



Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Impact of Covid-19 on Homelessness and the Private Rented Sector, HC 309

Monday 18 January 2021

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Ben Everitt; Rachel Hopkins; Ian Levy; Mary Robinson; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 245-274

Witnesses

I: Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, Former Chair, Rough Sleeping Taskforce.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Casey.

Chair: Welcome everyone to this afternoon's session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. This is an inquiry session into the impact of Covid-19 on homelessness and the private rented sector. Before I come to our witness this afternoon, I will get members of the Committee who have any particular interests relevant to this inquiry to declare them. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Ben Everitt: I am a councillor.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I am also a councillor.

Mary Robinson: I employ a councillor in my staff team.

Rachel Hopkins: I am a local councillor and one of the vice-presidents of the LGA, and I also employ a councillor.

Ian Byrne: I am a sitting councillor in Liverpool.

Ian Levy: I employ a parish councillor in my staff team.

Q245 **Chair:** Thank you all for that. It is helpful to get that on the record. I now come to—I was going to say Dame Louise Casey, but it is now Baroness



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Casey, to give you your full and current title. Welcome, Louise, as I think I probably know you better. Perhaps you could just introduce yourself and say what your role is or has been. That would be helpful.

Baroness Casey: I am Louise Casey. Yes, I am now a baroness, but I am not sworn in yet; I have not been introduced. I am overwhelmed by the concept of it, so I am working on everything else apart from that—only joking.

Last year, I think after the election, Secretary of State Robert Jenrick and No. 10 approached me to think about doing a review into the Conservative Government's manifesto commitment to meet their rough sleeping target. They brought it forward, I think, to 2024, and they wanted, I think, an old timer to have a look at the possibility of that, and how that would happen.

That was superseded by the pandemic. When I got back from a particular overseas trip, which was also about homelessness, I offered my help to the Department and to colleagues to see if there was anything I could do to help to get action going on getting Everyone In, as it is now called. I did that for several months—I think it was mid-March through to the end of July-August time—pretty relentlessly throughout that period.

Q246 **Chair:** Thank you for that introduction, which fills in the background of the situation. As you say, you led the Everyone In initiative for the first weeks. There is a bit of concern that Everyone In is not quite happening as it was, with the same energy and urgency. What is your take on it from outside now?

Baroness Casey: I think everything has got relentless and more challenging as time has gone on, to be honest. I was talking only this morning to colleagues in St Mungo's who have very much run all—or much—of the emergency provision and hotels in London. Staff have been doing this now for close to 12 months, so I think, in the same way that we are hearing loud and clear, and rightly so, about fatigue within the National Health Service, there is a level of relentlessness, fear and fatigue in many of the homelessness organisations, many of which are dealing with people who clearly have very significant drug, alcohol and mental health problems, who cannot self-isolate and so on and so forth.

If your question is about the Government, it is sad about Kelly Tolhurst, who to be fair I have only met once. I think she was very much finding her feet as a Minister in this space. I have no idea what has happened—it sounds like it is something very personal and very difficult—but I think she is a loss to the ministerial team in MHCLG. The thing that I do think is needed, Chair—or can I call you Clive?

Chair: Call me what you want; I called you Louise.

Baroness Casey: I have known you far too long. On the second part of your inquiry, they do not need a Minister; they should just ask you what to do about private renting. Anyway, a dedicated lead is really important, and I think that post my leaving, a dedicated lead actually keeps the urgency up. Until the pandemic is closed down, we are vaccinated and reaching the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

next stage, I think the issue of people who move around, who are homeless, with insecure accommodation—many in hotels—isn't something that anybody can walk away from any time soon.

Q247 **Chair:** One thing that has been said to us is that, in the first weeks when the Everyone In programme got going, everyone knew exactly what was required. People on the streets should not be on the streets; they should be somewhere safe. Everyone got it, and everyone worked to that end. Do you think that that certainty of objective has diminished now, and it isn't always absolutely clear to everyone that that is what the objective is?

Baroness Casey: To be honest, I think some of it is the very nature of this very strange year of being in lockdown, which was really clear, then not being in a lockdown but being in something else, then being in tiers, and then being in different tiers. It is quite hard actually, particularly if you are running homelessness services or if you are homeless, to keep up with some of that.

I am not saying that the country should not have been in lockdown, then in tiers, then not in tiers. I am not commenting on the overall health approach to how we are dealing with this. I am just saying that if you are working on homelessness, you are dealing with, on the whole, a very vulnerable and very chaotic, and often very transient group of people, where clarity is all.

Honest to God, Clive, I've been around for so long, haven't I? When I pitch up and poor old Jeremy Pocklington, the permanent secretary, gets a text from me in reception saying, "Hello Jeremy—I'm here. Do you want a hand?" I am not sure that every permanent secretary in Whitehall would think, "Great—I've got Louise downstairs," but to his credit both he and the Secretary of State thought, "Great—we'll have her."

I have quite a lot of experience of these large and difficult programmes to move quickly on. I am not blowing my own trumpet or anything, but I have been around the block quite a lot. I ran Troubled Families. I understand local government. I think I have the respect of colleagues in local government across the political divide. I am quite apolitical, so people know that I am not trying to do anything other than get something done.

I was there about a week, and I thought, "We are just not moving quickly enough." I penned an email, which I read again yesterday, and it is really straight down the line, saying, "I don't care what's happening; I don't care what's going on, you've got to get everybody in." That email came on the back of my first conversation with the deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam. I was just running through with him the different scenarios of what I thought we were facing, and then I had the space basically to try to make it happen as quickly as possible.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Large programmes do not scare me, having run a programme for 120,000 families, which was 500,000-plus individuals, and ditto, under the Labour Government, I ran quite significant programmes.

This was really tough because we had to move really quickly, and I found some of the layers of bureaucracy between what was needed and what needed to happen challenging at times. The other thing to say is that we were chasing a public health crisis, so it was not about trying to solve rough sleeping. That is one of the things that I wanted to say, particularly to this Committee, because this is your expertise in terms of the Department.

It was really clear to me from Jonathan Van-Tam and then from Chris Whitty, that we had a real problem on our hands if we had people who were transient and moving around. There was that story about the guy in Brighton who was called a super-spreader—he was not homeless, but there were noises about super-spreaders. I remember Sadiq's people said, "Louise, we've got this hotel. We're going to open a hotel," and I thought, "Great," but it was for 150 people. I thought, "We need 5,000 spaces, not 150." That really pivoted the work of MHCLG's team, to try to help brigade that, essentially. The clarity of it was easy at that point.

The other thing to remember, of course, is that it was easy for homeless people to understand. That should not be forgotten here. There was a great moment when I was listening to a guy talking on the radio. He was being interviewed by Nick Robinson, who said, "It must have been lovely to come in," and the guy said, "I was rounded up!" Then he tried again and said, "Yes, but you're in the Travelodge in Bristol. That must be amazing." The guy said, "It's like a prison in here!" At the time I was punching the air, thinking, "Great—a clear message: 'You're coming in, and we're not taking no for an answer. Secondly, you're isolating, mate. That's life—it's tough, but you're going to isolate.'" Then of course, he had an iPad, which meant that he could watch whatever he wanted, and he had a television, and got used to it.

That clarity got more difficult when the lockdown and rules started to change. If you stick someone who is a drug addict in a hotel, what are they going to do? They need help, and if they are not helped, they will go out, raise money in any way that they can, and score. It is a tricky thing, and I think you should hear directly from people such as Petra Salva from St Mungo's, who you have not interviewed on this issue. Some of those people have been just extraordinary. What I saw last year and continue to see is the best of public service.

Chair: Okay. Let us go to Ben Everitt, who wants to pursue some of those issues.

Q248 **Ben Everitt:** Thank you very much for your time this afternoon, Baroness Casey. Do you think that Everyone In applies to everybody, including those who have arrived on the streets since we started the programme in March 2020? If so, what more should local authorities be doing to offer that new cohort of people emergency accommodation on a regular basis?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Casey: That is a really tough question, because if we track back to last year, our starting point was that we had to find accommodation for about 5,000 to 6,000 people. The estimates that the Administration had at that time were not only the street count of the year before, but realtime estimates from local authorities that took that figure to about 6,000.

I thought, "Right, okay. Fine." Then two or three days later, I discovered that in England we now have quite a network of church and community shelters. They range from static shelters that open during cold weather, to night by night shelters, used in particular by—I might as well name the difficult issue from the starting point—people with no recourse to public funds. Remember, I have not worked domestically in street homelessness for a long time. I have worked internationally, and I keep an eye on what we are doing here, but I did not realise the level of numbers in those shelters was more like 3,000.

At that point, we had to up the game again, putting a lot of pressure on colleagues in local authorities, the team at MHCLG and the voluntary sector, to move faster at opening up accommodation. I presume you know that the numbers went quickly from 5,400 to 15,000 to 22,000 and up to 29,000, after I had gone.

What do I think about that? I remember having a call with somebody and saying, "Look, the virus isn't discriminating between whether you are from Portugal, Bexley or Sri Lanka. Last time I checked, you are all at risk." It's not that we didn't have any choice; it was the right thing to do in the middle of a pandemic. It shows the country at its best that, in the middle of a pandemic, we are humanitarian, in making sure that people are able to come in. If I am honest, I don't think that will go away until we are sure that we have chased down this virus. That makes things very difficult for Ministers in MHCLG.

So, Ben, if I can call you that, the pandemic arrived against a backdrop of lots of things that have happened in homelessness the last 15 years. When I was the homelessness tsar under the Labour Administration, economic migrants were not a feature that I ever worried about. We worried about long-term homeless people and women who had been out on the street for years. We had a vulnerable cohort in 1999, which I will come to, as I think that is an issue now, but we didn't have one of the causes of homelessness being migration.

Being utterly direct and cutting straight to it, I think that one of the causes of rough sleeping is an inability to manage immigration properly. Sorry; that is really brutal. As you are probably aware, over the years I have worked in different Departments. Under Labour and then under David Cameron, I had to run interdepartmental programmes and policy. The Home Office is a pretty tough Department to get through the door, open up and say, "Hey, we need help here." That is something they are going have to turn to, because there is no way out of this. If you want to end rough sleeping, or get the numbers back down to the hundreds, then somewhere along the line somebody has to bite off this issue with people,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

who are all put into one group, incidentally. I found it interesting last year that essentially non-UK nationals were all treated as people with no recourse to public funds, and it is much more complicated than that.

I have taken us on to more controversial territory—forgive me for that. The straight answer to your question is: as long as this virus is out there and killing people, it is incumbent on us, as a community and a country, to make sure that we protect people in the best way possible. Once that vaccine is safely in as many people as humanly possible, we should come back to those sorts of issues at that stage. I think it is just a really tough one for this Government right now. Rishi Sunak must feel like he might as well just throw the cheque book away and let everybody draw down whatever they want.

I can understand some of the nervousness around that, but the problem with homelessness is that it is transient, and you have people who cannot self-isolate because they are not able to be in anywhere. In the same way, we have people who have been working in these hotels, dealing with people who are drug addicts, who are addicted to alcohol, and who have very significant mental health problems. They are not calm patients you can deal with.

Those workers are worried about being vaccinated. Those are the sorts of issues that I feel we need to get to, and then once we get there we should revisit—I have views on no recourse to public funds, which I can share with you, but right now I think we need to help everybody who needs help.

Chair: We will come on to that issue in a minute with other questioners.

Q249 **Ben Everitt:** Indeed. Funnily enough, just following up on no recourse to public funds, you spoke about that example in the past tense, from your experience at the beginning of this. What is your confidence, in terms of the present tense and the future tense, that we are going to have such a wraparound and no-nonsense approach to it? We have heard that winter night shelters are only open as a last resort, and that is possibly because people with no recourse to public funds are finding it very hard to get access to emergency accommodation elsewhere.

Baroness Casey: Let's be clear for a minute: 33,000 people have either moved through emergency accommodation, or—I think they said in November it was 9,000 or 10,000—are still there. Some of those people in that 9,000 to 10,000 will still be there because they have no recourse to public funds or their papers are not sorted yet. That is something I found very interesting when I went through a particular hotel last year with colleagues from St Mungo's and was just trying to get a sense.

Essentially, you have people who are UK nationals—perfectly normal, homeless, with recourse to public funds. They may have multiple needs and multiple issues running, but there is nothing to stop them necessarily moving into the system. You then have people who were economic



HOUSE OF COMMONS

migrants who did not have their papers but with a lot of effort could get their papers and could become settled citizens.

That process, I believe, is still going. That is quite a significant group of people. It was like: "Oh my God, get it all done." The Government are paying for voluntary organisations to do that work—out of homelessness budgets, incidentally. If I was back in a civil service role, I would be taking a long hard look at why MHCLG funding is going on essentially an immigration thing, but I realise that is technical.

It was just interesting how the rough sleeping people end up having to do a million different things, because no other—I am at home, so I am using stronger and more direct language than usual. The rough sleeping team end up dealing with essentially systemic failure elsewhere, and that is part of the problem with the fact that there isn't a strategy. It ends up with them having to deal with things.

Then you have a group of people who will not have recourse to public funds, and the only way to sort them out is to get them a job. I found it fascinating that obviously the migrancy sector on the whole are advocates for people's rights and trying to get them their papers; there aren't people who are set up to find them jobs. You have certain organisations that do it, and certain that don't.

There was that great moment with Prince Charles out for Pick for Britain. I got the team in MHCLG to ring practically every single farmer in that scheme. I got the information off DEFRA, and the farmers were not that keen on taking people out of the hotels without support and without help, so that did not get us anywhere.

Finally, you have a small group—it is a small group, I think—of people who just should not be here. They have failed their asylum or refugee status, and they should not be here. Then it's up to lawyers or other people to fight for them on their behalf, but some of them are swept up into this. That is where the communal night shelters have, in a way, hidden this from official sight. Of course, it always matters who is in Downing Street, which people are in power and what their policies are, but that is just a technical nightmare.

The thing about immigration is that, if it is not managed well, it is really difficult for managers and people running the services to deal with it. What the Government has done is said that there is a clause that says local authorities can help people if they think that they are at risk of losing their lives, which I think they still are, or that there is a clause that says they can help them if there other specific—I have the wording somewhere on a bit of paper near me, but I am not very good at looking at papers. You know exactly what I am talking about. I think this is one of those boulders in the road that at some point people have to split down and work out a way through it.

Classic Government: everybody does this. Labour has done this, as have the coalition and the Tories. If you don't count it, you don't see it—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

therefore, you cannot set a target around it. People are always nervous about counting things in Governments. One of the interesting things for me is that when I did the integration review last year, I was trying to establish the number of people who are legally here but have no recourse to public funds. How big is that figure? I reckon—the Department should be able to tell you this properly—that there are 10,000 people who are still in emergency hotels and other forms of accommodation. If the figures are 2,000 to 3,000, is it honestly worth it? The administration involved with all of that—part of me thinks that if the numbers are that low, we should just declare an amnesty and move on.

But if the numbers are huge, that is a different thing. That is a million people here with no recourse to public funds that somebody like me is asking for an amnesty for. That is a very different thing, and right now we are worrying about poor people and whether they get universal credit. You have Marcus and many others worrying about whether kids get food. The Government has to make those decisions, and that is the really difficult thing. The size of that group is really important for us to understand.

Q250 Chair: We will move on now. I think we have some more questions on no recourse to public funds, but I just want to say to colleagues now that Louise has probably answered some of the questions that would have been put. If we can pick out the bits that we want further information about, that will be helpful, to move this forward.

Baroness Casey: I can keep my answers shorter as well, Clive. It's because I'm in my bedroom.

Chair: I did not realise that had an effect on you, Louise. Never mind; we'll go on.

Q251 Ian Byrne: I think you've answered most of the questions today—you gave some fantastic answers to Ben. For the record, I was going to talk about the powerful evidence session that we had with individuals who were homeless.

One was called Abeo, who told us that having no recourse to public funds meant he slept rough, with no help. He said he felt that the Government had left him on the streets to die. It was extremely powerful—I think everyone here went away with tears in their eyes after listening to him describe his experiences. He eventually found accommodation, but only after numerous interventions by charities such as St Mungo's, which was magnificent in helping him into a house. Of course, that is a temporary situation. He has now been threatened with immediate eviction by the council. Just to put it on record, do you think it is right to enforce a no recourse to public funds policy during this pandemic? You mentioned an amnesty, didn't you?

Baroness Casey: As long as the virus is as prevalent as it is right now, I find it hard to think that we would not put a roof over people's heads during the pandemic. It is a matter of political decision making about what one does with people who have no recourse to public funds.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The balanced way of looking at this, pre pandemic, is: if people come here and know those are the terms, it is very difficult to then reverse those terms. I know that is where colleagues, probably on this Committee and within Government, would come from—if those are the terms by which you accepted arriving into the country. For example, we know that many people do not present till after a year. I reckon a lot of those people are working for a year, then fall out of work.

That is why the technocrat in me thinks that the solution is to say, “How do we get jobs for these people?” That would have been fine before the pandemic, but now we are looking at a country with close to 400,000 redundancies in six months last year. More people were made redundant between March and October last year than in the last recession of 2009. The sorts of things that you might think were reasonable to do pre-pandemic are harder. If someone is on the street or in a communal night shelter and they cannot self-isolate, we are putting their life at risk. Nobody in this country, whatever their political persuasion, wants people to die—that is not where anybody comes from in public life.

In a way, that was the well-meaning intention behind the Government’s introduction last year of the guidance on communal night shelters. It is a matter of record that I feel that we should not have communal night shelters anyway—they are a sign of failure. I spend my life going to other countries in the world helping them to work out how they can use them as a specific intervention, not have them all year round.

If I were doing a review for the Government, my starting point would be, “How do you create a safety net that isn’t the street? How do you lift the safety net up off the street?” That is what I was talking about to John Healey on the Labour side before the election last year. The clever way of looking at this is not to let people end up on the street, where they become more and more sick, and more and more challenging, and we are less able to get them back in, but to find a much more preventive safety net, which means much more quickly that they do not go near the street.

Ian Byrne: I have another question.

Baroness Casey: Liverpool, Ian, were brilliant last year. You should be very proud of Liverpool and the charities.

Chair: He thought you were talking about football.

Baroness Casey: I won’t declare my hand on that!

Q252 **Ian Byrne:** That could mean a couple of things.

Louise is spot on. We are very proud of how the city reacted. To be fair, I think that the country reacted excellently. I am going to touch on what the issue is now. Local authorities do not have a duty to help those with recourse to public funds. That is the MHCLG’s legal position but, on the other hand—and we are finding this in Liverpool—they are asking councils to bring everyone in, and insist that the Everyone In initiative continues. Are the Government trying to have their cake and eat it by claiming the successes of Everyone In while not providing a solution to the actual,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

practical challenges that councils face?

Baroness Casey: Yes. Governments always want to have their cake and eat it; it does not matter who is in Downing Street—that is par for the course. I am semi-joking. The fact of the matter is that, during the pandemic, the best way of dealing with this is to continue people's responsibilities to make sure that people are not at risk of death. That is very clear.

When the pandemic, God willing, passes in some way, shape or form, this issue will become really challenging again. The Government always have a "get out of jail" card, which is that it is down to local authorities to make those decisions. The challenge is that there is a postcode lottery about where someone might be homeless and what their treatment is.

The stuff around no recourse to public funds is one aspect. That also applies to people who have recourse to public funds. While I have the floor, as it were, I will say that part of the issue is what we were facing before the pandemic. If you looked into the figures—we have the best information about what is happening in London, because of the CHAIN data—the stand-out thing in that data is that there is a growing group, and this was the worrying thing pre-pandemic, of people who have been out on the streets for more than two years. When I saw Robert Jenrick being a bit critical and met him for the first time, I said, "I have lived with figures. Figures go up and everybody says they are not right. Figures go down and people say you are fiddling the figures." Sometimes you are in a no-win situation on figures when you are in government, which is why multiple sources of figures is always helpful in how you deal with data.

I think the same thing about delegating to local authorities around no recourse to public funds. In a way, my other worry has been that actually people who needed treatment could not get it because what local authorities are doing, and understandably so—again, Lord Porter would say they have had a very difficult decade of cuts to local government; Gary may use different language, but people know that it is £16 billion. That means that all the treatment options have gone.

At one point last year, I turned round and went, "Right, we have got these in people now"—the people who needed rounding up and almost needed scaring in to try to save their lives. I was like, "Right, where are we at with treatment? Tell me about drug, alcohol and mental health beds" for three days, and eventually it came back that there were none within the M25. I am like, "Right, ring The Priory. I don't get this." Then I realised that part of the issue was that government works through local government and local government does commissioning. If local government does not have a lot of money, it is not going to commission £400 or £500 drug and alcohol beds.

Then you have got poor old frontline charities. St Mungo's is one, but there are countless brilliant frontline charities in this country on homelessness—we have got some outstanding practice, with Thames Reach in London as well as others; I do not want to over name-check



HOUSE OF COMMONS

them. Actually, those people know who needs those treatment beds, and they cannot get them. So this delegating to local government is a good thing—we have one of the architects behind the Act, Bob Blackman, here—because, in theory it is a really powerful thing to be able to do individual assessments of people, both to prevent homelessness and to deal with it. That is an upside.

The downside is that if you leave everything to local decision making, going back to Ben's question about whether it is clear, it is not as clear as you might want it to be. Going to your question about no recourse, it is not as clear as you might want it to be. Delegating to local authorities is a bit like devolution, isn't it? Devolution is: hand it out and reduce the money. So it is complicated. I think all of this has needs to come to pass once we get people vaccinated.

Ian Byrne: That is an excellent answer. Thanks, Louise. *[Interruption.]*

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I think you're on mute, Chair.

Chair: It was brilliant, what I just said. Over to you, Brendan.

Q253 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thank you, Chair; I never doubted it for a moment.

One of the aims of the Rough Sleeping Taskforce that you previously led was to look at how those brought into emergency accommodation with the NRPF conditions could be helped. Did you manage to make any progress on this before you stepped down?

Baroness Casey: Yes and no. I thought it would be more straightforward. I did not realise quite how complicated and how just angst-ridden this whole issue is. Everybody just climbs into their bunker and stays there. There is not a lot of problem solving.

I do not wish to be overly brutal, but if you were to caricature our immigration policy—of course it is not the responsibility of this Committee—you have got 20 years of saying, "Keep the numbers low, set targets on numbers, keep people out," and then you have got the other side saying, "That's a horrible policy. We need everybody here. London is open." What you have got in the middle of it is this clash between immigration policy and homelessness, which people working in homelessness are trying to problem-solve, and it is very painful.

Two or three years ago, colleagues and voluntary organisations were graffitied for being racist, because their facilitating some people to go home to another country who had reached the end of the road and really wanted to go home—and had no option but to go home—was seen really bad thing. That got quite personal for some of those individuals and those agencies. I think, Brendan, the whole thing is quite fraught, and actually it does not need to be fraught. We are where we are with it, and I felt very strongly that the people that we have managed to get into this emergency accommodation, we should either get their bloody papers sorted or get them a job, or get them home.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I will say this—I am sure nobody, particularly in the Department, wants me to say it: at one point, at the beginning of the pandemic, we had over 75 people that absolutely wanted to go back to Romania. They were scared. They wanted to go home. They were absolutely up for it. Could I get anybody to help? I even rang up the lovely bloke who used to run the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. You know, I was like a civilian wandering about in a different world just trying to find solutions to some of these things, and, no, I couldn't. I even rang easyJet, actually. I rang easyJet, because I know people at easyJet, and I rang BA, and said, "Can any of you help me? I have got 75 people that will happily go home." Seventy-five people, when you have got hotels that you are trying to stand up with 150 beds—that is a lot of beds that you could use.

I think in a way I wish that the review, whether I did it or somebody else did it, had happened before the pandemic, because in those reviews you could unpack those issues and let the evidence and the data give you the solution. Because either those people need a job—they either need to go home, if they can go home, or they need a job, or we need to get them settled status. What you cannot do is have people wandering around the streets, particularly in the middle of a pandemic, who potentially could get ill and spread it. It is a mismanaged policy. Sorry to be so brutal. It is a mismanaged policy because it also falls across different Government Departments, so it is a fraught political potato across different Government Departments and it means that people running the hotels have very limited solutions as to what they can do for those people.

Q254 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thanks for that. Just picking up on what Ian was mentioning before, and individual situations where people have been temporarily housed but their local authority does not believe it can help them any further, due to restrictions on benefits, will they return to the streets unless the Government makes a change to its policy, do you think?

Baroness Casey: I think this has to be dealt with, yes. The choice in the last few years that we might as well be up front about, and open about—I don't know why this is a secret—is that the use of communal shelters is largely for that group, and, actually, for a group who are working, who use those communal shelters and then send the money home. In a way I always believe that sometimes the most difficult problems just need more light on them so you can look at them. That is why if I was in Priti Patel's job or in Rob Jenrick's job I would be wanting to know the numbers. I would want to know how many people are in that situation, so I know what the cost would be if I needed to sort it out.

Q255 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thank you. Finally, in terms of defining who is subject to NRPF, in the past couple of weeks or so there has been some confusion. Do you feel that Ministers understand this, and who has access and why?

Baroness Casey: So you are talking about new arrivals at the moment?

Q256 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Yes, and just generally, and about the rules: do



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you think there is that understanding there of the wider policy and the impacts, at ministerial or Government level?

Baroness Casey: I think people understand what is going on. I think people know what is going on. I just think it is very difficult to find a way to resolve it straightforwardly, but this is no secret in Whitehall. The thing just to remember, though, is that the vast majority of people in that 33,000 are UK nationals or people that are here legally. Let's not get overly obsessed with this. If I am worried about anything I am worried about the fact we have a very large number of people who have been out on the streets for more than two years, some who have come in through this pandemic, who we need to have onward solutions for. I understand the politics around people with no recourse to public funds, but they don't dominate this 33,000 figure. These are domestic subjects that we have a responsibility towards.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I am not sure if we have lost our Chair. I think he is here.

Ian Byrne: Substitute again, Bob.

Bob Blackman: I am off the bench again for another challenge. Excuse me while I check who is next in line.

Q257 **Mohammad Yasin:** I think it is me, Bob. Thank you, Louise. My question is about the new immigration rules. Do you agree with the changes brought in by the new immigration system, which introduced rough sleeping as grounds for cancelling someone's leave to remain?

Baroness Casey: Not particularly, no, I don't. I just feel that we are in the wrong place on all this. We have upwards of 5,000 people regularly sleeping out on the streets and we have just brought in 33,000 people. That number has slowed down. At the beginning and over those six months, I don't think people were jumping queues or fiddling around; I think that need was genuine and was there. I think it is a tremendous story. I did a stint at it, but there have been people doing this for close on 12 months.

I wish we were talking about how we would have a rough sleeping strategy or how we would come out of this pandemic with a cross-party, cross-Government strategy on reversing the worst aspects of what the pandemic has done to poor people in this country. I am quite up front about the fact that I feel that the situation is very grave, in terms of the number of people who have never claimed benefit before who are now having to claim it.

As for the reason it is 33,000, this has been happening for quite a long time now with things like local housing allowance. When the Prime Minister was the Mayor of London, the local housing allowance in London was 50%, not 30%. We have the lowest benefit levels that we have given to people at any time since the 1990s. We have upwards of 330,000 people made redundant in the last six months of last year. We have extraordinary levels of people in temporary accommodation, and I am desperately worried



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about people who have been in that accommodation with children, four children to a bedroom, trying to do home schooling, for example.

I feel that those are the really big and substantive issues. Nobody in this Government went out and got a pandemic. Nobody is responsible for the pandemic, but we are all responsible for what we do during and post the pandemic. I think you have to step back and have a look at how you heal some of what has happened in the United Kingdom in those few months, and I would put homelessness within that. I did when I looked at the integration review.

I understand that if people come into the country on certain terms, and then they want to change those terms on arrival, that is really tough. I get that, but I think that the way we need to come at rough sleeping is as part of a wider look at what we are doing here. I always say to colleagues, and I have said it to most Prime Ministers I have worked for, "Do tender before you do tough." It is kind of a human way of dealing with things, and that is a much more effective way.

I am quite anti-begging. I will be completely honest with you. When I was the rough sleeper tsar, once we knew that we really had got to grips with the problem and had decent drug and alcohol measures in place, I was up for making sure people were very, very persuaded not to beg. I would even use law against people who were aggressively begging. As long as your conscience is clear on your welfare state and a homelessness strategy, I think you can take a tough view around some of those issues—you couldn't at the moment.

Sometimes a dose of really strong politics is not what is needed on very complicated problems; what you need is lots of doses of gentle politics across the political divide to try to work out what the best solution is. Obviously, their line to you, if they do appear before the Committee, my poor colleagues in MHCLG, will be to say something along the lines of, "We will be working with the Home Office to look at what the guidance is and how it will be applied," and then what will happen is that it will turn into a very small cohort of people who fall into this group, and then they will have to define what they think antisocial behaviour is. Well, good luck with that one—I was the ASBO tsar—it is pretty tough. For me, that was just a bit of big politics that just didn't help us at that particular moment.

Q258 Mohammad Yasin: We also heard in December from Sam, who, as a newly recognised refugee, had just 28 days to find accommodation. She couldn't find any appointment for universal credit. She had no savings. She was spending most of her time filling in homelessness applications. Do you support 28 days becoming 56 days to prevent newly recognised refugees from being at risk of rough sleeping?

Baroness Casey: Yes. The long and the short of it is that it is well-nigh impossible for a domestic person to get themselves sorted out—my God, if I didn't have my birth certificate, I do not know where I would be. These things take time. I do think there should be a limit on the time: I think that that focuses the system as much as the individual. But I think I would



HOUSE OF COMMONS

make it parallel with that for the prevention of homelessness duties, which is also 56 days, so that it makes sense within the system.

Right now, I think it's just—well, I'm doing bits of work around food banks and things like that at the moment, and I have to say that for colleagues working on universal credit, in the DWP, the impact on that system has been huge in the last 12 months, so I understand that suddenly doubling, if not more, the number of people on universal credit has shown that the DWP system can cope up to a point, but the number of people who are really struggling to get their applications done within the five-week period is not insignificant. Of course I'm worried about refugees in that scenario, but I am very worried about the vast numbers of members of the public who are really struggling at the moment and the impact of the 80% furlough on them in terms of paying their rent. I have met countless mums who are at food banks because they have to pay their rent first; they can't afford to think about being homeless and that's why they have turned to food banks.

So yes, 28 days is a bit tough. There is a system for refugees, though, that the Home Office has in place. Fifty-six days would probably be more sensible. That fits in with other homelessness responsibilities for local authorities, so from an autocratic/technocratic perspective, it makes sense. Right now, we are still at the stage, though, where the pandemic is live; and until it is not live, one has to be very careful about chucking people out of anything.

Mohammad Yasin: Thank you very much. Back to you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mohammad. Thanks, Louise. You have worn one of my computers out, so I have gone over to a second one! I am back with you now.

Baroness Casey: I will take that as a compliment, Clive.

Chair: Absolutely. We will now move on to the issue of the Rough Sleeping Taskforce.

Q259 **Mary Robinson:** Louise, we have heard about your huge and amazing success last year as chair of the Rough Sleeping Taskforce and about the energy and work that went into all the programmes that were introduced. When you stood down in August, it was something of a surprise. Why did you step down?

Baroness Casey: For two reasons. One was that, even though I had known about it for a while, actually being elevated—to use that word—to the House of Lords is a huge deal, and I thought it was the right moment for me to think about what, really, that means and what I should be doing. That was quite a big deal and that was the primary—it was one of the key motivations.

I think the second thing was that I didn't go back to be the homelessness tsar. Robert Jenrick and I remain in contact. I think the Department know how to do it, and the people at civil servant level have continued. They



HOUSE OF COMMONS

might not have my profile, and they are not as old and haggard and warrior-like as me, but nevertheless they have continued and they know what they are doing. I think MHCLG is very lucky to have that particular team. They have a lot of experience, so I did not feel that I was leaving them with any management to worry about, because we needed to continue with the action.

The other thing is that if I am responsible for something, I have to be fully responsible for it. If I was appointed the homelessness tsar, I would have wanted the strategy on rough sleeping, not just responding to the pandemic. What the pandemic response has shown is that this is possible. At one point last year in this same room, probably looking at the same computer, I thought to myself, "My God. We have got the numbers right back down again to the hundreds." It was a phenomenal moment. Even last weekend, because of the cold weather, the numbers in places like Westminster, which literally attracts everybody to it, were down considerably.

I felt that this learnt compassion fatigue of homelessness is always going to be there. There is nothing we can do about rough sleeping. Unlimited budgets. Constant challenges. We swept that aside with, "If you want to do it, it is possible", but that was not a rough sleeping strategy. I still think that somebody needs to take a step back and look at how you sort rough sleeping and homelessness.

Of course, you are always dealing with the symptoms of failure. Rough sleeping is mainly a systemic failure. Sometimes it is a systemic failure around human frailty. The fact that people end up as drug addicts or have major alcohol problems, and the fact that their route to help is the street, is a failure. For me, the system has to look at how you solve that. I thought, "They don't want me to do that." What they needed me to do was to put my shoulder to the wheel and get as many people in as possible and make sure we held it all. We achieved that, and it has not massively unravelled. If anything, that team has continued to do it and it has enjoyed massive political support from all parties, certainly at local level. People have been up for it. But it is not a rough sleeping strategy, and that is the thing for me.

Q260 Mary Robinson: You seem to be pulling apart the two things, the Rough Sleeping Taskforce and policy. Were there any policy issues that you thought were problems for you that stood in your way?

Baroness Casey: The issue about no recourse to public funds is a pragmatic nightmare: figures that are too big, no ability to get them work, it being too slow to get papers sorted, and an immigration problem that I felt the rough sleeping system was having to deal with. When the lockdown lifted—I always think of social welfare problems as an overflowing bath. If you want to solve an overflowing bath, the first thing you do when you run into the bathroom is switch the taps off. You have to prevent the problem in the first place. We spend a lot of our time dealing with what is in the bath and clearing up after it. We don't spend enough time on prevention.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I did not and I do not feel that there is a strong enough prevention of homelessness strategy. That is not just about things like local housing allowance, which are all definite issues, or even things such as routing people from prison to the street. During the pandemic, while I was still there, we had people coming out of hospital and ending up at risk of rough sleeping, and we had people coming out of prison. Those things drive me insane, because they are preventable. I cannot look after a child who has come from a tough background, ends up in care and then comes back out again. I would like to do that, and I have had a go at that in other jobs.

When I was rough sleeping tsar, there was one prison in north London that discharged on a Friday and one prison in south London that discharged on a Monday. We had a fighting chance with one and we had no hope with the other. Over time, that type of stuff would get to me, so it was better to say, "Listen, if you want me to come back and do the review, I will come back and do the review. In the meanwhile, let's carry on with the pandemic work."

Q261 **Mary Robinson:** Are you surprised you have not been replaced, Louise? You suggested that there was a huge vacuum when you left. In fact, Fiona Colley of Homeless Link says that she is not sure that the Rough Sleeping Taskforce is even active any more. What progress do you think has been made since you left, and what do you think is happening with the Rough Sleeping Taskforce?

Baroness Casey: The Rough Sleeping Taskforce was—how can I put it? At one point, I ran something called the Respect Taskforce. We might have called the Troubled Families scheme the Troubled Families Taskforce at one point. It is an expression to indicate to Whitehall that it is not business as usual.

I'd been annoying everybody, with no formal role, and we got to a point where I thought we ought to explain that I am actually part of something, and that I am accountable for that, in some way, shape or form. So, Mary, it was my idea, to be honest, to create a chair of the Taskforce. It was running a specific team of civil servants, with a specific job. Those people haven't gone away; those civil servants continue to do a really good job, in my view. They didn't need me over them.

If I were in the voluntary sector, I would be appearing before you and saying things along the lines of, "Not enough direction is going into this." To be fair, at the beginning we were relentless about it. It was almost like—not turning the taps off, but, essentially, we put the taps on full, then took the taps away and let all the flow come out. It was like a huge dam bursting, of 30,000 people, all of whom were in or near the streets, or at risk of being on the streets. What the Government did was put the taps back in place.

If you work in a night shelter, sometimes you have to choose who comes in. It's awful. You want everyone to come in, but sometimes you have to make a choice between somebody who is able bodied and okay and who you think might have somewhere to go that night, and someone who is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not able bodied and not okay who you think needs to come in. In a way, that is what some bits of the sector have found hard. To be fair, some bits of local authorities are too hard, and they did gatekeep. There are some cases that people could put before you that even I would say, "For God's sake, let that person come in and get on with it."

Q262 **Mary Robinson:** You spoke about the review earlier, and you said that you wished the review had happened before the pandemic. What has happened with the review? Where did it get up to? Did you conclude it? Have any of the reviews that have been begun into this actually got to the bottom of it?

Baroness Casey: To be fair, I was going to start the review for them after Easter, and then Covid got in the way. So, no formal review of the Government's manifesto commitment and rough sleeping strategy has happened. The Secretary of State, Rob Jenrick, and myself—our doors are open to each other.

My current view is that we need to keep the eye on the pandemic, on what is happening on the streets and on homelessness for now, and we should see where we are towards Easter. Hopefully, God willing, more normality will return. As much as I am concerned about rough sleeping, and there is an argument that you should lift the safety net up off the street, I am also concerned about families in temporary accommodation and the significant challenges that they are facing.

Obviously, Government stats take a while to be collected and realtime data is often difficult. Barking and Dagenham, which will be an area that everybody tries to get to because it might fit within the local housing allowance, doubled the number of people on universal credit between March and October. I think it went from 13,000 to 34,000 people in one borough alone by October, and a further 40% of the people in that borough were furloughed at that point. If that is what we think is happening in quite a number of lower-income and deprived areas, and I think it is—it is not just deprived areas, but low-income areas—the impact of that on homelessness will be significant.

I also think that if you were to look back at how you would have to look at the review, it has to look at some pretty tough issues—house building, for example, and what is affordable and what is social. If you want to end rough sleeping and to tackle homelessness, you have to look at some of those issues. Only 54,000 homes were built in the year preceding the pandemic, out of a manifesto commitment of 330,000. We now have huge dependence on the private rented sector, which is our least regulated and most at sea sector. I know I am not here to talk about the private rented sector, but all I am trying to say is that if you were looking at a review, you would have to look at quite significant and substantive issues and then to move through to some very detailed issues, such as: why do we have a street culture in our towns and cities? It is not only in places such as Leeds, Manchester, London and Bristol, as it was in my day; you will find people begging in Folkestone, Ipswich and Gloucester. It has changed, and those things need to be looked at.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Taskforce was my ability to try to have some sort of focus and role that was public and accountable. I did the first bit as a volunteer, and I did the second bit not as a volunteer. In relation to the review, I have said to the Secretary of State that I think there is no point in doing a review now. There isn't any point right now in doing a review. We would be better to cast it and look at what is happening overall. That would be a responsible way of looking at it for the Government.

Mary Robinson: Thank you, Louise, and I am sure that the Secretary of State will be listening. [*Interruption.*] I think we have lost Clive again.

Q263 **Ian Levy:** Clive, I think you are muted. I'm No. 7, so I will just go ahead. Thank you for taking part today, Louise. I worked for 27 years in mental health, and it is really refreshing to hear you talk, with the knowledge that you have. Your passion for what you believe in is absolutely fabulous. I want to talk a bit about the data and the numbers. The Everyone In initiative has shown the scale of the problem of rough sleeping, at around 33,000. It is much bigger than the Government's annual head count estimate of rough sleepers, at 4,200. There is a huge difference there. This ultimately reveals a lot of shortcomings in the way that we count and the head counting tool. Would you agree with that? Do you have any comments on the way that we count these numbers?

Baroness Casey: I am old school: I like my annual head count, I'm afraid. I think it is one tool in the kit. It is not the be-all and end-all. If those figures go up, everybody says the Government is failing. If those figures go down, everybody says the Government is lying. Sorry; that is brutal but true. That is why the way they do the counts, with all the verifications, is very helpful. Everybody knows they are a snapshot. Nobody is pretending that they are anything other than a snapshot, but I quite like a snapshot.

The CHAIN data in London shows that it is over 10,000 people during the course of the year, so you can start to see how you can have different subsets of information that you need and want. Also, the 33,000 is Government data. I thought it was quite funny that somebody from a charity said to me, "You know, it's 33,000. The Government don't recognise it." I was thinking, "Well, they bloody count it. Of course they recognise it." It's like somebody is phoning them to tell them the figures and MHCLG is writing the figures down. Honest to God, figures are a tool to be beaten with or not to be beaten with. What you need them to be is something really useful. A constant reliance just on the snapshot every year is a mistake, because it does not give you the data that you need to try to work out what you should be doing. You want different measures of how you look at rough sleeping, of which that would be one.

If we could get this problem solved, you would not necessarily need the CHAIN data to be taken to Manchester, Leeds and some of the other large areas. But you do want data that is slightly richer than a one-off street count. The 33,000 figure—to those on the HCLG Committee, it will not be a shock to know that we have very high numbers of people in precarious private-rented accommodation, we have very high numbers of people in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

TA and we have high numbers of people that were sofa surfing. It would be interesting to get an in-depth look at who the 33,000 people are, and how they compare and contrast.

At least here we have data about people who are non-UK nationals with different forms of status, whether they are non-UK nationals legally here and it is all happy days, whether they have no recourse to public funds, or whether they are failed asylum seekers and refugees—though I think those people will disappear very quickly, incidentally. I would not give up with the street count, but I would use it as one tool in the kit.

Q264 Ian Levy: That is helpful. Do you think these numbers show that the Government need to consider how best to help people who are homeless, using that data? Speaking from my constituency of Blyth Valley, we do not have very many rough sleepers—you could count them more or less on one hand—but we do have a lot of young adults up to their mid-20s who are sofa surfing, who have maybe fallen out with their family or for different reasons things have gone wrong, such as drug and alcohol abuse. There is a big concern with ex-veterans as well. Do you think that using the figures that we are getting from the street count help the Government to channel money through local authorities in the best way to help these people?

Baroness Casey: No is the answer. Obviously, if all your money is attached to people in visible street homelessness, it will skew your homelessness system. That is one reason why Bob's Act was so powerful and important. It allows us to cast a look back up through the system at the people you are talking about.

Rough sleeping is an adjunct of homelessness and other issues, so it requires a discrete look, because it is so complicated. On the other hand, a homelessness strategy—as long as we have people on the streets, we will obsess with people on the streets; if we did not have people on the streets, we would be thinking about other forms of homelessness and what to do about it.

I say this internationally, and I have been doing some work with the United Nations in my other life, as it were, as the chair of the Institute of Global Homelessness. When we got to the end of the Rough Sleepers Unit, the number on my last street count was 532—not a barometer of everything being perfect; just a street count. Then they turned around and said, "So, what next?" I said, "Families in bed and breakfast hotels. I want to eradicate the use of bed and breakfast hotels for families," and they said, "On you go." They changed the law and put a budget in.

That was a real indication to me that, actually, we could look at raising the safety net off the street, and we could look at the solution to many of the issues presented by the people you describe, not as a housing or homelessness issue, but as something else—for example, mediation and family support, or the Nightstop scheme that we funded under section 73 all those years ago, as Clive will remember. That goes back to a long time ago, but the Nightstop scheme is a way of giving people in exactly that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

scenario two or three nights in another family setting—it is like foster care for older kids, really—rather than putting them into the homelessness system.

My one worry about such a high-profile concentration on that aspect of homelessness is that it takes the attention from other aspects of homelessness. But of course it is right to have attention on this, because in a life on the streets, you die on the street and you get sick on the street. It is just not right for the United Kingdom to have a street homeless population.

Q265 Ian Levy: It is a little bit like your analogy of the bath taps. If you bring in that mediation and take people out of the disruptive situation, you may prevent them from getting to the point where they end up on the streets.

Baroness Casey: It is interesting that if you look at some countries in the global south, housing is never going to be an option, so some of the services that some of them provide start from the opposite: “You are never going to get a house, so how can we help you to not end up on the street?”

We have to remember that we are talking about a backdrop where I do not think we have a very substantive housing strategy. I do not think it is clear what the overall housing strategy is around low-income and very low-income people. Even affordable housing is not affordable to some of the people who we would worry about as families in temporary accommodation. Like all those things, what happens is that Government do certain things in certain areas, and sometimes what you want is to look at everything in the round.

It is a bit like the Troubled Families programme, which was so powerful. It built on a model that started under Labour called Family Intervention, which was pre-2010 and of the most powerful things that I have ever been involved in in my career. It looks at families in the round by looking at everything that is happening in that family—not just one individual in that family who is going wrong—and it tries to solve the whole picture. We do not have the capacity in this country right now to be more sophisticated in how we look at some of those issues, but we will and we should.

Ian Levy: Thank you. I have really enjoyed talking to you—it has been great.

Chair: I am back with you now—I have finally got my computer up and working. You have mentioned Bob Blackman on at least a couple of occasions, Louise. Over to you, Bob.

Q266 Bob Blackman: Hi, Louise. It is good to see you and hear you espousing so many things on which I share your views. May I touch on one issue around the Government’s aim? The Government have set out to halve and then end rough sleeping by 2024, and you are kind of inching around a view about whether that is achievable. Do you think the Government actually have a strategy to achieve that, particularly after the success of the Everyone In initiative? Is there a strategy there and can the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government achieve that by 2024 under the current plan?

Baroness Casey: I think, Bob, that the reason they wanted a review done is because as things stood prior to the pandemic, in March/Easter last year, they themselves had clocked that it would be a tad tricky—I believe that would be a civil service expression, Minister. Joking aside, I think they themselves recognised that it is a very tall order. Add a year of pandemic on to that, and I kind of think, “Okay.” The rough sleeping end is doable, in my view, but we would have to look closely at what is driving some of that homelessness.

Q267 **Bob Blackman:** That leads on to my next point. I, together with this Select Committee, have done a lot of work on homelessness and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the aim of which, remember, was not actually to tackle rough sleeping; it was to turn off the tap that fuelled the rough sleeping. It would give the Government—whoever was in government—the opportunity to deal with the problem of people on the streets, but not to add to people being on the streets. Do you think we should have a homelessness strategy that is all-encompassing, as well as dealing with the rough sleeping problem?

Baroness Casey: Yes, I do think that, Bob. I think that one has to look at them separately and together. I say that because I think that some of what happens around the street is actually very complicated, and that some of what is coming forward as homelessness actually could be about other issues in the household.

Again—just to name it—domestic violence is one of the biggest causes of homelessness. Nobody doesn’t want to do anything on domestic violence. I defy anybody to say that Ministers in the Home Office or wherever don’t care about DV; that just wouldn’t be the case. For me, the way of dealing with DV is perpetrator first—trying to keep the family in the house and get the perpetrator out. That is an example of how a homelessness policy is actually dealing with something that isn’t really about homelessness; it is about domestic violence. In the same way, we all have an influx of people who cannot afford their rent and will have to approach the local authority. They have no other underlying issues apart from the fact that they just can’t afford the rent any more and the benefits system won’t stack it up for them.

I remember the wonderful Martin Esom, who runs Waltham Forest, ringing me last year and saying, “Louise, I’m going to write to you formally, but for God’s sake, we have got loads of people coming out of the hotels in London, all piling into Waltham Forest,” because of course local housing allowance was just about doable there. If you are looking at homelessness, you have got to look at some of those really difficult issues.

You also can’t just say to local government, “Here you go. Here’s a prevention Act. On you go.” It’s just not fair. It’s not reasonable. It’s also not effective policy making just to say that to local government when they have had £16 billion-worth of cuts. We are not dealing with local authorities that have the same level of resource. There are days when I



HOUSE OF COMMONS

think, "How will local authorities cope?" One has to be careful about just doing rough sleeping or just doing homelessness. You've got to do both, Bob.

Q268 Bob Blackman: Can I touch on the other sensitive subject that you have kind of covered—no recourse to public funds? One of the problems is that everyone looks at it as a complete blanket of everyone involved in no recourse to public funds, but, as you quite rightly say, you have to individually assess the individuals who are in that position.

The problem that a lot of people talk about now is the pull factors—people traffickers and others trying to avoid our immigration rules and literally dumping people in the UK. Then, when they don't have somewhere to live or are escaping from having been trafficked, they present themselves as victims—quite rightly, because they are. Then there is the issue of whether they can be assisted. There are other people who try to avoid the immigration system and try to come in illegally. I have dealt with cases where people literally arrived in the UK with no job and nowhere to live, and thought that someone was going to find them something, even during the pandemic. You think, "Hang on, wait a minute. That's not a reasonable position for anyone to take," because what did they expect to happen under those circumstances?

Equally, the other challenge that has come from this is putting everyone together in this overall package, if you like. You have talked about people who have said that they want to go home. You were talking about Romanian citizens from the European Union, so they had every right, if they chose to leave, to go back to Romania, depending on their circumstances, but the Government wasn't helping. Do you think there does need to be a strategy over this, because, without dealing with it, as you say quite sensitively and appropriately, the risk is that if you actually get to a point of there being no street homeless people any more, all we are doing is adding a sort of pull factor and saying, "Come to the UK and we will find you somewhere to live."?

Baroness Casey: My impression over those few months—actually, I still do occasional outreach shifts—is that there are not loads and loads of people who think this is a great, attractive option. I think, Bob, the issue here is this: the immigration system is complicated, and it creates problems in other policy areas that it doesn't take responsibility for. So, thinking as if I was in Jenrick's shoes, I feel that he has every right to work very closely with the Home Office in implementing policies that don't just dump the problem on, essentially, local authority homelessness officers.

So, some of those issues around trafficking that you are talking about are really tricky and complicated. But at one point last year—sorry, this is televised counselling; I should stop in a minute, Clive—there I was thinking, "Oh, great, okay, brilliant." Sharon Thompson, fantastic woman in Birmingham, she's amazing—she's the lead for housing and homelessness; she's great, right behind it all. A guy called Steve Philpott: Steve's done— They ring me: six people in Birmingham, and they knew



who the six were. I was almost wiping—I never cry; I’m hard as nails. Even I was thinking, “Bloody hell, that’s good.” That’s Birmingham and it’s brilliant. Then two days later, he calls up and goes, “Oh, my God, the asylum-seeker service is about to open the Britannia.” I know the Britannia Hotel. I think it was the Britannia—and they are about to shove 200 and whatever asylum seekers in there, because they can’t contain them any more wherever they were, so they just, through their asylum system, they march, they just commandeer a hotel, they stick two workers in there. And I am in this room, literally in this same room, and it is like, “What are you all doing?” Then I am ringing up Matthew who runs the Home Office going, “Matthew, what the — is going on?”

So, in a nutshell, that explains the fact that these things have to work like that. They have to work like that, and obviously, in my previous life, my obsession was with health, and I actually thought the biggest barrier last year, when I started, was going to be around health, and actually it was some of these issues to do with Home Office policy that created more of a headache. To be fair to the people running the asylum service, they stopped one from opening, but it was too late to stop another. It won’t be any news to any of you on this call, but remember that, obviously, those big hostels, and moving people around the country, most of those people are sent to deprived areas—the very areas that are hard-pressed anyway. The very areas where we have got all sorts of problems anyway—the very areas that feel not just left behind, but kept behind deliberately—we then shove massive asylum seeker numbers into them, whereas we don’t put them—so that is an issue for this Committee. Sometimes you need—you know, do you and the Home Affairs Committee want to sit down and work through a really difficult issue together? This would be one to have a good go at.

Q269 Bob Blackman: One of the other challenges is, I think, under the immigration legislation proposed, that people will not have recourse to benefits until they have worked here for five years. So, we know that someone could come here, have a job, have somewhere to live and actually be working, and through no fault of their own suddenly become homeless. What happens then? There is a concern that straight away there is going to be a problem in this regard.

Baroness Casey: And so, you see, I think that is where I have got to that stage in my life where I just think people need to be transparent and honest about what that strategy looks like. If that strategy is that the people who fall through the system, sometimes through no fault of their own, go into church-led communal night shelters, then own it and let people decide whether you think that is a good or bad thing. I happen to think it is a bad thing. I happen to think it is not where we should be as a country, but actually, what I don’t like is things being done behind closed doors. So, I think if that is the strategy, let’s not pretend it is something other than it is, Bob. Let’s just say it, and if people think that is reasonable, that is what democracy is about. But I think what we need is greater transparency. Going back to Mohammad’s question, I suppose when I saw that, what I felt was not outrage about whether it was right or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wrong; it was disappointment that right now that just was not what was needed as an intervention. Actually, people in local authorities and in charities, and colleagues in Whitehall at both ministerial and civil service level, are trying to make sure we humanely deal with all this stuff.

If people sign up for a visa, come to this country and lie about the terms of that visa, I am pretty tough about that, Bob. That's life. However, I think it is all a bit of a mess, and it is in danger of overshadowing the bigger issues around homelessness. The success story of last year and this year, if anything, is the extraordinary work done between health and homelessness.

There are two things. First, the hero of it in the voluntary sector is St Mungo's and Petra Salva. You should get Petra Salva before you. I tried to get her another honour, but she has only just got one, so I could not get her another. I am saying that because she has a gritty understanding of the really in-depth issues around all this and could give you a window that I would not be able to, because she is so close to it.

The second thing is that the health stuff was phenomenal—people like Jemma Gilbert, of the Healthy London Partnership. We had to segment people into different cohorts, and by "we" I mean the sector. We had to get PPE to people. I am more worried about getting vaccinations for people in these hotels who are staff, who are putting themselves so at risk. People in care homes should have those vaccinations, but they are sitting in a chair or in a bed. They are compliant. They are not people who are banging off the walls, refusing to self-isolate. We are putting workers in harm's way at the moment by not getting those people high enough up the queue for vaccinations, but the story of last year was health, Bob—health and homelessness.

Q270 **Bob Blackman:** Can I ask you one last question? You once said that well-meaning individuals and some charities had inadvertently—I think you said inadvertently, but you can clarify it—encouraged the perpetuation of rough sleeping. Do you still agree with that? Is that still your view?

Baroness Casey: I was younger then, Bob.

Bob Blackman: We were all younger once.

Baroness Casey: I was younger then, and more brash. In good times, I think I would say that— Look, what do we know about services? We know that there are more charities in rich areas offering services than there are charities in poor areas offering services, because we know that some of how services are run is not straightforwardly about an assessment of need and then setting up services; it is about lots of other things.

I do feel that people are handing out money to people on the streets who are significant drug addicts—people who are, as to your earlier point, being trafficked and used on the streets. I go back many years to a girl who was outside a McDonald's on the Strand in the run-up to Christmas. She was tiny, blonde and very young, and she therefore attracted a great deal of money. Her "boyfriend", who was actually her pimp, collected that

money and left her there. Getting her in was almost impossible because she was terrified. That must be 25 years ago.

I think that the solution to rough sleeping is not cheap, easy or basic. I would rather we did not have people begging on the streets. Why do I think a lot of people beg at the moment? Because they have a drug addiction or alcohol problems, or sometimes there are more serious issues like crime at play—or they are just totally messed up. I am not going to say, “Arrest every beggar.” I am going to say, “Sort out rough sleeping and then circle back to street culture,” but to ignore street culture and say it is not part of the dynamic is naive and not true. If the public want to help, it remains my view: give to a charity.

Q271 **Bob Blackman:** Absolutely. I have another thing to ask you on the back of that, because you have mentioned aggressive begging and homelessness. We still have the Vagrancy Act on the statute book, despite many attempts to get rid of it. It is claimed that we need it to combat begging. Do you support the view that we should repeal the Vagrancy Act and have clear anti-begging—particularly anti-aggressive begging—legislation?

Baroness Casey: Yes, I do. I think it’s crazy to have to arrest people just for being homeless. It’s weird. Last year, I was conversing with a colleague in a local authority that had got the numbers down really low, and we were talking about whether there was public health legislation that would help us to get people in, as we did in the middle of the pandemic. Bob, I would have used it if I thought we needed it. There was one communal shelter that felt they should not close—they were the only ones who could help those people and the wrath of God would come down upon them if they closed. Any hotel that was offered did not seem suitable. My response was, “I will use any piece of legislation that I can get my hands on if it means closing this communal night shelter, so why don’t you pass that along to them? Do they want a call from me, or from you? We are closing that communal night shelter.”

Legislation has its place, but we need an update to the Vagrancy Act; it should not be about homelessness. That said, Bob, it will be bloody hard to craft. As the former antisocial behaviour policy person of many, many moons ago, I know that the area is quite fraught.

Q272 **Bob Blackman:** I think we understand that. It is really the issue of being homeless that needs to be removed.

Baroness Casey: We could have a different culture in this country. The pandemic has been really interesting, because it has shown this amazing public spirit to want to help and do things—it is just extraordinary. Coming out of the pandemic, what if we said, “You know what? We’re going to make it culturally not normal for people to be on the streets,” the same way we might want to do something about care homes and poor families? There are two or three big things that we could choose to do as a country, and one could be to make sure that people are not on the streets—end of—and if that means constantly badgering them to come in, we’ll do it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Bob Blackman: Thanks very much.

Baroness Casey: I could go on for the full two hours. This is a nightmare.

Chair: You have not quite filled the two hours yet, but we'll probably let you off the last 20 minutes.

Baroness Casey: Fortunately, I don't work for anyone any more, so I am not in trouble with anyone.

Q273 **Chair:** Thanks ever so much for that, Louise. I thought at one stage you were offering Bob a partnership to work together on dealing with the Vagrancy Act and finding a substitute for it. We will not hold you to that, though.

The point you just made about ensuring that the brilliant people who work in hostels for the homeless and night shelters get the vaccine as quickly as possible is absolutely right. Actually, looking at the priority categories, if the directors of public health and health services at local level used a bit of imagination, they could probably include most of those people as care workers. I hope they do have a look at that—certainly, I have a commitment that Sheffield will.

Baroness Casey: Good. That's fantastic.

Chair: [*Inaudible.*]

Bob Blackman: Sounds like you've broken a second computer.

Baroness Casey: This is a problem in Select Committees.

Bob Blackman: I think we were going to Rachel anyway, if you have anything left to ask, Rachel.

Q274 **Rachel Hopkins:** There is so much I could talk to you about, Louise. I thoroughly agree with the point about frontline workers accessing the vaccine, but I was wondering what your view is on a specific programme of vaccination targeting rough sleepers or those who have been brought in to insecure accommodation, because they might not access what has been rolled out very easily.

Baroness Casey: To be fair, I was quite pleased last week when Jenrick made the announcement about the additional £10 million for reopening some hotels and things like that, that they added GP registration. Again, it was a sign of co-working between health and homelessness colleagues.

I often think, if only rough sleeping and homelessness could be an adjunct to the NHS, because the people who are most at risk are often super-vulnerable. For example, we know that of those 2,000 people in London who have been on the streets for more than two years, 80% to 90% have got drug, alcohol and mental health problems. We know about respiratory problems and their connection to living on the street. We know just how tough that is. Over the years, I have toyed with the idea of moving that specific group to being a DHSC rather than an MHCLG responsibility.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sorry, that is not what you asked about, but your question was an example of the unseen nature of homelessness.

I would add families to that. At one point last year, just because I had the ability to be annoying, on the key worker bit of being able to send kids to school, I was worried about homeless families in TA and coping with that number of children in one room. I am joking about being in my bedroom—how lucky I am. If we looked at some of the issues from a health perspective anyway, it would be so much better. I have been slightly concerned that the profile of that particular cohort is not high enough in people's thinking.

We have got Dr Alistair Story and Andrew Hayward, who are amazing and have been really helpful. They and the homelessness charities feel so strongly because we took a health-led approach to how we cohorted and triaged people last year, and they believe that that saved lives and lifted pressure from the NHS. Some of the people in the hotels would have been in a hospital if they were not in a hotel. One of the by-products of taking all that action last year was removing massive pressure from the NHS around those people.

We had Médecins Sans Frontières in one of the hotels so that they could stand up the hotel with that level of medical care. I would like now to see exactly what you just described, which is giving that same thought to people who have to work in those particularly at-risk projects—for example, the hotels—and the people who live there, because they find it much more difficult to self-isolate. They are banging on the walls. Joking aside about my man who said, "It's like a prison in here," keeping him in, if he has a drug addiction, is pretty tough. It is in everybody's interests to put them high in that vulnerable group.

Clive is probably right. If that conversation is had with directors of public health, I think they would get it very quickly. Maybe I ought to suggest that to colleagues. I know they have written to local authorities, but people write all the time—you have to catch their attention.

Am I done? Excellent. I am not even drinking—it's Monday.

Bob Blackman: Dry January.

Mary Robinson: I think we may have lost Clive again.

Baroness Casey: Mary, does it look like that's the end of the questioning?

Mary Robinson: I think we should all collectively hand over to Bob, perhaps to bring proceedings to an end, unless there are any other questions.

Bob Blackman: Given that we cannot hear Clive, I thank you Louise for coming along, answering all our questions and giving us all such a useful insight into your knowledge over many years of experience in this field. It has been invaluable. The Minister has changed over the weekend, which



HOUSE OF COMMONS

means that we will have the Minister at a future date when he has got his feet under the table and had an opportunity to be thoroughly briefed before he comes in front of us.

Thank you for answering our questions. I think that brings proceedings to an end.

Chair: It does, Bob.

Bob Blackman: Ah, you are back on, Clive.

Chair: It was goodbye from him and now it's goodbye from me as well.

Thank you very much, Louise. It was great to have you. I think we will certainly follow up that last point about the vaccine.

Baroness Casey: That would be great, Clive. Thank you.

Chair: We had better end it there before my computer fails for a fourth time. Thank you very much.