



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: [Homelessness](#), HC 702

Monday 14 March 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 March 2016.

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Helen Hayes; Kevin Hollinrake; Liz Kendall; Julian Knight; David Mackintosh; Jim McMahon; Mr Mark Prisk; Mary Robinson; Alison Thewliss.

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Evidence from witnesses:

Questions 1 – 69

Witnesses: **Jon Sparkes**, Chief Executive, Crisis, **Howard Sinclair**, Chief Executive, St Mungo's, **Kate Webb**, Head of Homelessness Policy, Shelter, and **Giles Peaker**, Chair, Housing Law Practitioners Association, gave evidence.

Chair: Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming to our evidence session in our inquiry into homelessness. I am just going to ask Committee Members to put on record any interests they have that may be relevant to this inquiry. I am a Vice President of the Local Government Association.

David Mackintosh: I am a Northamptonshire county councillor.

Helen Hayes: I am a councillor in the London Borough of Southwark and I also employ a councillor in my staff team.

Mr Prisk: I employ councillors in my staff team.

Q1 Chair: Could we ask you to say who you are and the organisation you represent?

Giles Peaker: I am Giles Peaker. I am a solicitor at Anthony Gold Solicitors and current Chair of the Housing Law Practitioners Association.

Kate Webb: I am Kate Webb. I am Head of Homelessness Policy at Shelter.

Jon Sparkes: Jon Sparkes, Chief Executive of Crisis.

Howard Sinclair: Howard Sinclair, Chief Executive of St Mungo's.

Chair: Jim McMahon is joining us. It is his first meeting of the Committee as a new member. Jim, at the beginning we put on record any particular interests that we have relevant to this inquiry, so could you just say what they may be in your case?

Jim McMahon: I am a serving member of Oldham Council.

Q2 Chair: The obvious first question is: how many people in the country are homeless at present? Are the numbers going up or down? Why can we not get an accurate measure of them? We have a lot of statistics, but people then say they do not properly relate to this or that number, and there are reasons why they are not believable in some cases.

Jon Sparkes: I will start with two numbers. As you imply, there is no single number, but if I give two numbers. In the latest count, an estimated 3,600 people would sleep rough on a typical night in England. That figure is up 30% in the last year, based on the same methodology. A larger number is that last year 275,000 households approached their local authority with concerns about homelessness. Those are the two figures that I would give. All of the figures are going up and, at the moment, the rough sleeping figure is certainly going up in all regions of England.

Howard Sinclair: With regards to rough sleeping, in London we are in the fortunate position of having CHAIN. The national rough sleeping figure is a snapshot taken by local authorities on one night, the vast majority of whom estimate as opposed to count.

In London there is a 365-days-a-year database that has information inputted. We have long argued that CHAIN should be rolled out nationally to get a truer picture of rough sleeping across the country. The information in London is much better and up to date.

Kate Webb: I would offer a third figure, which was that just under 69,000 households were accepted as homeless by their local authority, and were housed in temporary accommodation at the end of the last quarter for which we have statistics. That is probably the group—the statutory homeless households—that we have the best data on, but we would agree that overall there is very poor recording of who is

homeless. This is largely because a lot of people try to self-serve and will sofa-surf or stay with friends and family for as long as possible.

Giles Peaker: I have nothing to add. I agree with those figures.

Q3 Chair: There are some figures, then, that are absolutely accurate and believable, but they are only the tip of the iceberg, are they, and they are better for London than outside? We are in this grey area where people do not present themselves to the authorities but are homeless. Do we count everyone who gets through the door of a local authority and probably gets sent away with, 'Go down the road and see if you can find something'?

Kate Webb: No. The best figures we have are on people who are accepted by their local authority and are owed the full rehousing duties. That will be people who are in priority need—largely families but also some single people—and are unintentionally homeless. Local authorities should be recording everyone who approaches them as homeless, but we know that often some people are sent out of the door first, so they never make it onto the books. There is always going to be that grey area underneath.

Q4 David Mackintosh: In terms of the distinction between homeless people that are sleeping rough on the streets and the hidden homeless of households that cannot get secure and stable accommodation, how important is it to distinguish between the two and how do we go about that?

Giles Peaker: Legally, there is no distinction. Someone is homeless if they do not have accommodation that it is reasonable for them to remain in. That includes whether they are sofa-surfing, staying with friends or on the streets. There is no distinction.

Jon Sparkes: Possibly the most important distinction is what we are doing about it. In some cases we will be doing something that is intentional, such as providing hostel provisions or temporary accommodation such as a B&B. In other cases we will be doing nothing and turning people away to sleep on the streets. That distinction is probably more important.

Kate Webb: Yes, we would be inclined to agree. Those distinctions do not tell you about the nature of someone's homelessness, because there is a very strict legal definition that we all use. They tell us about the options available to people. We are very mindful of the fact that the reason that we do not see children, for instance, sleeping rough on the streets is because the statutory legislation for families with children

provides that very strong and important safety net. They are hidden away, but at least hidden away with roofs and beds, in most cases.

Howard Sinclair: For me, the numbers—particularly on the streets—are underestimates. For the people on the streets, it is not about their housing condition; it is about their individual need. Very often people end up on the streets because they do not have a family to support them; because they have mental health issues—we have just launched our Stop the Scandal campaign, which shows that five out of 10 UK nationals on the streets have a diagnosable mental health problem—because they have alcohol and drug dependency; or because they are just out of the criminal justice system. I could go on—tenancy failures.

For people who sleep rough, there are a number of issues relating to their circumstances, including health issues, that mean they cannot even sofa-surf.

Q5 David Mackintosh: How does homelessness differ between major cities and other areas outside?

Howard Sinclair: In terms of rough sleeping, where people have no roof and no shelter, people outside of London, in smaller areas, are harder to find and to see. Rural homelessness and rough sleeping is on the increase, but there are not the capacity and services to get out and about. For example, we run outreach services for rough sleepers in Gloucestershire and there are three members of staff. They will not cover Gloucestershire of an evening and find rough sleepers, whereas in the City of London we have a significant team who can go out and go to every street. The effect is the same. The major issue is then recording the numbers of people. Just because you live in the country does not mean that you do not suffer homelessness and that you do not sleep rough.

Jon Sparkes: If you look at the recent rough sleeper count you can see some obvious ones in the top 10, like Westminster, but you also see Brighton in the top 10 and Cornwall in the top five. There is a difference in the nature of it and in the ability of the count to identify and see people, but this is more than just a London and urban issue.

Kate Webb: From a statutory homeless perspective, and families in particular, there is a correlation between levels of homelessness and local housing pressures. Generally speaking, in markets where pressure for housing is most acute, because of lack of supply or high costs, that is where you will see the highest rate of statutory homeless, but there definitely is not an area of the country where people are immune. As Jon alludes to, rural areas can present some of the biggest

challenges for resolving homelessness because of a lack of affordable properties locally.

Q6 Mr Prisk: How well do you feel that StreetLink has helped to better populate an understanding of where people are rough sleeping? It is still in its relatively early stages, but it strikes me that one of the advantages is that it helps us better map where rough sleepers are?

Howard Sinclair: Absolutely. StreetLink is a telephone service that you can call if you see someone sleeping rough. Call the service, someone goes, and we will then contact the local team to go out and meet with the people. Of course, in London and the major cities where there are teams that can be done that night or the next day. In other areas, if there are not the services or the infrastructure, it can take much longer.

This works on two counts. It is beginning to help us paint a picture of rough sleeping nationally, but that will only be effective if we can publicise and get the word out about StreetLink, make it part of people's consciousness, and let people know that they can do something when they see someone sleeping rough, which is to phone StreetLink and get the appropriate services along. We can then show where the gaps are in service provision within local authorities. We monitor that and report on that information.

Q7 Liz Kendall: You have already touched on this, but I wondered if you would say a bit more about whether there are particular kinds of social groups that are more likely to be homeless, both rough sleeping and in temporary accommodation?

Jon Sparkes: A range. One of the interesting recent phenomena is that the single biggest reason for someone becoming homeless now is the ending of a private rented sector tenancy. If there is a typical person who is in a private rented sector tenancy, that is the first place to look.

Q8 Liz Kendall: Has that changed over time? How recently has that been?

Jon Sparkes: That has changed over time. Over the last five years that proportion has gone from 11% to 29%.

Giles Peaker: In London it has gone from 10% to 38%.

Jon Sparkes: That is the first place. The reason it then becomes more difficult to identify the typical group is that there are structural and personal reasons for people becoming homeless. The structural

reasons are around not being able to afford a property to live in, for whatever reason: the price of the property, level and reliability of income, and level of benefits versus rental on properties, so big structural reasons. Then there are the personal reasons that we are probably more familiar with, such as relationship breakdown, addiction and mental health issues, and then the very predictable reasons for people who leave the care system or who leave the prison system. There are probably some typical groups there, but they merge in to each other a lot.

Howard Sinclair: Jon has described it well. I would get the sense of urgency over to the Committee. This is an increasing problem, and increasing day by day. I was in one of our services in Bristol a week ago where we are putting cots in a room half the size of this room where 25 people are sleeping each night, and then folding the cots away. The waiting list for a hostel place is between two and a half months and three months. I would urge the Committee, as part of taking evidence, to come out and see some of the services.

That was a new phenomenon for me. I have been doing this work for 14 years and I was shocked by what I saw and how we are having to respond. Those people are people with very low-level needs, who have lost their tenancies in the Bristol area and cannot get into the private rented sector. There is a real sense of urgency in terms of the increasing number of rough sleepers we are seeing on our streets.

Q9 Liz Kendall: Can I just check: you said that is the single biggest group now—those who were in private rented accommodation—and that that has changed over the last five years?

Howard Sinclair: Very recently, yes.

Kate Webb: Phenomenally—it is a 250% increase over the past five years. For statutory homeless—again, largely families, but some singles—it always used to be things like relationship breakdown or friends and family not being able to provide accommodation for someone. Overwhelmingly over the past five years, it has become the very prosaic issue of someone losing a tenancy in the private rented sector and simply being unable to find anything else that is affordable.

Liz Kendall: As a constituency MP, I certainly see that. I am getting more and more of those. **You have already touched on the personal reasons and wider macroeconomic reasons. If you look at rough sleeping and those who are more broadly statutory homeless, which is the most important for each of those two groups, or is it impossible to say?**

Kate Webb: For the group of people we work with, I would be very confident in saying that it is overwhelmingly the statutory problems. We did a very revealing piece of work at the tail-end of last year where we spoke to teachers in London schools. They were saying to us that five or 10 years ago they felt that they had a good sense of who in their classes would be homeless, but now it is impossible to predict; it is people with stable but low-paid jobs, and they are now in the situation where they cannot assume that the children they are teaching have a bed to sleep in.

That has become commonplace for many people on low incomes. The overwhelming thing that people tell us when they come to us for advice and support is, "I never thought I would be in this situation. I never thought that my family would end up homeless." It is just because they have fallen foul of a completely dysfunctional housing system.

Jon Sparkes: We, for example, work primarily with single homeless people who are away from their family, if they have a family—the people who are least likely to be owed a statutory duty when they approach their local authority. We work with about 9,000 people each year, helping them to find a sustainable way out of their homelessness.

I would say that we are seeing both. We see people who have had difficult lives, for whatever reasons, since they were very young—half of them became homeless before the age of 21; half of them have no qualifications. There is clearly a story behind each of those. We are also seeing people who, as Kate has said, have had a life where they have rented or owned somewhere, have had a job, have been relatively successful, and have fallen because the affordability of housing has moved too quickly for them.

Howard Sinclair: With regard to rough sleepers, it is that complexity of need. It is increasing mental health, literacy and numeracy problems, people coming out of prison, and drug and alcohol dependencies. It is the whole complexities, which, when put together, lead people to sleep rough as opposed to being homeless, in that sense, and completely falling out.

Giles Peaker: Anecdotally, I support what Kate has said. An increasing proportion of our clients seem to be employed, part-time, possibly low waged, but have ended up losing a private sector tenancy. It is often a rent increase, and that is it.

Q10 Helen Hayes: Further to those comments, particularly about the private rented sector, Giles, I wondered if you might comment a little

on the range of protections, or in some cases lack of protection, that are available in law for people in that situation?

Giles Peaker: The important duty is the full statutory duty to secure accommodation. That is only available to people in priority need, which is primarily people with children, who are pregnant, or who are vulnerable for some other special reason, such as old age, physical or mental disability, and so on. Simply possessing one of those categories does not mean that they are vulnerable, but they have to be vulnerable for that reason.

That will secure them the full housing duty, as it is colloquially known, in which the local authority has to secure them accommodation. This is temporary accommodation, often for years, and eventually, hopefully, full-time secure accommodation, either through social housing or through the private sector.

Protection or help outside of that group is extremely limited. There is a duty to provide advice for people who are homeless but not in priority need. This typically amounts to a list of letting agents and being told to go away. If somebody is in priority need but is intentionally homeless, again there is an extremely limited duty to accommodate them for three or four weeks—to give them enough time to find somewhere—and to assist, which will, again, typically mean a list of letting agents and being told, “Find your own accommodation”.

Outside of the full statutory protection, which is typically families or people with very particular vulnerability, there is very limited support indeed.

Q11 Kevin Hollinrake: Jon and Ms Webb, you both mentioned that things have got worse in the last five years. Why is that?

Kate Webb: It is a combination of factors. Undoubtedly, in our experience, the changes to housing benefit have been part of it. Local housing allowance, particularly for private renters—

Kevin Hollinrake: That came in in 2008.

Kate Webb: Local housing allowance was introduced in 2008, but it was then reformed in 2011. In 2008 it was designed to allow you to rent the median house in your locality; it was relatively generous. From 2011 up until what will be 2020, it has been subject to a number of salami cuts. What we have unfortunately seen is that rents have continued to rise and the support available for people has been cut and will now be frozen.

You have just had a divergence open up between people’s financial capability and the rents they are being charged. At the same time, the

housing market, particularly in the south-east, has been doing well, so rents have continued to increase. This is fuelled in part by a pincer movement of first-time buyers not being able to buy and people on a housing waiting list not getting into social housing. You have had a big increase in demand, which has increased rents and competition in the private rented sector.

For landlords we invariably see that if they can rent to someone who is not on housing benefit, then that will be their first choice. If you are on a low income and need housing benefit, even if it is a top-up while you are in work, it is very difficult to find a landlord who will let you at a rent that you can afford.

Q12 Kevin Hollinrake: Is that what you mean by a dysfunctional housing market?

Kate Webb: Yes. At the moment we have a lack of supply of all tenures. There are something like 1.4 million households on the waiting list for social housing, but even people who are not so much happy to rent privately as resigned to renting privately will still tell you that it is not as simple as walking into a local letting agent and finding a private rent. There is incredible competition at the moment.

For many people, home ownership has become completely out of the question.

Q13 Kevin Hollinrake: Those pressures were even more profound prior to the crash in 2007 and 2008. House prices were rising much more rapidly at that point in time.

Kate Webb: It depends where you are in the country. In London there really have been some phenomenal increases in house prices but also in rent. We were relatively fortunate, before the 2008 crash, that rents had not mirrored the boom in house prices. In some senses, for renters, those financial pressures have kicked in post-crash, which has been at exactly the same time that we have tried to curtail housing benefit spending.

Also in the wake of the crash you had restrictions on lending, which meant that those people who could previously have just about got on to the housing ladder—in terms of buying and then being safe from all of those pressures of the landlord giving you notice, not finding a new tenancy—have been stuck in what is inherently a more insecure sector.

Q14 Kevin Hollinrake: Would it be fair to say that there are different pressures in London than there are in the rest of the country, in terms of homelessness?

Kate Webb: From our experience, they are definitely more acute. Prices for rents, as well as house prices, are significantly higher in London. The housing benefit reforms have borne hardest on London, which was a deliberate and very explicit policy because it was deemed that London rents, in inner London at least, had become excessive. There are extremely stark pressures on London, but, as I said earlier, I would not want to give the impression that it is just a London issue and we can be relaxed about the rest of the country. There are often issues with low wages and seasonal work. The one thing London does have going for it is that it does have, relatively speaking, a very large private rented sector and also a large social rented sector. There are parts, particularly in rural areas, where finding accommodation is just incredibly difficult full stop.

Howard Sinclair: From our experience it is London, but over the last couple of years, in places like Bristol, Oxford and the south coast, we are seeing that it is a growing problem, certainly in terms of accessing housing for our clients.

The other issue for us, and the other factor that has led to the rise in homelessness, is that we have seen the impact of the reduction of funding to local authorities being played through into services, particularly supported housing services for this client group, which have been reduced over that period. If you take away the preventative services, then more people are not prevented from becoming homeless. The people we see do need those specialist social and health services to help them maintain their tenancies.

Going forward, again the sense of urgency for us is with some of the changes for the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, particularly around supported housing and when cuts to supported housing will impact this client group disproportionately, and the very vulnerable will end up in prison, on the streets, or in hospital. We will not be able to afford to run services that we run today. Speaking for St Mungo's, that is a significant hit to our income—over £8.8 million.

Q15 Kevin Hollinrake: You said in your written evidence that there had been a 77% increase in immigration. How much is that a factor in terms of the services that you are providing?

Howard Sinclair: In terms of rough sleepers it has been a factor on the streets, particularly in London, particularly Westminster, where people from eastern Europe have come across and have ended up on the streets. A lot of that is to do with expectations; a lot of that is to do with people being trafficked and let down. That is an issue. Rough sleeping, nationally, is not just an issue for a DCLG Committee. If you are to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, the Department of

Health with regard to mental health, the Home Office with regard to immigration policies, DWP in particular with regard to benefits and sanctions, all need to be significant contributors to dealing with homelessness and rough sleeping.

Q16 Kevin Hollinrake: Jon, has local housing allowance had a material effect in terms of homelessness?

Jon Sparkes: It is the interaction between benefit and rent levels, as Kate has said. Typically throughout history this has been solved either by provision of social rent-level housing or by using housing benefit to fund housing at market rents. At the moment we are seeing both of those falling away. We need to solve with either one or the other, or a combination of both, but certainly not neither.

Q17 Kevin Hollinrake: There has been a 40% to 50% increase in housing supply. There is a theory that that increase will solve some of the homelessness problems. Is that how you see it?

Jon Sparkes: An increase in housing supply of the right type, tenure and security has to be part of the solution, but I would stress the right type, tenure and level of security.

Howard Sinclair: I would be harsher. The dialogue is about affordable housing. The people who end up homeless and on the streets cannot afford affordable housing. There has to be a commitment to social housing where it is needed, and that has completely dropped off the discussion across all political parties. Yes, a supply of housing will inevitably trickle through, but that will take years and years. In London and Bristol, regarding the situation I described earlier, there is no social housing to rent.

Q18 Julian Knight: First of all, on the social housing issue, you were very specific in talking about the last five years, but I wonder whether or not you recognise that any shortage in social housing has a far greater tail period than that; you can look 15 or 20 years back in that regard. Would you comment on that, in terms of where we potentially went wrong, prior to five years ago?

Jon Sparkes: You are absolutely right. None of the above has been a party-political statement or about the lengths of particular Parliaments. Over several Parliaments—and we are now in the third different configuration of Government in three Parliaments—there has been a movement away from social housing, towards the private rented sector and housing benefit funded solutions without necessarily having the reforms in the private sector to allow it to support that. We reach a position now where 82% of landlords in the private rented sector say

they will not rent to homeless people, but the tail is much longer. It must be from the 1980s or 1990s, when the choices were taken to move away from social housing provision and towards a housing benefit funded system.

Kate Webb: That idea first gained traction in the 1970s, and it was a very deliberate, conscious decision at the time that the country had enough social housing and could start directing subsidy towards housing benefit. The huge problem with that approach is that nobody stopped to consider when we no longer had enough social housing. We continued with the same approach of successive Governments not building and assuming that housing benefit was an adequate solution. That led us to the choices that were made five years ago, when it was deemed that the housing benefit bill was excessive and had to be pared back, which has now led us to the rise in homelessness and the collapse in the private rented sector that we were talking about.

I absolutely agree that it is not a five-year problem; it is a 40-year problem.

Q19 Julian Knight: What do you think are the effects of the increase in buy-to-let, in terms of the availability of property and the way in which tenants are potentially treated?

Jon Sparkes: If you go back to that figure of 82% of landlords saying they will not rent to homeless people, then buy-to-let, by definition, is barely a solution at all. It would only be part of a solution if we find ways that both enable homeless people to access those properties and enable landlords to have the confidence to let those properties to homeless people.

Giles Peaker: We can go back again to the figures mentioned earlier, about the single largest cause of homelessness now being the ending of a private sector tenancy. It has risen by around 250% over the last five years. It is not a contraction in the private rented sector that has caused that.

Kate Webb: There is something about the buy-to-let market in England. It tends to be individuals or couples investing for their pension, owning one or two properties. It is inherently unprofessional. That tends to make people quite risk-averse, so they will go for the six-month AST, whereas what we and the Government would prefer is for them to let on a five-year tenancy, which would mean that you are not going to get that risk of people churning through and having their tenancies ended. It also means that they often do not know what their own rights and responsibilities are. That can lead to some of the sharp practices that lead to people becoming homeless.

When we talk about social housing being the preferred option, it is certainly not dogmatic and it is not just about affordability. It is that social landlords often know how to work with more vulnerable households. They know how the housing benefit system interacts with their rent and they are far more tolerant of it.

An individual private landlord who is doing it primarily as an investment vehicle cannot hope to have that kind of expertise or tolerance.

Q20 Alison Thewliss: We had evidence from the No Recourse to Public Funds network about people who have perhaps come here and then lost a right to public support, and have been essentially forced into destitution. They say that Government policy regarding access to welfare for certain groups of migrants is a direct cause of homelessness. Could you tell me a bit more about the impact that that kind of situation has? I myself have had constituents who have lost that right.

Jon Sparkes: The simplest version of that is that if you do not have the right to housing benefit then there is nothing to fund a place in a hostel, and therefore—in the same circumstances—you are much more likely to be rough sleeping if you are from outside of the UK than if you are from within. That is simply because there is not the funding to fund the place. That is the most extreme version.

Kate Webb: If we go back to Clive's question from the beginning, those households obviously will not be counted in those statutory figures because they only include people who are eligible for assistance in the UK. That is another class of people who are going to be falling under our iceberg, so to speak.

Thankfully, with families we do see that social services have some limited responsibility under the Children's Act to prevent families falling into destitution. However, their bar for that is incredibly high, and it also has some quite troubling interactions with the rest of the homelessness legislation, because, as I am sure we will get on to, local authorities are all struggling for temporary accommodation at the moment. When social services are also coming in and having to provide accommodation under their own responsibilities, it is just further pressurising a system that is heading towards breaking point.

Jon Sparkes: It is an important issue, and the sector that we are in has perhaps been guilty of not talking about it enough. Talking about migrant homelessness and destitution became such a toxic discussion, but the discussion now is a much simpler one of, "Let us look at what has caused the person's homelessness." If the person's homelessness is because they have lost a job and therefore their ability to contribute,

there are ways that we can support them back into employment and to continue to contribute. If they are here, for example, due to trafficking and are a victim, then we should be addressing the traffickers and supporting them to return home, if it is the safest and best thing to do. If they are here to break the law, then there are authorities that deal with people who break the law. If they are working illegally, then we address the employer.

There is a much better discussion going on now, and more sensible solutions are being put forward, rather than a polarised discussion about migration.

Howard Sinclair: In terms of rough sleeping, we are certainly seeing increased numbers of people from eastern Europe who do not have the right to public funding, but it is a complex issue as to why people come here, how they get here and what they are leaving when they leave home. I spent time in Bucharest before Christmas, seeing how people live out there. People have what they loosely call a home. In some cases that is a shack where a family of three live; it is literally a shack. In some cases it is sewers.

It is a more complex issue than just saying, "People are coming over here and sleeping rough, and choosing to." It is a wider issue than just St Mungo's, and there are issues for this Committee to think about, if thinking about rough sleeping in its totality in England today, and where it is going in the future—how people come to this country and how we support them.

For our workers who go out night after night across London and the south, the first question is not, "Where are you from and can I see your identity card?" The first question is literally, "Are you alive and can we keep you that way?" Once under a roof, whatever that may look like, we ask, "How can we work with you to improve your situation?", as Jon said. Very often that is about work and not about providing housing.

Q21 David Mackintosh: Mr Sinclair, you talked about this not being just a CLG issue but being one across Government. I entirely agree with that. I know that there is a cross-departmental ministerial working group, which includes the Department of Health, the Department for Education, DWP, and the Home Office. First, how does that interact with the sector? Secondly, how could something like that be replicated on a local level around the country? I speak as a former council leader, and one of the things that really got things moving, with a different set of problems, was the Troubled Families programme, which brought together a lot of agencies because they were forced to work together, with

payment by results and lots of other things. What are your views on that?

Howard Sinclair: Local areas do remarkably well, with the resources that they have, to keep rough sleeping at the level that they have been. It crosses party-political grounds. No one wants to see someone on the streets. Local authorities in particular have worked hard with the voluntary sector to make that so. Using the example of London, I will only say good things about the GLA's No Second Night Out and other initiatives. We would be facing far more rough sleepers in London had it not been for the Mayor and the GLA's lead over the past 10 years. If we compare London to places like Madrid, Paris and Washington, we can see the difference the joined-up approach makes.

If there has been one failing and one party that has not been as actively involved as I would have liked, it would be Health—particularly mental health services, which we continue to struggle to access.

There comes a time when you can only stretch resources so many ways before people slip through. The latest rough sleeping figures show that the effects of the reduction in local services over a number of years are now beginning to bite, and that is why the numbers have increased. The only way to do it—and we should be proud of it in this country and particularly in London—is by all of the agencies working together. Homelessness is everyone's issue and it is not inevitable.

Jon Sparkes: In terms of that Committee itself and how we interact with it, since Marcus Jones took on the role of homelessness Minister, he does invite the sector in and he talks about the work of that Committee. The existence of that Committee is a good thing in principle. The advent of StreetLink may have been from within that Committee.

At the moment, there is very little evidence that the influence of DCLG is spreading to the other Departments. Whether you are St Mungo's and looking specifically at rough sleepers, or others such as ourselves looking across homelessness, it is clear that—given the complexity of this and the cross-departmental nature of it—there needs to be a cross-Government strategy more than a cross-Government Committee to address all of the issues that we are talking about. That is not a criticism of that Committee—I have only been in the sector for 18 months, so I will not comment beyond that—but there is very little evidence that that Committee is impacting change in other Departments.

Kate Webb: We would certainly agree with that perspective. The will to work together appears to be there, and is incredibly welcome, but there are some obvious missed opportunities at the moment. The

interaction between housing benefit levels and private rents is an obvious one. CLG have a commitment to reducing homelessness, and DWP policy is not adequately supporting it at the moment. The interaction between the Ministry of Justice and homelessness is another area. We are always very clear that preventing homelessness should be our primary goal. Relying on legislation to pick people up when things go wrong is not good enough. It has been deeply frustrating to us that the legal aid reforms have made it much harder for us to prevent homelessness because they say that we can only be funded to help people under legal aid when they are at crisis point, rather than helping them upstream where you can prevent them ever getting towards the homelessness office.

Q22 Mr Prisk: On rough sleeping and the underlying issues—some of which you have already touched on—there is a dilemma that I see, and that I am sure we all see as constituency Members, and that you are acutely aware of: how do you best help people who are sleeping rough, particularly those who have addiction issues, without facilitating behaviour that means that they stay on the streets?

Howard Sinclair: I go back to the fact that rough sleeping is not inevitable. The first step is to get people out of doorways and off the streets. It is about ending homelessness, and the pernicious form is rough sleeping, so you have to get people in. Working on the streets is impossible, so you have to get people in.

It is then about working in a specialised and professional way around the individuals and their histories, and helping them to confront some of those issues. It will vary. For some people it takes years and years for them to realise that perhaps they do need to tackle a drug or dependency issue. The prevalence of mental health is a barrier to that. The only way to do it is through good services working one to one with individuals to stop them returning to the street. Ultimately these are people's own lives and we are there to support them.

No one chooses to spend time on the streets. It is not inevitable. People end up on the streets because of failures in other aspects in their lives and in other services and supports in their lives. We need to get them off the streets first and then work with them around their specific needs, to help them meet those. It is a complex job. It can take time and people do need support. Ultimately, rough sleepers are exceptionally vulnerable, yet they rarely get seen as such. I come back to my concerns around supported housing services and some local authority services going, that that vulnerability is missed. This is an unpopular group, in terms of service provision.

Jon Sparkes: I would echo that. There is growing evidence that getting someone into safe and secure housing—the so called “Housing First” model—is the most effective way. If you provide the support, treatment and help for the complex needs that they have, it is almost obvious that if you do that in a safe and secure environment where they have a roof over their head, or on the streets, it is going to be more effective to do it in the former case. That is not to say that it is a magic answer. We work with people on their personal health and wellbeing, support networks, employment, employability, and housing, and it can take several years of painstaking multi-disciplinary work with them; it is just quicker if they have a safe and secure place to live.

As Howard says, the vulnerabilities are missed, but if your average age of death is 47 and you are 13 times more likely to be a victim of violence, that is not an environment in which to be supporting people.

Howard Sinclair: Between 2005 and 2010 the numbers of rough sleepers came down by around a third. We know how to do it. It just cannot be done overnight and there is no magic pill. There is no avoiding the fact that it takes joined-up agency work with some very complex and vulnerable individuals—I would argue the most in our society—but we can do it.

Jon Sparkes: What you are hopefully hearing from this group is that this is something that should be solvable. This is not something that is somehow impossible to solve. It is not inevitable that people will become homeless. It is certainly not inevitable that they stay homeless. Every one of the organisations here is demonstrating, day in, day out, that you can solve this.

Howard Sinclair: At a time when the public purse is under pressure, the financial cost of growing numbers on the streets—apart from the human cost and the cost to local neighbourhoods and local communities—is that people will end up in prison and A&E. 90% of homeless people are discharged from accident and emergency back on to the streets, which compounds it. People end up in hospital. There is a financial cost here. Not tackling rough sleeping mounts up to the public purse. It is so short-sighted.

Q23 Mr Prisk: Did you want to add to that?

Kate Webb: No.

Q24 Mr Prisk: I was with the YMCA in my own constituency in East Herts, and I am very familiar with both your organisations in this field as well. The message there was that this joined-up approach is

critical in breaking the cycle and transitioning people back to their former lives. It seems to me, and it was the evidence on the ground, that at the moment, in terms of the agencies engaged, health is the area where we are missing. Do you think that is correct? I am thinking principally of mental health services.

Howard Sinclair: It is DWP in terms of benefits and sanctions, but there is a great gap in terms of health services for homeless people. The nature of the people we see means that they are not going to go to hospital or to the GP for health services, which are drawn tighter and tighter. The complexity means that they cannot address that need. They do not have the capacity themselves.

I do believe in and welcome the focus on mental health services across society, and will include that in terms of rough sleepers. We have Stop the Scandal, which shows that five out of 10 UK nationals sleeping rough have a significant mental health problem. That needs addressing, and it is in everyone's interests. I would completely agree with that analysis.

Kate Webb: We have recently started co-locating some of our services with the mental health charity Mind. We would be very happy for you to come out and have a look at how that works in practice.

Mr Prisk: I suspect that the Committee may be interested in that, yes. Thank you.

Q25 Mary Robinson: As you say, people sleeping rough are exceptionally vulnerable and often need specialised support services for issues such as drug addiction and mental health, which, as you say, is such a large issue. Can this be effectively delivered when people are on the streets?

Howard Sinclair: You have to work where people are initially, but the aim is to get people in. The most effective form of delivery is if people have a bed and somewhere where they can feel secure. We are quite assertive in saying to people, "Your being here is not good." You cannot properly diagnose or assess on the streets. Sometimes we have to, and those services are also lacking. But absolutely yes, you have to get people in, wherever they are from, and begin to help them to build their lives again—with health, housing, working and learning services.

Q26 Mary Robinson: Would you be able to say how you address it when people are on the streets? How do you intervene?

Howard Sinclair: We have a range of services. We have outreach teams who go out across London and the south each night. They will

know the individuals. The primary aim is to get people in and say, "Please come in".

If we see people in distress or who we believe have significant mental health issues, we can call on community mental health teams and other resources. It is very difficult to get out, to liaise with them, and to make that happen. They are not immediately available when we need them.

We have our psychological intervention teams that work on the streets. We now have our own street legal team that works on the streets. Where we have to, we will go out and work with people in doorways and where they are sleeping, but it is a very poor substitute. The onus is always about trying to get people in. If we know the people, we get them into the hostel system. If people are new to the streets then we get them into services like No Second Night Out where we can conduct a proper assessment. You cannot do that in the pouring rain.

Q27 Mary Robinson: You indicated that the success rate for getting people off the streets and into help with a roof over their head is reasonably high. What sort of time commitment do you have to put in to that, to get the result?

Howard Sinclair: It is not trying to say, "As long as it takes". 80% of the people in London who are referred to No Second Night Out are not seen on the streets again. They come in, they are assessed and they are given a service offer, which could be a range of interventions from mental health to reconnection with a local area, or another country, so we have good evidence of what works.

We are beginning to see people coming in, being assessed, taking the service offer, but then ending up back on the streets again as some of those support services further down the line or the pathways are getting tighter and tighter, and are not able to pick up and maintain people in their properties. We have a range of evidence of what works, in terms of the people who sleep rough, and that we can make that difference.

Q28 Chair: How can we make the difference down the line—if you put a lot of work in, and you get someone back on track, and then the track disappears a little further down?

Howard Sinclair: No one's life is a straight line. We all have our ups and downs. It is about building in systems that are sensitive enough that when people are stable—their health, their mental health and they are housed—they then know that there are places and people they can turn to if they are struggling.

Q29 Chair: Do they come back to you?

Howard Sinclair: They can come back to me. In many cases there are floating support services run or funded by the local authority, which have been reduced. As a sector we need to get better at linking into natural communities and volunteers much more, as a safeguard, so that people know that they have someone they can turn to.

As we have managed to get people into housing and out of hostels, the risk has become that they become very isolated. There is not that early warning system that stops people from sliding back into the conditions that saw them ending up homeless and rough sleeping on the streets in the first place. If I look across the last five years in homelessness provision, most of the homeless hostel beds are still available. The cuts to supported housing and floating support, and those less intensive services further down the line, have been really drastic.

Jon Sparkes: In terms of sustainably moving people out of homelessness, we know what works. We know the ingredients: a roof over their head, reliable income, health and wellbeing, and giving them the tools to build their social networks. The truism that, "Anybody can become homeless" is kind of true, but it is not true not for people who have those four ingredients in place.

We know what works, but, as Howard said, it is those services later on. If they are not there on a sustainable basis then people will go back to the streets again. They will fall back as soon as the next big thing goes wrong.

Kate Webb: I agree with that, but I sound a small and pessimistic note of caution around the sustainability. You are absolutely right that we know what works in terms of transitioning from A to B, but the big question at the moment is the long term. All agencies are finding that they are relying more and more on the private rented sector as the permanent housing for people. As I said earlier, tenancies are inherently insecure. It is very standard to be given only a six-month tenancy. The great unknowns at the moment are how many people placed in the private rented sector sustain that over a period of years, as opposed to months, and what sustainability will look like by 2020 as those structural pressures continue to increase, particularly if rent and housing benefit levels continue to diverge. That is our big concern at the moment.

Jon Sparkes: That is absolutely right. The best evidence we have at the moment is from the work that DCLG funded over the last five years, that we then delivered through 153 local projects where, using DCLG's

funding and those projects, we were able to create 9,000 tenancies in the private rented sector, 90% of which did sustain for at least six months. We do not have the evidence beyond that, but we can see the support that people get and the response in terms of sustaining.

Q30 Helen Hayes: Is it your experience that local authorities are using their housing option schemes to reduce the numbers of people either applying or being accepted as homeless under the statutory duty?

Jon Sparkes: One piece of evidence we have is from some mystery shopping that we did just over a year ago. We made 87 visits to local authorities. When I say “we”, I mean aspiring actors who had previously been homeless. They knew what they were going through and were playing roles such as a vulnerable young person, or someone escaping from domestic violence and so on—people that we thought were vulnerable. Many of those were turned away with just the basic information that Giles talked about, many of them without having seen a housing professional.

Certainly there is some evidence there, and if you have a housing options type system that is about best endeavours and not backed up by regulation and legislation, then, in a situation where there is a lack of supply, the tendency is going to be to gatekeep.

Howard Sinclair: At No Second Night Out, 40% of the people we see have approached a local authority housing team prior to ending up on the streets and coming to us. They work with 3,500 to 4,000 people each year.

Q31 Helen Hayes: Are the current statutory duties sufficient, or is there a need for new statutory duties for local authorities?

Jon Sparkes: With the right safeguards, a model such as the system in Wales, where there is a duty of prevention, regardless of priority need, is the way forward. That cannot ever be at risk of diluting someone else’s rights further on. Certainly a duty on local authorities to prevent is good in terms of avoiding the human misery of people ending up on the streets. It is also good for the public purse. The modelling we have done says that that early intervention on day one is between £3,000 and £18,000 less expensive per person in the first year, so there is an economic case as well, although, at the moment we have commissioned a piece of work to assess the cost of this. That duty to prevent would certainly make a huge difference in turning off the number of people that end up as clients of Howard.

Kate Webb: If I can return to your first question—I imagine Giles wants to as well—on whether we see gatekeeping, we undoubtedly do.

People underestimate how tenacious you have to be to get a homeless application taken, and that is due to a combination of housing options, and it operates in a slightly grey area; it is not in the legislation, but it is firmly embedded in local authority practice. We often see problems with people who have gone through the housing option system, and what they are being offered and what help is available is never quite confirmed to them. There is a lack of accountability around it.

We cannot avoid the fact that there is a sharper form of gatekeeping as well, where people are just being incredibly poorly served by a public service. We have had pregnant clients, who should be automatically regarded as in priority need, told that they are not pregnant enough. There is no such question in the legislation. We have heard of some local authorities who will come out and announce to the waiting room that if you continue with an application, you will be re-housed in Birmingham. Of course, that is never confirmed in writing, but as a verbal declaration it sends a clear statement about whether you should continue to make an application.

It is undoubtedly a hostile environment if you are trying to make an application. As Jon says, we cannot help but understand that the pressure that has led to that is because local authorities feel hugely under the cosh. People are becoming homeless because of a lack of affordable and stable housing. It is not the case that local authorities have a secret supply that they can re-house people into. I would not want to sound blasé about the pressures that they are under, but from a human perspective it is having a hugely detrimental impact on people.

Giles Peaker: I could certainly provide plenty of anecdotal and judicial accounts of gatekeeping. The problem is typically not just making an application difficult, but an attempt to filter people away from getting a homeless application made, let alone accepted.

That has unfortunately been, in part, the role of what some local authorities have been calling their housing options routes. It was something that was recommended by someone who was a DCLG homeless adviser until he turned out not to be. Typically we find people saying that you have to go through the housing options route for 14 days or 28 days before they will take a homeless application. If someone is at risk of homelessness, that application has to be made when they present, otherwise it is gatekeeping. I will not go through the full details, but this is a common practice.

That said, a statutory prevention duty would hopefully, assuming the correct safeguards were in place, help to minimise this because it would mean taking a homeless application at the first stage, rather than

attempting to filter it off into housing options in the hope that people will basically go away, which is what often happens. Taking it as a statutory duty, preferably an extended period, over the current 28 days, might help to reduce gatekeeping because the people would be on some sort of statutory duty from day one.

Q32 Helen Hayes: What kinds of support would you envisage local authorities offering at that earlier duty-to-prevent stage?

Jon Sparkes: At day one it could be mediating with a landlord, or the parents if it is a young person. It could be financial advice or access to short-term financing or a bond scheme that enables someone to get into the private rented sector. It is that level of intervention, which is more than a leaflet and a list of landlords, but it certainly is not a duty to provide accommodation; it is about preventing at the earliest stage.

Q33 Helen Hayes: Can you comment more on the current definition of priority need and some of the challenges that presents?

Jon Sparkes: The biggest challenge that is presented is for people who tend to be Crisis clients, who are single homeless people and simply fall outside of it. If you have neither the duty to prevent nor a duty to provide accommodation, then that is basically nothing. Those people will have to make do for themselves, and often that means going away and sleeping on the streets.

Q34 Helen Hayes: I certainly see—I wonder whether this is reflected in your wider experience—that there are people who anybody looking in on their situation from the outside would regard as vulnerable, by a common-sense definition of vulnerability, but who fall between those two stalls. Is that a common experience?

Kate Webb: Yes.

Jon Sparkes: If they are someone whose only alternative is going to be sleeping on the streets or in some other very insecure accommodation, they are extremely vulnerable by any normal person's definition. Clearly there were changes as a result of the Supreme Court case just over a year ago, when the test moved from being, "More vulnerable than the average homeless person", to being, "More vulnerable than the average person who becomes homeless"—the first of those of course being a ratchet effect, which means that you have to become more and more vulnerable to qualify for anything, just by definition, and the second being a much more common-sense approach.

Howard Sinclair: I support everything that has been said. The note that I would put in is that if there is to be a change then it needs to be properly resourced. What we have seen in the past is that local authorities in particular, who I have a sympathy for, have taken from Peter to pay Paul. Resources very often move from one area of homelessness to another to meet a new duty.

From our perspective, we support the legislation but it needs to be properly thought through and resourced.

Kate Webb: We would agree. We certainly do not see it as a silver bullet. We are very mindful that local authorities at the moment have a power to re-house non-priority-need households. I am not sure that we have ever come across a case where that has happened.

They do have a duty to provide advice. Again, as you say, that could be a leaflet, but we are mindful that it is unclear, even with the duty to prevent, what meaningful outcomes would be produced. One of the big unknowns at the moment—of the many unknowns—is how many of those people being seen by housing options and re-housed through them, which is about 200,000 cases per year, were non-priority-need households, so it could be the case that a lot of people are getting quite meaningful assistance at the moment. The problem from an accountability perspective is that it is all happening outside the law.

We would be very cautious in assuming that the Welsh model, with the particular pressures of the English system, is a silver bullet for meaningfully changing outcomes for people. We would also be 100% adamant that if you are increasing the duties and responsibilities for a local authority, the resourcing has to be there.

Giles Peaker: On the priority need point, briefly, the issue of vulnerability, even after Hotak, Johnson and Kanu, is still the front-line battleground for housing solicitors. Councils will still take, for instance, people with suicidal tendencies, people who are self-harming and clinically depressed as not vulnerable. That is a routine decision. We see that weekly.

Kate Webb: We were made aware of a case recently where a woman who was diabetic needed to refrigerate her medication and was living in a car. Her initial assessment from the county council had been that she was not vulnerable, even though she was completely unable to keep her medication safely.

Q35 Julian Knight: You have been relatively critical of local authorities in your evidence so far. What do you think such authorities, and arm's-length organisations, could do better within the confines of

their current budgets? Where can they effectively manoeuvre resources in order to deliver a better service?

Jon Sparkes: I do not think you should necessarily read what we have said as critical of local authorities. We can see the position that they are in. We can see that they have an understanding of the housing market in their area, and they can see how difficult it is to deal with the situation. That said, when we did our mystery shopping, it was not simply that the law was wrong. There were many cases in the mystery shopping where the treatment of that individual was simply unprofessional or even inhumane. Being professional as opposed to unprofessional, or humane as opposed to inhumane, does not cost anything more. There is a role in this for best practice and making sure that local authorities are assessed and monitored in terms of their best practice on this.

A lot of it does come back to funding and local authorities' ability to fund homelessness services does depend on how much money they have. I do not think that you can do a "Robbing Peter to pay Paul" argument and say, "They should not do this thing over here; they should do this thing."

Q36 Julian Knight: My question is very specific, because we are in the real world in that regard. In terms of current budgets, is there anything that you see within your reference frame where you go, "Okay, they are spending this here or they are spending this there, or they are not doing this here or they are not doing it there."?

Kate Webb: The best practice point is an important one. With Citizens Advice we provide the National Homelessness Advice Service, which is a second-tier service for local authorities that promotes and spreads best practice. Some local authorities are doing it fantastically well. We had a case last week where there was a family with five children, one of whom was quite severely disabled, and whereas many councils would have forced them to wait for bailiffs to come and the pantomime trauma of being physically thrown out on to the street, the council dealt with them as homeless because they were threatened with homelessness, and got them into decent temporary accommodation straight away. That is fantastic, and this was a council in the south-east. Simply spreading best practice is something that they can do within current budgets.

The second point, as Jon said, is about being humane. We could have spoken earlier about the increase in households that are being re-housed temporarily or permanently out of their local area. That is something that is happening more and more, particularly in London, because of a lack of local affordable options. There are two ways to do that. You can either do it, as happens in the worst cases, where people

are told the day they become homeless, “We are sending you to Hull,” or, “We are sending you to Birmingham,” and there is no conversation about school places or support, or you can do it in a more thoughtful way where you talk to the family about where they may have links, what school places are available and you re-settle them. In budgetary terms, there is not a huge difference, but in terms of the outcome for families it is hugely different.

Your final point was about what other arm’s-length organisations can do. I would say that we do have a small concern about the proportion of lettings from housing associations that is going to homeless households. It has fallen off quite considerably in recent years, and that raises the prospect of a household being accepted as homeless and the local authority having to re-house them, but without suitable accommodation being available—perhaps if housing associations have become more business-minded and are being more discerning about who they let to—then you are forcing people to be trapped in a limbo of temporary accommodation.

Q37 Julian Knight: Do you think that housing associations are failing?

Kate Webb: I would not go so far as to say failing, in the same way that I would not say that councils are failing, but certainly, because of the changing environment, we have seen a more risk-averse approach. They are very nervous about taking households that will be subject to the overall benefit cap. Some allocation policies have been redrawn, so there is a shift away from housing homeless households and towards working households. These are all decisions that may have been taken locally for sound reasons, but they are further squeezing that supply of accommodation for families in temporary accommodation.

Jon Sparkes: If you extend it then you get to some of the advantages of devolution, because if there are financial savings to be had, the financial savings will often fall in a different part of the system to where the investment needs to go. There are opportunities if you can have local authorities making early interventions that then save the health system, the prison system, or whichever other part of the system.

Julian Knight: It is about joined-up thinking and action between different Departments in that regard.

Kate Webb: Yes.

Jon Sparkes: Yes.

Howard Sinclair: Taking the last point first, St Mungo's is a registered housing association provider, but general-means housing associations could and should be doing more about putting properties aside for people in social need. The drift is towards 80% market rents, but they were set up for the very people we are talking about today, and there is a risk that they forget their routes, to use that phrase. The good ones do not, but there is a risk in the private rented sector and the social housing sector.

If I come across as critical of local authorities, that is not right—and not just because I worked for local authorities for 12 years. They have had a hard time. The biggest issue about local authorities is, yes, their funding has been cut, but their infrastructure has also been cut. A lot of the expertise and knowledge of local authorities, in homelessness and other areas, has drifted away over the past five years. They make the best of a very difficult job.

There are two areas where I think that they could improve. There is something about ring-fencing the allocation and the provision that they have. If we look at supporting people on what has happened since the ring fence has been taken off, a lot of that money has dissolved into mainstream local authority services, and there has been a record kept of what has been lost. The ring-fencing of the resources they get is definitely one area where they could do better, going forward. It is as simple as that.

Q38 Julian Knight: Mr Peaker, you mentioned the statutory period before. Is there anything else in terms of how councils and arm's-length organisations can do—from a current budget perspective—to deliver a better service for people?

Giles Peaker: I would go along with what the others on the panel have said, but I would be concerned to see any change, or proposal for change, in the current statutory duties as a way of easing the burden on councils. They do face an extremely difficult situation.

Q39 Julian Knight: You do not want them to move the goalposts, in that respect.

Giles Peaker: Councils face a very difficult situation. Taking it out on the homeless would be a strange way of resolving it.

Howard Sinclair: Almost by definition, what we have spoken about is that homelessness is not just an issue of housing. It is about benefits, health, and economic factors. For local authorities, their role is to pool those resources together and sometimes they have been let down in

trying to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping by other agencies and pieces of Government.

Q40 Julian Knight: Has there been enough focus on homelessness within the devolution agenda?

Howard Sinclair: No.

Q41 Julian Knight: I may have to change my question. Has there been any focus on homelessness?

Howard Sinclair: There has, but there are lots of competing priorities, as there are with funding. Sadly, people judge homelessness by the number of people you see on the streets. That is when it comes into the public consciousness: when there are some spikes in Southwark or the numbers go up by 30%. As we have spoken about, homelessness is a greater issue underlying, and rough sleeping is the tip of the homelessness iceberg. That tip is getting demonstrably bigger, so it stands to reason that the iceberg under the water is also getting bigger.

Q42 Alison Thewliss: On priority needs, in Scotland the homelessness legislation removed priority need. What difference might that make here? It is clear that people are missing out as a result of the prioritisation.

Jon Sparkes: Yes. In Scotland the statutory homeless figures have certainly been coming down, and they have come down consistently and predictably since the abolishing of priority need. At the same time, the number of people approaching local authorities and the number of people in temporary accommodation have remained static, and the length of time that they are in temporary accommodation has grown. What we have seen in Scotland is a huge advance, but only a part of the system, and in an environment where there is significantly higher availability of social housing. Changing just the priority-need rules would be a step forward, but it would not get us anywhere if we did not change the other things around it. Having the evidence from Scotland is a huge advantage because we can see what happens if we just do that.

Kate Webb: We would be incredibly cautious about extending the same approach down here. The evidence from Scotland is mixed. There does seem to be an increase in gatekeeping, which has gone alongside the expansion in access. It is back to that question of what to sacrifice in order to expand rights.

The context in Scotland is also hugely different. There are not the same acute pressures around affordable housing supply, and there are very strong questions about whether it could be introduced into England without the situation breaking. The lead-in for Scotland was also a very long timeframe. It was very carefully planned and prepared for, over a number of years. There is no evidence that we are ready to extend that approach over here with the housing pressures that England has.

Q43 Jim McMahon: Should the categories of priority need be reviewed? Somebody came to my constituency office over the weekend, a Syrian refugee who had been given leave to stay. Within three weeks they had been kicked out of the state-funded accommodation and made homeless. Should groups like that be included in the list, and would you expand any of them wider?

Jon Sparkes: There is certainly evidence that when priority-need categories have been reviewed they have helped to solve an issue. Look particularly at the level of homelessness there was amongst ex-service people. That was to do not only with changing the line on priority need, but with the support that people received on leaving. It is one of those categories where, if it is predictable that homelessness is likely, then you manage the pathway in that area. The forces have certainly done that, but the priority-need ruling helped as well.

It is something that you do need to keep under constant review, but going back to the previous question, unless there is availability of housing, you are going to force the system to break or force more gatekeeping. That is why we have focused, when reviewing the legislation, further upstream with a prevention duty, rather than forcing the issue on priority need.

Kate Webb: Giles mentioned earlier the Supreme Court ruling last year that sought to re-introduce a common-sense definition of vulnerability to priority need, because it had become extremely difficult for a single person who was not ex-forces or ex-care to be accepted as vulnerable. We are keen to see how that beds in.

I am also very mindful of the fact that the priority-need categories were extended quite considerably in 2002. It is no coincidence that you then saw local authorities being very enthusiastic to adopt the housing options model as it developed. There is a precedent that there is that tandem tension between extending rights and an impulse to squeeze access.

Q44 Jim McMahon: Do you think that there is a conflict built in where the local authority has the statutory obligation, but very limited resource, and is arbitrating not necessarily on who is in need, but on how they can squeeze the limited resource that they have? At that point it becomes less about the individual circumstance and more about how they attribute the funding they have, does it not?

Howard Sinclair: There is a risk. For the people we see each day and night, from a humanitarian point of view, we just need to get them in, fed, warm, sort their health, and then work within the context of the law as to what we can offer in terms of how we reconnect people into a future life, whether in this country or another. That is a secondary issue for us. The primary issue, which is people not dying on our streets, is something that we should all be focused on as a first step, and then we can worry about identities afterwards. The risk is that we focus on discussions of definitions of need and criteria, and we miss the basic point about what we are trying to achieve and what this country is about.

Giles Peaker: In terms of the definition of priority need, councils are the ones who decide whether somebody is in need. This is the thing. Resources are technically not supposed to be taken into account in that decision, and there have been some Court of Appeal cases on that. However, it is undoubtedly true that at the margins—the edges of the categories of priority needs—the decisions have become harsher and harsher. That is certainly so for the most pressured councils. It is explicable and understandable, but it has certainly been happening.

Q45 Jim McMahon: Given what I have heard about how chronic the situation is for many people, when we talk about where the line should be—on getting a roof over somebody's head versus the wider social considerations that should be looked at—is it acceptable, given where we are, to be saying to people who are homeless that hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation, or being forced to move to a town or city where you have no social network, is acceptable because it is better than the alternative of not having a roof over your head?

Jon Sparkes: We have seen that a roof over their head and then addressing whatever needs they have is compelling evidence. Of course, that requires there to be the roofs in the first place. In terms of moving people to other cities, most of us would agree that that is not good. It is not ideal because one of those ingredients—

Q46 Jim McMahon: The question was: is it better than the alternative? Discussion has led to us accepting that we are not in an ideal world.

Jon Sparkes: It is. It is not a sustainable solution in many cases because having social networks is one of the things that keeps you out of homelessness. Moving people away from their social networks is not going to be helpful.

In a very short-term situation, where it is the choice between a roof over someone's head or not, then a roof over someone's head is better than not.

Kate Webb: Yes. It is inference, but I am always going to argue that the roof over someone's head is better than no roof. That is why we are pragmatic about the flexibility the guidance gives local authorities about where to move people.

There is a small and practical note of caution, which is that, as Jon says, those social networks are incredibly important to people. We are very aware, given that the homelessness process is so traumatic, that by definition someone is at bottom when it happens. If people feel that what is being offered to them and asked of them is going to make their lives worse, then they will not engage. If the price of being accepted as homeless is a move away from your job or away from your mum who provides childcare, then we do see through our services that there is a push to try to make do with what are unfortunately going to be unsustainable solutions, which is why, particularly in London, you do see this rise of deeply unsuitable accommodation and very severe overcrowding. That is people's response to the market pressures, which are saying, "Local authorities are under-resourced; we are going to have to move you."

Q47 Jim McMahon: Would you accept that a local authority that does relocate a homeless person outside of its own boundaries is fulfilling its obligations?

Kate Webb: As long as they have followed the process correctly. We do accept that if there is simply no accommodation and the local authority has tried to procure accommodation within its area, have looked at the support needs of that family, and there is no alternative, then, regrettably, yes, it may be appropriate to move them out of area. The legislation and guidance allows that at the moment.

I was slightly struck and confused by some of the submissions from local authorities to the Committee, which implied the guidance is far more restrictive than it is. As long as local authorities are taking households' needs into account and trying to find something locally, then if that fails they are allowed to move people out of area. All we are saying is, "Can you do it in a humane way that considers the impact that it will have on people?"

Giles Peaker: The Supreme Court was very clear about this in the case against Westminster last year. What was happening was that people were turning up and being told, "You are being shipped out to Birmingham/Milton Keynes/Hull" the next day. There was no consideration of their circumstances or whether there might be any closer accommodation in borough, nearby borough, or even within London. It was just, "That is what we have got, and out you go." The Supreme Court was very clear that that must not happen and that simply breaking someone's entire family support and employment position to ship them out to somewhere that the local authority thinks they can afford was not acceptable

Q48 Jim McMahon: Is that what the court ruling said?

Giles Peaker: Yes.

Jim McMahon: Or did it say that proper consideration was not made of those points?

Giles Peaker: Exactly. Proper consideration was not made.

Q49 Jim McMahon: What I am saying is that a local authority, after reviewing a process, could include those points for consideration, but still conclude that the family should be relocated out of the area.

Giles Peaker: If that consideration was carried out properly then the people who would be potentially moved away would be moved into a situation that would effectively work for them. You would not be removing people with medical or employment needs in their local area; you would be moving people who could sustain themselves and quite possibly flourish in the area that they were being moved to, given the proper consideration.

That was not happening, and I am afraid to some extent it still is not happening. A colleague has a case at the moment where a local authority simply said, "You will be moved to Hull" and he said, "But I am working. I am employed full-time." He said, "You will find another job," and that was it.

Q50 Jim McMahon: If after all this and through the course of the discussion we find ourselves ultimately at the place where local authorities are, which is most likely a starting place of wanting to change the world and make it a better place, but through the rules, obligations, requirements and limited resources they have, they end up narrowing that down to a place where upon reflection we look back and say, "That is perhaps not acceptable" but that is more or less how we have ended up in

the space of a very short conversation in some ways. If, after proper consideration of family ties, medical conditions and all the things that we have talked about, a local authority does decide that ultimately they can fulfil their obligation only by placing somebody outside their own boundaries, if that offer is refused, is the local authority entitled to say, at that point, "You are choosing to make yourself homeless"?

Giles Peaker: They do, yes.

Kate Webb: And legally they can.

Q51 Jim McMahon: Is that acceptable at that point?

Giles Peaker: Subject to a review of whether the decision was well-made, which is the current situation.

Kate Webb: We work with the law as it is, rather than how we wish it would be. We would accept that in that situation they probably do have the right to do that. That is why we would argue that advice is paramount. It goes back to the point about prevention. What we often see is that people become very confused about what they can and cannot do. What we would want to do in that situation is make sure that we have managed to speak to that family so that we can fully explain the ramifications of turning it down. If they then choose to, they choose to. The important thing is to make sure that the consequences are very clear to a household.

Jon Sparkes: What you are demonstrating is that although a change to the duty of prevention will be incredibly helpful and will make a significant difference, we are not going to solve homelessness through very small technocratic changes in the way a particular rule is applied. It comes back to the comments that Howard and others have made about the need for a strategic approach that covers more Departments than just Local Government. As important as the prevention duty would be, and will be if it is enacted, it needs a much bigger response.

Q52 Jim McMahon: I see this from a different point of view, as a former leader of Oldham Council. We tend to be the place where other councils send people. There are pressures that come with that. First, local authorities do not inform the host council when they arrive, so you are not able—even if you wanted to—to know where those people are and to provide the wraparound support like employment and mental health type support.

You have talked about the type of private landlords that we have. You have some very large ones, and some where it is a pension fund. What I see in Oldham—because house prices are so low; you can buy a terraced house for £40,000 at auction—is that

you end up with these amateurs with a desire to be professional, who brag about a portfolio of properties that are very run-down terraced houses that you would not want to live in yourselves. They are built on debts. You buy one and rent it, buy another, etc, with debt accumulating. There is a change coming and it talks about the pressures further down, and I would welcome your views on this—I do not know whether you have done any work on this—where those private landlords will not be able to claim tax relief on the interest payments on mortgage payments. For a lot of private landlords in towns like mine, that will mean that their business models fall apart because there was not enough room in it to begin with.

Have you done any work on what that might mean? It does feel as though we are reflecting very particular pressures in London, the south-east and coastal towns, and saying that maybe the solution is that people do not relocate somewhere else, perhaps without thinking a step ahead about what the situation might be in six months' time or a year.

Kate Webb: It is hard to reliably model the impact that it is going to have on landlords' business models. Some of the associations are extremely agitated, but they tend to get extremely agitated at lots of things, which does not necessarily lead to landlords exiting the market.

I certainly would not be comfortable predicting that there is going to be a collapse in supply of cheaper, private rented accommodation, particularly in markets where it is harder for them to offload it on first-time buyers.

Q53 Chair: In a report in the last Parliament we suggested that where an out-of-local-authority placement was going to be made, the local authority making the placement had to notify the receiving authority on a statutory basis that the family was coming, and give them all the information. The Government turned that down. Would that be sensible?

Giles Peaker: There is a statutory requirement that the receiving council is notified. It just does not happen. There is a freedom of information request that showed it happening in just under 50% of cases.

Q54 Jim McMahon: Was that for individual families who had access to public funds, or was it for families and individuals who did not have the right to public funds?

Giles Peaker: This is for people who are being placed in temporary accommodation in another borough.

Q55 Chair: That is temporary accommodation, not permanent accommodation.

Kate Webb: Yes, so they would not have the right to public funds.

Giles Peaker: Yes.

Q56 Chair: Are we sure that there is a statutory duty where it is permanent accommodation, where someone has been re-housed? I do not think that there is.

Kate Webb: No, but the numbers are so very low that most councils are finding that the permanent rehousing in the private rented sector is not an option for them because of the pressures that we have been talking about. For the vast majority of the numbers it will be temporary accommodation.

Q57 Bob Blackman: One of the problems in London certainly, and in a number of other authorities, is transient people who move to an area because it is desirable—they want to live in that area—and who may initially make a private rented application, and may get children into schools. They then become homeless. One of the problems is that they may have come from outside London. If a local authority then says, “You came from Birmingham, Bradford, or somewhere else in the country”, why should the local authority then not say, “That is your home. Perhaps you should move back to the area of the country that you came from.”

Giles Peaker: They can.

Kate Webb: Yes, they can.

Q58 Bob Blackman: They do and that is one of the issues that happens. Are you saying that that should change and that local authorities should have a statutory duty to house in their local area?

Giles Peaker: No, this is separate.

Kate Webb: No. There are two issues. One is the local connection issue. At the moment if you become homeless and you make an application to the council, they have to take it, but once they have accepted that you are owed a homelessness duty they can look at whether you have a local connection to their area. If you do not and you do have a local connection elsewhere, then you are simply moved on to the council with whom you have a connection.

Q59 Bob Blackman: I am aware of what the position is. I am just teasing out whether you as witnesses think that that should change.

Kate Webb: No.

Jon Sparkes: In the proposed duty to prevent, that initial duty to prevent or to help prevent will be before assessing priority need, local connection and so on. The initial duty to prevent would be, yes.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Q60 Chair: We will try to deal with the last couple of questions. Were you in mid-flow when we cut you off?

Kate Webb: Yes, I was. I would very much like to respond to Mr Blackman's question, if someone else can relay the answer to him. There are two key bits of legislation that he was getting at. One is the issue of local connection, and at the moment, as I was explaining, the law is very clear that if you do not have a link to a council, and they do not owe you the re-housing duty, they can pass you on. That is very sensible, and broadly works well in our experience. There are a few issues around gatekeeping and local connection being applied at the wrong point.

Chair: You are getting an answer to your question, Bob, which has just started.

Kate Webb: As I was saying before we broke, on local connection the law does allow local councils to see if there is a local connection, and they can be passed on if there is not a local connection. That is the first bit of the legislation that is relevant to what you were asking.

Q61 Bob Blackman: The bit that I am asking about is not the legislation, because I know what the legislation is. I am asking for your views on what, possibly, the legislation should say.

Kate Webb: The legislation says what it should say. At the moment, it strikes a very sensible balance between recognising that these are families that are often at a point of real crisis, and that where they are re-housed is going to have a very meaningful impact on their lives, and the fact that local authorities do not have an infinite supply of housing available to them. As we were saying earlier, it asks local authorities basically not to be flippant when they are sending families out of area. We would argue that, given the current pressures on local authorities, that is the appropriate balance.

I just want to pick up on the point you made in your question about someone not having links to an area beyond school places and having worked there and things like that. I would really appeal to the Committee not to downgrade the meaningfulness of things like that on a family's life.

Bob Blackman: I would not downgrade them. I am using that as an example to say that it is not someone just suddenly coming from Birmingham, arriving in Westminster, say, and saying, "Find me somewhere to live, Westminster City Council". I am not talking about that type of situation, because that is a totally different view. What I am considering may not even be a family. It could be a couple who arrive and then make a home initially. They may have a six-month rental initially. They may then have to move to somewhere else and get another six-month rental. Then they are made homeless.

Kate Webb: As I say, we would want them to be able to stay in area, but we recognise that at the moment the local authority, when they have exhausted all options, can move them out of area, and we would recognise that that is all they can do when there is no housing available. It is just recognising that those families are at crisis point. The thing that parents invariably say when they come to us is, "I feel like I have really let my children down. I feel like I have failed as a parent." It is a humiliating experience to go through. In that situation, there is also the issue of actually having to explain to your kids as well that they are going to have to move school. Often they do not even have time to say goodbye. It is very easy, when we are scrutinising the legislation in these committees, to overlook the quite profound impact that will have on a child.

Bob Blackman: I have someone approaching me virtually every day with this sort of crisis. It is a real problem for those families. Clearly, you get to the point of the local authorities going to assess whether someone has a strong local connection or not. That is obviously a moot point

Kate Webb: It goes back to what we were saying in response to Mr Knight earlier as well. There are good and bad ways of doing what is a very difficult move for people. Certainly, we are doing some work at the moment, which we are looking forward to sharing with local authorities, about ways you can make those very difficult conversations, and what are essentially very difficult forced moves, smoother for households. There are good ways and there are bad ways of handling what is a very difficult situation.

Howard Sinclair: We have lots of experience in reconnecting single homeless people back to their areas. Again, it is variable, but

there is a body of knowledge there about how best to do it, and how to make those decisions and work with local authorities, some of which are great and some of which are not.

Q62 Bob Blackman: How much have you done for single homeless men on these particular areas? One of the problems obviously is that local authorities will naturally take a view that if there are children involved and a woman, then the woman and the children would get housed. I would not say that is wrong, but often the man is then left—I have seen this personally—and there is a cycle of alcohol dependency and drug dependency. Suddenly, someone whose life was fine goes downhill quite dramatically.

Jon Sparkes: I would say a couple of things. One is that their need for a supportive network is just as great as anybody else's. The absence of a supportive social network will have an effect on their homelessness, and all of those other symptoms that you described. Clearly, the level of need in terms of housing if there are no children is different. It is not the same, but by not intervening in any way you are just as likely to be consigning that individual to life on the streets, and all of the other complex needs and vulnerabilities that go with that. The other thing I would say is that it is just not as straightforward as there being couples with children over here, and single men over there. When we talk about single homelessness, it is shorthand. Single homelessness in the shorthand can also mean couples who do not have children. In that local connection example that you gave, imagine if one of the couple has a job but the couple becomes homeless and are forcibly moved to another area. That person loses their job and you are creating another vulnerability. It is not quite as stark as that, but the key thing is remembering that one of the things that keeps people from being homeless is a supportive network and the ability to access that. If you move a single man, you are moving him away from that network just the same as anybody else.

Howard Sinclair: We undertook some research a few years ago and found that upwards of 70% of people living in hostels had children. 80% of people in hostels are men; 20% are women.

Kate Webb: It goes back to the point earlier about the system needing to actually be joined up, because more housing benefit in the homelessness legislation is not very good at recognising the needs of non-resident parents. It is very hard for a parent who does not have full residence with the children to actually get accommodation where they can come and stay. Certainly, benefit policy and homelessness legislation refuses to accept that children could live in two places at once.

Q63 Jim McMahon: Would you like to see more clarity given, or the assumption changed? At the moment the assumption is that if you fall into one of the vulnerable groups, and the council has a statutory obligation to provide you housing, they have a duty to consider local connections. Would it not be cleaner, in your view, just to have it explicit that you have a right to be re-housed in your community?

Kate Webb: It is whether that is achievable.

Q64 Jim McMahon: There is a London problem, is there not?

Kate Webb: Yes, there is.

Q65 Jim McMahon: However, there is the rest of the country as well. I suppose what I am trying to say is that we tend to make laws for the worst excesses, rather than the majority. It is the case that quite a lot of people fall through the net outside of London because of the rules that are set.

Kate Webb: There is a presumption in favour of local connection. Basically, there is a presumption of local re-housing, and then a safety valve if that is something that is not possible. If you are in an area outside of London and the south-east, and outside of those worst excesses of housing pressure, then, if the council is still moving you when there was accommodation available, that would be challengeable. The operation of the law is actually already quite flexible and sensible in that respect.

Giles Peaker: I am not sure if we are sliding between the two different things of local connection and referral to another authority, and out-of-borough/out-of-London housing. The two are getting slightly confused. The local connection/local referral part of the current legislation does seem to work pretty well, in that it is based on whether people have a strong connection or a clear connection to another authority, in which case that is where they are referred to. They are told, "You can go home to your home borough", in fact. That is after they have applied as homeless, and after they have been assessed as to whether a housing duty is owed. Housing outside of the borough, or outside of London, is quite a different thing, and I would not think, frankly, that legislation that suggests that councils go trawling back through people's schooling to find what local authority they graduated from school in, in order to send them back there, would be a good idea. Once you start trying to actually frame that legislatively it would be a nightmare. At what point would connections be valid for that purpose?

Q66 Chair: The duty was changed in the last Parliament to allow local authorities to provide homeless families with accommodation in the private rented sector rather than in social housing. In principle was that not a sensible approach, given the shrinking pool of social rented houses and the fact that the private rented sector is growing? Was that not sensible in principle? Does it work in practice anywhere?

Jon Sparkes: In principle, given the shrinkage of social housing, it is perfectly possible for private renting to be part of the solution, but it is only part of the solution where it provides secure, affordable and accessible accommodation, for example in length of tenancy. Six months is unlikely to be the time it would take to put in place everything you would need to make sure you are sustainably out of homelessness. Something more akin to three to five years might be more sensible. In terms of affordability, the predictability of rent increases would be an important ingredient in the security of that individual. There is no reason in principle why private renting should not be part of the solution. It is not a very good part of the solution at the moment.

Kate Webb: We would agree. The change in 2012 came from just a wish to move people into temporary accommodation faster, which in principle is very sensible. Unfortunately, it failed to do anything about affordability, and actually occurred at a time when affordability was getting worse because of those rising market pressures and the cuts to local housing allowance. It failed to do anything meaningful around stability. The Government have spoken warmly about the merits of longer term, five-year tenancies, but there is little in the way of teeth behind it yet. The vast majority of landlords still want to offer 12-months tenancies. It is very telling that in practice local authorities have found that they just cannot use those new powers. Actually, we are aware of at least one local authority that was initially enthusiastic and has ordered a pause on private rented sector offers because it is so concerned about the sustainability of housing.

Giles Peaker: Certainly, in principle, yes. In practice, I can think of two or three London councils that are currently using it with any enthusiasm. Most have simply hit the affordability wall. They cannot find private sector tenancies for a 12-month guaranteed term for a rent that would be affordable for the homeless person.

Q67 Chair: Is that also true outside London? Clearly, the rent differentials outside London between private sector rents and social rents are not as great, are they?

Giles Peaker: No, but local authorities find themselves in quite different positions with the relative availability of social housing stock,

whether it is their own or housing associations'. The situations vary. The areas where social housing stock is seriously pressured are where PRS discharge would be of interest.

Kate Webb: It is actually one of the areas where local authorities probably do have a view to the long term and more sustainable options. It is not remotely in their interests to place someone into a private rented sector offer that will not be sustainable. They do not want that family coming back to them in 12 months' or 24 months' time. What we have seen, particularly outside of London, where temporary accommodation is more temporary, is that they have preferred to use that and get households into what they see as a sustainable housing option.

Bob Blackman: One of the solutions that was tried before was three-year leases, and then housing benefit picked up the gap. The problem was then that if someone got a job they lost benefit, pound for pound, and therefore they could not afford the rent. It is the opposite of a virtuous circle. Clearly, the predominant issue is the supply of reasonable quality housing in areas of need, which has forever been the challenge.

Kate Webb: That is absolutely correct.

Q68 Chair: I have just two final points. In terms of getting independent advice and assistance, do people know where to go? Is it readily available? Have the legal aid changes made a difference? We will do this fairly briefly now.

Giles Peaker: Most of homelessness is still available under legal aid, although the early intervention work under welfare benefits went. However, that said, that does not actually mean that you can get hold of anybody who does it. Large swathes of the country have at best one provider. In West Sussex, for example, Shelter is the sole provider. That is basically one provider for a county. Some areas are reasonably well supplied where there is a legacy of firms doing it, but where people have dropped out they are not being replaced, and in some areas of the country there is literally nobody doing it. Legal aid homelessness advice is hard to come by.

Kate Webb: Yes, I echo that. The legal aid changes contributed to nine of our local centres closing, which has undoubtedly made those advice deserts worse. Although it is still available for homelessness cases, as I mentioned it is not available for those issues that result in homelessness, such as disrepair and housing benefit. It is extremely frustrating for our colleagues who are working in courts not to be able to help someone with the housing benefit delay that has led to them

facing possession. Do people know where to get help? Often the Housing Options Service is people's first port of call, which is why it is important that local authorities can create a culture where they are genuinely helping people and not gatekeeping. Certainly, there is always more that can be done in terms of encouraging people to seek advice. Time and time again we see that if people know that they can seek advice, and they feel empowered to seek it early, then you genuinely can prevent homelessness. It is not inevitable that rent arrears lead to homelessness, for example. The absolutely crucial thing is raising awareness and getting people to come and seek advice early.

Jon Sparkes: I have a similar point. People know where to go. They might not have the faith that when they go there they are going to get what they need and what they want at the moment. It is more about people knowing that when you do go to your local authority for help, you are going to get something, rather than whether people know where to go.

Howard Sinclair: For our clients it is very difficult. 55% have the lowest form of literacy. There is 52% numeracy. We estimate that we work with people with about 130 different first languages. There are complex needs and mental health problems. You need someone who has got a bit of time to sit down with you and work through what is an exceptionally complicated system, and very often that time is not there. I re-emphasise the point that good housing advice and good money advice prevents homelessness.

Q69 Chair: Finally, if nothing were to change as we conduct our inquiry, and we come to the conclusion that nothing can really be done, where are we going to be in another five years' time? If there is one thing we could recommend that would really make a difference, what would it be?

Jon Sparkes: The trends are there and you can extrapolate. Not only are instances of rough sleeping growing, but that increase is accelerating. If we do nothing then that will continue. As Howard has described, following the tip of the iceberg the rest of the iceberg will grow as well. If we can do only one then, then it would have to be a serious cross-Government strategy to tackle homelessness. That is slightly a cover-all.

Chair: You are going to give me a second, I feel.

Jon Sparkes: If that is not a valid answer, then there will be two things. There is a short-term urgent issue, which is about properly funding and enabling people to access emergency provision, which will help people today. In terms of the longer term, it would be the duty to

prevent, so that everybody who needs help gets some help. That is not the duty to provide housing, but a duty to provide help and a duty to prevent.

Howard Sinclair: One thing is the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The 1% housing benefit cut and the LHA cap will mean that St Mungo's will not be providing accommodation services in two years' time. The 2,800 people who we support each night will be in prison or on the streets. That is the urgent issue, and I would urge this Committee to look at how supported housing will be exempted from that Bill. If it goes through as it is, our 66 hostels will become backpackers' hostels. We will not be able to afford to run services and take that across the sector and take that nationally.

Kate Webb: In terms of where we are heading, I would agree with John. The trends are very clear. Homelessness is increasing, and the most acute signs of crisis are increasing: namely, rough sleeping, families in B&Bs over six weeks and people being moved out of area. We are particularly worried that the loss of private rented tenancies is only going to get worse as well, with proposals to freeze local housing allowance, despite increases in rent. In terms of the one thing that can be done, it does all fall under the banner of supply. Of all tenures, for social housing it is about maintaining investment in new housing and resisting the proposals in the Housing and Planning Bill to force local authorities that are operating under the most intense pressures to sell off their council housing, because that is just tying their hands in their ability to re-house people. In the short term, we can improve supply in the private rented sector by looking again at local housing allowance levels. It has to be attainable for people to actually access private rented housing if they are in low-paid jobs. By 2020 we risk the entire tenure just drying up for people.

Giles Peaker: I have little to add. Will it get worse? Yes. Will it get worse faster? Yes. That is already happening, and is just going to continue. I would add the benefit cap and the roll-out of the reduced benefit cap to the issues that are going to cause increased homelessness, and fast. It has already made temporary accommodation for a lot of local authorities virtually impossible to deliver, because they are still subject to the benefit cap on their housing benefit.

One thing that could be done is to stop making it worse. That is the simple answer. There are some immediate triggers facing us. The 1% cut and the LHA cap on housing benefit will impact on supported housing. The roll-out of the reduced benefit cap is going to have a fairly dramatic effect across the country, whereas the first £26,000 one basically affected London. £23,000 and £20,000 outside of London is

going to have a dramatic national effect, really taking large swathes of public sector tenancies out of affordability for families in that situation. If the rents continue to increase whilst there is the LHA freeze, without wishing to be overly melodramatic, we are heading towards a serious crisis.

Chair: On that note, thank you all very much for coming and giving evidence. You can tell by the time we have spent discussing these issues that the Committee is taking it very seriously, and it is something we want to try to make sure we get as much evidence as possible on, including going out and looking at various projects so we can see at first hand exactly what happens. Thank you very much indeed for coming and for your evidence.