



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: [Homelessness](#), HC 40

Monday 6 June 2016

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

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Evidence from witnesses:

Questions 173 – 232

Witnesses: **Mateasa Grant**, Crisis “mystery shopper”, **Daisy-May Hudson**, director of “Half Way” film, **Ross Symonds**, author of “Homeless in Bristol” blog, gave evidence.

Chair: Welcome to the Committee’s evidence session in our inquiry into homelessness. Thank you to all our witnesses for coming this afternoon to give evidence to us. Just before I come over to you, Committee members need to put on record any interests they may have in this inquiry. I am a Vice President of the Local Government Association.

David Mackintosh: I am a Northamptonshire county councillor and chair of the APPG on Ending Homelessness.

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

Q173 Chair: We have put on record our interests. Could I just ask you, for our records, if you could just say who you are?

Ross Symonds: I am Ross Symonds.

Daisy-May Hudson: I am Daisy-May Hudson.

Mateasa Grant: I am Mateasa Grant.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming. Our intention this afternoon is to give you an opportunity to tell us about your experiences

so we can learn lessons from those, and they will hopefully help us produce a report eventually about what the problems are with the current system and how it might be improved. First of all, I am going to ask David Mackintosh, one of the Committee members, to begin the questioning.

Q174 David Mackintosh: Thank you very much for coming along today. I know what you are going to be telling us about is very personal to you. I just wonder if you could start by telling us what led you to becoming homeless.

Mateasa Grant: My situation was that I was going through quite a turbulent relationship with a partner and that broke down. After that I was living with a friend who then became evicted and I was living off my savings, which then in turn ran out. I did not have a job because my employer's company went into liquidation, so then I had no form of income and that was what led me to homelessness.

Daisy-May Hudson: My mum, my sister and I were privately renting for 13 years, and our landlord was Tesco. Because they were not really interested in raising the prices with inflation, our rent remained relatively stable. After 13 years we got a letter to say that Tesco were selling off their assets. At that time, when we tried to look for suitable accommodation in the area that was affordable for my mum—she was working but we were a single-parent family—there was nothing that was in our price range, and so at that point we had no option but to declare ourselves homeless to the council.

Ross Symonds: At the end of November last year I lost my job. About four weeks later I broke up with my partner, who I was living with. I did not have any money for a deposit. After a couple of weeks over Christmas, living on the good will of others and sleeping on couches, that good will ended and I found myself sleeping in a night shelter and the floor of a Salvation Army for a month.

Q175 David Mackintosh: Thank you. Did you approach the council to help before you were homeless? If you did, what more could the council have done in order to prevent you from becoming homeless?

Mateasa Grant: I was homeless—I had no roof over my head—before I approached the council. Maybe I should have approached them sooner to find out my options, but I did not feel like I needed to approach them. I have never approached the council for any help or support in the past, so I did not know where the first step would have been or the right way of going about things.

Daisy-May Hudson: My mum went to the council and we were offered help with private rented accommodation. We would have been

offered benefits to help us with that as well. My mum is approaching 60, and to go into an insecure private rented accommodation and have the thought of perhaps being evicted in 10 years' time was something that she really did not want to happen. We really would have benefitted from council housing and being able to have that secure lifelong tenancy. They did offer to help with private renting, but because of the priority bracket in order to be eligible for council housing you have to be at that homeless point where you have nowhere to sleep that night in order to be put on the list for council housing.

Ross Symonds: I approached Bristol City Council pretty much the first day. They referred me back to St Mungo's, who run the housing services in Bristol and the homelessness services in Bristol, who then referred me back to the private renting team of the council. I have no substance of any significant mental health issues. I was not suitable for any kind of supported housing—priority housing. It was a case of, "You are going to have to sleep in a night shelter until the council get back to us", which they did after about three weeks. I finally got my appointment with the private renting team. Within a week of that meeting, they had sorted me out with somewhere to live.

Q176 Chair: Mateasa, I understand you have been going round as a mystery shopper, going to a number of councils and trying to find how they deal with people who are homeless. In your case, as a single person, that is presumably how you presented yourself to them. Do you want to tell us a bit about your experiences with these various councils? Did one council very much differ to another, or did you find some general problems with many of them?

Mateasa Grant: I did find the same problems across all the councils that I approached. At the same time, I was constantly surprised by the different experiences that I had in each one of those councils as well. Generally, I found that the line of questioning that they were asking me was a set of five questions, or three or four questions. Maybe they might not even adhere to the structure that has been set in place. It was not a very confident experience to know that at the end of it I would have been housed or I would have been supported by any one of the councils that I approached throughout the mystery shop visits.

Q177 Chair: Did you find that the approach was that you were a problem that they wanted to go away?

Mateasa Grant: Pretty much. As I approached them under cover, I was an 18 year-old girl who had been kicked out of her house by her parents. Generally the stereotype around that would most probably be that it was my fault; that is the reason why I was

homeless. A lot of the time I was advised to work out what my problems were with my home life. I was never asked if I was being abused by my parents or what the problem was. Like I said, I am not very confident that I would have been given any support by the councils if the line of questioning would have been successful for me.

Q178 Chair: Did you find that there was a bit of harshness in the way you were treated, and that you were very much a number coming through the door rather than there being any sympathy for the particular problems you had?

Mateasa Grant: Even if I was given advice to speak to a department that could maybe give me some more advice, that department would generally be in the same building that I was standing in, but I was not allowed to see them face to face. I would have to phone them. There would be times I would be given numbers for organisations and the numbers were incorrect or I would have to find the information myself. A lot of the time, as well, they would just tell me to go to Google. If I am homeless without access to the internet or any money or a smartphone, I do not know how I am supposed to access Google.

Q179 Chair: Daisy-May, Ross, does any of that chime with your experiences about how you came across the services when you went for help?

Daisy-May Hudson: I have been university-educated, but I found the language of letters and the Homelessness Act very difficult to negotiate. When we refused the offer of accommodation because it was not suitable for our family—we were asked to move two hours away from where my sister already went to school and she was in the middle of starting her GCSEs—we tried to ask for a review, and when that was refused we had to go to court. It was very much up to us to try to work out what our rights were.

I always say when you first become homeless it is such an alien thing, particularly if you have come from a normal family or just a normal experience, to then suddenly have to redefine all of the stereotypes and all those negative connotations that are attributed to being homeless; you have to renegotiate that and there is no help. There is no support that will help with your mental health because that is a huge adjustment. You just feel like you are in this completely isolating experience and the only person that you can speak to is someone on the phone, and really they are just rushing to get you off the phone anyway. There are a lot of things that can be done to help you feel human again at a time when all your sense of being has been taken away.

Ross Symonds: I just find it massively frustrating. I am lucky; I am quite tenacious, so the reason I got somewhere relatively quickly is I am quite lucky, but it was also a case of just having to turn up every day, knock on the door of the relevant agencies and just nag and nag and nag and nag, because otherwise you would just drop off their radar. There were only 18 beds in the night shelter, so you would have to queue three hours before it opened to be guaranteed a bed. I was chatting to my fellow homeless people who had been homeless for months, years even, just because they were so frustrated and they had given up. They would not go. They were just like, "What is the point in going? They are never there. They always seem to be in training or they say, 'Come back tomorrow', and so you go back the next day and then they are not there."

It is just massively frustrating. It was the fact that I do not have any substance issues and the fact that I was very, very highly motivated to get out of the situation. There are people who I bump into in Bristol who are still on the streets and have just given up with St Mungo's.

Daisy-May Hudson: In addition to what you said, you were able to maybe get the process moving quicker because you were able to go down to the offices every day. If you are someone with a full-time job, which is often the case of hidden homelessness, where you are living in a hostel but you are also trying to keep your life running as normal, you do not have time to go down and make sure that people are getting your enquiries seen to and you do not have time to chase. Even when we were living in a hostel, being able to pick up our post was difficult; there were specific postal hours, which were in the middle of my mum's working days. All these things are there to hinder you rather than to help you.

Q180 Chair: Leading on then, how good were the councils at keeping you informed about what was happening?

Mateasa Grant: You have to have some form of self-motivation in order to get yourself out of this situation. Of course you cannot just assume to go to the building and get some support and then that is it; you sit back and relax. You have to have some form of self-motivation in order for you to achieve success at the end of this, but at the same time the process is demotivating. It demotivates you from the moment you walk in the building.

My personal experience was when I first sat down and spoke with a stranger and exposed myself to them, I got laughed at in my face by more than one person in the same building. From there I am not really going to want to then expose myself furthermore and I am not going to

really want to talk to anybody in that department about the experiences that I was going through, if I feel like I am just going to be subjected to laughter. It is a demotivating process.

Them keeping in contact with you is a case of you approaching them. They never phone you. It is very hard to ever get a message back if you have left a message, but then again even trying to make a message is difficult; the time when I was homeless I did not have credit on my mobile phone all the time. I was using other people's phones. The process is very, very difficult and it is demotivating.

Ross Symonds: The people at what is called the Compass Centre in Bristol were all lovely. They were all really nice people. They were really understanding and really empathetic. However, I was dealing with the No Second Night Out team, which consists of only two people, and they would disappear off training together, so you would not have anyone to speak to for a day. If somebody kicked off because they were on spice and they were getting violent in the centre, they would just shut down the centre for the day. Everybody would suffer just because of somebody else's actions.

Daisy-May Hudson: Often you will find it will be one letter per three months. When we were staying in a hostel, we were living every day waiting to hear where we were on the list and whether it is was being processed. We were never given any sort of time limit of how long we were going to be there. I know that is difficult because often they do not know who is coming through, but what that does to your mental health is leave you in this constant state of panic and anxiety, because you could get a phone call that day to say that you need to move. You could get a phone call that day to say that you are going to have to move because they have offered you a property and then you will have to move the following day. That is really, really stressful. You are not given time limits.

It took three weeks for the council to change our lightbulb because of these back-and-forward phone calls where no one really knows what is going on. When we contended the suitability of a property, the letter that we got back from I think it was the deputy head of housing—there was such arrogance. It just felt horrible to read. It was like we were being told. When my mum said we could not move two hours away because she wanted to keep my little sister in the school that she was in, they said it would not be unreasonable for her to move schools or we could find someone to take her to school every day, which is completely ridiculous because we cannot afford that. The answers came from such a place of arrogance and ignorance as well, which made you feel even worse and that you had no room to negotiate in.

Q181 Bob Blackman: Can I just clarify for all three of you what the period was between you becoming homeless and then you getting accommodation?

Ross Symonds: One month. Five weeks basically.

Q182 Bob Blackman: You went through a court case so it is a bit more complicated in your case, Daisy.

Daisy-May Hudson: We did not go to court in the end because the council decided that they did not want to go court, which obviously meant that they were in the wrong. We were in a hostel for a year.

Q183 Bob Blackman: So it was a year between you becoming homeless and getting permanent accommodation?

Daisy-May Hudson: Yes.

Mateasa Grant: Mine was about six months, and that was without the aid of any council help. I did it through my own self-motivation, as well as the assistance of charities as well. I love charities.

Q184 Bob Blackman: The other issue I just want to touch on is what your expectations were. You had become homeless through no fault of your own. What were your expectations of the public services when this happened to you?

Mateasa Grant: I was naïve. I had been working ever since I was 15. I first started an apprenticeship when I was 15 years old and I was 23 when I first became homeless. There was a long period of time when I was working, paying my taxes and I had this idea in my head that if I have been paying into the system for so long, if anything was to happen to me then I would get supported. That was the expectation I had. I did not know exactly what to expect. I had never approached a council before. I did not know what the right questions were to ask or what to expect. I assumed because I had been paying my taxes and I had been funding the system since before I left school, I would get some form of assistance.

Daisy-May Hudson: We were on the council house list for the 13 years that we were privately renting, so for my mum as well she thought that by that point we would have been offered somewhere to live. When we physically could not live anywhere else because it was so unaffordable, we thought at that point we might get somewhere to live, yet we still had to wait a year in a hostel with very little information and sense of care. We just felt that by that point we

should have been offered somewhere to live and in our area there is just not enough council housing.

Ross Symonds: My expectations were low. My degree is in town planning, so I am more than aware of the housing situation. It was more hope. There is only one way, so you have to go that way. There is only one process of getting somewhere, so it was just a case of doing what I was told by St Mungo's and the council and hoping for the best, really.

Q185 Bob Blackman: Did any of you approach any elected councillors or MPs or anyone for help, and, if so, what was your experience?

Daisy-May Hudson: I already had a little bit of a relationship with Eleanor Laing, who is a Conservative MP in Epping. As soon as we became homeless, I wrote to her to tell her what had happened to our family. At first she was very sympathetic and then I would write to her every three weeks or something, updating her on our situation and asking what could be done. In the end she started getting her secretary to write back. I wrote back and asked for a response from her and not her secretary, at which point all contact really dwindled. I do not really have a lot of faith in the power of MPs to be able to do anything because I never got a good response.

Q186 Bob Blackman: Mateasa, did you approach anyone?

Mateasa Grant: Not while I was homeless, but throughout the mystery shopping process.

Q187 Bob Blackman: But not when you were experiencing your period of time.

Mateasa Grant: No.

Q188 Bob Blackman: Ross, did you?

Ross Symonds: No.

Q189 Kevin Hollinrake: Regarding how homelessness occurred in your particular situations, how much of it was caused by a lack of support from the authorities and how much was from a lack of availability of suitable accommodation?

Ross Symonds: A bit of both. The services are woefully under-resourced and the housing stock is ridiculous. That was my experience. There just are not enough resources across the board.

Q190 Kevin Hollinrake: If you felt the support was better, would you have got somewhere more quickly?

Ross Symonds: Maybe if I had had somebody fighting my corner a little bit more, who was able to perhaps go out and source accommodation, it would have helped.

Daisy-May Hudson: Having been on the council list for 13 years, if there was enough housing stock then we would not have been in that problem in the first place. Also, we would have happily privately rented if we had a guarantee that that market was going to stay affordable and that we were not going to be evicted in 10 years' time. Again, that is the problem with the private rented sector. If there was intervention before that, where there is not this issue of you having to be a certain priority bracket in order to get housing, which meant we had to live in a hostel, then maybe our experience would have been very different.

Mateasa Grant: Often I was told that there was a lack of housing, yet in certain areas where I did do the mystery shopping the housing looked as if it was quite sufficient. I was told there were a lot of empty houses. It depends on what area you go to. However, like you said, if there was enough housing, why have we got people waiting on the housing list for 13 years. However, I do believe there is a shortage of housing. We can see that. That is why you have so many people on the streets right now.

Q191 Kevin Hollinrake: You believe you saw instances where you were told there was no availability yet you felt there was? You identified some availability.

Mateasa Grant: Yes. It was in a particular part of the country. I cannot really name the area.

Q192 Kevin Hollinrake: You think you were being fobbed off, really, by the local authority?

Mateasa Grant: Yes, that is what it seemed like. A lot of the time throughout the vulnerability questions, they would tell you that you are not a priority. I heard that so many times: "You are not a priority. You are not vulnerable enough." It was those set questions there. If you then challenged those questions, they would say, "No, we have not got enough housing. You are not vulnerable and we have not got enough housing." It was the line of questioning and then always being told that there was not anywhere to go anyway.

Daisy-May Hudson: Also, mine is quite specific to the area I was in—Epping in Essex. I have done quite a lot of work and investigation into areas in London, and right now there are council properties that are being sold off—whole council estates. We have a chronic shortage of council housing and yet there is so much that is being done to sell it off. That seems quite ironic when the homelessness figures are skyrocketing and yet we are selling off council housing. It does not make sense.

Ross Symonds: When I met up with the private renting team eventually, I was told to prepare to wait months and months and months. Literally as I walked out the door I got a phone call from them saying, “Something has become available”, so it was right time, right place, really. They were managing my expectations. It could be months.

Chair: A couple of my colleagues had to leave. You probably saw them go out. It was nothing you said. To explain, they had given their apologies at the beginning of the meeting that they have other Committees they have to attend this afternoon, so that is just the explanation as to why people do sometimes come and go from evidence sessions.

Q193 Alison Thewliss: Were you expected to accept whatever service was offered to you, and how much choice did you feel you had within the process?

Ross Symonds: I think I could have turned it down but it would have been a massive black mark.

Mateasa Grant: I never got offered any accommodation by the council. I found that through some charities. However, I was told, and I had been told from other people as well, that if you do turn down any offer that they give you then you are intentionally making yourself homeless. You are not given a choice at all really. You are just being told, “If you want our help, this is how we are going to help you.”

Daisy-May Hudson: You used to be offered three options and then that was changed last September, I think. After living in a hostel for six months we were then offered a property that, as I said, would have meant it took two hours for my sister to get to school. It was on an estate where there had recently been a stabbing of a 15-year-old child, and my sister was the same age.

We asked for a review and you are given a form with three lines to respond as to why the property is not suitable, and then you have to wait quite a long time, and then the council came back with this big

long response. Basically everything that we said there was a rebuttal, where what they were saying just did not make sense. They then said at the end therefore we had made ourselves intentionally homeless and they are going to be taking possession proceedings of our temporary accommodation, which means a mother and her two children were going to be evicted from a hostel.

At that point we had no option and we would have been on the street. We had to get legal aid and go to court. We were only narrowly in the bracket to get legal aid because that has now been cut as well. At that point we went to court and then the council decided they did not want to go to court, and then they said they were going to offer us another accommodation in due course. What I have noticed is there is a recurring pattern that as soon as you try to dispute anything with the council, they will say you have made yourself intentionally homeless and they can just clear you off the list as quickly as possible.

Q194 Alison Thewliss: You were made to feel quite an inconvenience, then, in challenging anything that you did not think was quite right.

Daisy-May Hudson: Yes. You feel like all the power is in the council's hands and you have no room to negotiate.

Mateasa Grant: It sounds like they bullied you with the responses you were given—automated responses. You could not even use your own language to defend yourself. You were given a set of three replies, and then when you choose any one of those they give you an essay back that does not make sense. It sounds like a form of bullying to me.

Daisy-May Hudson: When you are in that situation, particularly for my mum, as a mother all her autonomy and her power to put a roof over her children's heads was taken away and we ended up going into a hostel. There was just one point where she could say, "I am not moving my children into that property because it is unsafe", and the council would not even listen to a mother trying to choose the best life for her kids. You just have no power, particularly when housing is the whole centrality of your existence. Once you have somewhere safe to live then everything else can happen. When someone has all that power to have a house dangling in front of you, you do not know whether to chase it every day or if the best option is to just stay silent. You do not know the best way to try to get a property.

Q195 Alison Thewliss: Was there any consideration given to where your sister might go to school? Did they just expect that you

would take the two-hour journey, or was there any support given as to where they were proposing to move you to?

Daisy-May Hudson: No, we got a letter. We had loads of evidence that we gave to the council to say why that property was not suitable. One was a letter from the head teacher from the school. It said that it would be detrimental to her emotional stability, she is just about to choose her options and she recently moved schools because she had been bullied out of her last one while we were in a hostel as well. We explained all of this to the council and they still said it would not be unreasonable for her to move schools. This is a year before her GCSEs. The other option was that we could pay for someone to accompany her to school if we were worried, which is unfeasible.

Mateasa Grant: So they would go to school with her.

Daisy-May Hudson: Not from the council. We would pay for someone to take her to school.

Q196 Alison Thewliss: I noticed on your blog, Ross, that you mention some of the appointments and things like that with health providers, and they were quite difficult to keep once you were in the situation you were in. Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Ross Symonds: You turn up and they would say, "There is nobody available today. Can you come back tomorrow?" You would arrange a time and then go back the next day, and they would go, "No, they cannot see you today. There is training," or "something has happened", or "something has overrun". You would come back the next day and the same thing would happen and then you would get a text message. I must have walked 10 miles a day just on the streets. I used to go to the library. You only get two hours on the computer in the library, so then I would walk to the job centre, then I would walk back to the Compass Centre, St Mungo's, and then back to the library. Then I would go to Shelter and try to speak to various people. It was just hugely frustrating.

Q197 Alison Thewliss: Did you find that one service would say, "Come here at this time", and another service might ask you to do the same thing at the same time? Was there a lot of difficulty in making sure you are in the right place at the right time with different agencies trying to ask things of you?

Ross Symonds: Yes, especially if you have not got a car and everything. It was just lots and lots of walking, traipsing backwards and forwards.

Q198 Alison Thewliss: You mentioned about trying to keep appointments when you were working and your mother was working as well. Was that quite common that they would ask you to come and do things at times where it just was not suitable?

Daisy-May Hudson: Yes, when we were offered the first property we got a phone call on one day and they said, "You need to come and pick up the keys the following day at 3.00 p.m. to come to have a look at the property and decide whether you want to take or not". My mum said, "I am really sorry; that is during my working hours." They said, "You need to come". That was the only option we were given. There were things like post. Just often we were asked to come into—actually, we were not offered to come into the council a lot, but just things would take place, like when we asked for the bulb to be changed they wanted to come at 2.00 p.m. and my mum said, "I am working", and they said, 'That is the only time we can come'. All these things are just there to debilitate you, really.

Ross Symonds: The night shelter is run by a Christian charity, and there are only 18 beds for the whole of Bristol. You would have to get there at about 4.00 in the afternoon—it did not open until 7.00—just to be guaranteed a spot. You could not do anything during those times; otherwise you would be sleeping rough.

Q199 Mary Robinson: We have been discussing some difficulties, particularly around work and appointments, etc. I know, Ross, in your blog you say that getting a job was the key to getting out of the situation in which you found myself. It is obviously a key and important issue. Did being homeless make it harder to find a job and harder to keep it if you had one?

Ross Symonds: Yes, just the logistics of where you keep your stuff. You look at my CV. Office work is what I do. It would be almost impossible to get an office job. You turn up with a rucksack and say, "Can I have a shower in there before I start the day?" Plus, you have to be at the night shelter by 4.00 to guarantee a bed. You could find some part-time work, but then you would still have the problems of where you keep your stuff.

Q200 Mary Robinson: How did you manage that situation?

Ross Symonds: I did not, to be honest. It was applying for stuff and then thinking, "I will just deal with that when I get to it". I did not find any work. I did shortly after I moved into my place, which was good. The way I thought was because I was waiting for private renting, the quickest way to get a place would be to find it myself. It is almost impossible to find somewhere that accepts housing benefit straight off the bat without being referred by the council. Finding stuff

through Gumtree or Rightmove by myself was not viable unless I had enough money for a deposit, and I would have to work to raise enough money for a deposit.

Daisy-May Hudson: I had just left university. I came out of university wanting to take on the world and actually I was living in a hostel with no internet, so trying to find a job was really, really difficult. Also, my self-esteem was pretty low at that time. I did not really want to go out and try to sell myself and be really bouncy in job interviews. I just felt really depressed and sad. That was a difficult time as well to find work. I did find work eventually. Luckily I am a very motivated and tenacious person. I do not know if everybody would have been able to get themselves out of that situation, because it does affect your mental health so much and not having the internet is a difficult position to be in.

Mateasa Grant: A lot of the time when you are applying for jobs, even if you are successful they are going to need to send your contract to an address and if you have no address I do not know how you are supposed to successfully start your job.

Ross Symonds: It does knock your confidence, because there is a certain stigma attached to homelessness, which I probably had before I was homeless. If I thought that, what is your potential employer going to think?

Q201 Mary Robinson: How do people get round those issues? Against all the odds you go along to an interview, you get in a job, the contract is going to be sent to you, or there is some sort of communication. How do people address that?

Mateasa Grant: If they have people around them, they may be able to ask a friend if it is okay to use their address as a care-of address. That is an idea but it is not really suitable. I am sure there are other people who do not really feel happy about having somebody else's post coming to their address. Whatever history they have with their name, credit history and that sort of stuff could potentially affect another person. You might not want that to happen to your friend.

Ross Symonds: You could use the St Mungo's address. They would allow that, but if somebody was sending and someone in HR did spot that address, the game would be up anyway.

Q202 Mary Robinson: Some hostels, it seems, only accept people on housing benefit. I know there are issues about housing benefits in

hostels where the rent goes up, et cetera, if you get a job. Were you faced with the choice of secure accommodation or work?

Mateasa Grant: When I was living in a hostel, I was not working at first, then I got a job within my first month of being in the hostel. Again, I was oblivious to the whole idea of housing benefit, how much you get paid, et cetera, until I was in that hostel and I realised that the rent that I was paying per week for the room that was being covered by the housing benefit was double the normal amount you would pay.

Ross Symonds: Hostels are so expensive.

Mateasa Grant: I could not believe it. It was double the amount. If I wanted to just go and seek my own property, but then again trying to find somewhere while you are not working and someone to cover you with housing benefit is mission impossible. When I did get the job the housing benefit was taken away, and then I would have had to pay the full amount. I then had to find a place to live from the hostel, which ended up being cheaper, but I had to do that.

Q203 Mary Robinson: You are saying that when you were on housing benefits in the hostel, that was more than you would have paid for another accommodation?

Mateasa Grant: Currently the average amount that I pay in the area I live is around about £115 a week. Where that hostel was was two hundred and something pounds a week. It was odd to me that they could overcharge for a smaller property. I am sure the room rate for my age is less than the amount I was given at that point in time, so it did not make sense to me.

Ross Symonds: There was talk about me going into secure accommodation at one point, and the guy just said, "We could go down this route. If you really wanted to we could probably change the forms and swing it." But he said, "If you go into somewhere like that and you get a job, you will not be able to afford to live there because the rent is just too high. You are better off waiting for somewhere private to come up."

Q204 Mary Robinson: Have you any experience that people are advised not to get a job?

Ross Symonds: That was the subtext. He was saying, "If you move in now you will not be able to work."

Mary Robinson: It is widespread.

Daisy-May Hudson: They told my mum that had she not tried to work her whole life, we would have been in a much better financial

situation having been on housing benefit and benefits. However, she said, "I wanted to work".

Mateasa Grant: That was how I felt from always working to then being practically forced to go on to benefits; I really, really did not want to do it because I did not understand the system. As soon as you are in the system you understand you are just a burden; you are a nuisance; you are not really worth it. That is what it honestly feels like: you are not worth the help. As soon as you have your benefits in place, it is like it is a choice of life, like that is what you want for yourself. It is a horrible experience.

Q205 Mary Robinson: How easy is it when homeless to access benefits? How easy is it?

Mateasa Grant: For me I just had to have the hostel. As soon as I had the hostel and jobseeker's allowance, that is when I could get the benefits. I did not really want to go on jobseeker's allowance, but that is when I realised that was the only way I could get housing benefit. In that sense it was easy, but it is not really a path most people would take.

Ross Symonds: I was claiming JSA and I just used the address for St Mungo's.

Q206 Kevin Hollinrake: Just on that point, Mateasa, where you were saying that you were in supported housing—a hostel—and then when you got a job you quickly found a rented flat. Was that transition possible because you got your job, presumably, at that point in time?

Mateasa Grant: Yes. As soon as I got the job, I saved up some money for a deposit and left. It was a half-motivating experience and a half-demotivating experience because when I went in that hostel— it was a women's hostel—I saw so many people that had been in that environment for more than two or three years. The girls were telling me they had been there for six or seven years, and they were still in the same position where they had not had any help or any housing, or the right support for them. I could not be one of those people that had been in that system for long enough, just constantly going to people asking, "What is the next step? What is the next thing to do?" It was a case of, "Alright, cool. I have a roof over my head for now. I do have some support, but in order to get me out of this situation the only one that can do that is myself."

Q207 Kevin Hollinrake: Your homelessness coincided with a breakup of a relationship. Did this whole experience affect your mental health?

Mateasa Grant: Yes, it did. The relationship that I had with my ex-partner was an emotional relationship. Coming out of that I was mentally affected. However, the housing experience after exposing myself to people who were supposed to be supporting me then turning and laughing at that situation that I had experienced demotivated me and it did affect my mental health. Being in the hostel as well motivated me and it did drive me, but just seeing and witnessing what other people were experiencing did affect me as well. I emotionally get affected when people around me are suffering.

Q208 Kevin Hollinrake: Do you think that will have a long-term effect on how you look at things?

Mateasa Grant: It is still affecting me today. It still affects me today. I get quite anxious and weary around certain organisations I might step in, because I do not know how they might be looking at me. It does still affect me. Maybe I do not feel like it should but it does.

Q209 Kevin Hollinrake: Daisy-May, you mentioned depression going through this process, and how your mum must have felt not being able to put a roof over you and your sister's heads. How do you think that affected your mental health, your mum's and other people involved in the same situation?

Daisy-May Hudson: We now live in a council house, but my mum will stay up all night questioning all the decisions she has ever made because society makes you feel like it is your fault rather than this being a situation that was through no fault of her own. While we were in the hostel, every day I would come back and not know whether she was going to be happy or sad. It was turbulent. Every day was a different mood.

She suffered from depression and had to get help when we were in the hostel. I was suffering from quite a severe eating disorder that was made worse by stress, and so while I was in the hostel every day it was making me sicker and sicker. We were struggling for the council to recognise how affected we were by our mental health despite doctor's letters and referrals and things like that.

Also for my sister she was 13 when we first went into the hostel and they are her most formative years. She was deeply affected by the experience and her sense of self and security and her hope for her future as well. To grow up feeling like you are a second-class citizen because of the way people treat you or speak to you when you are

homeless, she felt that while she was trying to make sense of the world herself as a teenager.

We were all deeply affected and definitely once we first moved out of the hostel into our property, my mum was very much institutionalised by not having somewhere permanent. Even when we moved into our house, things would still be in boxes and she would keep stuff in little piles. She was not noticing that these were her patterns, but I could see it. She just did not know how to make a home anymore.

Mateasa Grant: I still suffer from that as well. The thought of moving or packing a box or a bag is a traumatic experience.

Daisy-May Hudson: We moved three times in the space of one month or something, because we moved out of our original house; we then moved into another hostel; we then moved into another hostel. That is the whole contents of our house each time, and that is really traumatic. That is the whole contents of our house each time and that is really traumatic.

Ross Symonds: I have suffered from low mood and depression for a number of years. Ironically when I was homeless I did not really feel it. There were times when it was quite frightening, when you were in a queue and someone has just lighted up a crack pipe. You just think, "Whoa, this is a situation I am not used to". I found that I did not have time to get really upset until a week after I moved into my flat, because when I was homeless you are always surrounded by people because you are either in a library or a job centre using their computers, or you are in a queue with other people, like where they give food to homeless people.

You are just always surrounded by people. When you are sleeping you are in a dorm, so I did not have time to sit down and really get upset about the situation. It was only about a week after I moved in where I could go, "Wow, that was quite a full-on experience".

Q210 Kevin Hollinrake: How do you feel now? How long was that ago?

Ross Symonds: It was January. The whole of January I was homeless. Now I am feeling strangely positive about things. Hopefully I may have even killed my depression because nothing has been that bad since, really.

Q211 Helen Hayes: Can I ask, as people who have all been through that experience of being made homeless, of going through the

system and coming out the other side of it, what is the single thing or couple of things that would have made a difference and would have made your experience better, less traumatic and easier to deal with?

Mateasa Grant: For me personally I feel maybe in the initial approach, when you first speak to somebody and you have to explain to them your situation, there could be somebody there to represent you and to engage with you as if they are on your side and they are not judging you or assuming that it is your fault. To have somebody with that sort of mind set or that sort of character to help you and assist you from the beginning would be an advantage.

The line of questioning, the questions in particular, are so limited as to how quick you get your help. If you answer these questions, "No, no, no, no", "Alright then, no, sorry, you do not get any help", so then you leave. Those questions around how vulnerable you are or whether you are a priority needs to be addressed as well.

Daisy-May Hudson: I completely agree with that. The assumption that you have done something wrong before they even really know your case, particularly on your first day of being homeless, is really tough. Also, the process of deciding whether something is suitable was something that was really problematic for my family. I always felt that when the people sit in the council, this is their 9-to-5 job, and they do not understand that one sentence that is said to you over the phone or on a letter has such huge ramifications for your whole life and your family's whole life. Maybe there needs to be more training in understanding the impact of their words or the impact of their decisions, because while they can leave their office and go home and go back to their house, we are waiting on every single thing that they are saying.

Ross Symonds: The same, basically. They are lovely people. That is why they go into that job because they are nice, caring people, but they are quite jaded, under-resourced and they are constantly dealing with some quite difficult characters. You all get thrown into that bracket. I would like to say extra training, but that is all they seem to do.

Mateasa Grant: I am not sure about extra training, but there just needs to be people in the organisation that are willing and have that within themselves to want to help people because, like you say, it is their 9-to-5 job. They are coming there to get paid. For me it is not like they actually cared. I preferred dealing with the charities, people that were not getting paid to help me, because they gave me the most support and they gave me the most understanding. I would prefer charities to have some form of more assistance and more funding by the Government. The Government put a lot of pressure on charities

and those sorts of organisations, but they should help support them and they should fund them.

Ross Symonds: If it was not for charity, I would be sleeping rough.

Mateasa Grant: All of us would not be here if it was not for charities.

Daisy-May Hudson: A lot of the information that I got about how to dispute suitability came from the Shelter website. Unfortunately their phone lines were so busy because there are so many people with housing issues that we could not ever get through. Their website was very helpful. Also, I have started now a dialogue with Epping Council since getting rehoused, and they are interested in talking about ways that information can be given as soon as you become homeless, so you feel less in the dark and you know what your rights are and you know who to go to for support. Things like that that can just make you feel comfortable in a really alien situation.

Q212 Chair: That is how councils might improve and we will take those points on-board. Is there one thing Government could do that you want us to make clear in our recommendations?

Daisy-May Hudson: Build more council housing.

Mateasa Grant: Build more housing, definitely. Like I said earlier, there have been times where you feel like there is housing available, so why is that not being utilised? It is clear that we do not have enough housing, and the housing that we should have should be suitable for the people in the area that are homeless. In London it is pointless building a whole load of one-bedroom and two-bedroom flats because we have a load of families living in hostels. We should build accommodation that is suitable for those.

I do not really feel just shipping people to different parts of the country just because that is where the housing is maybe more available is fair on people's mental health and on their social circumstance. Just generally it is not fair. Why should somebody just have to up and leave their whole life because that is where the house is?

Ross Symonds: More housing stock is the obvious answer, but, until then, more resources for the councils so it is not all down to charity.

Daisy-May Hudson: Also, more of a holistic approach to the whole housing crisis, because we are talking about council housing, but if the private rented sector was affordable then more people would be

able to live there. There is so much dependency on council housing because buying property is unaffordable and because renting a property is unaffordable, so now there is a huge demand for council housing yet council stock is being sold off or through regeneration schemes or Right to Buy. If you are going to tackle housing, you need to be looking at the whole picture.

Q213 Chair: Is there anything that you would like to say to us that you have not had an opportunity to say so far?

Daisy-May Hudson: It just seems quite ironic that we are sitting at an inquiry about homelessness, yet recently the Housing and Planning Act was passed. It just does not really make sense because there are policies in that there are going to actively make people homeless and housing less secure.

Chair: You have got your message across anyway. The Bill is now an Act, so that will be legislated on, but that does not stop us making recommendations and taking account of many of the things you said to us today. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us. You have really got some very important points across to us about your own personal experiences. That can be really helpful to the Committee. Thank you for coming.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick**, Heriot-Watt University, and **Professor Sarah Johnsen**, Heriot-Watt University, gave evidence.

Q214 Chair: Good afternoon. Thank you both for coming to give evidence to the Committee this afternoon. Can I just begin by asking you to just say who you are and the organisation you represent, please?

Professor Fitzpatrick: I am Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick. I am a professor at Heriot-Watt University. I am a Professor of Housing and Social Policy and I specialise in homelessness research, specifically the legislative aspects of homelessness in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Professor Johnsen: I am Professor Sarah Johnsen, Professorial Fellow at Heriot-Watt University, and most of my research focuses on homelessness, particularly rough sleeping and complex needs, and I have particular expertise in Housing First.

Q215 Chair: Thank you both for coming. Could you tell us a little bit about the Crisis independent review of homelessness legislation and what its findings were? It would be a good starting point for the Committee if you could just explain those.

Professor Fitzpatrick: I chaired the Crisis expert panel. On the panel, as you probably know, were a diverse range of representatives from the different stakeholder groups on homelessness, particularly statutory homelessness. We had some of the leading homelessness organisations. We also very importantly had representatives of the landlord bodies of social landlords and local authorities, as well as housing lawyers. That was absolutely critical to the work that was done by the Crisis independent panel because we wanted to try to develop a set of recommendations for changing the homelessness legislation in England, which had buy-in from all of those different stakeholder groups.

The key recommendation, as the Select Committee is already aware, from the panel was to recommend a set of changes to the homelessness legislation in England that were inspired by what had been called generally the Welsh model, based on the Act that was passed in Wales in 2014. Do you want me to outline the key aspects?

Chair: We will come on and look at the Welsh model in some more detail a little later on in the questioning.

Professor Fitzpatrick: The main recommendation was that the legislation in England ought to be amended in order to provide greater protection for single homeless people, to bring the Housing Options approach that has become so important in terms of the response to homeless people in England inside the statutory framework, and to put prevention interventions really front stage. That was the set of objectives that we had, and we felt that the Welsh model provided a number of important innovations that would be useful in furthering those aims in England.

Q216 Chair: Just looking at the current situation, was your basic finding that some groups lose out particularly under the current legislation and are not served well by it?

Professor Fitzpatrick: Yes. The finding of the panel, and indeed the evidence that has been available for some years, is that single homeless people generally in England do not get the service that most of us would want from local authorities and indeed that local authorities would want to provide.

Clearly that is rooted, in part, in the way the legislation was set up originally in 1977. It came into force in 1978 with the Housing

(Homeless Persons) Act such that the priority-need criteria excluded most single people from material assistance. They were entitled to advice and assistance but not to be given either temporary or permanent housing.

Local authorities have the power but not the duty to provide accommodation to single homeless people, but generally we know that they do not. We have evidence from research that has been done from case law and from the local authorities themselves. I am one of the authors of the homelessness monitor series, which Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation fund. We do a homelessness monitor report—a state-of-the-nation report on homelessness for each of the four UK countries.

In the English monitor report, we do a survey of local authorities each year and ask them a range of pertinent questions about policy and practices and what is happening on the ground in their area. We asked them last year whether they struggled to provide meaningful assistance to a range of groups, including families with children, people with complex needs and different single homeless groups. The majority said that they often struggled to provide meaningful assistance to single homeless people. Only 5% said that of families with children, but a majority said that with regard to single homeless people, particularly those with complex needs. We have a range of evidence, and really a consensus, that single homeless people do not get the help that they need to resolve their homelessness as things stand.

Q217 Bob Blackman: At the moment, vulnerability is a very important aspect when a local authority is assessing whether someone is homeless or not, and what that basis is. Do you think the bar is set too high? If so, how do you believe it should be adjusted?

Professor Fitzpatrick: Are we talking about single homelessness?

Bob Blackman: We are talking about vulnerability generally, because single homeless people at the moment, as you quite rightly say, do not really get a look in in most local authorities, unless there is some very special reason. Even with family accommodation, there are vulnerability assessments, are there not?

Professor Fitzpatrick: There are a number of different layers to that. Families with dependent children should have automatic priority need. There is no need to assess vulnerability in order to assess entitlements under the legislation. There is then another set of issues around the suitability of the accommodation offered to those families. At that point, their specific circumstances should be taken into account.

Where there has been a lot of case law and controversy over the definition of vulnerability is obviously with respect to single people. You will be aware, of course, that there has been the Pereira test, which has been very influential in court cases and local authority practice, whereby it was decided that the appropriate test for vulnerability was that a homeless applicant had to be more vulnerable than an ordinary homeless person rather than an ordinary person. The threshold then seemed to be ratcheted up in subsequent case law, to being more vulnerable than an ordinary street homeless person. That is an extraordinarily high bar because street homeless people are very vulnerable, which is something my colleague, Sarah, will say more about. They are extremely vulnerable in terms of mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, physical health issues and so on, so that bar is certainly an extremely high one.

When the recent case law was put out, the Hotak and Johnson cases, that further nuanced the position on that. The Johnson case did bring the bar down somewhat, but the Hotak case compensated for that to some extent, by saying, "If people could rely on a long-term basis on support from family and others, then perhaps that would be taken into account in vulnerability." So, the fundamental problem is that vulnerability is used as a means of excluding most single homeless people from material assistance. My own view would be that, rather than engaging in more debate and case law around exactly where we should put the vulnerability threshold, it would be better to do something more fundamental, as we are recommending in the Crisis report, to provide material assistance to single homeless people as a whole.

One of the things that has come out of a lot of the work that we have done with local authorities, through the homelessness monitor, the Crisis review panel and so on, is the frustration that a lot of local authority staff have; they feel that the way the legislation is set up at the moment, they are often unable to help the people that they view as the very most vulnerable—rough sleepers in particular—because they do not have a statutory duty to do so unless they meet this very high threshold test. There is a lot of support among many local authorities for providing more meaningful assistance to single people. I am not sure altering the vulnerability test is the best way to do that.

Q218 Bob Blackman: There appears to be a great deal of inconsistency about how housing services see their duties and the services they provide. We have just heard from a panel of witnesses with their personal experiences of a wide range of local authorities, I suspect, although we did not go into specifics. Do you think the problem is that local authorities are looking at, "Do we have a priority to house this

person or this family?” compared to, “Actually, we need to point people to somewhere they can live and assist them into accommodation”? They actually avoid that responsibility. Is that the problem?

Professor Fitzpatrick: I think the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, back in 1977 when it was first passed, was a radical change and a very important step forward for homeless people, but single homeless people were always left out of that. It means that, over the last 40 years, local authorities have to work within the law, and you have had a culture that has built up—the legislation is very important in leading culture and culture change—whereby there is this very sharp division being made between priority-need cases, mostly families with children and some vulnerable single people, and single people. Local authorities, for good reasons, spend a lot of their time assessing what people’s entitlements are to ensure that they stay on the right side of the law. That makes it very difficult for local authorities—or it has in the past made it very difficult for them—to engage in the sort of problem-solving applicant-centred approach that you would want them to undertake.

Now, the introduction of Housing Options from around 2003 onwards did lead to a very sharp culture change and a very big decline in the number of households accepted as statutory homeless in England. That was a change that was welcomed by most local authorities and a lot of frontline staff in local authorities, because it meant a move away from that very priority-setting, legalistic and rather process-orientated approach towards a more problem-solving-type approach. The difficulty they have is that there has been an awkward fit between the statutory entitlements people have and the Housing Options approach. That is where you get into that difficult territory about whether there is gate-keeping going on, about whether local authorities are just diverting people away from their entitlements. I am convinced that there is a lot of very good prevention work that goes on under the Housing Options umbrella in England, but because it is outside the statutory framework it is not very transparent exactly what local authorities are doing, and therefore it is not clear which local authorities are doing good work and which local authorities are gate-keeping. We do not have much research evidence on it either.

The principles of Housing Options are absolutely right and command a great deal of consensus. The time has come to reconcile that with the legal framework. I would not blame local authorities for their practices. We need to provide a legal and policy framework that enables them to have that more outcomes-focused approach, and that has been difficult for them.

Q219 Bob Blackman: How should local authority housing services be monitored? Because at the moment there is no process for monitoring them. As you say, anecdotally, some of them will be good, some of them will be bad, some may do extra things, some will provide additional services, but at the moment there is no monitoring of that all, is there?

Professor Fitzpatrick: Yes. Certainly those of us who are interested in the promotion of good homelessness practice would like to see more regulation and monitoring. I appreciate that there is a lot of wider politics around whether there should be any kind of more rolling programme of audit and regulation and so on. I look to Scotland—obviously, I do a lot of work on homelessness in Scotland—and there the Scottish Housing Regulator has been a very, very important stakeholder in the development of homelessness policy and in ensuring that there is actually a culture in Scotland that is very anti-gate-keeping. Local authorities are very concerned about being accused of gate-keeping because the Scottish Housing Regulator makes that part of the inspection programme that they undertake, which is no longer a rolling programme. It is lighter-touch than it once was. Still they do these very in-depth thematic reports, which are taken very seriously. In an ideal world we would want to see something like that in England as well, speaking personally, but I understand from discussions on these things that it might not be something that commands consensus across the board, because clearly there are resource implications and it has to be proportionate and so on. I do think it is a gap at the moment that there is not that kind of inspection and regulation regime. You are reliant on individual cases going to court and so on; that is very important as a way of holding local authorities to account, but a more regulatory function would also be good and very helpful.

Q220 Helen Hayes: I agree with you. The regulatory framework and the framework of responsibilities that councils have needs to change. I know lots of councils are very nervous of that because of the resourcing impacts of a change in their responsibilities. I just wondered whether, as part of the review, you had looked at what a change in the duties would do to councils that are already stretched in their ability to meet the responsibilities that they have at the moment. What might be necessary to ensure that not only do they have new duties, but also the ability to meet them?

Professor Fitzpatrick: I think there we are getting into the details of the recommendations that were made by the Crisis independent review panel. The review panel was very mindful of the pressures that local authorities are under, and the increasing pressures that local authorities are under. We had three local authorities represented on the panel, albeit that everyone was there in an independent personal capacity, but they were coming from that perspective. There has been

a lot of engagement outside the panel with local authorities in different fora about the new duties.

The way I would characterise what we are recommending in the Crisis review report is actually not so much additional duties but reshaped duties. I am not suggesting that there would not be an upfront investment required to lead the cultural change. It will be quite a big cultural change, more for some local authorities than for others, but certainly quite a big culture change, and there will need to be some investment upfront. There is also some very significant scope for cost-savings in the longer term that perhaps we can come on to.

What I would also say is in the homelessness monitor report, I mentioned earlier we do this survey of local authorities each year, and we asked them for their reaction to the Welsh model, because that is the direction that we were taking in terms of recommendations. A majority were in favour of it in terms of English local authorities; it was more evenly split in London, but it was the majority; even in London it was more or less 50/50. They were in favour of it. We asked some open questions about why they were in favour of it. There were a range of reasons. Some of that was about making better use of the resources they already have. It is not a silver bullet. What we have recommended is not going to suddenly generate lots of new houses and so on. It is about making best use of the resources that they have, by, for example, putting more emphasis on prevention, giving them longer to engage in those preventative measures, and also protecting them from allegations of gate-keeping if they try to engage and to incentivise households to engage in relief and prevention efforts, rather than go down the statutory homelessness route where they have to accept the duty to offer secure rehousing?

I do not want to give the impression that there are not a lot of challenges there. There would have to be some upfront investment and some local authorities will feel that it is too challenging for them. My sense is that the majority of local authorities think that there is a good opportunity here to make better use of the existing resources that they have.

Q221 Alison Thewliss: I come from Scotland. I am going to ask a couple of questions about the experience that Scotland has been through in changing the homelessness legislation there. We have discussed the issues around priority needs, as it is used within the law in England. I was wondering if you could tell the Committee a bit more about the process we went through in Scotland to get to abolishing priority need and the impact that that has had.

Professor Fitzpatrick: I should declare an interest, so to speak, in the sense that I was a member of the Homelessness Task Force that developed proposals that eventually led to the 2003 Act and the abolition of priority need. I was involved in those discussions way back then as well. There were a number of recommendations from the Homelessness Task Force, but really the most important one involved the abolition of priority need. What that means, effectively, is that virtually every homeless person is entitled to settled, permanent rehousing. That is absolutely unique in itself, an entitlement that you would not get anywhere else in the world. It was very radical and it has won Human Rights Awards and so on, and I think quite rightly.

The impact of the abolition of priority need was of course to bring single homeless people into the system. We saw an early rise in the number of acceptances from 2002-03 up until 2005-06; the number of homeless acceptances in Scotland did rise, but actually what people often do not realise is that they then started to tail off slightly. There was just an initial upsurge. We did not have this huge increase in the number of acceptances, but what we did have was a very large increase in the use of temporary accommodation in Scotland. The number of households in temporary accommodation trebled between 2001 and 2011. That was in part because the demand went up because the number of people accepted rose, but much more importantly—and this is something that the Homelessness Task Force probably had not anticipated—the number of social lettings declined over that period for unrelated reasons to do with demography and the long-term impact of the Right to Buy. It meant that it became more difficult to move people out of temporary accommodation and into social house.

What we should have done, as a task force, and perhaps what the governments that were implementing it should have done, is move on the prevention agenda much more quickly than we did. We reinforced the statutory safety net without having that rigorous emphasis on homelessness prevention to minimise the number of people moving into the safety net. I think we should have taken on the Housing Options model much earlier than we did. We did it in 2010; we should have done it back in 2002-03. In Scotland the concerns about gate-keeping would have been less so because you have the Scottish Housing Regulator keeping a careful watch on that.

The ideal homelessness system that we are trying to work towards is to have the rigorous emphasis on prevention and early intervention that the Welsh model and our recommendations for England are trying to achieve, so that you minimise the number of people who need to use the ultimate statutory homelessness duty. It means that at that point, hopefully, you can abolish priority need so that everyone who does find

themselves homeless after all those efforts can actually be rehoused. That is what Scotland is now attempting to do because we have both abolished priority need and we have recently implemented Housing Options. That is early days; it is still to be worked through in Scotland, but it is effectively what the Welsh model is trying to achieve.

Q222 Alison Thewliss: I was very interested in some of the Welsh model things. I think one of my colleagues is going to ask you a wee bit more about that as well. I was looking through the homelessness monitor report, which has been very good, and I am very impressed with the thoroughness of which all the different issues around homelessness are examined there. There was a bit about the impact of welfare reform on homelessness and the different approaches in Scotland going forward and England. Can you tell us a wee bit more about that as well? Some of the evidence earlier on was talking about benefits and welfare reform?

Professor Fitzpatrick: Welfare reform is obviously in principle GB-wide and has had impacts on homelessness across GB, but in different parts of the country there have been mitigation efforts made. Particularly if you are talking about Scotland, there have been some very important mitigation efforts made. There have also been in England and elsewhere, but just focusing on Scotland, the Scottish Government and Parliament have done a number of things that have been very important in mitigating the impact of welfare reform and its link to homelessness. The Scottish Welfare Fund has been actually really rather an important success in Scotland, and it has really protected people in crisis in a way that has come out of other research that we have done on destitution and so on. To be fair, across most of GB it has really stopped the bedroom tax generating much by way of homelessness because of the extent to which discretionary housing payments have been used to mitigate that. There is not just the homelessness legislation in Scotland, but other aspects of housing policy in Scotland and particularly, to be honest, the fact that social housing supply is not under anything like the same pressure in Scotland as it is in England means that the impacts have not been quite so great, as yet.

But there are a number of things that are extremely difficult to manage in Scotland as well as in England. I am thinking particularly of the shared accommodation rate for under-35s; that has been very problematic throughout GB with respect to the rehousing of single homeless under-35s. In Scotland, in particular, the proposed extension of the LHA, or the shared accommodation rate, to the social sector is going to be particularly difficult because such a high proportion, more than half, probably, of all homelessness acceptances in Scotland are single under-35s. A lot of that social housing is no longer going to be

covered by housing benefit, so there are particular issues for Scotland, going forward, in that respect.

Welfare reform is very regional in its impacts all over GB. In London you have an extremely difficult situation, with the local housing allowance caps being a primary driver of homelessness, because they are interacting with this very high-pressure housing market. Elsewhere in England, there is more emphasis on the impact that the increasing or intensifying sanctions regime has had and indeed in some areas people focus on the bedroom tax. It tends to be that people talk to us a lot about the problems of the shared accommodation rate everywhere, but there are other factors, such as the benefit cap in London as well. Scotland is part of that mix. It is partly due to the mitigation efforts we have had from the Scottish Government, but quite a lot of it is the fact that the housing market looks different in Scotland and things are a bit easier for that reason.

Q223 Helen Hayes: I have some questions about the Welsh model now if that is okay. First, could you explain why the extension in Wales in relation to the risk of homelessness from 28 days to 56 days is important?

Professor Fitzpatrick: This is one of the recommendations that we call a no-brainer, because it commanded more or less absolute consensus. I cannot remember anyone disagreeing with this recommendation from any stakeholder group. What local authorities say is that 28 days just does not give them enough time to intervene in a meaningful way. As I am sure you know, people having their assured shorthold tenancies in the private sector ended is the number one cause of statutory homelessness in England now. Once you get inside that 28 days, it can be very difficult to do anything about that. 56 days, of course, matches quite closely the notice period that is needed before people are asked to leave at the end of a fixed-term tenancy. It is two months' notice. It gives local authorities much more breathing space to work with people and to do something sensible.

That is just on the private sector rented side. You could argue as well for other potential causes of homelessness, whether it be rent arrears or anti-social behaviour, that having that longer period of notice gives them longer to work with those households. I would say that that is one of those recommendations that really is pretty unproblematic and uncontroversial; really, it would be a bit strange if we did not do it, because it is obviously a good idea.

Q224 Helen Hayes: How effective has the prevention and relief work being undertaken by Welsh local authorities been so far?

Professor Fitzpatrick: One thing that has to be said is that it is early days. The relevant legislation has only been in force for just over a year. We only have statistical returns for the first three quarters. There is an evaluation that has just recently been commissioned by the Welsh Government that is just about to start. We should have those caveats in there.

All of that said, I would be in good company by being very upbeat about what we are hearing out of Wales so far. If you look at the statistics, there has been a 67% drop in the number of households accepted as homeless in Wales. We await the evaluation behind those statistics, but by anyone's standards that is a very significant drop. You are also seeing success rates in terms of both prevention and relief being reported that are 60-odd percent. I think it is 67% for one and 63% for the other. It is somewhat lower for single people, but still very high.

Just as importantly, the anecdotal evidence we have had back from the voluntary sector as well as the local authorities is that the new is working well. When we did the last Welsh homelessness monitor, we were literally going to press just as the legislation came into force, so we were hearing what people were anticipating rather than what they were experiencing, and we did get a very strong sense at that point of the sheer extent and breadth of the goodwill that the new model was attracting

My sense—and I have not done any more research in Wales since that point, but I have talked with people about it both in the context of the Crisis panel work and also other work that we are doing—is that it continues to command a high-level of consensus. There have been challenges. Some local authorities have had a big culture change to go through, others less so; others say that it was closer to what they were doing already. The sense I get is that we can be very optimistic. The evidence so far would warrant optimism. I got the sense that one of the things that worked very well in Wales was the training that the Welsh Government invested in. Very cleverly, that training was delivered jointly by the Welsh Local Government Association and by Shelter Cymru, and having those different stakeholder interests represented in the training package meant that it was very well received by the local authorities. I would be very upbeat and optimistic, but with the caveat that it is still early days.

Q225 Helen Hayes: You have partially answered my final question, but if you could just say a little more about how the new duties were received by local authorities across Wales and the support that was

put in place to facilitate the transition and whether that was sufficient and how that went.

Professor Fitzpatrick: As I said, the only academic research that I have done was at the point that the new duties were just about to come into force. People had been through the training by that point. They knew what the financial package was going to be and so on, and of course there are always going to be concerns about whether the resources were enough. This was a big change in culture. There were also concerns on the voluntary sector side that perhaps the new model had not achieved all that they had hoped, in terms of things like there being a duty to ensure everyone had somewhere safe to stay and so on. Like all of these things, it represented something of a compromise.

The overall sense that I had, both from local authorities and from the other stakeholders at that point, was that they were very supportive of the model. They thought it was a big step forward from the previous more legalistic approach. They felt reasonably well supported, or pretty well supported, in terms of implementing it, which is not to say that there were not concerns. Some local authorities had much more ground to make up than others, so there was more concern in some areas than others. Since then, I am reliant more on what I am hearing from colleagues who are working in Wales and are doing consultancy in Wales, or are visiting Wales or are providing services there. The feedback that I have had personally is still really very positive, but that is not based on any new research.

Q226 Chair: Sarah Johnsen, should we be looking for any changes specifically with regard to people who have complex needs? That is not just homelessness but probably mental health problems, drug addiction or alcohol problems. Should we be looking to change our approach to dealing with those individuals as well?

Professor Johnsen: This is where I have my chance to push for Housing First.

Chair: I was going to ask colleagues to come in and ask about that.

Professor Johnsen: Okay, should I not? You want a more general comment.

Chair: Yes, just generally.

Professor Johnsen: Would you like me to talk about Housing First now?

Chair: I will ask my colleague.

Kevin Hollinrake: If that is the answer to the question—

Chair: Right, I have been put in my place. Off you go, yes.

Professor Johnsen: Again, Suzanne used the phrase “no-brainer” earlier, and I think that is a populism that is appropriate in this case also. There is really now consistent compelling evidence internationally from a number of countries that have implemented it using very robust randomised control trial studies and so on to show that it is an extremely effective intervention with people with long-term experiences of homelessness and complex needs, particularly substance misuse issues and/or mental health problems. Where it has been particularly successful is around housing sustainment. In all of these studies, 80% to 90% of people who have been accommodated by Housing First are still housed between one and two years later. You cannot underestimate the significance of that outcome, given that this is a group of people who have cycled in and out of homelessness and of various forms of institutional care, often for very many years. It has been extremely effective on that account, and there is certainly a call for promoting that as part of strategies to address long-term homelessness.

Q227 Kevin Hollinrake: It sounds sensible—I can see that—but there are also some downsides in terms of the effect on other members of that accommodation? If you are bringing alcohol or other substances into a hostel or supported housing that must potentially lead to some not very pleasant influences on other people in that housing.

Professor Johnsen: Housing First actually encourages the use of independent tenancies and scattered-site housing sort of within the community. Of course there are still issues and concerns around the risk of neighbourhood disturbance and so on. There are a few key differentiating features of Housing First. One is that the tenancy should be long-term. There also should be long-term and very intensive support attached to that, and certainly what various Housing First pilots have found is that when that support is ready and available for people, the concerns about neighbourhood disturbance just do not come to fruition. What tends to happen when any concerns are raised by neighbours or housing providers is they will get in contact with the Housing First support, the team that provides support, alert them to that and then the support team will go and mitigate that. The evidence is that when that is done quickly and efficiently, it stops things escalating to a point, so the neighbourhood disturbance does not become a massive issue and it can also prevent potential for evictions.

Q228 Kevin Hollinrake: So are you saying you would not promote the Housing First type model if it was in a communal living environment?

Professor Johnsen: That is a very good question. There have been a few countries have trialled Housing First in the scattered-site housing where people are dispersed within the general community and also more congregate forms of housing. In Finland, for example, a number of former shelters, large-scale shelters, were converted to Housing First accommodation, and also in Denmark they compared scattered-site versus congregate housing and consistently the outcomes have been better for people in the scattered-site housing. Very importantly, research also consistently shows that homeless people using these services themselves much prefer the scattered-site housing.

There was a massive social experimentation project funded by the European Commission called the Housing First Europe project, and that concluded that actually the congregate forms of Housing First, insofar as they are used, should be reserved for those people who do not want dispersed accommodation or have not done well in dispersed accommodation with intensive support. Certainly the architects of Housing First and most people who endorse it would promote the use of scattered-site on a number of grounds: it is what homeless people prefer; it reduces the risk of long-term institutionalisation; it mitigates any stigma attached with homeless accommodation; it can facilitate community integration; and also it ensures that homeless people are not surrounded in the long term by other formerly homeless people, who might have complex needs such as substance issues and mental health issues, because this can, as you correctly point out, create a source of conflict and can also potentially impede people's recovery.

Q229 Kevin Hollinrake: Okay. It is great to have some reassurance for my mother, because she used to run a rehabilitation programme for ex-offenders, and she had a zero drugs and alcohol policy in that hostel. I am sure she would be pleased about that.

Professor Johnsen: If the support is there, the neighbourhood disturbance is not nearly the issue that people fear it will be. That has been quite consistently shown in research.

Q230 Mary Robinson: You have probably answered the question that I was going to ask, which was whether you thought Housing First, or the principles from it, should be rolled out in England. I am assuming that the answer to that would be "yes", but I just want to then put a contrary experience, which is from one of our previous sessions where a representative from Manchester City Council, and another from Bristol City, expressed doubts about it, basically raising the prospect that people could find it an easy route to getting to housing, by declaring themselves homeless in that way.

Professor Johnsen: Housing First has generally been used with people with the most extreme, complex experiences—people who have been historically very service-resistant and the ones who have cycled in and out of homelessness and so on. Yes, there is a complicated issue about the kind of fairness of people potentially queue-jumping in a context where social housing particularly is very, very scarce. However, there is a kind of moral case for supporting these people who are extremely vulnerable and often have forms of trauma dating back to childhood, but also there is an economic case. Again, research has consistently shown that Housing First is cost-effective and has the potential to deliver quite extreme cost savings and therefore it will cost the public purse less. We do not have the same degree of evidence in the UK to showcase the cost-effectiveness of Housing First as is the case elsewhere. In the United States, for example, they were showing that it can save—I cannot remember the statistics exactly off the top of my head—in the order of thousands of US dollars per year, compared with providing communal hostel accommodation, shelter and so on.

In the UK what we have heard is that because the pilots have been so small—they are 10 to 20 people—it is very difficult to evidence the cost savings attached to that. What has been shown by some research conducted by the University of York is that actually it is almost certainly not going to cost any more than hostel accommodation and it has the potential to cost an awful lot less.

Q231 Mary Robinson: Would you say on that basis that it should be extended in England?

Professor Johnsen: Yes.

Q232 Chair: I have one question about the wider approach to housing homeless people, because in the end we are talking about the allocation of a scarce resource—social housing. There are other people in priority need as well; people may have been on the waiting list for 10 or 15 years, and they may resent the fact that someone who has not been on the housing list, or has been on a very short time, gets a council house that they have been waiting 15 years for and still have not got. So how far does housing policy take account of these competing needs, where it is not just about housing homeless families but actually trying to meet needs of other people as well?

Professor Fitzpatrick: Perhaps I will kick off and then Sarah might want to join in. Just picking up the point on Housing First, I want to reinforce that I am very much of the same mind as Sarah on this and think that the rolling out of Housing First in England should be a priority for Government because the evidence is just so strong that it is the right model. The number of people involved in that very complex

needs end of the spectrum is actually relatively small, in terms of the number of people in any one local authority who are in that category. They are also in very extreme forms of need. They also cost the taxpayer a lot of money in terms of the other public services that they use, for very poor outcomes. Therefore, I think there is both an economic and a moral case, as Sarah said, on Housing First.

On the wider issue of statutory homelessness and people who are homeless and perhaps who have some other issues but not the more extreme cases we are talking about in terms of people who have been sleeping rough for many years, there is a balance to be struck. I would agree with that. One of the concerns, going back to Scotland for a moment, is that we got into a position, when we abolished priority need, that it was approaching more than half of all social housing allocations were going to statutory homeless households, and personally I felt that was too many and a lot of people felt it was too many, because you do need space for these other groups as well.

That reinforces the case for the Housing Options/Welsh model whereby, when you are faced with a homeless person, you do want to try to do your best to resolve their problem but that is not necessarily about the allocation of social housing. In the allocation of social housing, they should have reasonable preference because I think that it is a very important principle that we should allocate based primarily on housing need. Other factors are important but I think housing need is very important. However, I do not think that we should think of homelessness policy entirely as being about the allocation of social housing. I think that is partly what the Housing Options model helped us move away from. You can resolve people's homelessness in other ways. Homeless people should have reasonable preference in social housing allocations but I would not take the view that they should have overriding preference over everyone else. We should always ensure that there is space for the other medical and other priority groups and, to some extent as well, to take account of other public policy objectives, such as ensuring that people can be mobile and take up work.

What I would not want is to see us going to the other end of the extreme, which is sometimes suggested, where we move away very radically from social housing being allocated on the basis of need and instead being allocated on the basis of "deserve", if you like. We can see from the past, from before we had homelessness legislation, that that can lead to the exclusion of the most vulnerable and the poorest and the people who are in greatest need and that is a very retrograde step. But it is getting the balance right and ensuring that we take steps such that there are a range of options that we look at for homeless people and not just the allocation of social housing.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for coming this afternoon to give evidence to the Committee on this important subject. Thank you very much.