

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Black homelessness, HC 1505

Wednesday 7 January 2026

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Women and Equalities Committee members present: Sarah Owen (Chair); David Burton-Sampson; Dame Nia Griffith; Christine Jardine; Kim Leadbeater; Kevin McKenna; Rachel Taylor; Nadia Whittome.

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee member present: Florence Eshalomi.

Questions 28 – 63

Witnesses

[I](#): Polly Stephens, Head of Policy, Impact and Partnerships, New Horizon Youth Centre; Danielle Celeste, Teacher, Researcher & Theatre Practitioner, Off the Wall Players; Henri Baptiste, Founder/Board Member, Pathway Housing Solutions.

[II](#): Alison McGovern MP, Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Philippa Davies, Director of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Polly Stephens, Danielle Celeste and Henri Baptiste.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today our evidence session is on black homelessness. This afternoon we are taking evidence in person and virtually from Polly Stephens, head of policy, impact and partnerships at New Horizon Youth Centre; Danielle Celeste, teacher, researcher and theatre practitioner at Off the Wall Players; and Henri Baptiste, co-founder and board member at Pathway Housing Solutions. Welcome to you three. I also want to welcome our very special guest, the Chair of the HCLG Committee, Flo Eshalomi. You are very, very welcome to join the Women and Equalities Committee today.

We are going to go around and different Committee members will ask questions. If there is anything that you think you want to go into a longer answer on or if you have loads of data that you want to talk through, please just follow it up in an email with us because we have two panel sessions today. I am going to hand over first to my colleague Rachel.

Q28 Rachel Taylor: It is great to see so many people here at the Committee today who have an interest in this topic. Excuse me, I am struggling with my voice, as many of us are after Christmas. I will come to you first, Henri, if I may. Can you tell us broadly about the problems faced by young black homeless people?

Henri Baptiste: For me, the obvious manifestation of homelessness is rough sleeping. That is a stereotypical, homogeneous homelessness situation that society is used to. In terms of youth homelessness, young people experience a range of trauma, or a range of issues in relation to abuse at home: it could be that they fled home because of abuse at home; it could be that they fled home because of family breakdown matters. We also have a high percent of young people who are leaving the care system.

From our experience, what we are finding is there is a range of social but also economic factors, including changes in the welfare system, that have impacted young people. We found that young people tend to be what is described as "hidden" homeless: they are not necessarily showing up in statutory figures, and they are finding informal ways of addressing their homelessness situation. Some that we have come across have been young females who are entering into inappropriate relationships, essentially just to have a roof over their heads.

We are currently undertaking a small study on youth homelessness at the moment as well, which is starting to gather some more data around youth homelessness. What we are experiencing is that young black people in particular experience a range of intersectionalities as well, which have a wider impact on what is already a vulnerable group. Just to quickly add to that, there is an issue in terms of young people who



subsequently go on to find accommodation and the issue of cuckooing, which is becoming more and more prominent.

Q29 Rachel Taylor: Polly, how do other protected characteristics like gender, sexuality, disability and transgender identity affect a person's experience of being black and homeless?

Polly Stephens: What we consistently see in our services is that over half of the young people we have worked with for over half a decade come from black communities, from a variety of different backgrounds. What we see for a lot of those young people is them being adultified when they are trying to access statutory services, or having discriminatory experiences at the hands of services like the police, which are often some of the main interactions for people who are forced to sleep rough.

In terms of intersecting identities underneath that, about half the young people we saw who were disabled in the last year were from black communities. We see a lot of autism, undiagnosed autism, ADHD, and a lot of mental health needs that are either not being met for cultural reasons or not being met because of language barriers. We increasingly work with a very big refugee and asylum seeker cohort, and they face enormous barriers when trying to access services across the board, as well as a greater risk of discrimination and harm when forced to sleep rough or risk of experiencing other forms of homelessness.

Q30 Rachel Taylor: Has anything specific come up around sexuality with young black people in particular?

Polly Stephens: We see some of that, and I would be happy to send some evidence from some partner organisations like Akt and Stonewall Housing that we work with. I can send that in a note. We see that about 5% of the young people we are working with identify as LGBTQ, but often there is a lack of cultural competency within services for young people to trust them enough to disclose things like that.

We see that increasingly, young black women—as Henri said—are presenting at services and over-represented in domestic violence services. For example, in Camden alone, 46% of the people accessing women's shelters are from black communities, which for a community of only 14% cross-city is a wild over-representation. There are also particular barriers within those services, particularly statutory services, around cultural competencies, understanding of faith, understanding of language barriers, and all that kind of stuff.

Q31 Rachel Taylor: I will come on to you now, Dani. What additional safety concerns do black people face when sleeping rough, and why do you think that is?

Danielle Celeste: One of the additional safety concerns is disproportionate criminalisation and an increased interaction with the criminal justice system, which poses a direct safety risk. For example,



black people are significantly more likely to be arrested under the Vagrancy Act, which criminalises rough sleeping. More than 4,000 people were arrested under the Vagrancy Act in the last five years, and black people were more likely to be targeted. According to some research done by Generation Rent, between 2008 and 2022, 8% of arrests under the Act, which criminalises rough sleeping and begging, were black people. That is higher than the ethnic group's proportion of the general population, which is 4%, and more than England's rough sleeping population of 5%. That is one of the increased risks.

There is increased risk of violence and abuse, which rough sleepers face anyway by members of the public, but black people may face the added layer of racially motivated attacks from members of the public. Yes, those are two things that I thought were quite important.

Henri Baptiste: From the research that we have done, we acknowledge there is an increasing number of black people who are sleeping rough. But the rough sleeping population is roughly about 6% of the total homeless population. What our statistics are showing is that mainstream services that are commissioned to deliver services to rough sleepers are not necessarily, or by standard, collecting data on ethnic profiles of the groups they are coming into contact with. What we are finding is there is actually a lower number of BME people who are represented in rough sleeper figures. Part of that is the way in which the data is collected.

What contributes to that is the ability of those institutions or organisations that are commissioned to deliver those services to actually reach people from BME communities. We ran a rough sleeper project, and the case studies we have were where we were able to reach people in places where these services were not entering. While the question is geared towards what their experiences might be, there is also a question there about whether rough sleeper services are actually meeting the needs of underserved communities.

Q32 **Kevin McKenna:** That actually leads very neatly into what I was about to ask next, which was really looking into housing provision in the social sector and private sector, and services that support people. Can you just tell me about the kinds of discrimination that black people face across social housing and private housing, but also homelessness services themselves?

Henri Baptiste: That is a broad question. Obviously, I am going to have to provide you with something in addition to this oral presentation. The reality is that black people face discrimination across the whole sector: from the housing market sector to statutory homeless services provision. It is quite a generic response you are going to get. But our experience is that even in terms of access to the private rented sector, they are discriminated against in that sector essentially because of the right to work. That is a challenge.



There are people who tend not to trust the statutory homelessness system. There is also structural discrimination in terms of access to statutory homelessness services. I am giving you quite a generic response. Really to give credence to the question, what I would much rather do is provide you with a more detailed written response.

Q33 Kevin McKenna: That would be incredibly helpful. Thank you, Henri. Dani, just building on that really, how easy is it for people facing these systems to actually challenge any discrimination that they encounter?

Danielle Celeste: Well, it is quite difficult. Sorry, I am just going to go to my notes on that question; I thought there would be another question. Here are my notes on challenging discrimination that black people face across social housing, private renting and homeless services in the UK. It is possible but extremely difficult in practice. Although legal protections exist under the Equality Act, the burden of proving discrimination falls entirely on the individuals, often at a time when they are in crisis, lack resources or fear jeopardising their housing options. Often the discrimination is subtle and covert, not overt, and takes the form of things like gatekeeping, harsher eligibility decisions or being quietly deprioritised, making it hard to evidence.

In the private rented sector, landlords can object to applications without explanation, allowing racial bias to operate unchecked. Complaints mechanisms in social housing and homelessness services are often not robust, with organisations largely left to investigate themselves. Often black people facing homelessness are reluctant to complain to the same services and organisations that they have experienced discrimination and racism from.

Structural policies also make discrimination harder to challenge. Right to rent has been shown to encourage racial profiling, while no recourse to public funds limits the rights of many black migrants to seek help or challenge unfair decisions. It seems that there is poor ethnicity data across housing systems, which further obscures patterns of discrimination and prevents accountability. The Regulator of Social Housing focuses mainly on governance and safety and not day-to-day discriminatory practice.

Q34 Kevin McKenna: Obviously, challenging that more cryptic discrimination is very hard and can be very stressful. I can see some stresses that that will cause people, but how does challenging and experiencing this sort of discrimination impact on people's health and wellbeing?

Danielle Celeste: That is another question that is quite wide, and maybe some more evidence will be sent in writing about that. The mental health impacts are significant and have been well documented. Being repeatedly denied housing and treated unfairly by landlords and facing gatekeeping from councillors can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, depression and trauma. The uncertainty of unstable housing or the fear of homelessness can create a constant state of vigilance that harms emotional wellbeing.



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Experiences of racism themselves are recognised as a health stressor, and housing discrimination adds another layer of harm. I have lots of notes on this, so maybe I will send them in writing because there is quite a lot.

Q35 **Kevin McKenna:** Please do—absolutely.

Danielle Celeste: Okay.

Q36 **Chair:** Can you remember a specific, stark example that you could share with the Committee that would help us really get to the heart of this?

Danielle Celeste: In terms of discrimination?

Chair: Yes, in terms of discrimination.

Danielle Celeste: Yes. I can talk about a research project that I worked on in 2014 with Crisis called No One Turned Away. Although it was 10 years ago, the findings are quite similar on more recent research projects I have worked on. I do not know if you know anything about No One Turned Away, but it was essentially like a mystery shopping research project. I was one of the people who was a mystery shopper; I was sent to 18 different authorities nationally. Out of the 18 housing options services, I would say four of them did not discriminate, that I could say.

In one housing options service, I was waiting in line and I had been there since 8 am outside and then inside. Then before 1 pm, about 12.45 pm, just as I was going to be seen, they pulled the shutters down and said, “You’re too black to be seen right now, so you have to come back tomorrow.” Another place, I was left waiting until around 4 pm, having been there from 8 am. I was told to go to a local phone box and do a reverse call and given a number to call. Another place, I was told to go and speak to the men sitting on the wall outside and they would help me with housing. Another place, I was told, “You can’t just come here and expect to get a house. We have to house the people who are white people here first.” Those are a couple of—

Q37 **Chair:** They are examples from local authorities?

Danielle Celeste: Yes, local authorities. There was one other experience that I will quickly say, where I was there in a housing options service and some colleagues happened to be there on the day who were white—obviously, we could not talk to each other—and their experience was completely different from mine. My experience culminated in, again, waiting there from 9 am, and roughly around 4.45 pm or 5.30 pm, I was told by the lady who was dealing with me not to worry, they were going to house me.

In the corner of my eye, I saw four policemen come into the housing options service and a mental health van. I thought, “Oh my gosh.” I asked to go to the toilet, went to the toilet, and quickly put a jacket on and changed my appearance. I took out the letter that I had because I



had asked for a letter just in case anything goes wrong, to show them what I was doing. Then, magically, everything was fine. But if I had indeed been aggressive—because that is why they said the police were called—or I had been exhibiting real mental health issues, I am sure that they would have stayed because it does not matter whether I am a mystery shopper or not, if I am displaying those things, that is needed, isn't it? But obviously I was not, so then it magically went away.

Those are some examples I can tell you, which obviously, I experienced, but they are more objective and not subjective.

Henri Baptiste: For me, the issue of housing inequality and homelessness is not just about conscious and unconscious bias; it is also about systemic discrimination, structural discrimination and institutional bias. That is very much about policies, practices and systems that are put in place that inadvertently discriminate and create barriers and challenges for particular minority community groups. For me, that is a real issue within this as well because that is very much about how policies are designed and implemented, and the fact that, inadvertently, their impact is essentially that certain groups receive a disproportionate service.

For me, while there is weight that we need to add to the argument about conscious bias, unconscious bias and discriminatory practices, even the design of policy, or the fact that policy is not always inclusive in its design or consultation process, is a factor that has to be considered within this inquiry as well. Those actions also limit opportunities to affordable housing or safe and stable accommodation.

Q38 Kim Leadbeater: Thank you everyone for coming this afternoon; you have done an amazing job so far of highlighting that there is clearly a problem here. Building on what Henri just said, let us try to look at the solutions. If you were looking at the Government's recently announced national plan to end homelessness, specifically with regard to reducing the excess risk of homelessness faced by black people, how would you evaluate what that plan looks like?

Polly Stephens: We were pleased to see that the national plan to end homelessness has a focus on prevention. We have said for a long time that youth homelessness interventions are one of the most powerful prevention tools we have across the board. The Government's own data shows that over half of entrenched rough sleepers in later life first experienced homelessness under the age of 25. What we also see from almost 60 years of frontline delivery is that interventions at that point can meaningfully end homelessness for good for those people. With us working primarily with young people from black communities, it is also one of the most powerful tools that we have to tackle black homelessness.

While we were pleased to see that there was a subsection that recognised young people as a distinct group, there was not a lot about how that



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might intersect with certain racial backgrounds. A lot of the recommendations specifically for young people were more around things like the homelessness code of guidance or a toolkit, and not as much about tangible housing. Our disappointment with that sits in the fact that we often say that young people need a specific service. It is never going to be appropriate to put a 19-year-old, who has only ever lived at home, in a shared hostel with lots of people in their 30s and 40s.

Similarly, we see that young people often need supported housing because they are not ready to move straight into independent living, but there are a lot of barriers to that created by multiple things, including the more recent Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act. Similarly, what we see for young people is they are financially discriminated against, so they are given fewer benefits. They are not eligible for the single accommodation rate. If you are a person with certain lived experiences, for example, sexual violence, or certain mental health needs, it is not going to be appropriate for you to go into an HMO or a shared home, but they are barred by their age from being able to access that.

As was said earlier, family breakdown is the biggest cause of youth homelessness. Not getting the same amount in benefits and housing is given under the assumption that you have a family network to make up the difference and you can afford to survive on that. If I am a young person living in London with no access to a family network, and I am given a lower rate of every form of benefit, how on earth am I supposed to navigate that system?

We would like to see more about that. My question to the Minister and this Committee would be, since we know that 18% of homelessness presentations at councils are under 25 and 8% to 10% of all people recorded sleeping rough in London are under 25, would it be fair for us to ringfence the resources that the Government give to the housing crisis and prevention pathways to the same extent? Would we be willing to ringfence 8% to 18% of our services for this prevention that evidence shows us really works?

Q39 **Kim Leadbeater:** That is really helpful, thank you. It is good that prevention and trying to get in there at an early stage is talked about, but also you would like to see a bit more about young people specifically and, from what you said, about young black people specifically?

Polly Stephens: Yes, for sure.

Q40 **Kim Leadbeater:** That is really helpful, thank you. Danielle, what is your evaluation of the strategy?

Danielle Celeste: The Government's cross-departmental homelessness strategy gives very limited attention to the specific needs of black people and other ethnic minority groups. Unlike other at-risk groups, who receive detailed sections and tailored recommendations, the strategy



includes only a brief paragraph acknowledging that ethnic minority communities face additional barriers such as discrimination, language challenges and the lack of culturally appropriate services. Although it notes emerging evidence on the role of racism in homelessness, it offers no really concrete actions, funding commitments or plans to address these disparities.

Q41 Kim Leadbeater: I will come back to you maybe about what you might like to see. Henri, do you want to do a bit of an evaluation overall?

Henri Baptiste: Yes, there are a number of points here. First, there is a fund attached to the new homelessness strategy. Let me see if I can quickly find it on my notes. Yes, it is the ending homelessness in communities fund, working with the voluntary, community and faith sector. For me, part of that is recognising that particular groups are facing challenges. Maybe there should be a consideration of ringfencing some of that funding so that it is targeted at particular communities whose needs are not being met by existing homelessness provision.

Secondly, rather than echoing what others have said, there is also a broader agenda. One aspect of that is around the social and affordable homes programme. Within that, it talks about community-led housing. For me, community-led housing is a vehicle for addressing homelessness. It is about looking at other strategies and policies that can support addressing the issue of black homelessness. I believe that the SAHP has it within its remit to do that.

Thirdly, how do the new devolved authorities and mayoral authorities that are going to be developing homelessness strategies and housing strategies transition themselves and translate them? How will they translate themselves into ways in which they will be developing strategies and indicators that address homelessness within particular communities, actually having targets and outcomes achieved as part of that through the work that is going to be taken on by these new authorities? Local government reorganisation provides additional opportunities as well, and it is whether we can embed this conversation around race and homelessness within those discussions.

Another key factor that has come up for us is the misalignment between local housing strategies and homelessness strategies. They tend to be designed and produced separately, maybe with reference to each other, but I would like to see more cohesion between housing strategies and homelessness strategies. I know that sits somewhat outside of the question that you asked, but there is a broader conversation here about how Government—if you are talking about Government in general—can respond to some of these.

Another point that we have acknowledged is the loss of social housing and the loss of public assets. We are about to launch a campaign that shouts out and calls for more ethical disposal of social housing. What I mean by that is that the loss or sale of housing association properties to



the market has an impact on the net additionality of new housing. For me, that is a key question to ask, and building on that, there is the liberation of recycled grants that are used by housing associations. Again, there are a number of things to bring forward, but I will put that in the form of an email.

Q42 Kim Leadbeater: That would be brilliant. Thank you very much, Henri; that was really comprehensive. Just to finish off then, maybe we could have a final thought from all three of you in terms of what might not be in the plan that you would like to see.

Does it worry you that there is not much reference to race or racism in the plan? Is there anything else that you think could be added? You have made some really valuable points in terms of what this looks like from a devolution perspective. Is there a way of ringfencing money? Housing and homelessness should be a bit more joined up. That is a criticism that the Government face on many subjects; they are not always very joined up in their thinking. Is there anything else that you might like to see in the strategy, and are there any concerns about the lack of reference to race or racism?

Henri Baptiste: One of the key things is that I sit on the APPG for ending homelessness as well, and what is stark is that the subject of black homelessness for me cross-cuts APPGs. I am wondering—I suppose this is a question for you—whether the findings and recommendations from this inquiry will be shared with it to inform its conversations going forward?

Kim Leadbeater: Yes, that is a really good point.

Henri Baptiste: If there is one thing that you wanted from me, that would be it right now. I will put everything else in an email, yes?

Q43 Kim Leadbeater: Yes, that is very helpful. Joining the dots is really important. The Chair is nodding, which is a positive sign, Henri. Thank you for that. Danielle, any last points from you?

Danielle Celeste: Some recommendations would be restoring the local housing allowance so it covers at least the cheapest third of local rents and improving welfare support to reflect real living costs and avoid disadvantaging low-income households. That was said before. Also, in terms of—I have forgotten the name now—the duty to collaborate and requiring public services to work together to prevent homelessness, it would be really great if some black lived experience people could be part of that in terms of building something new that comes straight from the ground up. They can work with local authorities to ensure that their concerns and their experiences feed right into this new strategy.

Some other recommendations would be anti-racism training and guidance for housing and homelessness services, and improving ethnicity data collection and using it. That is really important. Yes, everything else I will send in writing.



Q44 **Kim Leadbeater:** That is brilliant. That is really comprehensive; thank you very much. Polly, anything to add?

Polly Stephens: No, I would agree with everything you said. You cannot come into any single frontline homelessness service in the UK and say that it is not a race issue; it just absolutely is. Come to our day centre any time, you are very welcome, and you will see that that is the truth. We could go further to recognise that structural and institutional racism in the way that we have with other statutory services. It would be nice to see that more recognised in Government homelessness plans.

On top of that, as I already said, there is this financial disadvantage that we put on young people who want to work; they want to contribute to this community and country in every single way they can, but we just financially penalise them. One of the things that we suggested through the Youth Homeless Chapter collective was, okay, if young people get a lower rate, for young people who do not have family support, who are either care experienced or have interacted with homelessness services, you could give them an independence payment that would just top them up to the same rate as everyone else so they have the same tools. But that is an equalities thing, and what we actually need to see here is more equity. We need to look at actually actively going to black communities that are so underserved by these services and giving more, rather than just the same as everyone else.

Q45 **Chair:** I know Kim said that was the end but I have one other question, which is around some recommendations that you have talked about there. They are all very sensible, particularly around anti-racism training and equity, and being proactive with underserved communities, but there are an increasing number of local authorities for which they will fly in the face of their political direction. Have you seen any instances where the political direction further to the right has caused a worsening of the problems, or are you planning how to deal with and combat that challenge in the future?

Polly Stephens: Unfortunately, yes. We spend a lot of time at our service—we are a frontline service; we are a very findable service; we have a day centre—and we have done a lot of active planning about what we would do if we were targeted. We already experience and have for a long time—but it has definitely got worse—a lot of online abuse to our staff about what we do because we talk about being very proud to work with anyone who comes to our doors no matter their background. We have increased reports of people being harassed while forced to sleep rough or in general just out and about.

Again, we work with a group of asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom report absolutely staggering discrimination and abuse. What we also see is people coming to London because they feel safer here. There is more community here; it is perceived as a safer space for them. There is not that much of a pathway or model for people who feel they need to be in London for those reasons. It is quite difficult sometimes to work



with authorities to have a bit of flexibility around that. The third sector in general is struggling, and we are worried that we will face more and more of it.

Q46 **Chair:** Henri, you have your hand up?

Henri Baptiste: Yes, just very quickly. From our perspective, we have already established a culturally specific project. That project was set up through grant funding rather than being funded through mainstream provision. The conversation about the changing political landscape is something that is current, but our project was set up two years ago during a different landscape where we were still facing some challenges that we are continuing to face today. We recognised there was a gap at that time, which was two to three years ago.

Politically, yes, the climate has changed, but it is embedded within practice regardless of what institution is in power. It is very much about whether practice and bias create challenges and barriers for services. As a black-led organisation, we do not work exclusively with people of colour; we work with people who are marginalised in society. We need to recognise that it is not just these new challenges that we are facing, but existing challenges that institutions practise that create those challenges as well.

Danielle Celeste: I just wanted to quickly add to that and to your question: finding a different way for black communities to complain when they have faced discrimination would be a really good way to combat that, because then it is not left to the local authority and the housing services to police themselves. That would go a long way with the question that you asked, creating a robust way for people to complain separately.

Chair: Right. Thank you very, very much all three of you. I have the Minister waiting just there as well, to whom we will be able to put some questions that you have raised here today. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alison McGovern and Philippa Davies.

Chair: Welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee, Minister. On our second panel we have Alison McGovern MP, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We also have Philippa Davies, Director of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Welcome to you both. You will have heard quite a lot of the discussion in the first session, and I am going to hand straight over to David.

Q47 **David Burton-Sampson:** Thank you very much to you both for coming today. You will have heard a lot of this already through that session and



maybe from your research, but black people are four times more likely to be homeless. Black-led households are 12 times more likely than white households to be living in temporary accommodation. They are twice as likely to be stuck in temporary accommodation for over five years, so their families are less likely to secure social housing through the statutory system as well. Minister, what evidence does the Government have on why this situation exists?

Alison McGovern: Thank you, Mr Burton-Sampson; I really appreciate the opportunity to give evidence to you all as a Committee. It was also really good to listen to the contribution from Polly, Danielle and Henri; I thought they did brilliantly. I am terrified of giving evidence to you all and I am here all the time, so I do not know how they did it so brilliantly. Mr Burton-Sampson, you ran through the data and that is right. In the previous panel, we heard that there is a combination of structural causes. The overriding structural causes of homelessness include not having enough money to pay for a tenancy, being in a more fragile part of the labour market, and not coming from a wealthy background. Black people are more likely to be in a position where those causes affect them.

I was really interested to listen to Danielle's testimony about what she has experienced. I have been a constituency MP for 15 and a half years. Anecdotally, we all know from our own life experience and from what people have told us that there is probably direct discrimination as well. We have heard it again, and there are some sources of evidence on that. The English Housing Survey has some evidence of the increased expectation that people will be treated in a racist way, but it is fair to say that we could probably have more. We know about the structural causes; that is clear in the data. We know there is direct discrimination. It might be helpful if we had more evidence. Philippa, is there anything that you want to add to that?

Philippa Davies: The only thing I would add is that we also have some, again, limited official data on people's experience when they are in the system. We know that 45% of black rough sleepers do not know where to get support versus white rough sleepers who, for example, have more awareness of that system. There is a bit of evidence but—exactly as the Minister says—there is scope to go further.

Q48 **Chair:** I just want to come back to the phrasing of that point, Philippa, that white people will know more and black people will know less about where to get this information. Is it the fact that there is less knowledge, or is it that more of that information is actually targeted at a white audience?

Philippa Davies: That is an extremely fair question.

Q49 **Chair:** Has any evaluation been done on that?

Alison McGovern: I am not aware that we have. Having a new homelessness strategy with some quite clear goals attached to it gives us the opportunity to find out.



Q50 David Burton-Sampson: On the new homelessness strategy: first, thank you and well done on getting that out there; it is a real positive that we now have that strategy in place. However, the plan makes very few references to race. The word “racism” only appears once in the whole 28,000-word document. Especially after what you have heard today, how will the plan start to address the racial disparities in homelessness risk and outcomes?

Alison McGovern: Thank you for that question. It is really helpful for this Committee to take that lens over the strategy. The strategy looks at the groups that are more likely to experience homelessness. You will see that there are a number of specific examples given where the Government need to work together through the duty to collaborate that we are suggesting to try to prevent that.

It comes back to your previous question in that our goals through the strategy are to increase prevention—so increase the instances of homelessness where we are able to prevent somebody saying to their council, “I think I might become homeless.” We want to increase the instances where we are able to prevent that homelessness, get families out of B&B accommodation and make that never happen unless it is really urgent, and halve long-term rough sleeping.

We know from the data that taking a race lens on those goals will help support black people, as well as having those goals and making that happen. We need to make sure that we have the data at hand to evidence that as we move forward in the delivery phase so that, as we go through the next year and the year after, and we are reaching those goals, we have the data to be able to say to ourselves, “Yes, we tackled both structural and direct causes of the racism that we are seeing.”

Q51 David Burton-Sampson: Obviously, we can see that there is a disproportionate risk for black people here. Are there any parameters, targets or milestones to track progress in reducing the disproportionate risk that black people are faced with? If so, what are those measures?

Alison McGovern: Our goals are for overall levels of homelessness, but I would suggest that we ought to have transparency over the ethnicity data, try to improve the quality of that data, have it transparently available, and then work through our partners in local government to make sure we deliver on closing that gap. I am very conscious that ringfences were mentioned, which I definitely want to come to and comment on, but there are other areas. A fairly significant proportion of homelessness arises through domestic abuse. I know from the grassroots organisations—the by and for organisations—how effective they can be in supporting people from different backgrounds. We need to have transparency of the data and improve the practice and then, as the months and years go on, to check back and make sure that we are closing that gap.



Philippa Davies: The only thing I would add is that the strategy explicitly states that councils and public services must use “lived experience, and use data to design accessible, inclusive and culturally-sensitive services”. I appreciate this goes wider than racism, but it is absolutely critical in responding to some of the stuff we have heard today. As the Minister says, it would be a failure if our local plans in local areas did not address some of the things we have talked about today.

Q52 **David Burton-Sampson:** Just to confirm, the plan does not currently look at this level of data but, after what you have heard today, is this something you would be willing to take away and look at?

Alison McGovern: I have looked at the data we have and it would be really helpful if the Committee made recommendations on where it feels that improved data collection could be achieved.

Q53 **Christine Jardine:** Actually, you just touched on the very first thing I was going to ask. We have talked about data and the importance of it and where there might be gaps; are there specific gaps, perhaps in public services or local government, where the data with regard to race and homelessness is not being gathered already that you would like to see?

Alison McGovern: Philippa, I might bring you in on that. MHCLG is obviously responsible for the national level statistics. There is always a tension when you are working with local government where delivery is at the forefront: you want to make data as easy as possible to collect, but as high quality as it can be. I would want to work with them on that. Philippa, is there anything specific you want to add?

Philippa Davies: It is absolutely with that lens, because we recognise there is a real balance here between asking for too much or too little. Having reviewed the work of the Committee so far, we have really thought about our breakdowns within the overall black households signifier which we cannot do very well at the moment. On the question of intersectionality that you have talked about today, again, we are not yet able to break it down to that level of nuance. I think hidden homelessness was reflected on earlier in the Committee and, by want of it being hidden, our data on hidden homelessness is just not as rich as it could be. Obviously, as the Minister says, it needs to be balanced with the burdens on local government and not expecting so much that it just becomes a barrier to service delivery.

Q54 **Christine Jardine:** The interministerial group on homelessness and rough sleeping has said that the strategy is a whole Government effort. There are various Ministers in the group, including MHCLG, Home Office, DFE, DWP, DHSC, MOJ, Treasury, and Cabinet Office. Minister, you mentioned the impact of domestic abuse and the role that it unfortunately plays. Has it been considered that the Minister for Women and Equalities should be included in the interministerial group?

Alison McGovern: Thank you for that question, Ms Jardine. I am tempted to say it is not an exclusive invite. Before Christmas, I was part



of a group of Ministers that brought forward the child poverty strategy, obviously the homelessness strategy, and the strategy on violence against women and girls. It was very important that those strategies spoke to each other because many of the underlying challenges that each of them is trying to address are similar. The reason I mention that is because I have worked very closely with Ministers in other Departments to try to bring those different lenses to the homelessness strategy. Obviously, I have worked very closely with Jess Phillips and Alex Davies-Jones from a violence against women and girls perspective to really try to help them with what they want to achieve in that very important strategy, but also to make sure that their insights were used by us in MHCLG in getting the homelessness strategy right. I would give one example of that where Jess and I worked very closely together to try to make sure that we could get the right guidance for local authorities in support of people experiencing domestic abuse.

I would be very happy for a Women and Equalities Minister to come along, but I feel that in the group of Ministers that we have had work and collaborate on each of those three interconnecting strategies—I would also give a mention to Stephanie Peacock and the youth strategy—we have people with good knowledge and experience but, as I say, far be it for me to shun any of my colleagues.

Q55 Dame Nia Griffith: It is nice to see you, Minister. Following on from that, you work well with your colleagues but can you tell us a little more about how the planned legal duties on public services to identify, collaborate and address the issue of homelessness will actually work in practice out in the field?

Alison McGovern: Thanks for that question, Dame Nia. We know that there are some significant barriers to getting people the right help and support at the right time. I saw this in reality in my former ministerial life in DWP when we were trying to make sure that people were able to access universal credit easily and swiftly and that information could be shared with, for example, local authorities so that they could offer important support.

The duty to collaborate is really about making sure there are no artificial institutional barriers that might get in the way. The idea is to shift from a passive system to an active one where we expect people to really work together. That will lead to our prevention goal being achieved if we get it right. I think it was Polly in the previous panel who said we know that if we can get young people the right help at an early stage, we can stop them experiencing homelessness throughout their life, and how valuable that is. The duty to collaborate, particularly thinking about young people, shows how valuable that would be. It is about shifting from a passive idea of “Here’s information” to an active duty to collaborate with the simple objective of preventing homelessness. Philippa, is there anything you would like to add from a legal point of view?



Philippa Davies: Only that we have plenty to work through, so we will build on the duty to refer that was introduced in 2018. As the Minister says, it is a bit more passive in that you have to refer, but there is no duty then on you to try to do your best to prevent the homelessness that you have found. Internally, we have some work to do in Government, but we will come forward with proposals as soon as we can.

Alison McGovern: Chair, if I may, it comes back to your earlier point about whose responsibility it is. It is clearly the state's responsibility to make sure that its support is active and giving people the right to a roof over their head in reality and not just in theory.

Q56 **Chair:** Coming back to the last question I asked the last panel: what happens when you have local authorities and devolved powers that do not wish to comply on this? For example, we have the Mayor of Greater Lincolnshire who has proudly said that they are anti-woke, and proudly pushed back and said, "We're going to sack equality and diversity officers." I doubt very much that they will be offering anti-racism training for their council officers. That comes to Henri's point about what happens with devolved transitions: how are we going to ensure that what we need to see happen is actually delivered on the ground?

Alison McGovern: This is a really important question, and it is why there are national goals. As I said to Mr Burton-Sampson, that is why there have to be goals, transparency and clarity. I find the idea that ending homelessness might be in any way party political profoundly disappointing. I can think of people—not just from my party, the Labour party—who are in the House and have done, and still do, great things on ending homelessness. I find the idea that anyone might think that what is in the Government's homelessness strategy is somehow so political that they could not sign up to it really disappointing.

What I have heard from local authority leaders of different political stripes up and down the country is that they believe in the potential of people who have been sleeping rough for a very long time, and particularly our children who are stuck in temporary accommodation. No one should disparage that, and it would be extremely disappointing if people from whatever political background made disparaging remarks about what we are trying to achieve.

Q57 **Chair:** There are plenty of carrots, but is there any stick from the Department when it comes to devolved powers and local authorities reaching those targets and shared goals?

Alison McGovern: We are coming from a position, particularly in local authorities, where they have been significantly underfunded and deprivation was not recognised properly in the funding system. We have changed that. We need to move to the new system of funding so that we re-establish that connection between deprivation and council funding, and help support colleagues to help us meet our goals. I take your point, but



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we are not quite in the right place to be thinking about that at the moment.

Chair: I am just a really pessimistic person, Minister. I am sorry; I am such a cynic.

Alison McGovern: As we launched some investment for the strategy, I had the great pleasure of going to Hackney with Mayor Sadiq Khan to see some work that he was doing. I have spent many hours of my life listening to Andy Burnham talking about his work on homelessness, which is excellent, so I have hope.

Chair: I am glad. We like to have hope in our Committee.

Q58 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Sadly, we have heard some dreadful examples of the treatment of black people, even by local authority housing officers. What plans are there to set up racially informed cultural competency training, first, for the people who are setting the social policies but, much more broadly than that, for the people who are actually supposed to be implementing them? What monitoring—which links in with the Chair's last question—might there be of that in practice?

Alison McGovern: Thank you for that question, Dame Nia. On the monitoring point, it comes back to what I was saying before: we have some exacting targets to meet and we keep a close eye on what is going on in every local authority area. Homelessness and temporary accommodation are concentrated in particular places, so we monitor them very closely. As part of the homelessness strategy, we have committed to update Parliament regularly in the usual way.

On training and so on, I might ask Philippa to talk about the competence and conduct standard that we are working on, which arose from work that the previous Government did following Grenfell.

Philippa Davies: In the case of social housing providers and the management of social housing providers, we are bringing in a standard set of requirements to ensure that housing management staff have the skills, knowledge and experience to properly serve their population. Our policy statement around that has been really clear that this must include equalities and diversity, and awareness of need and vulnerabilities, so it specifically picks up some points in the social housing system that we have already talked about today. That comes in in October this year; it will be kept under review and evaluated by 2028. That is one real step to improving competency and conduct within the social housing system itself.

The other bit that I would just pull out is that, as part of the homelessness strategy, we committed £12 million to a new national workforce programme. It is not for social housing providers, but for people working in homelessness services both in the voluntary and statutory sectors. This can be used on training, including anti-racism



training. As one example, this year we funded Shelter to deliver training on supporting homeless migrants and, as part of that, there was an explicit focus on anti-racism, so I would expect a similar use for that programme going forwards.

Chair: You have two-for-one here in terms of Chairs: I am really delighted to have Florence Eshalomi, Chair of the HCLG Committee.

Alison McGovern: What did I do?

Q59 **Florence Eshalomi:** It's your lucky day. I just want to ask, Minister and Philippa, if you have had sight of the Shelter report, "My colour speaks before me", which came out last year. I had the opportunity to attend a launch back in July and meet some participants in that report. It details the racism in social housing which, according to that report, is deeply embedded in policy and practice. It also lists a number of recommendations in terms of addressing this, and I am glad to hear some of the announcements you have just made, Philippa. One of the recommendations was that all local authority staff—including in allocation, planning and housing strategy—should be required to publicly publish and report complaints on racial discrimination and that this report can be anonymised. Is this something that the Ministry would look at?

Alison McGovern: That is a really important point. Shelter's research obviously informs a lot of our work. We are reviewing allocations, and I will take that suggestion as an option for something we would want to do in the future.

Q60 **Nadia Whittome:** Thank you, Minister, for all your time so far. The Government's plan makes no mention of unfreezing local housing allowance except to say that it is "under review". Given that black-led households are more likely to claim LHA, would raising LHA help to address the racial disparities in homelessness risk?

Alison McGovern: Thank you, Ms Whittome. Social security has a really important role to play in this. We spoke at the beginning of this session about the structural causes of homelessness where we see that black people are more likely to have lower incomes, and that just means they are more likely to experience homelessness. You will know that the Government took some significant steps on social security at the Budget, not least removing the two-child limit, which will have a positive effect.

On the local housing allowance specifically, we know that the Government are forecast to spend significantly more on housing benefits overall. We have talked a bit about social housing in this session, and I am very keen that we deliver on the £39 billion commitment to increase the amount of social housing. Again, it was said by Danielle, Polly and, I think, Henri, that we have not invested enough in social housing. If we are able to do that, that should have a positive effect for people.

The challenge is whether the private rented sector is really delivering for people in a way that is affordable and acceptable. We all know that it has



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not been, and that is why we introduced the Renters' Rights Act. We need to do all those things and, as we have said, keep LHA under review. I know it is a really challenging situation for people. I want to see more social housing built and enable more people to get into a really good tenancy that is affordable for them.

- Q61 **Nadia Whittome:** I appreciate the range of things that the Government are doing on this, but the freezing of the local housing allowance is one of the main factors driving the crisis in temporary accommodation. According to Crisis, after years of freezes by successive Governments, only 2.7% of homes in Great Britain today would be affordable for people relying on housing benefit. We know that black-led households are more likely to claim LHA, are significantly over-represented in temporary accommodation, and are more likely to stay there for longer. Is it the view of the Department that these things are not linked, because Shelter says that they are?

Alison McGovern: It is definitely my view that social security has a significant impact on people's incomes and that the cause of homelessness is not having enough money to be able to afford a roof over your head. The question is what do you do about it. I want to build more social homes because that enables people to often have an affordable tenancy, and there are also quality issues and the security of tenancy. We also want to improve the quality of the private rented sector as we do it, and we will keep LHA under review.

- Q62 **Florence Eshalomi:** One of the areas we are looking at on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is the condition of homes, and you referenced the private rented sector. There are big issues in terms of the state of homes in the private rented and social rented sectors. A number of people are unable to move because the LHA rate is still frozen. Again, following on from Nadia's question, data from Crisis shows that 34% of black households rent privately, and a number of them will rely on LHA. An EIA—equality impact assessment—from DWP back in 2022 found that people from BME backgrounds are more likely to be impacted by the decision not to increase LHA rates. Just coming back to that question: what additional work is being carried out in the Department to look at the impact of freezing LHA specifically, and the disproportionate impact it could be having on BME communities in the private rented and social housing sectors?

Alison McGovern: As a slight caveat to what I am about to say, obviously the renters' rights reforms and so on are the direct responsibility of the Housing Minister who I am sure you have had before your Committee many times. He will have talked about the importance of those changes to renters' rights and we hope that giving people more power in the system will help them to be able to be treated better in tenancies and so on.

When it comes to LHA, I really repeat what I have said, which is that I know the impact that social security has. We have an increasing bill



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forecast for the Government on housing benefits, and we need to keep it under review to make sure that the social security system is effective in preventing people from getting into not just poverty but deep poverty that they cannot escape from. I will be working with colleagues in DWP and other Departments as we go through the homelessness strategy to try to make sure that we have the policies in place to achieve the goals that we set.

Q63 Florence Eshalomi: Would one of those things be working with colleagues in DWP to break down the data on people who are receiving LHA by ethnicity? My understanding is that that data is not currently available, or it is not collected.

Alison McGovern: I will happily do that.

Florence Eshalomi: Okay.

Chair: Does anybody else have any other questions? If not, we are on the wind-ups now in the main Chamber, so there will be votes soon. Minister and Philippa, thank you so much for your time. This brings this session to a close.