

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Covid-19: Housing rough sleepers, HC 934

Monday 25 January 2021

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Members present: Meg Hillier (Chair); Shaun Bailey; Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; James Wild.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, Aileen Murphie, Director, NAO, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, were in attendance.

Questions 1 - 73

Witnesses

I: Jeremy Pocklington, CB, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Baroness Casey, former head, Covid-19 Rough Sleeping Taskforce, MHCLG; and Penny Hobman, Director, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping, MHCLG.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General
Investigation into the housing of rough sleepers during the
COVID-19 pandemic (HC 1075, Session 2019–2021)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jeremy Pocklington, Baroness Casey and Penny Hobman.

Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 25 January 2021. Today we will look at the Government's efforts to protect rough sleepers during the covid-19 pandemic. That's people sleeping out on the streets—not all homeless people, but those who have absolutely no roof over their head. As the pandemic unfolded, it became apparent that this was a very big public health risk, and those people needed support.

In a Herculean task, by May 2020—bearing in mind that this initiative did not start until lockdown—almost 15,000 people in England had been provided with emergency accommodation. We on the Committee would like to put on record our congratulations and thanks to all those local government officers and housing workers who worked so hard in all our areas up and down the country to make sure that people were supported. I know that in Hackney, my great team did a fantastic job, including with the seven people who did not want to be rehoused. Of course, that was a challenge as well, but they made sure that they kept in touch and knew where they were at all times. We know it was complicated, and we thank all those people, and officials in the Department, for doing that.

Since that time, the Government have committed to providing 3,300 new housing units over the next 12 months, and we are keen to see how that is going. Of course, we want to make sure that the Government have plans for long-term solutions—something the Committee has looked at often on the housing front.

If anyone wants to follow the coverage of our pandemic response hearings, keep an eye on #CovidSpending, which will direct you to our work. I call James Wild MP to kick off.

Q1 **James Wild:** Mr Pocklington, I want to start with the announcement from a couple of weeks ago about winter funding and a further £10 million. Do you consider that to be sufficient to deal with this problem during these cold winter months?

Jeremy Pocklington: Our assessment is that, yes, we have got adequate funding at the moment, although of course we keep the situation under review. The £10 million that you refer to is from our Protect Plus programme, but that is in addition to everything that we have done this year. The work of Everyone In has not stopped throughout the year, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

33,000 people are currently being supported. I would also like to put on record my thanks to all the outreach workers, co-ordinators and managers working in councils and charities, and in the accommodation sector, for all their work that has made that such a success during the past year.

The £10 million, in addition to the money that has already been provided this year, is providing additional targeted support, as we are asking councils to redouble their efforts to accommodate all those sleeping rough during this particularly acute phase of the crisis. We are asking them to reach out again to those who have so far refused accommodation, or to people who have, for whatever reason, returned to the street. It is a call to arms to have a further go at supporting them, and also ensuring they are registered with a GP as the vaccination programme begins.

Q2 James Wild: Great. I will come on to the vaccination programme shortly. I talked to an organisation, the Purfleet Trust in King's Lynn, that has done great work along with the local authority, Broadland Housing Association and others. It made the point that getting people into accommodation is obviously very important, but the real challenge is keeping them there. Is there enough focus on and funding for the wraparound support and the skills development that these often vulnerable people need?

Jeremy Pocklington: The importance of providing appropriate wraparound support has been at the heart of our approach during the past year. The vast bulk of our funding is actually resource spending, rather than capital spending, and a big reason for that is to enable appropriate support. That is something that we learned during the Everyone In phase, when we worked with charities and Baroness Casey to ensure that appropriate support staff and security were provided.

We know from the Department's own evidence, through our rough sleeping questionnaire, that the significant majority—about 80%—of rough sleepers have mental health needs, and a significant majority have substance abuse needs, and it is important that we provide support, so that we give our best shot at transforming lives and putting people on to a sustainable pathway out of rough sleeping.

Q3 James Wild: Baroness Casey, do you want to add anything to the points about the importance of wraparound support and skills development, and that focus?

Baroness Casey: It would be fair to say that in the early months of Everyone In, from March onwards, the overriding priority was the public health response to covid-19; there was less concentration on the multiple needs of many people on the streets. My opening gambit, which colleagues in the Department are aware of, is that we were not pretending at that point to be doing an all-singing, all-dancing rough sleeping strategy. There were moments in those early months when I looked round and thought, "Where the hell can we get treatment, and alcohol and detox beds, from?", on the basis that they did not exist to quite the same degree as when—well, it was an awfully long time ago, but I was the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

homelessness tsar back in 1999 and onwards, when the obsession with treatment and detox was important.

I was pleased that later on in the year, the Department was very clear, and funding has been made available for treatment and support. I think that is incredibly important. When you have crises—severe weather is the traditional one—you can get in people who you otherwise cannot get in. You need to use those moments to get treatment and support, so that they do not go back out, but stay in. Even prior to the pandemic, the CHAIN data in London, which I think the Committee is well aware of—it is in the NAO Report that we are discussing—showed that.

Pre-pandemic, looking at the number of people who had been out on the streets for more than two years in London—the situation is always slightly different elsewhere, but it is a good indicator—it was a significant dent; it was a significant issue. About 90%—I think it is 86%—of those people have drug, alcohol and mental health problems. That is backed up by what you said a moment ago, Jeremy, about the qualitative work that was done on 500 rough sleepers at the tail end of last year. That, yet again, Mr Wild, showed incredibly clearly just how ill those people are in other ways involving drugs, alcohol and mental health. So yes, it's the right question, and it's a vital response that will be needed in the longer term.

Q4 James Wild: Mr Pocklington, on the funding, the voluntary sector is clearly at the heart of a lot of the response. Do you think that you have got the balance right when it comes to the funding that it can apply for directly, as opposed to much of it being filtered through local authorities? That creates more hoops to go through for the voluntary sector; it has to make a bid to local authorities in order to provide the support services that we can predict it will provide.

Jeremy Pocklington: It's a good question. The majority of our funding is through the local authority route, and I think that is the right approach, given our desire, set out in the rough sleeping strategy, that local authorities should be in the lead in co-ordinating the response and tailoring it to local areas. We do provide some funding directly to charities and voluntary groups, but the bulk of our funding goes through councils. That is either directly through the Department's money—the £700 million that we have provided—or through funding that councils have themselves provided through their own resources this year, which we have also then funded, as we have discussed with this Committee on several occasions.

Q5 James Wild: I spoke to my borough council this morning to get their views ahead of this session, and one of their key asks was for long-term funding. You have obviously provided a lot of funding this year, but on delivering the manifesto commitment, are you looking to provide longer-term funding that does not involve continually having to apply for certain grants, with all their bureaucracy and processes, and looking to give a bit more autonomy to councils to tackle this problem, working with the voluntary sector?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jeremy Pocklington: I think the importance of longer-term funding and the ability to use that to build up capacity and capability in the sector throughout the country is well understood in the Department. We have been able to do that to an extent this year, through our rough sleeping accommodation programme, RSAP, which I am sure we will come on to discuss. We have clarity over our funding for next year, for the homelessness and rough sleeping agendas. We will have £750 million funded from the Department next year, which is higher than this year. Of course, there are aspects of the agenda that will need to wait for the spending review later this year, but in terms of where the Department is, we understand the importance of providing longer-term certainty, where that is possible.

Q6 **James Wild:** Great, thank you. In terms of numbers, how many people do you estimate are still sleeping rough in England?

Jeremy Pocklington: Our local intelligence is that the number of those sleeping rough at the moment is significantly lower than in the last formal snapshot that the Department took, which dates from November 2019. That number was 4,266, I think. The numbers are significantly lower than that. The next official number will be published on 25 February. That is an official statistic, so I cannot pre-empt the publication of that number to give you a more precise figure.

Q7 **James Wild:** Okay, but you said “significantly lower”; I think that was your phrase. We will all interpret that in our own way.

If I can come on to the vaccination element of this funding, what targets do you have for vaccinating rough sleepers? How many are you expecting to do, and by when?

Jeremy Pocklington: Vaccination is obviously a very important priority for us in the Department and in Government. The strategy is that rough sleepers should receive their vaccination in line with their position in the priority groups, as outlined by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and agreed by Government. Rough sleepers need support to take their rightful place in the queue, as set out by the wider Government. The deadlines are the same deadlines that the Government have for the wider groups.

Obviously, many rough sleepers may be clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable, so they will receive their vaccination in the coming weeks. That is why, as part of our Protect Plus programme, as well as housing rough sleepers, we have focused on asking councils and others to ensure that rough sleepers are registered with a GP.

From our evidence, we found that a high proportion of rough sleepers are registered with a GP. From the evaluation that Baroness Casey has also referred to, we think the number is about 85%. They are not necessarily in the right place, and it is not just about registration; it will be about engagement as well, in order to ensure that rough sleepers can receive not just their first but their second dose. We are working closely with the Department for Health, the NHS and Public Health England on this.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q8 James Wild: Have you modelled how many of the 33,000 people who have been helped through Everyone In will be in the first nine vaccination priority groups?

Jeremy Pocklington: I don't have that information at the moment. We are working very closely and in real time to make sure that we have as good data as we possibly can in the weeks ahead.

Q9 James Wild: When I talked to the Purfleet Trust in my area, they made the point that this will be a success if the vaccinations happen in a place where people feel comfortable, and with people they trust. There is a lot of concern and misinformation around, and people are distrusting of authority generally. How is that being built into how the vaccination programme will support these individuals?

Jeremy Pocklington: I think that's right. We know that trusted support contacts and trusted relationships with support workers will be important. We are working with the NHS on the fact that for some people who are rough sleeping, mainstream provision may not be the appropriate way to receive the vaccination, and alternative approaches will be necessary, so that they receive the vaccination in a setting that they are comfortable with. That is very much part of our work at the moment.

Q10 James Wild: Part of the challenge is the gap between jabs, particularly for people in these groups. Has any thought been given to reducing the period between jabs back to three weeks, to make it more likely that people will return?

Jeremy Pocklington: That would be a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS; we are working closely with them. We do not have plans to do that at the moment, but we need to ensure that there are high levels of registration and engagement, to make sure that this group is vaccinated.

Q11 James Wild: Okay, thank you. Baroness Casey, you said that this was primarily a public health measure, rather than one designed to tackle rough sleeping, given the broader support that homeless people need. Were you given objectives for the programme when you kindly agreed to take on a slightly different role from the one that you had come into the Department to perform?

Baroness Casey: Well, I sat down with Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State, and that afternoon—actually, with Jeremy—I think we realised that there was one pretty straightforward objective, which was to make sure that people on the streets and people in what I thought of at that time as informal communal settings—that is, some of the tent cities that have grown up both in London and outside it—needed to be brought in as quickly as possible. We had a very singular focus in terms of getting everyone in.

May I just jump back to the vaccination issue for a moment, in case it does not come up later? There are two things I should point out. First of all, I reassure you, Mr Wild, that on the whole, in my 25-year experience of working with people who are vulnerable, medics and nurses are some of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the most trusted people, and very often get to the bottom of what is going on in people's lives more effectively than us civilians. The problem has been getting medics, and particularly people in uniform, such as paramedics and others. They are very trusted people; they are trusted by people who are homeless, and sometimes they make some of the most effective outreach workers.

My second point—I raised it with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and I know that the Secretary of State in MHCLG and Jeremy are very aware of it—is that I am terribly worried that outreach workers and those working in some of the most chaotic projects right now are not being seen as key workers in the vaccination process. They are in a very big group of people who will come after, and after, and after other rightly important people in the NHS.

I can assure you that running some of these hotels, with people who have extraordinarily high levels of need, presents a real difficulty, especially when they have been in those environments for several months. People are bouncing off the walls; it is not easy for them to say, "I'll self-isolate". Using volunteers and staff in that scenario is important. However, just as last year our concern about getting PPE to those people was vital, this year I would say that getting them near the front of the queue, once the big priority top four groups have been dealt with, is vital.

However, I am worried that they will get lost in the directors of public health and local authorities, and staff whose need is legitimate, but who are not on the frontline in the same kind of way. I think we need to ensure that helping these people happens, as it also has a cost to the public purse, because of the amount of money you spend trying to pick it all up. I hope it was okay to say that, Chair.

Chair: I think we got the message loud and clear.

Baroness Casey: Your initial question, which was really straightforward, was about the objective. Remember that we were days into an announcement that was essentially saying that the country had to go into immediate lockdown. Colleagues in the Department and colleagues outside it in local government and charities just put our shoulders to the wheel and tried to make that programme as big, as quick and as effective as we possibly could. That was the objective.

Q12 James Wild: Great. That's very clear. Mr Pocklington, the Report shows that the latest figures are that 16 homeless people were recorded as having died within 28 days of contracting covid. Do you have a more up-to-date figure or estimate from the Department?

Jeremy Pocklington: I do not have a more up-to-date figure from that ONS data, which records the number of deaths during the first wave. Obviously every death in the pandemic is a tragedy, but the number is lower than in many other countries. We continue to monitor the situation with Public Health England. I am sure that in due course we will have other estimates, but that is the latest estimate that we have.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q13 **James Wild:** Okay, thank you. In putting together your plans and objectives to get everyone in, did you estimate what the position would have been on infections and predicted deaths had that action not been taken?

Jeremy Pocklington: There is some evidence on this by external academics that I think was in *The Lancet*, which suggests that the work of Everyone In avoided 266 deaths and 21,092 infections and so made a significant impact on the pandemic's impact on this group.

Q14 **James Wild:** Baroness Casey, can I come to your role? You were in the Department ready to conduct a review, and then, as the crisis hit, you volunteered to take leadership of the response. Who did you report to? How are you accountable to Ministers?

Baroness Casey: I had been asked by Downing Street and MHCLG before Christmas—it was announced in February—to do a review. I was not ready to start that review until well after Easter; we were still trying to assemble a team and I was abroad doing homelessness work in other countries. To be honest, I arrived back in the country the weekend before lockdown and got in touch with the Department and said, "Is there something I can do to help?" I went in on that Wednesday, because they were having a roundtable, and proceeded from there. That is how it all happened.

James Wild: Okay. Mr Pocklington, in terms of the plan—

Baroness Casey: Sorry, on accountability, which was the most important part of your question, just to be really clear, I reported as an adviser to the Secretary of State and to Downing Street but I had a very clear and regular line in with Jeremy Pocklington.

On top of that, just to be absolutely clear, all financial and significant decisions remained within the normal chain of command from officials to then the junior Minister, Luke Hall, and up through him to Robert Jenrick, and then in the normal ways. I at no point made any financial decisions or took responsibility for those sorts of things. I told people what I thought we should be doing and how we should do it, and I made a very significant push on bringing forward some of the money towards the permanent accommodation, but to be honest, all of that was lifted very much by colleagues in the Department in the normal way.

Q15 **James Wild:** In terms of the plan, Mr Pocklington, the theme of some of the evidence we have taken around covid is that Departments did not have plans for quite a number of the elements of the response that were then developed at pace, and in this case clearly very successfully in terms of achieving that objective. Why was there not such a plan within MHCLG for this scenario in a pandemic?

Jeremy Pocklington: I am aware that that is a theme of the Committee. What I would say in this context is that local resilience forums did have vulnerable people plans that were prepared as part of the influenza pandemic preparedness plan. As part of that, LRFs and local authorities would be making sure they knew who their vulnerable people were,



including rough sleepers, and how they might need to engage with them as part of a pandemic response. But you are right that the Department did not have a central plan in relation to rough sleeping.

What was important, though, was that we had built up over a number of years—perhaps it is better to say we rebuilt—the capacity and capability in the Department and the relationships with the sector that we needed, so that when the pandemic struck we were able to hit the ground running and move so quickly, as the NAO Report says. To be more specific, through the rough sleeping initiative, we were already planning to fund 6,000 beds and 2,500 staff in the sector this year, so we were able to move very quickly, building on those solid foundations.

Q16 James Wild: What are the main lessons for protecting rough sleepers that you have drawn from how the pandemic has been handled?

Jeremy Pocklington: As Baroness Casey said, our objective initially was very much focused on public health and taking rough sleepers and those at risk off the street; then, over time, it moved through the work of the taskforce to stopping, as far as we possibly can, rough sleepers who had been taken off the street going back on to the street. That has been the pattern over the year. We have learned a lot through that process.

Getting the investment in the right place really matters. I have talked about the rough sleeping initiative, and I am sure we will come to talk about the accommodation programme. The funding, the capacity and the relationships were the right launchpad. Cross-agency working and partnership working has been absolutely essential with councils, the GLA, charities such as Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo's, Housing Justice and Homeless Link—we have worked with a whole range of charities in the sector—and the accommodation sector. We initially leveraged relationships with DCMS to ensure that we had access to hotels like Travelodge and InterContinental hotels; Ibis also provided accommodation quickly. Then, having the management information meant that we could model the costs and make the case to the Treasury. As the pandemic has progressed, we have invested more and more into this question of wraparound support and the importance of that if we are going to deliver lasting change for the individuals affected.

I would also say that simple things matter. We are talking about individuals who often have complex needs, and simple things can really help. Providing backpacks and phones made a difference. Having their own space made a difference as well and helped transform the lives of many involved. I know Baroness Casey and Penny have seen more of the individual cases than I have been able to do, but we really have had many stories of lives that have been transformed through the course of this year.

Q17 James Wild: Baroness Casey, the Report acknowledges the views of people involved in delivering the response on the impact that you personally had. What difference do you think you made to the Department's approach?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Casey: To be fair, I think colleagues in the civil service were hit by the pandemic in a whole raft of ways, and MHCLG at that moment also had to try to get organised around getting food to thousands of shielding individuals around the country through local authorities. I think Jeremy was the interim permanent secretary at the time, so it was an “All in this together” moment as much as anything else. I have been around a long time, truth be told, and it is not that long ago that I left off running the troubled families programme for the very same Department, working very much in partnership with local government, so I had those links. Plus, I am not shy when it comes to ringing up hotel owners and asking them to do various things.

I think I provide a bit of an extra senior person on the deck, as it were, to try to push this forward, and I did not really stop. Oddly, being quite independent actually means it does not really matter to me who is in charge of a local authority, whether it is Sadiq Khan or Gary Porter in a shire; my job was to try to do as much as we could as quickly as we could to try to get this over the line as much as possible.

The other thing is that it is not unusual for me to be in direct contact with colleagues in local authorities, so I sent out an email when I felt things were just a bit too slow, saying, “This is all great, but can we get this done by the weekend, please?” In retrospect, I realise that was somewhat churlish of me, because actually it was incredibly fast. I think I just added an extra weight at the right moment and the right time. I am quite used to Government systems and used to the voluntary sector, and used to local government. Other people could have done it; I just had the ability to be there at that point and I just helped out, really.

Q18 **James Wild:** Okay. A final question from me in this section: Baroness Casey, may I ask why you stood down in the summer and how you would assess the Department’s handling of the issue since you have stepped down from the role you had?

Baroness Casey: Well, I never went back to be the homelessness tsar. I agreed that I would do a review for the Government post the election, when their manifesto commitment had changed. Obviously covid happened and I went in to try to do whatever it is. I felt that we pretty much had the system in place to make sure that everybody that needed to be in was in. The doors were still open for people that needed to come in. The system was created. The hotels were open.

Then, the other thing that was important was—to be fair, Penny and Catherine Bennion in the team, deserve a great deal of credit for this—that it became really clear that we needed to pull forward the permanent accommodation with support. I wanted to make sure that that was done, really. Just in case anybody ministerially or over at the Treasury decided that they were not going to do that, I felt a necessity to stick around long enough to make sure that happened, and it did. Then I felt I could gently step down and allow other people to carry on doing the work.



As for what has happened since, I think that you can see it in the NAO Report. I felt slightly exhausted when I read it, with the sense of unrelenting responding to need; I think it is something that you asked at the beginning. Ideally the Department would have been in a position, but I don't think they were, to go for big announcements over strategic periods of time, which are actually a lot easier to deal with than £10 million here and £10 million there. That is tough for colleagues in the Department. It is very tough for colleagues in local government, but I think as the permanent secretary outlined at the beginning, the Department has been responding to the covid-19 situation. It would be hard to see how they would not have been able to do that, but nobody should underestimate, the toll that will have taken on colleagues in the Department and, importantly, colleagues in local government and the charitable sector. But we will get through it, and at some point, God willing, this vaccination will help all of us and we can get back to normal.

- Q19 **James Wild:** I did say that was my last question, but I just have a quick follow-up: I particularly agree with your point about staff resilience and the people who are on the frontline. Do you think the Department has done enough to ensure that that resilience is there? A lot of the people who are doing this work are on short-term contracts and do not have certainty, and then, if they contract covid, they are taken out of the situation when they self-isolate. Do you think the resilience is actually there to give the support people need?

Baroness Casey: It is a huge question really about resilience in the public sector right now—not only across the national health service but within some Whitehall Departments. Colleagues that I know are out doing street tonight work to get people in during this freezing cold weather. We are lucky as a country that so many people will do lots of things and work incredibly hard regardless of what they are paid and what rank they are. If I was to single out one thing from the pandemic—I have said this before publicly—for me it would be that both the public and the public sector have more than stood up to the mark and gone way beyond what anybody could have expected them to do.

James Wild: Thank you. Back to you, Chair.

- Q20 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I wonder maybe if Penny Hobman would want to add to that important question about supporting the very frontline staff. Is there anything more you think the Department should be doing, or you would like to do, if you had a complete free hand? It is difficult to say when your permanent secretary is sitting virtually next to you.

Penny Hobman: Yes. I would just add to what Baroness Casey said: we do recognise the great toll that has been taken on colleagues working in local authorities, who have stood up amazing services over the course of the pandemic. I have a team in my Department of about 25 advisers who were drawn from local government and the voluntary sector, who provide decades of experience, who advise into the Department but also work hand in hand with local authorities, with a view to being able to help



HOUSE OF COMMONS

problem solve and broker solutions with them, which I think has been a really important part of the successful response to the pandemic.

Q21 Chair: Thank you for that for now. Just to warn you, your lighting has gone a little awry—we are seeing you in moody shadow, which may be the new look for MHCLG. That's better; thank you.

I want to ask Jeremy Pocklington about the costs to local authorities. First of all, have you reimbursed local authorities for the costs that they have had to pay out so far?

Jeremy Pocklington: The support offered by local authorities has been part of the wider work that the Department has done to support local government and their finances during the past year, so the short answer to your question is yes. Our latest estimate updates the numbers in the NAO Report. Our monthly forecast, which we have discussed several times before—monthly monitoring—shows that local authorities are expecting to spend £192 million this financial year on homelessness and rough sleeping relating to the pandemic. Obviously, as you know, we have provided £4.6 billion of un-ring-fenced funding, and other additional funding on top of it. I am not going to repeat all that; we covered that in December. But yes, it has very much been part of our funding. The Department has got additional funding in addition to that—the £700 million that the Department has spent or is spending this financial year on homelessness and rough sleeping. At the margin, there may be a little bit of overlap between those two numbers, and a little bit of double counting, but that gives you a sense of proportion and scale.

Q22 Chair: Obviously, what you say is that it is all fine, but there are a couple issues on the ground. One is that there are all the additional costs around rough sleeping, and that might be picked up by other agencies. Although your Department is funding local government, have you done any analysis of where it bleeds into the health sector or other aspects of local funding that may not be directly in the remit of local authorities? Who is keeping an eye on that across Government?

Jeremy Pocklington: I think it might depend a little bit on the area in question. The notion that rough sleepers create pressures on public services, if I may put it like that, is something we are acutely aware of in the Department. We have provided funding—for example, greater funding to support ex-offenders leaving prison, and greater funding for treatment for substance abuse and mental health. It is something that our funding goes to support as well—parts of that £700 million that I referred to.

Q23 Chair: There are lots of elements to this and there is a target to tackle this issue by 2024, which we will go into a bit later. Are you the overarching accounting officer for all of that, because the Minister is in your Department? Elements of that funding will not be under your remit, but do you still have sight of that?

Jeremy Pocklington: There are elements that are not within my remit, and I will not be the accounting officer for those elements—just to be clear. I am the accounting officer only for the funding that goes through



HOUSE OF COMMONS

MHCLG DEL. I am also the accounting officer for the local government finance system, as you know. Where funding goes directly through the Department of Health and Social Care, I am not the accounting officer. More broadly, the importance of this being seen as a cross-Government strategy and approach is something that has been brought alive during the past year. It is something that we are focusing on more and more, and I think it needs to be part of the strategy that I know we are going to come on to.

Q24 Chair: Okay. Maybe I will pause there, because we are going to come on to the strategy later, but we all know the dangers. One Department cuts a bit of funding and you end up picking up the pieces but without the funding to do it. How does your original plan for what you thought you were going to spend compare with what you have spent so far?

Jeremy Pocklington: We are getting into geological layers of funding. Let me try to disaggregate in high-level terms what existed before the pandemic and what has been added since. The simplest way to say it is that this was already a priority before the pandemic. The Department was planning to spend just under £500 million—I have the figure £495 million—before the pandemic struck. That was allocated in previous spending rounds and the spring Budget, just before the pandemic got going. During the course of the year, £225 million of new money has been added as a result of the crisis. An element of that is bringing forward money to this year that was from future years, but that has also been topped up as part of our Next Steps accommodation programme, which I am sure we will discuss. I wanted to give you a sense of the quantum.

Q25 Chair: Baroness Casey touched on this, but it came through strongly in the evidence, particularly from the smaller voluntary groups on the ground, which are living quite precariously. They have lost income because of covid. If the money is stop-start and then it comes to them through local authorities—which may be the right approach—that does not help them smooth out their staffing levels and the other support that they can offer. Have you given any consideration to that? I know it is often in the hands of the Treasury. What commitment do you have that, especially as you approach 2024, you will have a smooth funding curve to support people who have been on the streets?

Jeremy Pocklington: The importance of that certainty is understood. We are doing everything that we can in the constraints that we have and in advance of the spending review later this year. On rough sleeping, our flagship intervention is the rough sleeping initiative. We have confirmed that there will be no reduction in that next year. Existing interventions that are currently being funded will be guaranteed for the first quarter of next year. We are working now on the funding for the remainder of the year. We are also working now for our plans on the next stage of the rough sleeping accommodation programme and will set out our plans on that soon. We are doing everything we can within the constraints. We have a significant amount of money being invested next year: £750 million. I recognise, however, the importance of providing as much certainty as we can, particularly to the smaller charities.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q26 Chair: I get that you recognise that. The thing is we are talking in telephone-number figures, but some of those small groups—Mr Wild mentioned some in his constituency and we all know them intimately—are very small, and a little blip in funding or uncertainty about whether funding will be with them in the next month or two weeks can make all the difference in whether they continue to support a few vulnerable individuals, and in some cases, very small numbers. That is a real problem.

Ms Hobman, you talked about having a group of 25 advisers. Are some of those people at the frontline? Are you hearing from them, so that you are making decisions in the right timeframe and not leaving it until it is too late?

Penny Hobman: Those advisers are working directly with local authorities on a day-to-day basis.

Q27 Chair: Are they from some of these small, frontline charities? I don't necessarily mean from every small charity, obviously, but do you have people who have that frontline experience other than Baroness Casey?

Penny Hobman: Yes, that is right. Some of the advisers are drawn from a local authority background. Others are drawn from the voluntary and faith sectors, so we have a breadth of experience in the team. Yes, we do hear regularly and understand the importance of continuity of funding. That is why we have taken the step that Jeremy just outlined to confirm already to local authorities that there will be no reduction in their RSI funding next year and to confirm that activities in the first quarter will be funded, so that local authorities can give that onward certainty to the organisations they commission.

Q28 Chair: Large chunks of the money that have been allocated have not been ring-fenced. Could you just be clear about the rough sleeping initiative money? That is ring-fenced, isn't it?

Penny Hobman: The rough sleeping initiative funding has been ring-fenced to local authorities to use for the purposes that we agree with them. Each year, we undertake a co-production process with local authorities where we jointly work out their plans for funding. We intend to do that process again for the coming year. As I said, we are modifying that in the light of the stresses that are on the system at the moment in managing the pandemic, so that it is more proportionate and that there is early certainty.

Q29 Chair: Mr Pocklington, as permanent secretary and accounting officer, when you are giving money that is not ring-fenced, what are you doing to assess how it is being spent on the ground without micromanaging local authorities' budgets? What are you doing to assure yourself that the money is going where it was intended, given that it is not all ring-fenced?

Jeremy Pocklington: That is a really important question. It depends on the route through which the money is sent. Some of the money is local authorities' own resources, where it is ultimately for section 151 officers to ensure that it is being spent on value for money according to the relevant



HOUSE OF COMMONS

purposes. For the Department's programmes, this is an area where I would emphasise proper evaluation, as well as financial controls, to ensure that the outcomes we achieve are appropriate. We know that our programmes do actually save the taxpayer money. An important example would be the rough sleeping initiative. We know that, thanks to our investment to date, rough sleeping was evaluated to be at 32% of what it would otherwise have been. The programme has a benefit-cost ratio of fiscal and social benefits of 3.81:1. Those interventions are good value for money given, unfortunately, the costs that would otherwise apply for rough sleepers—earlier, you alluded to the costs that rough sleepers would create for other public services.

- Q30 Chair:** It sounds like great news for the Public Accounts Committee that some thought is going into what we would call cost-shunting, but are you confident that you can maintain that approach? You were talking about the cost-benefit ratio, and we all understand that, but there will be pressure on the public finances for some time to come—decades, probably. Can you be sure that the Government will maintain the view that money is spent now to prevent that problem in future, and help people maintain a tenancy or a home, is good long-term value for money? How will you ensure that you embed that in Whitehall thinking?

Jeremy Pocklington: Some of these questions are of course matters for future spending reviews—as you know, I cannot pre-empt the outcome of those. Our role in the Department is to ensure that we are evaluating and monitoring our programmes effectively. We have the right evidence and data to support any bids or business cases in future spending rounds and, essentially, to show that we can spend this money wisely and, more importantly, support councils in doing that. That is also a priority for the Government—I am sure we will come to the manifesto commitment in this area—and of course that will also be an important factor.

Chair: On that theme, I will hand over to Shaun Bailey MP.

- Q31 Shaun Bailey:** Thank you, Chair. Turning back to vaccinations, Mr Pocklington, will those with no recourse to public funds be eligible for vaccination?

Jeremy Pocklington: That is a responsibility of the Department of Health rather than MHCLG, but my understanding is that yes, they will be eligible, not least given the wider community health benefits of vaccination. However, that is not an MHCLG lead.

- Q32 Shaun Bailey:** Okay. Have you had any correspondence for cross-working and co-ordinating that? I am conscious that the particular effort of getting people who have NRPF and are currently being supported is a cross-Departmental thing. Have any conversations taken place on the logistics behind that?

Jeremy Pocklington: We are very engaged on how the rough sleeping population, and those who are currently being supported in interim and move-on accommodation, receive the vaccination. I would not say that we have focused on one particular group, or on NRPF within that—the law is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the law on that issue. Our focus is on building a very strong partnership with the Department of Health, the NHS, and health partners, to ensure that rough sleepers can receive access to the vaccination.

Q33 Shaun Bailey: Turning to more general support for those with no recourse to public funds, can you talk us through how you have supported local authorities in terms of the cost of housing people with no recourse to public funds?

Jeremy Pocklington: The first thing to say, as I am sure you are aware, is that the term “no recourse to public funds” is often applied to a group that is wider than those who simply have the no-recourse condition attached to their immigration status. There are various sub-groups within those that are loosely termed NRPF. In essence, we have funded local authorities for their duties and obligations consistent with the law as it stands. Local authorities are well used to making these sorts of judgments in relation to whether or not people are eligible for support. The rules have not changed. Local authorities can offer support where there is risk to life during the pandemic, as they do in periods of extreme weather.

Q34 Shaun Bailey: That is helpful, but does the Department have any data on or a figure for money spent to support local authorities with regard to supporting those with no recourse to public funds?

Jeremy Pocklington: I don’t have a figure.

Q35 Shaun Bailey: Okay. The Department wrote to local authorities in May to remind them of the legal restrictions around supporting individuals who are classed as having no recourse to public funds. What was the anticipated impact of that, particularly in terms of the number of people who would be supported under Everyone In?

Jeremy Pocklington: The essence of the position throughout the year has not changed in the sense that the work of Everyone In, as I say, has continued. Minister Hall’s letter on 28 May made it clear that local authorities should properly assess people who are presented to them and use their judgment in determining what support could be provided, again consistent with the law as it stands. In essence, we were encouraging authorities to provide the greatest help to those at greatest need, consistent with the law.

Q36 Shaun Bailey: I am just trying to understand that a little bit more. I hear what you say, but reminding local authorities of the restrictions they would have in finding housing is going to have an impact. If I am an accountable officer in a local authority, am I not going to be reluctant to assist those with no recourse to public funds if the Department and the Minister have contacted me to remind me of the restrictions that are in place? I am curious about the rationale behind that and whether that, in the Department’s assessment, would have an impact on Everyone In.

Jeremy Pocklington: I would say that was part of a broader trend throughout the course of the pandemic that the Department has taken which, over time, is to emphasise the importance of individual assessment to a greater extent than perhaps it did at the very start when, as Baroness



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Casey says, it really was a very broad intervention in the first wave of the crisis. Through the Minister's letter and other things, we are encouraging local authorities to use their powers, depending on the precise immigration status of these people, to provide the appropriate support that they are able to. For those not eligible for housing services, it might still be possible for reconnection with family and friends and other support to be provided, consistent with the law and dependent on the precise status of the individual.

Q37 Shaun Bailey: Mr Pocklington, in terms of the local authority approach to assessment, how much does it vary from local authority to local authority? Is there a general conformity in the approach that LAs take, or would you say that, more broadly speaking, it varies? If it does vary, what work, particularly as a result of the pandemic, is the Department trying to do to maybe standardise that a bit more so that people do know where they stand?

Jeremy Pocklington: There is always a balance to be struck between the Department mandating the approach, and standardising, and giving local authorities the freedom, but funded, to make local decisions tailored to situations on the ground. Over the course of the year, the pandemic has progressed differently in different parts of the country, so there was some divergence in practice between local authorities. That is captured in the NAO Report. That could reflect the different local circumstances, resources and opportunities that local authorities had. We maintained regular dialogue with them through the adviser teams that Penny has already talked about.

Q38 Shaun Bailey: Just before I move on, I want to make sure that I have fully understood the two points you've just covered. With regards to correspondence between the Department and local authorities around the legal restrictions of NRPF, it was not an aim to try and limit the number of people who would be classed as NRPF being able to access support from Everyone In, and it was not countenanced by the Department that that might be an impact. Did I understand your response to that, Mr Pocklington?

Secondly, there is an acceptance of divergence. I am sorry if I didn't catch it, but the point of my question was about trying to standardise that approach. In a lot of the pushback that I get locally—not just in terms of NRPF, but more broadly with housing—people say it varies from local authority to local authority, and that a lot of the time they do not know where they stand. I am curious to understand what the Department is trying to do to standardise that, whilst fully respecting local differences and local ties, so people, particularly the most vulnerable and those who are homeless, know where they stand.

Jeremy Pocklington: In relation to the Minister's letter, which we have discussed, the Department didn't have anything like a target—some sort of specific quantum or specific reduction in support that was provided—in terms of what we were expecting to see in response to the letter. What we were doing, particularly as the first wave of the pandemic ended, was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

reminding local authorities of the importance of carrying out their individual assessments, but we didn't want to interfere in any way on either side of the argument, between local authorities making individual assessments about eligibility of those subject to that condition. I recognise that this is a complex area.

Q39 Shaun Bailey: Okay—sorry—I just want to be sure on that point. While there certainly wasn't a quantum that was put in place, would you say it was an aim for those people who are classed as no recourse to public funds to be restricted from accessing the Everyone In support, as a result of that letter? I just want to make sure that I understand and that I am getting it absolutely clear.

Jeremy Pocklington: I am not sure there is much that I can add to what I have previously said. We were reminding local authorities of the importance of carrying out individual assessments for those in emergency accommodation. They should continue to provide the support that is required by the law. Obviously, when the pandemic has been at its peak, it is not surprising that local authorities have rightly decided that they should support those in this group, but we are asking authorities to make individual assessments.

Q40 Shaun Bailey: Do you have any data on the number of people who are classed as no recourse to public funds currently being supported through Everyone In?

Jeremy Pocklington: The Department doesn't have data on that group precisely.

Q41 Shaun Bailey: I have spoken with the West Midlands Combined Authority homelessness taskforce, which does a lot of work in this area. They have that data and they keep that data. I am quite concerned that the Department wouldn't have that data. It appears that on the ground locally that data is somehow being collated. Mr Pocklington, what work is the Department trying to do with stakeholders to obtain that?

That is clearly important data that needs to be acquired, and regional agencies, as I say, seem to be able to manage that somehow. The WMCA told me they estimate that they have had around 200 people who were classed as NRPF, so I am curious about what work has been done to grab that data.

Jeremy Pocklington: We have a lot of work in the Department to improve our data on rough sleeping and homelessness. The specific picture on the collection of NRPF data is that it is very variable. Collecting that specific piece of data has not been our priority to date, given the hugely important other exercise and work that we have under way to improve data in the Department.

Q42 Shaun Bailey: One point that has been raised with me, particularly by my local stakeholders, is that at the moment, local authorities are assisting people who are classed as no recourse to public funds under a public health need. When that public health need ends, what do they do? Do they just turf them out? That is the question that was put to me by my local



HOUSE OF COMMONS

authorities—in those words. I am not paraphrasing that. “Do we just turf them out? We don’t actually know what to do, and our monitoring officers and legal officers are screaming at us at the moment, saying that we are probably in breach of our legal restrictions.” I am curious to understand what guidance would come from the Department on how to deal with that situation.

Jeremy Pocklington: I do understand the sensitivity and complexity of this area. What we are asking local authorities to do is to use the options that they have available within the law. It depends on the precise immigration status of the individual—rather than on whether the individual has a no recourse to public funds condition attached to their immigration status—the support that they can provide, and the extent to which they can provide, in some circumstances, accommodation where there is a risk to life. For some people, they can provide accommodation in other circumstances as well. There is support also for reconnection with family and friends. In some cases, for some of these groups, some basic employment support may also be possible. Ultimately, support with voluntary returns and that sort of option once the pandemic eases is available. Finally, for those who could benefit, there is support with the EU settlement scheme and support to help people resolve their immigration status. There are avenues open. A number of other actors in this space from the wider voluntary sector are also supporting this group, but obviously authorities need to act within the law.

Q43 Shaun Bailey: I can see Baroness Casey wants to come in as well, but surely, Mr Pocklington, the Department wrote to councils on 28 May saying, “You need to be careful about what you’re doing. You are restricted in what you do.” You can probably appreciate why local authorities are perhaps a little bit reluctant to go alone in terms of acting on this. I suppose what I am really trying to say is that although I hear what you say, my local authorities want guidance from the Department. They want to know what they can do. In London, for example, there are 2,000 people who are ineligible for benefits because they are NRPF. What do you do? How do you deal with those people? How do we do it in a safe way, and what support will the Department give local authorities to co-ordinate that response?

Jeremy Pocklington: I do appreciate the complexity. Probably the last thing from me on this is to say that, obviously, we are essentially in a period of lockdown at the moment. In the vast majority of cases, this is probably not a current, live issue for councils, given the risk to life where the pandemic is. It is their decision, but I am sure that is the decision that most are making. I do not want to go round in circles, but as I have said, the complexity of this is understood in the Department.

Q44 Shaun Bailey: I think there is probably scope there, Chair, for the Department to look at this. As I say, councils are crying out for some sort of guidance on this.

I want to ask one more question about no recourse to public funds. Baroness Casey, one thing that has been brought up with me is the circle



of vulnerability. Often, people who do not have recourse to public funds would, in normal times, be supported to obtain work, as part of combating homelessness, in sectors that are closed at the moment as a result of covid. A big concern among my local stakeholders is that there is a real risk of exploitation of people with no recourse to public funds, which starts a cycle whereby people are exploited, they come back because they end up homeless again and then there are additional pressures on local authorities to provide that support. I am curious to hear what your take is on that and whether you have seen that in your experience, both in and out of Government, with the work you have done. What is your perspective on that analysis?

Baroness Casey: My perspective on the conversation, on the evidence you have just heard, is that rough sleeping and, more broadly, homelessness are cross-departmental. One difficulty with this particular issue is that it is an immigration policy that is much broader than anything that MHCLG colleagues are able to manage. The guidance is clear to local authorities: unless there is a risk to life, they cannot help those people. That is why these communal night shelters grew throughout England. When we looked at the people coming in from those nightly shelters with mattresses on the floor, all over the country, lots of them were people who were here legally—some were working, some were not working—but they could not get recourse to public funds. To be honest, it would be great if you could level all the questions you just levelled at the permanent secretary of MHCLG at the permanent secretary of the Home Office, because it is a Home Office policy that has got us into this place.

On numbers, I will be brutal, as the Chair has witnessed me being at previous Public Accounts Committee meetings. The truth is, Mr Bailey, no one wants really to know those numbers, because if you know them, you have to do something about them. In my view, I estimate that we are talking upwards of several hundreds. It won't be 200 in London; it might be closer to 2,000. At the moment, no one can do anything with those people in an onward way. Once the threat to life is removed, local authorities cannot help them.

The guidance that you are asking colleagues in MHCLG to produce is there already. During the first wave of the pandemic, we were really clear that everybody had to come in. I remember having a call with someone saying, "Look, it doesn't matter whether they are from Bromley or Portugal. The disease might get them, and we need to get them into a place where they can self-isolate." As the lockdowns became tiered and more complicated, it was harder for local authorities to deal with.

At the end of the day, if we knew what those numbers were, there is a part of me that just thinks, "Why don't we just find a way to get them to be able to work here and stay properly?" We try to get people in the London hotels two things. The first was employment advice. Penny's esteemed team rang round a bunch of farmers who were advertising for fruit picking. I saw the DEFRA fruit picking initiative and tried to get them jobs. Similarly, people have been paying for immigration advice in the hotels, in order to fast-track people who could have papers and be here



HOUSE OF COMMONS

legally. The point I am making—I will shut up after this—is that this is so cross-departmental and MHLCG colleagues cannot just wave a magic wand at it. It would take a cross-departmental approach to sort it out.

Shaun Bailey: Thank you, Baroness Casey. Chair, I will leave it there for now.

Q45 **Chair:** I have one quick question for Jeremy Pocklington off the back of what was just said. As the NAO highlights, there are discussions. You are talking about discussions with the Home Office about this knotty issue, which is a policy that has clashed with covid in spectacular fashion. What is the outcome of those conversations with the Home Office? Has there been any progress on it from this perspective?

Jeremy Pocklington: Chair, forgive me, I am not sure exactly what you— Obviously, we are in regular dialogue with the Home Office about this and other things.

Q46 **Chair:** You can talk to the Home Office about it, but it is not much good if nothing changes, is it? As Mr Bailey has very clearly highlighted, there is confusion out there. The NAO highlights in paragraph 2.11 that councils are making tough decisions on ceasing to take in rough sleepers who are ineligible for benefits because they were confused about your interpretation. You are obviously discussing this with the Home Office. Are you getting any clarity that can help you to give clearer information and advice to local authorities to help people over the challenges that Mr Bailey and Baroness Casey have highlighted?

Jeremy Pocklington: As far as I am aware, there are no plans to change the immigration status of those affected by NRPF. What we are doing is trying to support local authorities in working within the law as it stands.

Chair: There we have it so far, for now. Let us go to James Wild MP.

Q47 **James Wild:** Mr Pocklington, as we have touched on, in the first six months of the programme, 33,000 people were helped into accommodation. The official snapshot figures recorded only 4,266 people sleeping rough from 2019. How do you account for the vast difference in those figures?

Jeremy Pocklington: If I may, I might hand over to Penny on questions about data, but the headline from me is that the snapshot figure is essentially a measure of the stock at a moment in time in autumn 2019, whereas the 33,000 number includes the flow over time. Given the fluid nature of that population, it is not surprising that there is a significant difference between the two numbers.

Penny Hobman: As Jeremy outlined, those two different sets of figures do, and count, different things. The annual snapshot takes either an account-based or evidence-based estimate of the number of rough sleepers on a single night in the autumn. We fully understand that that does not demonstrate the number of rough sleepers across the course of the year, but it does provide a robust and measurable moment in time that can be compared year on year. The 33,000 that we supported into



HOUSE OF COMMONS

either emergency accommodation or move-on settled pathways by the end of November is a different number. It is cumulative of people who have been supported across those months, and it includes both people who were sleeping rough and those whom local councils deemed to be at risk of sleeping rough when they presented themselves to the local authority.

Q48 James Wild: I take the point that it is a snapshot, but how many more people do you predict slept rough over the course of an average year than are recorded in the snapshot?

Penny Hobman: There is no official estimate of the number who would sleep rough over the course of the year. There is no population-level data of the number of nights that rough sleepers spend sleeping rough, for example, so we do not have an estimate across the course of the year in that way.

Q49 James Wild: The Report notes that the Department has estimated that a proportion of people who presented to local authorities were not actually at imminent risk of rough sleeping, which I think was a test. What proportion of that 33,000 do you think were not actually at risk of rough sleeping?

Penny Hobman: In the data that we published in June, which showed the picture at the end of May, when 15,000 people had been supported into emergency accommodation, our estimate, which we published with the figures at the time, was that 7,000 of those people were previously sleeping rough, 2,000 had come from shared sleeping sites, 5,000 were deemed at risk of sleeping rough, and the remaining 1,000 had been discharged from prison or hospital. That was the estimate made at the time in May.

Chair: Let us turn now to Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP.

Q50 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Good afternoon, everybody. May I echo the congratulations to everybody on getting this initiative up and running so quickly? What happened in my local authority in Gloucestershire was that quite quickly they got a significant number of rough sleepers into hotels—very expensive hotels—and the majority of them are still there. So what is the strategy, Jeremy, to encourage local authorities to find follow-on accommodation? This hotel accommodation is very expensive and is not doing the rough sleepers themselves any good.

Jeremy Pocklington: I think you're absolutely right about the importance of providing appropriate move-on accommodation, in the interests of the rough sleepers but also the taxpayer. In essence, that was the objective of the Next Steps accommodation programme and the rough sleeping taskforce, which began in May and has continued over the summer and beyond.

We are providing funding for local authorities, first of all to provide continued interim accommodation where that is appropriate, whether that's in a hotel—perhaps also in the private rented sector or supported housing, or through reconnection. We have provided £91.5 million for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that. Then, in addition to that, we are funding the creation of 3,300 new long-term homes for move-on accommodation, to be available—well, really from now, but the aim is to have the vast majority online by the end of March this year.

We have made progress. I recognise the position in your constituency, Sir Geoffrey, but of the 33,000, less than 10,000, I think, are now in hotels and the rest are in longer-term, settled accommodation, for example in the private rented sector or social housing, or are on a rough sleeping pathway and are in supported housing or have reconnected with family and friends.

Q51 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: But if what has been reported to me by my local authority is correct, while it may be happening in some areas, it is not happening in my area that people are moving on to other accommodation, so my question to you is what more can be done.

Jeremy Pocklington: Our adviser teams are working with individual areas to make sure that as much help and support as can be provided is being provided. We will have further rounds of the rough sleeping accommodation programme. There will be further support to be given and additional move-on accommodation will be created in the years ahead. The 3,300 that I mentioned is the first phase of a total 6,000-unit programme. So this is a real priority. I think that is an unprecedented amount of move-on accommodation that the Department is funding through a programme, so it is a real priority, but obviously there will be areas, perhaps particularly some more rural areas or towns, where it is harder to find and identify suitable accommodation locally.

Q52 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Casey, perhaps I can bring you in here. My local authority also report that there is a proportion of people that won't engage with them or any of the agencies, and that must be particularly hard during this cold weather. Can any more be done for that category of people?

Baroness Casey: Yes, and actually it's Dame Louise or Baroness Casey.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I'm so sorry.

Baroness Casey: Not at all, Sir Geoffrey.

Essentially, I think the point you are making is valid in rural areas, where we know that, historically, finding move-on accommodation and build has always been more challenging than, say, squeezing more out of places like London. In defence of the Department—I have no reason here today to be in defence or in attack, as it were; I am just here—to have actually, as we speak, moved through the hotel system 23,000 people, out of a total of 33,000 and with only 10,000 left, in six months, is, to be honest, by anybody's standards, Sir Geoffrey, pretty bloody impressive, I have to say. In urban areas and particularly areas like Manchester, London and Birmingham, getting low-cost accommodation in hotels was much easier. The average—I think we were looking, in London in particular, at 25 to 30 quid a night for that accommodation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

But that is not to deny—I don't think at all, and wouldn't want to sit here and say, that the point you have made is wrong. What one wants is to spend money on long-term solutions and, coming full circle to your first question, we really want to spend the money on people with long-term needs. I would also say that, in places—certainly Shrewsbury opened up a very famous hotel. I think it was called Rupert. They had people in that hotel—I did a virtual tour of it and met the team that worked there—that were extraordinarily vulnerable. In my day, first time round, 25 years ago when I was a volunteer, they would be called men of the road—people that have really been out for a terribly long time. So I think we have to seize the opportunity of those people now being in. I think, to be honest, Sir Geoffrey, it is not going to be straightforward in areas like yours to magic up anything really quickly. I think the permanent secretary is right to put his eggs in the basket of those permanent move-on accommodations that should touch areas such as yours.

Q53 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you for that answer, but, actually, Dame Louise, the specific question I had for you was the proportion of those people that will not engage with either the local authority or any of the other agencies, particularly out in this cold weather. What more can be done to help them?

Baroness Casey: First of all, I think that last year the numbers were down to—I remember thinking, "Wow, this is extraordinary." We were down to, when I was last the homelessness tsar—the numbers were sort of 500, 600 people. You are never necessarily going to get anything better than that, Sir Geoffrey. I was on a call with one of Penny's team with the co-ordinator from Birmingham, and he said, "Dame Louise, we've got six out." I went, "Do you know who they are and where they are?" The question then for us was, were we to force them in? I think you will always have some people who you need to keep the door open for. I think it is a fault line that, because the Department is holding a lot of the responsibility for the strategy on rough sleeping, including—I hope you do not mind me saying it, Jeremy—for the Department of Health, actually some of the treatment options to the people still out are not as readily available as I would like them to be.

Lastly, I am really pleased you mentioned severe weather. Over the weekend, because the Department reopened the severe weather emergency provision, we will have found people that came in over this weekend that will fit exactly into your group. I feel hopeful, because they have this permanent accommodation coming on that we can jump some of those very vulnerable people, who are refusing to come in at the moment, straight into that. But I am not going to sit before you, Sir Geoffrey, and say it is a perfect science and you will get 100% in, because as long as we have human frailty and as long as we have frail services, that does not always connect up.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Can I just clarify: I am sure my local authority know exactly who they are, and I am not in any way criticising the local authority for their efforts, but thank you for your reply.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Thank you very much, Sir Geoffrey.

Q54 **Shaun Bailey:** Just to begin, obviously I think the Everyone In scheme has been a success for the Department. I do not think anyone can argue against that. Thinking forward, one of the concerns I have had raised with me by some of my local stakeholders is this bottling up that they are a bit concerned might be happening, particularly where people were in rent arrears, and obviously there have been extensions or leeway given. There is a concern that we are going to get to a period now where some people are going to have 12 months-worth of rent arrears. Equally, within the west midlands, we are not talking about landlords with massive portfolios; you're talking landlords that have one other property that is their life savings and now their mortgage provider is getting on their back, too.

There is a concern about this flow into homelessness and rough sleeping. The impact of that will be an increase in people presenting and, equally, things such as increases in domestic violence, family break-ups—the pressure that is there. I just want to understand from Mr Pocklington whether the Department has done any modelling or work in that area, because that is certainly coming down the track, and also from Baroness Casey whether you have a perspective on that, and whether your work has identified it as an issue and whether there are any strategies in place.

Jeremy Pocklington: This is an important set of questions and issues, and ones that the Department is still looking at closely, although it touches on the whole of Government response to the pandemic, and, as I am sure you can imagine, the wider economic support that has been offered through the furlough schemes and other interventions to support individuals.

In terms of the MHCLG-specific elements, I would highlight a couple of things. First of all, we are monitoring access to statutory homelessness interventions closely. There is further data, I think, coming out later this week, actually, for the second half of last year. Overall, in the first wave, there was a decline in the number of people approaching their housing options team for support, compared with what had been forecast. In a way, I think that reflects the success of Everyone In. Some individuals perhaps went directly to that scheme, although the numbers in temporary accommodation have continued to grow.

More help and support are being offered to single individuals as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 really kicking in. Then, further up if you like, you raised the issue of people renting, which is also really important. The private rented sector is another important issue that we are monitoring closely.

As you know, given the immediate issues around the pandemic, evictions have been banned. That remains the case until 21 February, when that will be reviewed, and notice periods have been extended to six months. Again, we continue to monitor data and evidence around that issue closely. More data will come out on 11 February in relation to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

repossessions. However, it is an area that we have to monitor continuously in the period ahead, for the reasons that you outline.

Chair: Baroness Casey?

Baroness Casey: Sorry, Mr Bailey, I do not really have a great deal to add. The upside is that these are people in fixed accommodation, so we know where they are, and we can track them from that perspective.

I have to say that I think this one is a bit of a Hobson's choice for the Government and it gets caught up in what one would do overall with a financial support package across the population for different cohorts. Loads of landlords are actually very small landlords who have one or two properties. They will be suffering at the same time that you have actually got people who literally have nowhere to go. That's the point.

Shaun Bailey: That's all from me.

Q55 **James Wild:** Mr Pocklington, Sir Geoffrey touched on the Next Steps accommodation programme. Are you on track to deliver the 3,300 homes by the end of March this year, and how many of those homes are already up and running and have people living in them?

Jeremy Pocklington: There is very good progress; we think we are on track to deliver the vast majority this year. I have not got a specific number as to how many are in operation. I know that some are now being used in Derby, in West Suffolk, in Chichester—so, in different parts of the country. Brighton is another area. However, we are monitoring progress closely.

Q56 **James Wild:** I think you said the substantial majority. Does Ms Hobman have any additional data on what that means against the 3,300 target?

Penny Hobman: No, I don't have any more specific data, but we are confident that we will deliver those 3,300. As the permanent secretary said, some are already in use, particularly where they have been private sector leasing schemes. However, the vast majority of the 3,300 are new acquisitions or refurbishment of moribund stock. We expect most of them to be towards the back end of this financial year, given the works that are needed.

Q57 **James Wild:** Okay, and how long do you expect people to stay in these homes and where do they go after that period?

Penny Hobman: The intention with these homes is that they provide, as they describe, a move-on step for people on what we describe as the rough sleeping pathway. The expectation is that people would stay in them for up to around two years, although we will work with local authorities where there are exceptional circumstances and people might need to stay in them longer; we accept that. However, the intention is that they are the next step on the way to independent living for individuals.

Q58 **James Wild:** My local authority is providing 16 units under this programme, which is welcome. I have spoken to them and know that they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are on track to deliver that. You do not seem to have a figure at all on how many of the 3,300 you expect to be there? Can I press you on that? How many do you think you will have at the end of March?

Penny Hobman: We are confident about the 3,300 number being reached. As the permanent secretary said, there may be some that are completed a little later than that, but it is quite a moving picture at the moment, given that local authorities are now getting under way with acquisition, the refurbishment works and so on, which is why I am unable to give you a specific figure right now.

Q59 **James Wild:** The Report states that at the end of September, 23,273 people had moved on into settled accommodation. What do you understand that figure to be today?

Penny Hobman: The figures that we published on 8 January were the numbers as at the end of November, which was the 33,000 that had been accommodated overall, of which just over 23,000 had been moved on into settled accommodation. Those are the most recent figures that we have published since the end of November.

Q60 **James Wild:** Do you have a figure for how many people have moved on from hotels and other accommodation and have subsequently returned to sleeping rough?

Penny Hobman: No, we do not have a figure in the public domain for that specific question.

Q61 **James Wild:** Would you like to put one in the public domain today?

Penny Hobman: No. As the NAO Report states, the Department has been gathering management information during the course of the pandemic. These are new datasets that we are continuing to refine at the moment.

Q62 **James Wild:** When do you expect them to have been refined so that they can be published?

Penny Hobman: As I said, there is quite a lot of work to do to refine the new datasets, but when we are able to, we will put them into the public domain.

Q63 **Chair:** Are you saying that this is a Statistics Authority issue, or is it an internal departmental issue about the validity of the numbers?

Penny Hobman: Is that question for me, Chair?

Chair: Yes, as you were mentioning the figures. Is it about the national Statistics Authority, or is it about your Department not yet reconciling the figures?

Penny Hobman: There are two issues here. As the permanent secretary said earlier, the official statistics will be published next month, and it is important that those are not confused. There is also further work to be done within the Department on the management information that we have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

gathered throughout the pandemic to ensure that that is correct and refined.

Q64 Chair: Just to be clear, is that management information feeding into the future national statistics publication, or is it already agreed, and these are lower-level data in more granular detail?

Penny Hobman: The official statistics are the annual snapshot—the single number—and that has a much higher standard of verification because it is independently verified by Homeless Link and it—*[Inaudible.]*—methodology to the management information.

Chair: Now that we have got that clear, back to you, Mr Wild, on the other data.

Q65 James Wild: As well as the 3,300 in accommodation under this scheme, one of the other targets, was the 300,000 new homes per year. Mr Pocklington, in our December report looking at starter homes, we called on the Department to set out how many types of tenure of homes will be delivered under this 300,000 target, and when they would be delivered. Are you in a position today to agree to provide that information?

Jeremy Pocklington: We will need to respond to that recommendation through the process of the Treasury minute in the usual way. We are coming to the end of that process in Government, so I am sure that we will be able to come back to that at a future hearing, but I would like to respond through the usual process.

Q66 James Wild: One concern is that some of our constituents will not be in a position to purchase a property, even with the various Government support schemes. What is the role for social rent, particularly for people who are moving on from the accommodation that we have been talking about here?

Jeremy Pocklington: The importance of new supply is well understood, notwithstanding the debate on precisely how to interpret the 300,000 ambition. I think that is recognised in Government policy. In particular, last year we announced the next phase of the affordable homes programme. That provides £9 billion of investment between 2021 and 2026 and will provide up to 180,000 additional homes if conditions allow. We think that around half of that number will be for rent, and at least 32,000 for social rent is the plan, if the Government recognise the role of social rent as part of the mix.

Q67 James Wild: Thank you. Baroness Casey, you had agreed to do this review, although you made the point that you were not planning to do it immediately. Do you agree that that review still needs to happen, and are you still planning to lead it?

Baroness Casey: I still think we need a good look at not only rough sleeping but wider aspects of homelessness, particularly families in temporary accommodation who, to be honest, I have worried about a lot during the pandemic. So I think it still stands as an important thing to happen. The Department and I have agreed that we ought to just let the



pandemic and vaccines and those sorts of things go, get much further down the road and let time heal some of those very difficult things. It is no secret that I have said publicly that I think the Government ought to take a big step back and consider how it should look at many issues that have cut quite deep into the country around low income, rising levels of people on universal credit and so on and so forth, homelessness and, within that, rough sleeping. I am afraid that is a long answer to a short question.

Q68 James Wild: One of the areas in this review that I am interested in is day centres. Do you think there is sufficient investment into day centres, for example? They are often the first port of call, getting people in to have a meal and then sitting down and helping to deal with some of the longer-term issues that they face. Do you think that in the past we have invested sufficiently in our day centres?

Baroness Casey: To be honest, I think that the role of different services and how they operate around the street should be looked at. My own view is that we ought to be able to create in this country a safety net that is up from the street, so that people should not be on the street at all. You could look at some models such as No Second Night Out. I would like there to be “no first night out”, and I would look at the role of day centres and night centres within that. Just to write a ticket saying, “Great. Day centres. They need more money. We must resource them” would be a mistake. Looking at services and how they operate post the pandemic would be a sensible thing to do.

Also, the level of investment that the Department is putting into rough sleeping is very significant. One would want to look at what you were getting in return for that investment overall. I mean, £700 million? When I was in charge of the troubled families programme, we did not have that size budget and we had to turn around the lives of 120,000 families with quite a few children involved. So it does warrant somebody stepping back. I also think that the amount of money that has gone into the voluntary sector during covid has not been insignificant—not only out of the Department, out of DCMS, out of Comic Relief and out of the national lottery. It has not been perfect, but it is not a small amount of money to keep those projects going.

Q69 James Wild: Our Committee is all about bang for buck, so I very much agree with you there. Mr Pocklington, is the Department on track to deliver the target to end rough sleeping by 2024?

Jeremy Pocklington: I think we have strong foundations to take our work forward to deliver that ambition. Our focus right now remains on the pandemic, but we have transformed many people’s lives, thanks to the brilliant work that so many in the sector have done over the past year. The significant improvement that has been made to accommodation, this new national asset of move-on accommodation, will all help. But the challenge will get harder as the Parliament progresses, because we are dealing now with the more entrenched rough sleepers, who have significant mental health problems and substance abuse issues. Working



HOUSE OF COMMONS

hard with this group, and maybe with ex-offenders as well, is going to need to be a priority.

Q70 James Wild: What is your target for ending rough sleeping? What does that actually mean, and how do we measure it? We talked earlier about the 33,000 people, and we have had the 4,000 snapshot. What is the actual metric that you are using? We and the public can then judge whether you are working towards it.

Jeremy Pocklington: I completely understand the question. Of course, it is just not possible to say that there will never be a circumstance where no one spends a night out on the streets. The nature of the challenge that we have, and the role of health issues and relationship breakdown, means that, tragically, that outcome is probably never achievable. Thinking exactly how we will approach that definitional question is something that we will need to consider as we update the rough sleeping strategy. I think we all know the direction of travel that we need to take. We have plenty to be focused on in the Department, but we will need to return to the question that you raise.

Q71 James Wild: I think it is important to make sure that the resources are there to deliver the target, and that we are all clear on what we are aiming at. If I had asked you that question a little over a year ago, I wonder whether you would have highlighted the 33,000. You might have pointed to the snapshot data as the aiming point.

Jeremy Pocklington: Ultimately, the better measure to focus on is the snapshot data, but I recognise the need for the wider picture as well.

James Wild: Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Wild. Let's briefly go to Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP.

Q72 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Mr Pocklington, we have now got rid of the algorithm. In areas like mine, which was probably the most skewed in the entire country, I kept making the point—to the consultation on changing the planning system, and elsewhere—that it is not sheer numbers. The Government seems to be concentrating on the 300,000 number, but it is the housing mix that is important. In my constituency, how do you house public servants who are on very low wages? Nine out of 10 teachers do not live in my constituency. What will the Government do to concentrate more on housing mix and housing need, rather than on sheer numbers?

Jeremy Pocklington: This is an important issue that we will need to return to as we take forward the work of the planning White Paper. Ultimately, in the national planning policy framework—the NPPF—when local authorities are creating their local plans, they need to determine the appropriate mix of housing that should be available to meet the needs of their local population. Obviously, that is easy to say and harder to do, particularly in areas of very high land value. That, in turn, means it is important to ensure that we are able to bring forward both the right



HOUSE OF COMMONS

housing and the sufficient number of houses—new supply as well—in order to make prices affordable for as many people as we possibly can.

Q73 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: How can local authorities, particularly one like mine—as you say, land is very expensive—do that, when every edict coming out of your Department is all about numbers? It makes it very difficult for them to say to a developer, “Don’t build quite so many, but these are the ones we want. We want more social housing. We want more one and two-bedroom houses.” It is difficult for local authorities to do that.

Jeremy Pocklington: I think there is already quite a lot in the national planning policy framework—the NPPF—that asks local authorities to make those sorts of judgments and decisions. Obviously, local authorities have a lot of flexibility to determine how much planning gain they will capture through developer contributions—they have a lot of flexibility to determine how much to set and then how much affordable housing results from that.

On top of that, we have a number of Government interventions designed to support affordability. There is the new Help to Buy scheme, which will operate for a further two years from the end of this financial year. As we have discussed with the Committee, we are piloting First Homes, and I have already talked about the affordable homes programme. So it is a focus of the Department.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. I would just add that this Committee has repeatedly asked for breakdowns on the types of housing in all the various housing targets that your Department has set, Mr Pocklington. I lay a marker down that we will continue to ask for that, because, as Sir Geoffrey rightly highlights, it is no good having the housing if it is not affordable for people; you do need a mix.

Anyway, we will leave it there for today. I thank our witnesses: Jeremy Pocklington, the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Penny Hobman the director for homelessness and rough sleeping at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—now fully visible, without a shadow—and Baroness Casey, the former head of the covid-19 rough sleeping taskforce. I do not need to go through her entire background—we have not got time for that—but she is an expert in taking on and supporting people who have been sleeping on the streets, from grassroots up. Thank you very much indeed all of you for your time.