, decisive message from Government. It was unambiguous about what everybody should be doing. Do you think that has now waned a bit, been watered down, and we are now getting different responses because there is a lack of clarity from the centre about what is expected of everyone?

Henry St Clair Miller: Yes, that is right. We appreciate the funding that we have received, although there is evidence to say that is not sufficient. Yes, at the beginning there was a clear message. If you were to look at, say, the Protect programme, the messaging is no longer the same. My concern is around what statutory powers and duties were identified on day one. I am a bit worried that, a year on, we still have not got to the bottom of that.

Fiona Colley: I would agree. I am not sure whether it is messaging, but it is certainly the case that we are seeing very different decisions being taken in different parts of the country. Certainly from our point of view and our members' point of view, we feel like now is the time when there should be clarity and not localism. From listening to witnesses earlier, the last thing people need is different local views on what authorities are or are not expected to do. This is not that kind of issue. We are in the midst of a second wave of this pandemic. We are likely to see restrictions lasting for months to come. Now is the time for Government to be crystal clear about expectations and what we should be delivering for people. We brought people in once. We did it very quickly. Let us do it by Christmas.

Q218 **Chair:** Steve, perhaps you could also address the point about whether Government themselves really understand why Everyone In was successful and what is changing now. Do you think Government have a grasp of it?

Steve Douglas: I actually think Government have, but it comes back to money. The instruction, as it were, was "Get everybody in" and the points around NRPF and others, in terms of the assessments, are very valid. Essentially, it was, "Public health, local authorities, you need to work together". We have seen follow through where there have been some

really good examples. We could use Manchester or Liverpool, where that collaboration has continued. It still comes back to who pays for it. You then get into the conversation around budgets and one-year settlements. You get into conversations around health budgets, how they are aligned with housing budgets and how care budgets are aligned with other budgets. We now have that disconnect once again between those budgets.

There are some really good examples of good practice across the country. Instructing everybody to do does not quite work; we need long-term solutions and recognising the sovereignty of individual local authorities and collections of local authorities. We want best practice, with the funding that sits behind it that is necessary.

Chair: We have talked a bit about the initiative and how it has worked, but then there are other people coming as rough sleepers now who were not there previously. Rachel Hopkins wants to explore some of those issues.

Q219 **Rachel Hopkins:** I have a few questions. I will direct them at Fiona initially, but other witnesses please come in and say whether you agree or have something to add. How many rough sleepers have appeared on the streets since the spring, Fiona? What does your members' data show about the flow of rough sleeping since the start of the pandemic?

Fiona Colley: It is difficult to quite get a grasp of numbers. We will see the new counts and estimate figures coming out in February. The latest CHAIN data for London runs up to September. I am just trying to find the numbers. We saw that the numbers were stabilising. There were 1,901 new to the streets. These are just the London figures. Our sense from our members is that the numbers are down on last year, but not down quite as much as you would expect, given the Everyone In programme and the amount of money that has been spent.

From the StreetLink service, which we run at Homeless Link, we are seeing that the number of alerts we are getting from members of the public are down. Our numbers of alerts coming from rough sleepers themselves seeking help and support are considerably up. As a result, our overall numbers are steady on last year. We think the numbers from the public are down because people are not out and about so much at night and so are not seeing people. Our overall conclusion is that rough sleeping is down a little, but not very far.

Q220 **Rachel Hopkins:** Are there any trends around who rough sleepers are? Is there any difference from what you would expect if it is fairly static, rather than going one way or the other?

Fiona Colley: Our members are reporting that we are seeing, in some instances, people returning to the streets, so a core group of people for whom the support that Everyone In has provided was not sufficient and did not work for them. They have gone back to the streets. We are particularly seeing increases in prison releases to the streets, where prisons are failing to fulfil their legal duty to refer to local authorities, or

the support that should be available from local authorities under the Homelessness Reduction Act has not been available. The CHAIN data suggests we are seeing increased proportions of young people on the streets. We have not done the in-depth studies of this, but it is anecdotally perhaps because of precariousness of housing that young people are coming out of. They have maybe not been protected by the evictions ban in the way that other people may have been.

Q221 **Rachel Hopkins:** Pushing on that point slightly, could some of this be an outcome of unemployment? Particularly, we know that young people have been really affected by precarious work as much as precarious housing. Also, we heard earlier about no recourse to public funds. Are they still quite prevalent?

Fiona Colley: Yes. From the survey we have done of our members, certainly no recourse to public funds and people who were previously sofa-surfing, which is very often young people, are the numbers our members are seeing increasing. I would agree with you about young people. It is precarious housing, so people not in secure tenancies, or assured tenancies, alongside precarious work. Those two factors together are particularly affecting young people.

Q222 **Rachel Hopkins:** Is it more prevalent in city centres, or are we seeing more in suburbs and other areas?

Fiona Colley: I do not think we are picking up any clear patterns around that at the moment, just yet. When we get the counts and estimates data in a couple of months' time, we will have a clearer picture.

Q223 **Rachel Hopkins:** That would be helpful. Reflecting on what others have said earlier, are people who are new to rough sleeping, even though numbers are down, getting the same attention as that cohort that were helped in the spring?

Fiona Colley: No. I think that is quite clear. It is variable across different parts of the country. That is important to say. There are definitely parts of the country that are working incredibly hard and in close collaboration to ensure they are supporting people. It is certainly the case for many new to the street that they are not getting the support that was on offer when the Everyone In directive was launched. I went out on one of the street counts in November and asked, "What support will there be for people we find tonight?" The answer was, "None".

Q224 **Rachel Hopkins:** Steve, I saw you shaking your head. Do you want to add?

Steve Douglas: Yes. I would say it is variable. The most enlightened authorities have recognised that the principles of Somewhere Safe to Stay and No Second Night Out are essential. The triaging, staging posts and having somewhere immediately where that connection is strong work and have real positive benefits. I would agree with Fiona that it is still variable. We operate across the whole of London. We work in Bristol, Brighton, Reading, Oxford and Bournemouth. In many of those places, we have found that there is a real understanding that getting to people

who are at risk of rough sleeping and having options for them means there does not need to be a second night on the street.

Q225 **Rachel Hopkins:** Henry, did you want to add anything to what has already been said?

Henry St Clair Miller: No, that covers everything. It is difficult to find reliable data in this area, so we tend to rely on the London Councils information. There is nothing much I would add, other than there have been thousands of people, around 6,000, accommodated. I think there were reports that about 1,700 remaining in that accommodation are people who might struggle with move-on because they have NRPF. We know it is an issue and it is a continuing issue. I cannot comment about individual local authority practice. It is about reflecting on where authority practice has been good and trying to learn from that. There are positives from that kind of action.

Q226 **Ian Byrne:** I will direct this one to Fiona first. We heard in our evidence session on Monday that local authorities do not have a consistent view on whether they should be helping rough sleepers with no recourse to public funds. The legal position of the MHCLG is that local authorities do not have a duty to help them. Legal experts on Monday said the law was not clear and the situation was very confused, some cynics like me may say deliberately. What is your assessment of the current legal position?

Fiona Colley: The position is pretty much as you set out. It is being left to individual local authorities and their own legal teams to make their own judgment. When we speak to our members, which include a number of local authorities, they find that quite frustrating and would really like some very clear guidance on what they can and cannot do lawfully. Our sense is that most people working in homelessness, whether that is our charities or our local authority members, would like to be providing support, but they are very concerned about the financial implications of that and the lawfulness of doing so. They are quite frustrated, to be honest, about the lack of clear guidance and the sense that it is being passed down to them to make that judgment and that call. They are very dependent on the views of their legal departments.

Steve Douglas: I would agree with that entirely. I am sure we will touch on the Home Office guidance at some point. As with other homelessness charities, we are working tirelessly to ensure the right advice and support is provided. When you get guidance like that, which suggests that there is an issue around no recourse to public funds but, equally, anyone who is a non-UK national is potentially at risk of being depicted as a criminal, all it does is cause distrust for homelessness charities and local authorities. It does not help either us or organisations that are trying to meet those needs. Clarity and a better-thought-out process are required. We, as well as I think it was something like 70 homelessness charities, including many of Fiona's members, wrote saying that the policy is not acceptable and, secondly, there has been no consultation with any of those who are involved in providing that advice and support. We need to

understand it better because it does not work. It is helpful neither for us nor for our clients.

Q227 **Ian Byrne:** I do not know if you caught the earlier session before, but we had Abeo, who was actually living through this. Those couple of minutes of his life experiences living through this were powerful. We have evidence from good people like yourself and we can all talk about it, but when you are getting someone who is living through it and basically said he felt as though he was just on the streets and going to die because no one cared for him, it was heartrending. It just shows you what an issue we have. We need to resolve it.

Steve Douglas: To add to that, two of the others who you heard earlier were our clients. Those are the stories we hear every day. We work with 33,000 clients. That is the lived experience. When our outreach workers are trying to build trust and provide support and we have that environment, it makes it doubly difficult for us and homelessness charities to provide the support and essential services that are needed.

Henry St Clair Miller: I would start with this by disagreeing, from the perspective of the NRPf network, with the Minister for Rough Sleeping's statement to the Committee that the response that local authorities were doing during Everyone In was somehow the same as what we might do in relation to cold weather shelters, and that therefore there was really no difference in this area of work. That was not chiming with the amount of effort and support that was taking place on the frontline. We were doing long-term interventions with wraparound support. We were dealing with self-contained units with subsistence payments. I know there might be some authorities that did not do that, but I cannot answer for that. We were going beyond the statutory safety net that we were familiar with in relation to families and adults with care needs. We were doing all that above and beyond.

We felt, from that nucleus, there was a need for some explanation or for the law to catch up with what we were doing. That did not happen. The situation is difficult. We now have outreach workers and frontline staff looking at, for example, the Protect guidance. In the semantics, although there is still a call where a local authority might be able to use discretion in any way it feels fit, I have previously pointed out the fact that, if you do not have any statutory duty or power, it is quite hard to act with that discretion.

In addition, when we start bringing in terms like "Support to help the clinically vulnerable", that is quite challenging. That definition goes back to the NHS definitions of what clinically vulnerable is. I am sure whoever wrote that definition was not thinking about dealing with rough sleepers. Indeed, that definition comes with a disclaimer at the front of it that it may not include everyone who is at higher risk. That is in itself quite confusing. As a local authority, I might think, "If my overarching principle is that this is a public health emergency and anyone can catch Covid and die, I will act on that basis again and accommodate", but I guess I am

making that decision alone as a local authority. That is not the best way to do business.

Q228 **Ian Byrne:** I am going to stay with you, Henry. Do you think the MHCLG is trying to have its cake and eat it by asking councils to house everybody but ultimately not changing its position on no recourse to public funds?

Henry St Clair Miller: It is putting local authorities in a difficult position. We would like to perhaps have greater conversation around how we can see eye to eye on this. We need to utilise the funding that is available to make interventions. We can do that quite effectively through the work we have been doing. We need to have a narrative about looking at some of the concerns from local authority frontline practitioners, as I have been saying, and getting that sorted out one way or another.

If you leave it vague, you are effectively going to penalise some of the local authorities that have gone above and beyond. We will not then be able to say why we did certain things. You might ask questions about this later. If it comes to how we manage the situation when these exceptional accommodation measures end, I do not know how I am going to do that if I cannot explain what I was doing in the first place, with MHCLG's help in articulating that. It is a little bit of a fudge at the moment.

Q229 **Ian Byrne:** I will stay with you, Henry, while I have you. It is estimated that around 2,000 individuals still in emergency accommodation are stuck because they are ineligible for public funds. What will happen to this cohort when they return to the streets, unless the Government change the rules?

Henry St Clair Miller: That is a real plea to all the local authorities that are supporting the 2,000 people you referred to in that estimate. To reflect on what we already know about working with this group, there are a lot of things we can do when we engage properly, make referrals to immigration advice and engage with some of the issues people present with. Over the next couple of months, you are going to see a lot of activity around trying to resolve some of these NRPF issues by things like change of conditions applications, where you can get recourse to public funds if you have a certain form of leave to remain with NRPF. You have your cohort of European Economic Area nationals, where we can make applications for settled status. We can make referrals for people who have no immigration status at all.

It is not all negative. We can probably resolve 50% of those NRPF cases within the existing rules we have. Where we are going to get to the difficult decisions is, despite all that best effort, what on earth is going to happen then? If you have people who are making genuine immigration applications to the Home Office, our stats on working with social services cases indicate that you can be waiting 1,000 days to sort that case out, on average, for a single adult. Am I meant to continue that support? We have these little niggly areas like where there are people with forms of valid leave but with NRPF but there is not the change of conditions document, like someone on an ancestry visa. There is no way of easily

resolving that. There is also pre-settled status, where you have situations where EEA nationals might not be work-ready or they might not be a job to go into. We are going to be left still providing support.

I know that it is almost inevitable that people always say one of the main things we could do is return these people or put that down. It is not a first option. It is an option of last resort and there is all this work to take place. The two issues at the end of it are how long we go on supporting people who clearly have a valid case to make to the Home Office and how we are going to fund that. Then councils will have to come to a decision, where we might say, "This is the limit of what we can do". That is where we might have to have a discussion about return, but that is the final point, not the starting point. It is sometimes used as an easy get-out-of-jail-free-card option, which it is not.

Q230 Ian Byrne: I want to bring Steve in on this, and then Fiona. Earlier, as we mentioned before about the evidence, Abeo talked about being put in temporary accommodation but then potentially having 24 hours where he could be removed from it. This is something we have not heard on the Committee before. Is that a one-off, or is that what the people in this position are actually experiencing out there, Steve, in your experience at St Mungo's?

Steve Douglas: That is not our experience as typical. I would be interested by the details of that specifically. The point we make follows on from Henry's point. There are many of our clients for whom their situation is not yet confirmed. They might well have pre-settled status. They may well be going through a process. We have said that the most humane thing to do is to suspend the no recourse to public funds for at least 12 months, while the work Henry has described and longer-term solutions are worked through. To at least be having that conversation around some of those solutions is so important.

Fiona Colley: There are a couple of points. The first is, in terms of what will happen to people, it is important to point out that there are some parts of the country where people with no recourse to public funds have already been asked to leave accommodation. I know that is not the case in most of London, but it is the case in other places.

The other point that is coming back from our members, alongside the time it takes to work through immigration and legal cases, is the time we need to work with people to get them into employment and settle people down. For a lot of people who have come in under Everyone In, who have no recourse to public funds, this is the first time they have received any support for many years. A lot of our members are helping people who have very complex needs. The length of time that they have had to support and help them, not least when there may be situations where their documentation is in with the Home Office, makes it very difficult for people, say with limited leave to remain but no recourse to public funds, to find work in these situations.

Q231 Ian Byrne: I wanted to finish on this with a quick one, because I know

we are running against the clock. I will stay with you on this, Fiona. The Government told us that one of the aims of Rough Sleeping Taskforce was to assess how those with no recourse to public funds could be prevented from returning to the streets when Everyone In finishes. Have you had any contact with the task force? Is it still active since Dame Louise Casey stepped down?

Fiona Colley: I am not sure whether it is, in all honesty. It is fair to say that it was just getting started at the point that the pandemic came. I want to be fair on MHCLG, because we are working extremely closely with the team there. We are working well with the Minister at MHCLG as well. I am not sure exactly what the status of the taskforce is. It needs to be made clearer who is going to lead this work going forward. MHCLG is working closely with us and other leading charities in the sector.

Q232 **Ian Byrne:** Does anybody else want to make a comment on the taskforce, your relationship with it and whether it is still active?

Henry St Clair Miller: I have not heard that much back since. Nothing has changed.

Steve Douglas: I would agree with Fiona. MHCLG has just produced a piece of work around the lessons learnt from Covid, which is very helpful. The challenge is how it is taken forward. Dame Louise Casey brought the ability to pull other Departments into the conversation. MHCLG will be making recommendations. It knows. It has worked closely with local government and regional Government. It knows what the answers are already, I think, for example the lessons we learnt from Everyone In and those principles. It is then how they apply it across to health and criminal justice. The testimony you heard from the clients earlier needs to feed into policy, which is not just MHCLG policy. It is cross-Government policy.

Ian Byrne: Spot on.

Q233 **Bob Blackman:** In relation to the position with night shelters, this is the time of year when a lot of local authorities and charities will start to open night shelters to take rough sleepers in under normal circumstances. One of the successes in the spring, under the Everyone In programme, was getting people into proper, separated accommodation to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Fiona, I will come to you first, because you gave us some statistics. It appears that we are looking at a situation where night shelters may be needed again. Why is that?

Fiona Colley: It is because we no longer have everyone in, to be absolutely direct. We are expecting that we will need additional winter capacity because people are on the streets. However, I want to be positive about the work being done to make sure there is capacity this winter that is not night shelters. We have been working with Government to deliver the winter transformation fund. We received £2 million from MHCLG to disseminate to charities and voluntary sector groups. It was not to fund Covid-secure night shelters but to fund something better, to raise the bar. Our grants panel is meeting right now to make more awards from that fund. We are looking at things like securing hotels,

converting existing spaces into self-contained accommodation and making sure the additional support staff are in place to provide the winter provision that is very much needed.

In addition to the £2 million from MHCLG, we have managed to secure a further £1.3 million from National Lottery and Comic Relief. MHCLG has agreed to top up the fund to ensure all the good applications we want to fund can be funded this winter. As a result, many people coming into winter provision this year will have a much better Christmas and winter life than they would have done with the night shelters.

That said, there is a concern about whether that will be enough capacity. We know lots of local authorities are making provision to use hotels again, should we get the severe weather or other emergency situations. They are working on estimates of how many rooms they might need. It will be difficult to stand that up as quickly as you can stand up a night shelter that is standing ready. Our view is that it would be preferable if we had a clear directive again to bring everyone in. It would be more straightforward, but obviously not cheaper. It comes back to finances.

I do not want to be too negative about the situation as it stands. We think local authorities and MHCLG are working incredibly hard. We are on a working group around this.

Q234 **Bob Blackman:** One of the concerns is that the rough sleeper count was substantiated as being an interesting set of figures, but at least double, and probably triple, the numbers on the rough sleeper count have been taken in under the Everyone In programme. We do not even have robust data for the numbers of people that may be required. There is a requirement where normally night shelters would be dormitory-style accommodation. Clearly, that is completely unsuitable. Do we face a perfect storm here of having unsuitable night shelters being available, depending on when the severe weather emergency protocols kick in, depending on the severe weather, where we could end up without the accommodation and with people being faced with a choice: is it safer on the streets rather than mixing and mingling with people? Is that the dilemma for some people?

Fiona Colley: I hope it is not going to be the dilemma. Around the numbers and the estimates, one of the positives that has come out of this situation, the pandemic and the increased partnership working between local authorities and charities, is that, in our view and the view of our members, in many cases, local authorities are much more knowledgeable than they used to be about their street populations. Many areas are having weekly or more frequent meetings, talking about individuals. They know their street populations far better than they once did in many areas. I would hope that their estimates of the numbers of places in self-contained accommodations that are going to be needed are better than in previous years.

That said, we are concerned because they are saying, "I think I am going to need this many. I think I am going to need that many". If they find

they need more, instead of being able to take that open door response, "We have opened the shelter", they are going to say, "This is how many places we have". They might look at rationing of that safe, self-contained accommodation. As I mentioned earlier, we are seeing people looking more at verifying. Have they verified that someone is a rough sleeper? Are they able to qualify for that space or not? I do not think you will necessarily see more shelters opening, but it would be far preferable, no doubt about it, to bring everyone in now, in a planned way, rather than waiting for the wet and cold weather in January and February.

Q235 **Bob Blackman:** The Government have allocated £15 million for some night shelters to be made Covid secure. To what extent has this been successful thus far?

Fiona Colley: Is that the Protect programme you are speaking of?

Bob Blackman: Yes.

Fiona Colley: I am not sure that is what it is for. I think that is for local authorities, to support them in their winter planning and for finding secure accommodation. The guidance is clear that opening night shelters should be a choice of last resort. It is not quite as clear as it should be about what steps local authorities should look at prior to feeling that they have reached that point. With the winter transformation fund that we are disseminating, we are not funding any night shelters at all. We will only be funding programmes that will provide self-contained accommodation.

Q236 **Bob Blackman:** Steve, you are not providing any night shelters at all, as I understand it. Is it that you cannot make them Covid secure or that you think you have other provision that is all that is required?

Steve Douglas: First, it is worth giving real credit to Fiona at Homeless Link and Housing Justice for working closely on what Covid-secure communal shelters might look like. Quite a lot of work has been done to see whether you could make them secure. We have looked at the advice and our view is that our shelters cannot be made Covid secure. Going back to the principles of Everyone In, we think that is the right solution. I am heartened to hear Fiona describing the way the transformation fund is being used and effectively confirming that our assessment was right.

The conversations we are having, again agreeing with Fiona, are regular conversations now. Local authorities have knowledge around the numbers that are on their streets. Bob, I would agree with you when it comes to the official count and then what comes out of the woodwork et cetera, but actually there is quite a lot of on-the-ground knowledge. Our view is that self-contained accommodation is the right way forward, making sure that is Covid safe. That is not just for our clients. We have a responsibility to our staff as well. A significant number of our staff are BME and we think it would not be morally right for us to be putting both clients and our staff at risk. The right solution is self-contained accommodation.

There is a little bit of light, and it is twofold. First, the Government have provided a significant amount of funding on the Next Steps

accommodation programme. In London, it is the rough sleeping accommodation programme. We can see that there will be significant numbers coming online over the next few months. Secondly, the SWEP protocol is established. The numbers are coming through. We know and we have a good idea of what the shortfall will be. There are then genuine conversations with Government. At the end of the day, it is probably going to come back to money.

My final point on that relates to the ONS stats. There is always this question about whether we have enough in the budget to provide all this. The ONS stats from 2019, and I hope you have seen those, confirm that there were 778 deaths. Our view is that every death is an absolute tragedy. The *Lancet* has produced recent research on what happened during the pandemic. It has confirmed that 166 deaths were avoided because of the approach that was taken in Everyone In. Over 1,000 hospital admissions were avoided because of the approach that was taken. Over 300 ICU admissions were avoided. When we do the cost-benefit analysis of Everyone In and self-contained accommodation, look at the lives that have been saved and the hospital costs that have been avoided.

Henry St Clair Miller: From a managing perspective in terms of the housing Department, the positive of the Covid-19 response is that resource-intensive engagement. As rightly summed up there by Steve, there have been low death and infection rates, low drop-out rates and high engagement with complex issues. Even with the no recourse to public funds cases, there have been some move-on and some success. It is about not regressing from that and keeping up that level of support where we can. In terms of the case working, there is an invest-to-save argument. If you address the needs of vulnerable residents properly straight off, you might somehow save yourself some money later down the line. That is a very difficult one to argue from a line-by-line budget. Those are my reflections.

Q237 **Chair:** Steve, you took the issue nicely on to money, which is the next area to explore. Back in May, the Committee was saying another £100 million would help take us forward, in terms of finding more permanent solutions. Since then, the Government have put £105 million into the Next Steps accommodation programme, £160 million into longer move-on accommodation and then another £150 million in the spending review. Is there not enough money in the system now? Should we not all be saying, "That is job done. We can just get on and do it"?

Fiona Colley: If only. Our estimate is that the sector needs £1 billion extra per annum and for that money to be long-term and stable. We of course welcome the additional funding that has come through this year, but a great deal of it has been very short term, to be spent by March, and simply does not allow the sector to plan or invest in our services, to transform and provide the different services that are needed. We did some work with St Mungo's last year, looking at spend in the sector. Spend is now around £1 billion less than it was in 2008-09 and rough sleeping has doubled in the same period. We see that we need significant

additional funding. That is not the funding for building the homes; that is the funding for the support and prevention work.

Q238 **Chair:** It seems an awfully big figure, £1 billion, compared to what is spent now. It seems to be off the scale of anything I have seen before that might have been suggested. Can you justify it?

Fiona Colley: That is how much has come out of the system. As I say, the rough sleeping has doubled in that period. We have talked about finances and results being linked. A lot of that goes through local authorities. We have seen funding being cut from Supporting People and other areas over that time period. We will do some more work on this in a post-Covid world, but, as you have heard again and again, it comes down to money and particularly for that funding to be secure over a longer period.

Henry St Clair Miller: I agree with Fiona about the need for extra money. I would always say that, from a local authority perspective. My reflection on this, in relation to the Committee's inquiry, is that we could try to do a little more to join up the dots and look at this from more of a poverty and equality perspective. We have seen recently in the press the challenges in relation to the Government meeting their target of building 300,000 homes a year. We have seen a really positive reaction through a universal credit rise, which has been helpful, but then the benefit cap has had a negative impact for larger families who have not seen the benefits of that rise.

When I come to the area of NRPF, we have all sorts of annoying passporting problems, where there can be issues with people accessing things like childcare or free school meals because of not being on benefits and the NRPF condition. We have temporary accommodation. We are throwing money at temporary accommodation, because we need to because of the amount of people being housed. I note the London Councils request to increase the LHA rate for temporary accommodation to the 30th percentile where this is higher than 90% of the January 2011 rates. That would help us with our budget as it currently stands.

We could then move over to things like asylum cessations. Why on earth is it not 56 days before asylum support is terminated to someone who has been successful in applying for refugee status in the United Kingdom? The other big one you could address is universal credit delays when people make applications for that benefit. The point is that, if we get those things right, it frees up some of my officer time, because I am dealing less with other rubbish that gets in the way of me meeting actual need. Yes, we need more money. We also need to join up the dots with what we have available.

Steve Douglas: It is worth reflecting on the fact that this is probably the biggest settlement that rough sleeping has had in a decade. The figure is about £700 million. My background is that I worked at the Housing Corporation, the NDPB that was responsible for affordable housing way back. This is a significant settlement and should be recognised. Also, it

brings revenue and capital together in a way that is unprecedented. That is a real positive.

To Fiona's point around the £1 billion, it was research we did together. Since 2010, this is the denuding of local authority budgets, so the amount available to be spent on supported housing and Supporting People services. That billion is money that is not there that is available for local authorities. On the numbers, year on year, Shelter, the National Housing Federation, the Chartered Institute of Housing, all those agencies, and in fact your own Committee, have talked about the need for at least 90,000 homes to be built every year that should be affordable and ideally social rented. Until we get those numbers, there is not enough supply to meet the needs that are clearly there.

The last thing is in terms of the different funding sources. Even this week we had the announcement of £52 million for substance misuse funding. There is funding coming through the criminal justice system. The very first thing we could do is to better align that funding, so that, between the decisions that are made at delivery level and the decisions that are made at strategy level, between the funding that goes into MHCLG and the funding that goes into other services, there is a genuine alignment between the housing and the support side. That would make a real difference.

There is Fiona's point about making it longer term, four-year settlements. We have a four-year budget, but a one-year settlement. That really does not help local authorities, homelessness charities and providers to develop long-term plans for both the housing and the support that is needed.

Q239 Chair: To make it clear, this Committee has recently done a report where we firmly supported the 90,000 a year figure for building up social rented housing. We are convinced on that point. What would it need to simply make sure local authorities could give everyone safe, self-contained accommodation this winter? Please give short answers.

Fiona Colley: Do you mean in funding terms?

Chair: Yes, funding.

Fiona Colley: You probably got the clearest answer to that from the LGA yesterday, when it spoke of how much it is short and overspent. It needs clarity and underwriting of its costs, more than anything. I am afraid I cannot estimate what it would cost for it to bring everyone in.

Chair: I am sure we can get a figure from the LGA anyway if we need one.

Q240 Bob Blackman: The Government have a commitment to halve rough sleeping and then to eliminate it by 2024. From that perspective, there are certain key issues I want to pick up on. Henry first, is it achievable to end rough sleeping while maintaining the current policy on no recourse to public funds?

Henry St Clair Miller: The answer would be no. We are going to see new groups of people with no recourse to public funds entering the United Kingdom. European Economic Area nationals will be entering it under a new immigration system with the NRPF condition imposed on 1 January. We have other schemes in relation to those on Hong Kong British national overseas visas, who will also be coming into the UK with that condition. You could make sure you properly fund the kind of safety net provision that has to be there alongside the NRPF condition to make sure that is leveraged properly to meet urgent need and find a route out of those problems.

To take off some of the difficulties of working with this group, it is important to reflect on how the Home Office will need to think about protecting people's acquired rights a little more, so we do not have situations like those we have heard about from the witnesses of people being effectively trapped in a limbo where they cannot really leave the UK and cannot really access mainstream services. That could be looked at. The Home Office probably has scope to use the NRPF condition less. It could reflect: if you are entering on a particular visa, maybe you are going to have the NRPF condition, but how long is it right for that NRPF condition to be there for people who have made an immigration application and have a right to remain on family and private life rules? It has some ability to take off the pain, but in itself, no, you probably cannot end rough sleeping while you have these kinds of immigration restrictions.

Q241 **Bob Blackman:** What do you think the impact of the new regulations on 1 January is going to be? If you are sleeping rough, that can be a ground for cancelling your leave to remain.

Henry St Clair Miller: It is damaging. We talked at the beginning about messaging. It is the wrong message for dealing with this very complicated area of work. We want to be able to work with people and we want to build trust. It does not start with taking away leave. It is a misguided policy because it is also at this very sensitive time when we are dealing with the economic fallout of Covid-19. It has ended up hitting just the types of people we expect might be coming to us for assistance because they have lost employment, have forms of valid work leave and are not able to benefit from the other Government schemes to avoid being on the streets. It is absolutely unfair that it should address them and capture that group.

I am not an expert and I have to underline the fact that the Home Office has slightly clarified its position since the uproar. It has said that it would only consider this as a last resort, where valid offers of voluntary return, perhaps in partnership with local authorities, have been made and refused. It has clarified that, but there has not been the guidance to understand how it is going to enact this. I am still a bit lost about whether it is also taking responsibility for enforcement, where it is appropriate. Is it going to do that, or is that going to come to the local authority to have to negotiate with the person?

The final part about it, while it might be a bit clumsy, is that we understood that the Home Office already had powers to curtail leave. I do not really know what this has provided as a net benefit. It is a bit concerning.

Q242 **Bob Blackman:** Fiona, there will always be some people who say, "Do you know what? I do not want your help. I have been rejected by officialdom. The system has failed me. I am safer on the streets. I would rather stay on the streets and sleep rough". How is it possible to help those sorts of people, unless you literally have compulsion?

Fiona Colley: I am not sure how much evidence there is that that is the case. Officials thought a lot of people would not engage with Everyone In, would not come and engage with services, but people did when it was offered without condition and without judgment. I am not sure that that entirely holds up, that we need to have compulsion that people engage with support. It might happen occasionally. Like Henry, I would like to see the guidance coming soon. We are pleased to see what the Home Office is saying about how it will use these new rules, but certainly people are very concerned about the rules.

We are worried Our members are worried about whether it will deter people further from engaging with services at all, to perhaps make the situation you are describing, which may occasionally occur, even worse. Through StreetLink, we are starting to get a few inquiries from worried members of the public: should they still alert people and connect people to services? The last thing they want is for that to result in people being deported. It is a misguided approach. I look forward to seeing the guidance so we can see in a bit more detail how they envision this operating.

Q243 **Bob Blackman:** Steve, can I ask you one specific question? As Clive quite rightly says, this Committee has released a report saying that we believe 90,000 social units should be produced each year. Do we literally need to get to a position, however, of having a surplus of housing to ensure that no one ends up sleeping rough, so we always have something available for people who are in the terrible position and the crisis of not having anywhere to live?

Steve Douglas: I would like to think I am relatively young, but I go back to the Barker review that said we needed 300,000. We have not managed to get anywhere close to that. What is it? It is now twenty-something years.

Q244 **Bob Blackman:** Actually, it is more than that. I do not know how old you are. We will not go into that. The reality is that, as the Government will always say, we built more housing last year than anyone over the last 30 years. Of course, everyone harks back to the 1950s, before any of us, I think, were alive.

Chair: Speak for yourself, Bob.

Bob Blackman: Even then, under Harold Macmillan as Housing Minister,

we may have built 300,000 new homes but at the same time we had a huge slum clearance programme. We never got to 300,000 net, even during those times. Do we actually have to generate a surplus of available housing to conquer this problem once and for all?

Steve Douglas: We could spend the whole of the evening on this. You have two issues there. One is about supply because of homelessness. Having an adequate supply to meet all the housing needs of our population is a separate thing.

In terms of rough sleeping and those ending up on the streets, we believe that there is a combination of solutions that means you do not have to end up on the streets if you end up homeless. That is things like Somewhere Safe to Stay and No Second Night Out, which is a place you can go, your options can be assessed, your health needs can be assessed and then you can work through the options available for you.

Then, in terms of the settled, long-term accommodation, Housing First is really important as an example. There, there is a question about whether we have enough move-on coming through the system. You heard some of the stories earlier. For some, independent accommodation is not right and does not work. Recognising that individuals need different types of accommodation and have different support needs at different times of their journey is really essential. We have a really good chance of addressing rough sleeping. If the Government get it right, working across agencies, we can deal with that. We can genuinely address that. In terms of supply, there is a bigger challenge.

Chair: On that optimistic note, we come to the end of this session. I am glad we did not get into too much of a competition about age there. I probably would have won that hands down. As a bit of information, I was brought up in a Macmillan home. All I will say is that they built a lot, but the condition was that the size and quality were diminished somewhat. That is just a cautionary note on the other side.

Thank you to all three witnesses for coming along today. That has been really helpful, with a lot of practical information from your very hands-on personal experiences there about the situation in the ground. That is really helpful evidence for the Committee. We will take that into account when we do our report early in the new year. Let us hope it is a good new year in terms of tackling the really important issues of homelessness and rough sleeping. That is something we all want to see. Thank you all very much indeed. I wish everyone a very happy Christmas, or as happy a Christmas as we can in the circumstances, and a much better new year.