

Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Homelessness Reduction Act, HC 554

Monday 27 November 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 November 2017.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Clive Betts (Chair); Mike Amesbury; Bob Blackman; Helen Hayes; Andrew Lewer; Fiona Onasanya; Mary Robinson; Liz Twist.

Questions 1 - 81

Witnesses

I: Matt Downie, Director, Policy and External Affairs, Crisis; Deborah Garvie, Policy Manager, Shelter.

II: Councillor Rachel Eburne, Deputy Chair, LGA Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, and Mid-Suffolk District Councillor, Local Government Association; Sir Steve Bullock, Mayor of Lewisham, and Executive Member for Housing, London Councils.

III: Mr Marcus Jones MP, Minister for Local Government, Department for Communities and Local Government; Val Keen, Head of Implementation, Homelessness Reduction Act, Department for Communities and Local Government.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Matt Downie and Deborah Garvie.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us today. This is a one-off session on the Government's draft homelessness code of guidance. Just before we start the evidence session, could I ask members of the Committee to put on record any interests they may have that may be relevant to this session? I am a Vice-Chairman of the Local Government Association.

Mike Amesbury: I employ a councillor in my office.

Helen Hayes: As do I.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liz Twist: I am a councillor with Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council.

Bob Blackman: I am a Vice-President of the LGA, I am a sponsor of the Act and also I have a small property portfolio.

Mary Robinson: I employ a councillor in my office too.

Andrew Lewer: I am a Vice-President of the LGA as well.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming. Can you just say who you are and the organisation you represent, to begin with?

Deborah Garvie: I am Deborah Garvie, policy manager at Shelter.

Matt Downie: I am Matt Downie from Crisis.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you both for coming this afternoon. I have a fairly obvious first question: are you satisfied with the code of guidance?

Deborah Garvie: Generally speaking, we think it is well-drafted. We are very pleased that it retains a lot of the detail of the existing code. Our advice services, when they are assisting people at risk of homelessness and who are homeless, use the code on a very regular basis—weekly—when we are negotiating with councils to ensure that they fulfil their legal duties. That detail is very important; otherwise, of course, the detail gets decided in the courts and the whole spirit of this legislation is to make sure that that is avoided, wherever possible. However, there are areas where we do think it would benefit from some tightening and some additional detail.

Matt Downie: The main point to make is that, in and of itself, the guidance is written to the letter of the law; it is not written to the spirit of the law. Having been involved a lot in the discussions and negotiations of Mr Blackman's Bill, I feel that this is a missed opportunity to assist the shift in culture that was sought throughout. There are a number of individual instances of that, where particularly the opportunity to assist and suggest to local councils that they can step back from the minimum possible arrangements, from anything that might be an adversarial interaction between an applicant and the authority, could and should be taken. I would be happy to give a couple of examples of that, if that is useful.

Chair: Yes, please, that would help us.

Matt Downie: First of all, the guidance starts by talking about homelessness strategies and, again, talks about some of the stuff that was already there in the previous guidance. What it does not say is that, with a duty to refer coming, every single opportunity can and should be taken, with your local prisons, your Jobcentres, your armed forces, whatever it might be; they can and should be taken and should be part of your new protocols and strategies.



Another example is, when you look at the Local Connection section—chapter 10—what it says, quite rightly, is that, once somebody's 56 days of prevention have stopped, the local authority can then refer them on to where they do have a local connection. What it could say is that, if the activity that is taking place within those 56 days is working, why not carry it on? Why refer somebody on to somewhere else?

There are a number of these other ideas as well, where the eligibility for services is the thing that is meant to be undone, in my understanding of what the spirit of this legislation is, but what it is doing is rehearsing where that eligibility is. In some ways, what you could say about the change in legislation is that everyone who presents to any authority is owed something. Even people with no recourse to public funds are owed information and advice, free at the point of use. If you start from that perspective, you would end up with a different set of advice and guidance to local councils.

Q4 **Chair:** Presumably, you were consulted about the code, so were you listened to?

Matt Downie: We were consulted in a number of ways in the structure of the guidance, as it was put together, and I would say that we have, since the draft, had positive conversations with officials about this particular point about encouraging more of the spirit of the Act.

Q5 **Chair:** Do you think you are being listened to now?

Matt Downie: I could not possibly say. I do not know that for a fact.

Deborah Garvie: Our key area of concern is the guidance on affordability of accommodation. There are regulations relating to affordability of accommodation offered, but a lot of the detail is picked up in the code. The existing code has a very useful paragraph 17.40, which sets out that the accommodation would not be affordable "if the applicant would be left with a residual income which would be less than the level of income support or income-based jobseekers allowance that is applicable" in respect of them. It replaces with paragraph 17.45 in the draft code, which states that authorities would "need to consider whether the applicant can afford the housing costs without being deprived of basic essentials such as food, clothing, heating, transport", etc. To us, that is quite a major shift.

Always, the principle of whether accommodation is affordable has been that you should not be dipping into your residual income—subsistence-level welfare benefits—to afford your housing costs. That is what housing benefit is for. We would not like to see a shift to a council deciding what the level of affordability should be in terms of being deprived of basic essentials, first and foremost because that would undermine the principle that subsistence benefits are for basic subsistence and you should not be going below those, but also because that then shifts it on to councils to decide what a basic essential is. We are seeing some councils now going



HOUSE OF COMMONS

through every item of expenditure of a household. We could get ourselves into a scenario where the council is saying, "Why are you feeding your children brown bread rather than white, which is cheaper?" and having those very detailed spending decisions to decide whether or not you can afford your accommodation, when affordability should mean that you do not have to dip into income that should just be there for your subsistence and then you make decisions within that.

Q6 **Chair:** Just coming back to Crisis, have you got a detailed list of examples where you think the wording should be changed in the way that you indicated, to give a different approach to the code?

Matt Downie: There are a number of chapters. Any chapter around eligibility or the prevention or relief duty should, from our perspective, start with the presumption that—

Q7 **Chair:** Can you give us a note on that?

Matt Downie: Yes, of course; line by line, absolutely.

Q8 **Liz Twist:** Do you think more information should be included in the guidance to ensure that advice offered by local authorities is appropriate for different groups of people at risk of homelessness?

Matt Downie: Yes, there are a few groups just to touch on. The first is victims of domestic abuse. Late on in the guidance, there is a clear understanding that abuse is both physical and non-physical. Coercion, threats and psychological abuse should be considered as domestic abuse. However, before that point, it is really not clear. There are some differences of explanation and, for any local authority dipping into rather than reading the whole way through 170 pages, that should be clearer.

There is a lot of really good practice on the issue of domestic abuse and homelessness, which could really be brought out here. We recently had an inquiry of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness, which suggested things like the reciprocal arrangements between different local authorities and different housing associations, which cost very little but allow for people to move to different areas, where they are escaping abuse, and then the really quite pernicious experience that people have, where they cannot provide the exact form of ID that would prove a connection or whatever it is that needs to be proved in a situation of escaping domestic abuse. There were some good suggestions and examples made about different types of ID and proof that can be used. That sort of thing, where you can understand that people can access services they need and are entitled to, would be good.

There is a section at the back about victims of modern slavery and trafficking. It is absolutely brilliant that the guidance points more towards that; it is just not really clear on what basis anybody who is experiencing that is eligible for anything and, from the perspective of the authority, what they are supposed to do. For example, if the suggestion is that somebody who otherwise might not have habitual residency is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

eligible for some sort of assistance, it does not say that. Aside from identifying people, I am not really clear what that is.

Just on the issue of people with no recourse, the guidance helpfully talks about the types of information and advice for certain cohorts of people, but it does not mention that cohort of people. For any local authority now struggling with ineligible groups of homeless people, provisions around information and advice for that group are really important, and there are real things that can be done. Certainly, where we run services, there is a lot that we can provide to assist that group but, if you are not really incentivised through this guidance, then you might not do it.

Deborah Garvie: Chapters 21 to 25 deal with specific groups, and we generally feel that those sections are good; however, we would agree with Crisis that we would also highlight chapter 23 on ex-offenders, and also chapter 25, which has already been alluded to, on victims of trafficking. They are a little thin on the ground in terms of practical operation and information, and it is our understanding that there will also be codes of practice and a good-practice hub available from DCLG to go into some of the more practice expectations and examples. Maybe the code is not the place for those things but we do still think there could be a bit more information and a bit more meat on the bone in those two particular sections.

Q9 **Liz Twist:** Would you like to see the guidance itself strengthened in those areas?

Deborah Garvie: Yes, there are certain amounts of detail that we will also put into our fuller response, but they are a little thin on the ground.

Q10 **Helen Hayes:** I would just like to come back to the duty to refer, which you mentioned briefly earlier. Under the duty to refer, local procedures will be articulated by each local authority, and I wondered about the extent to which you were concerned that that flexibility allows inconsistencies and potentially a postcode lottery to emerge across the country as councils are allowed to respond in a different way.

Deborah Garvie: In terms of the way we would see that working, there is a slight issue where it says that a referral should not be taken as a homeless application, and we cannot see why it would not be. A homeless application can be where you walk into a Housing Options office and say, "I would like to apply for homelessness assistance". The authority would then go on and see whether you meet the criteria for them owing you a specific duty, but it should be taken as an application. Certainly, we would think that, if a referral is made from a professional in some other public authority—with the applicant's consent, which is the requirement—why should that not be seen as a homeless application?

Again, however, we have had a positive discussion with DCLG on this matter and their view was that there may not be a duty owed because the person might be at risk of homelessness but not quite fall within



HOUSE OF COMMONS

“threatened with homelessness” or the definition of “homeless”. In terms of the way we see it operating, certainly that should still be seen as an application, and then the authority would decide whether they owe a legal duty or not.

We would also like to see more encouragement of the public authority to co-operate. Mr Blackman’s original draft had a duty to co-operate on public authorities, and my understanding is that the reason that that was changed to refer is because there would have to be a lot of negotiation with other government departments and the Bill needed to get through. That is understandable but, again, in the spirit of the legislation, it would be helpful. What you would not want to see happen is a referral made by, say, email, and then the housing local authority, quite rightly, take that up, want to contact the person as soon as possible and ask for contact information, and the authority that referred just do not reply or give any further assistance. That would rather undermine the spirit of what the duty is there for.

Matt Downie: I would definitely agree with that. The opportunity to consider it as an application is there, particularly because of the consent that is needed from the applicant themselves.

When the National Audit Office report about DCLG approaches to homelessness came out, one of the interesting lines in there was about this light-touch approach, and this is an example of that. If you just take, for example, the fact that this does not really give guidance on how to respond to referrals on timescales, I can see that freedom and flexibility being a good thing for authorities, but we already know that. Just imagine a situation where somebody takes the opportunity not to respond until such time as the person has become homeless, because, at that point, you can apply a local connection, and on we go. You start to see where the dangers are. There has to be a better balance of informed prescription for local authority practice in this area; otherwise, what you might end up with is, on the one hand, referring authorities washing their hands of something and, on the other hand, the receiving local council and the Housing Options not taking every opportunity.

I would also say that there is nothing on whether the local authority should respond directly to the applicant, which needs clearing up. At a more strategic level, this offers an opportunity to build partnerships between different agencies locally. We are currently running a pilot in Newcastle, where Housing Options, ourselves and Jobcentre Plus are working together, sharing some data—where that is legal—sharing some practice and sharing some locations of staff. Therefore, that is the duty to co-operate and refer, all in one, and that is done through encouraging local councils to make those relationships being about the sum of its parts rather than just who tells what and what the minimum is that you can get away with.



Deborah Garvie: If I might just add, in terms of the postcode lottery point, the way we would see it working is that the applicant would apply to wherever they were. It may well be that they have been living elsewhere and, for example, when a relationship break down, they might move back with their mum or something. Their home could still be saved where they had been living, and they may well want to return that area because their children are in school and so on and so forth. The way we would see it working is that you would apply, perhaps because you need to do it in person, to wherever you happen to be and, under the prevention duty, it could well be a reasonable step that the authority that you apply to assess you and give you a minimal personalised plan, which says, "A reasonable step for you is for us to refer you back to where your home is, so that the authority there, which is plugged into local debt advice services there, can then assist you to save that home".

Certainly, when it comes to the relief duty, local connection applies there, so again there would be a referral back. It would not really matter where you apply, because it would be reasonable, depending on the circumstances, to refer you back to the authority that you have come from anyway.

Matt Downie: Just to add, one really good place to start with making sure this section can be as best as it could be would be for the department to look at where it is already spending money on trailblazers, because that has built a whole load of partnerships and good practice that is a lot more than the minimum that is suggested here.

Q11 **Helen Hayes:** You will be aware that there is some uncertainty still around the range of public bodies to which the duty to refer will apply, and I wondered about the extent to which you think that that is a problem and, in particular, whether you think it is a problem in relation to the implementation date of October 2018 in terms of them identifying the authorities and allowing them the time to put in place appropriate procedures and capacity. Do you think there are a range of issues around that?

Deborah Garvie: Matt has already alluded to the fact that it is important that, again, the spirit of this legislation is that you should be seeing public agencies in any given area working together to prevent homelessness for those at risk. Although it is not ideal if there is a delay to that aspect of the legislation, it is important to get it right. If that takes a bit longer because of negotiation with those various bodies, that is better. It is important that it is got right and that those mechanisms of joint working are worked through. Ideally, it would be best not to delay but we would not be averse to that.

In terms of the bodies that should be included, as we said in the consultation meetings, we would not just want to see hospitals, for example, but GPs. At the moment, we are trialling housing advice on prescription, because what we know is that, when people start to become at risk of homelessness, often their first port of call is the GP because



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they develop anxiety. The easiest way to deal with that is not necessarily a health issue but a housing-advice issue. We would also like to see some attempt to bring housing associations within that.

Q12 Helen Hayes: What will it need for that to work differently to the way that GPs, schools and other agencies currently make representations on behalf of people? I see lots of letters from GPs saying that housing is a primary issue affecting their patients and asking the local authority to do something about it. That just hits a system, very often, which already does not have the capacity to deal with those new referrals, so what makes it different in this instance?

Deborah Garvie: That is why we would like to see a referral being seen as an application for assistance, because that then says that the authority that receives the referral has to assess the applicant. What they would look at, in the spirit of the legislation, is, "How can we assist you? We might not have a duty to assist you but we may well have a general duty to provide advice and information and to refer you to other agencies. We then may well have a duty to assist you", and take it from there. It does not necessarily mean that they have to go on to the full new duties in the legislation, but it would require them to start looking at it sooner rather than later.

Matt Downie: I completely agree with that. Our experience of speaking to some of those other agencies is that it is the confidence that the referral will be taken seriously that leads to more confidence that the referral will be made.

The other thing that is just worth saying is that, a lot of the time when opposition to the Bill was put forward it was on the grounds of, "It is not needed. We are already doing it". There is no secret to reveal in terms of who the agencies are. Every single local authority knows them already and is in touch with them. In some cases, it is just a different department of the same local authority. The timings will have some effect, but there is already a common sense that should be there.

Q13 Bob Blackman: Could I just follow up? On the evidence that has been found from the trailblazers, were there any unusual agencies that people had not thought of at that time that need to be included? One of the problems here is making sure that we have a comprehensive list of public bodies that are involved. Are there any particular ones that come to mind?

Deborah Garvie: You particularly need to be looking at the MOJ and people coming out of young offender institutions as well as prison. When you are talking about the NHS, people might have hospitals in mind but do not forget other health services too. It is the same with the MOJ. Matt has already alluded to it being departments within the same local authority, particularly social services. It is very important that there is a lot of joint working there.



Matt Downie: The only thing that really is not unusual but is becoming worth saying more and more is about housing associations and increasing the knowledge of how that is done. As the fragmentation of housing associations increases, how is it that there is going to be some consistency in that? I have not seen anything in any of the trailblazers that is a completely new animal for referral.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** The other consideration is whether you think there needs to be any strengthening in the secondary legislation in relation to this duty. You are quite that the original plan was the duty to co-operate, but that would require every government department agreeing to the Bill, and there is no way we could get that in the timeframe. If there is a way of strengthening the requirement, then I am personally very keen that we do so.

Matt Downie: The risk has always been that people might see themselves as being able to do less with there being just a referral rather than co-operation. If there are some areas where particular agencies and bits of Government—particularly the MOJ—where we can see that beefed up or focused on more, then that is definitely good. Particularly the three groups—people leaving prison, victims of domestic abuse and care-leavers—are the ones that come up again and again, so a heavy focus on that would be good.

Q15 **Andrew Lewer:** Moving on to assessments, what clarification should the regulations bring to the meaning of “deliberately and unreasonably refuse to co-operate with the housing authority”? What safeguards should be introduced to ensure vulnerable people are not unfairly refused support but also to recognise when the authority has done what it can?

Deborah Garvie: Our understanding, all the way through with the legislation, was that this was to set a deliberately high bar, because, again, the spirit of the legislation should be, “How can we help you? We realise that you are in an extremely vulnerable situation, just because you are at risk of homelessness, for a start”. That was certainly our understanding for the choice of words, “deliberate refusal”, and we are rather concerned with some of the paragraphs in the code.

There is a particular paragraph that suggests that, if you choose to go to a medical appointment or a Jobcentre appointment over viewing a property, for example, that might get you into the realms. We would not see that as meeting that high bar, and we are very concerned that there are suggestions of that sort in the code, because that high bar—and I remember Mr Blackman saying this a number of times—would be somebody who just sits there and says, “I am not going to work with you at all. You have got to rehouse me”, and certainly not somebody who says, “I have a sick child at home and I do not really want to drag them out in the cold today”, “I have not got enough money left to get the bus to this appointment”, or “I have got to be at the Jobcentre on Thursday afternoon; it would be really difficult to go and view the property then”.



That would not be a deliberate refusal; that is just being unable to make a particular time slot.

A deliberate refusal would just be an out-and-out refusal to provide information or to attend appointments at all. We would like to see examples within the meaning of those parts in the code to suggest what a deliberate refusal is. It should not be a failure to co-operate but a deliberate refusal.

Q16 Andrew Lewer: Would you acknowledge the reality that there are people in the system who deliberately and unreasonably refuse to co-operate?

Deborah Garvie: I am afraid we do not come across anyone like that. We have single parents sitting in bed and breakfast rooms in the dark when their children are in bed, looking on Rightmove every night. I am afraid, when you are homeless, you are doing everything you can to find a home for yourself. We do accept, however, that that is part of the legislation, but it was only ever intended to catch people who out-and-out refuse to provide information or to co-operate in any way whatsoever, not people who could not make a particular appointment.

Matt Downie: It is right that the balance of responsibility is shared between applicant and authority. That was always the spirit in which Mr Blackman's Bill was drafted. If you look at the fact sheet on the Act that the department put together, it says that the bar is set at unreasonably refusing to co-operate so that it does not penalise those who have difficulties co-operating. That is a really helpful way of putting it. You may have a difficulty co-operating because there may be two appointments to choose between. One is you go to the Jobcentre. If you do not go to the Jobcentre, you may be sanctioned. If you do not go to the property viewing, you may be found non-co-operative. That really was not the idea here.

This was meant to be about a pattern of behaviour that demonstrated something that was demonstrably the sort of thing you are talking about, and not meant to be catching people out. The lesson from Wales is that they went too light-touch on this, and there are instances of people being found non-co-operative through a failure to co-operate, where the circumstances are such that it was not reasonable to presume they could have co-operated. That needs to be sorted out. One particular safeguard that we had discussed with the department around additional signoff from somebody else potentially more senior in the authority about a non-co-operation decision is not there in the guidance.

Just on this point finally, it would be worth adding to the guidance that the consideration of the applicant's vulnerability and capacity is as much a factor as anything else, and that is not really drawn out enough in the guidance. Our experience of working with people who might be on the cusp of being deemed to be non-co-operative is, unless you understand



the circumstances of the complexities of their lives during periods of homelessness, you will not understand how they reach decisions.

Q17 Mary Robinson: Just moving on, but still on the subject of the way people are treated, during the course of our inquiry and, indeed, in the Committee's 2016 report, some local authority staff were criticised for treating homeless people in ways that are dismissive and, at times, discriminatory. Do you expect the new code to lead to an improvement in the way in which some councils treat homeless people when they present?

Deborah Garvie: We very much hope that that will be the case. That was the whole spirit of the legislation and it is why we supported it. We have recently published a report where we have worked with our homeless service users as an expert panel to say how they would like assessments and personalised plans to be developed. What came through very strongly from that work is that this is something you remember for the rest of your life, and so do your children. When you look back at the end of your life, you are never going to forget this period. It is extremely stressful and you feel extremely vulnerable. Just the smallest bit of kindness makes all the difference. It should very much be about a culture shift, going from the system at the moment, which says, "Do you meet certain criteria and do you tick certain boxes?" towards, as I mentioned earlier, "How can I help? I realise this is a difficult time. I realise that you are going to be feeling at your lowest ebb".

A lot of it is about how you are treated, and what people said to us very strongly was that, even if the decision is the same, it is the way that you are treated and spoken to. The feedback that we are getting through the training that we do as part of our National Homelessness Advice Service, which is funded by DCLG, where we train local authorities on the new duties, is that that has come across as very helpful in terms of seeing people as a rounded person who has lots of worries, and household members who they have to think about, so we really hope it will lead to a real culture change. In Wales, that is certainly the experience. It will take some time and we realise it is going to be quite challenging for local-authority officers, but it is what we do every day at Shelter, so we know it is possible.

Matt Downie: The answer is that I do not know. When we went through the research exercise of mystery-shopping and did 87 local authority visits, over and above whether or not people got an assessment and what the decisions were, the experiences they had were the things that really stayed with people—the experience of not being able to speak to somebody and having to go through some sort of automation. The guidance could be much clearer on how that should only be used in limited circumstances. That really makes a difference.

There was the experience of lack of privacy—having to tell your story in a queue, having to shout over a desk, when the story could be one of the



most upsetting and dangerous periods of your life. That makes all the difference and does not cost very much.

Just to return to my first point, why not say it? If the aspiration for the way we treat homeless people is much better than it was, why not say it? Why not say that this is an opportunity to completely change the behaviour of applicants as well as the behaviour of local authorities by making it an interaction that is not about whose tick list wins? I would really love it to be true that we would see a difference in the way people are treated, but the jury is out. This is one opportunity, along with specialist advisers and everything else that the department is doing, to make that point loud and clear.

Deborah Garvie: One very simple way to achieve that—and this is something that our service users suggested themselves, because some of them are involved in this way—is to use people with personal experience of homelessness to design your service. They are the experts. That is why we used them as an expert panel. We would not even deem ourselves to be the experts; they are the experts. They are the ones who have been through it. They remember what made a difference and what made them feel worse, what hampered and helped. That is what we would encourage local authorities to do: to form an expert panel of their own local people who have lived experience of homelessness, and use them to consult.

Q18 **Mary Robinson:** From what you are saying to us, it seems like an opportunity to win on two fronts here, not only for the applicants—the people who are vulnerable and want help—but also for the local authorities to gain a better culture, which will go across the authority as a whole.

Deborah Garvie: Yes, very much so. In the long run, it makes the job more satisfying, if you like, for local authority staff as well. Nobody goes to work in a Housing Options team at a local authority to not be nice to homeless people. You want to give a good service and you want to assist people, so that culture shift would be beneficial all round, particularly in terms of catching people early and giving people advice early. Everybody who we spoke to as part of the work certainly did not apply as homeless to get the council house. When you asked them what they were expecting, they said, “Just a bit of advice, really, and a bit of support to help me know where to look. I had never been in this situation before. I had never claimed benefits before. I did not know where to go”. What came through were very humble expectations.

Chair: Thank you both very much indeed for coming to give evidence to us. We look forward to that further note as well; that would be helpful. Thank you.

Witnesses: Councillor Rachel Eburne and Sir Steve Bullock.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you both for coming this afternoon. Could you just say who you are and the organisation you are representing today? That will be helpful. Thank you.

Cllr Eburne: Thanks very much, and thank you for inviting us today. My name is Rachel Eburne. I am the deputy chair of the LGA's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, and I am a Mid-Suffolk District councillor. I am here representing the LGA.

Sir Steve Bullock: I am Steve Bullock. I am the executive lead member for housing for London Councils and also the mayor of Lewisham.

Q20 **Andrew Lewer:** Is it realistic to expect local authorities to be able to implement the Homeless Reduction Act in the timescales that have been specified?

Cllr Eburne: With regard to that, what we would like to see is the whole system being ready to go. At the moment, we are still in the consultation period. The consultation on the code of guidance is not due back to councils until spring, and some councils are being advised that means they are not getting the final detail until March. There is also the issue of secondary legislation but, again, some of that is not due till October. What we would like to see is all of the legislation available together for councils to implement all in one go, rather than to start implementing and then waiting for further advice and legislation to come.

Sir Steve Bullock: We are very keen that, when we implement this legislation, we are able to do it in a way that is true to the spirit of the legislation. We are very anxious that, with now barely 16 weeks, that is going to be very problematic, for the reasons that Rachel has just explained.

Q21 **Mike Amesbury:** The Government estimate that the Act will cost an extra £72 million for the first two years after implementation. Do you agree with the Government's estimates?

Sir Steve Bullock: No, we do not. We have done some estimates in London, and we think that London alone will need about £77 million a year, which we think gives us roughly a gap of about £67 million for each year, if that Government figure of £73 million nationally for three years is stuck to.

Cllr Eburne: At the moment, we do not know the amount of applicants who are going to come forward, so we do not know what the total costs are going to be. As pressures keep rising, we are concerned that costs are going to be insufficient, and we really do want to make this work. We welcome this approach very much and we would like to see it work. Because it is about doing things very differently, and new partnerships,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

skills, systems, culture and so on, we cannot say at the moment that we have that funding in place. Equally, the funding is not available to address the wider issues of homelessness in terms of the availability and affordability of housing, so there is a wider financial picture.

Q22 Mike Amesbury: How about the methodology proposed by the Government for distributing it to different regions? Do you agree with that?

Cllr Eburne: From an LGA perspective, we were involved in looking at the methodology and put forward different options. We cover all councils—rural and urban—so we were very pleased to be involved with that. I suspect, for London Councils, it might be a different case.

Sir Steve Bullock: The figures are quite stark. Something like 69% of homelessness happens in London, and it looks as if London would get about 42% of the funding. Having said that, we are conscious that, if the pot is this small and if London got it pro rata, it would leave very little for other authorities. We are not, for one moment, denying that they also face very significant homelessness challenges, so we would like to get something that reflects the scale of the problem in London, but we also do not think that you can divorce that from the pot not being big enough.

Q23 Mike Amesbury: The National Audit Office says that local authorities are increasing spending on homelessness while simultaneously reducing spending on preventing it. Could local authorities such as yours, Steve, allocate their existing resources more effectively to address homelessness?

Sir Steve Bullock: We are one of the trailblazers and we have been doing some work already, and we will go on doing that. However, what we cannot get away from is that there was a constant tension around the costs that we will incur. For example, we saw landlords increasingly moving towards nightly paid accommodation. As London boroughs, we work together to try to overcome that, and you make some progress but it then begins to slide again. The sheer cost of temporary accommodation in London does not stop us doing prevention work but we would want to do it in a much more rational way. We are, however, constantly dealing with the fact that our costs are rising.

Cllr Eburne: If I could add from an LGA perspective, we have different cost pressures in different areas. For example, the impacts of welfare reform are sometimes seen in rent arrears and so on, which are providing a cost in one area. While we would like to work as efficiently and effectively as possible to prevent homelessness, there are wider cost issues. Council funding is being cut and we need to work with that. In order to make a success of it, we really need the funds in order to do that.

Q24 Bob Blackman: You are talking about resources to implement the Act. What account have you taken on savings—for example, on temporary



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accommodation? In London, the cost is £600 million a year, and the emergency accommodation is even more expensive than so-called temporary accommodation, on a temporary basis.

Sir Steve Bullock: Clearly, we would hope that, once the Act is implemented, there would be savings, although the timescale is clearly open to question. The prevention work, however, will incur other costs; for example, it may well be that we are making payments to landlords to encourage them not to evict people who are homeless. They may be one-offs or repeats. We are not clear whether the cost savings will accrue or whether it will simply be that we drive down costs in one area but they rise in another.

Q25 **Bob Blackman:** Clearly, if you are preventing someone from ending up not having a home, and if you have a statutory duty to house them—it could be a family—you are going to have to find temporary accommodation, which is very expensive, at that point. If you act earlier, however, you can reduce that cost. Are you taking that factor into account in your summary? Clearly, the department is taking that into account.

Sir Steve Bullock: We are but we are not clear that, over a three-year period, that will produce savings on the scale that the department thinks.

Cllr Eburne: If I could add to that, there might be initial savings on temporary accommodation but we do not know what the scale of reviews might be. As you go into reviews, you may have to house families or individuals in temporary accommodation, so the costs may go there. We do not know the extent of that at the moment, so that is currently an open-ended issue.

Q26 **Helen Hayes:** Is it reasonable to expect local authorities to meet their prevention duty without wider reforms, including welfare reform and including wider housing reform, particularly in the private rented sector?

Cllr Eburne: We would like those all to go hand-in-hand. We really do need to see some changes with regard to welfare reform and particularly the availability of social housing. What we are finding, going back to the temporary accommodation issue, is that often we cannot get people out of temporary accommodation because they simply cannot afford the rent that is in the private rented sector or even the so-called affordable housing. We need social housing costs, and councils need to be able to address that, so that does need to go hand-in-hand. As I already mentioned, in terms of issues about universal credit and other welfare reform, we would like to see a strategic process across these three areas in the future.

Sir Steve Bullock: I would agree with that entirely but I do not think that, as local authorities, we can use that as a reason not to try to improve the way that we deal with homelessness. Again, just referring to my own authority, one of the things that we are looking at as a trailblazer is how we interact with the people: what is the nature of the questions



that we ask and what are the settings in which we ask them? It is becoming clear to us that, if we ask a different question, if we do not start by asking, "Are you aware of how the eviction process works?" and if we start by asking "What brought you here and where did this journey start?" the conversation can go in a different way. It does not solve the problem but it begins it in a different way. There are things like that that we have to do, as well as continuing to argue for those other changes.

Cllr Eburne: If I might just add to that, councils are looking at a wide range of initiatives at the moment around issues of getting single young people into accommodation. Councils have lots of different examples of ways in which they are working differently, and we are very happy to be doing that. We want to be doing that to help these people, but we would like to see wider changes in the future.

Q27 **Bob Blackman:** Just moving on to the placements that are made, we probably need to concentrate on London first, if you do not mind. At the moment, 90% of out-of-borough placements come from London. What action are you going to take about making sure that provision is available locally?

Sir Steve Bullock: The starting point for every London borough is that we would wish to make placements within our own borough or very close to it. The nature of London, in my case, means that I am not going to worry—and I think families would not worry unduly—if they were in Southwark or Greenwich next door. It is when you go beyond that that it becomes problematic.

We are trying to do a number of things together across London. We have a good track record of working on this. We try not to get into a competitive situation between boroughs. We have some work going on at the moment specifically about increasing the availability of good-quality temporary accommodation, which we hope will bear fruit. We are talking to DCLG about how that might work. I have to say, however, that, in the end, we are only going to make progress in London if there is a dramatic increase in the number of new homes that are delivered year on year, because the fundamental problem is that there are not enough homes in London for the people who are here, those that there are overpriced, and that then knocks through and we find families knocking on our door.

Q28 **Bob Blackman:** Is there anything that you would like to see in the code of guidance about this specific issue? At the moment, clearly, there is a duty to take into account, for example, where children are in schools or where people are working, as well as local communications that individuals have, when you are allocating a particular property, but is there anything that you would like to see amended in the code of guidance in this particular aspect?

Sir Steve Bullock: I am not sure that there are any specifics in there. We recognise that it is very problematic in the timescales that we are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

dealing with but, in principle, we agree with that approach. It is simply that, in the real world, it can be very difficult to meet those expectations.

Q29 **Bob Blackman:** It is not only a problem in London but a problem elsewhere as well.

Cllr Eburne: Yes, absolutely, and the LGA's position is that we would like to see councils all being able to negotiate with each other and using the voluntary agreement work that was in previous codes of guidance to ensure that that remains the case.

Q30 **Bob Blackman:** Are there any changes that you would suggest in regard to the code of guidance for this particular aspect?

Cllr Eburne: Our issue at the moment is that it is still under consultation and we are still talking to councils about what they would like to see. Until that comes to an end and we have a firm position on the different councils we are talking to, we would like to come back to you if there are any specifics on that.

Q31 **Bob Blackman:** It would be terribly helpful to know, from the LGA's perspective, if you are putting a submission in that covers some of these areas that we are talking about, because we can then advance those views to the department. We are just trying to be helpful in terms of facilitating this, if there is something specific on this particular issue on out-of-borough placements, because we know that is a real problem right across not just London but most urban areas.

Cllr Eburne: As I say, we do not have a specific point on this at the moment but we are waiting to see what councils have to say.

Q32 **Chair:** In terms of the section 21 notices, are there budgetary implementations in having to deal with households at a much earlier stage in the process, when a section 21 notice is served?

Cllr Eburne: There are financial issues, clearly, but one of the things that we would like to be able to do as councils is to be able to support work within the private rented sector. We would very much appreciate Government, which I am sure you do, recognising that we need the support there. There is a greater risk at the moment that tenants fall into arrears because of rising private sector rental costs, and we do not want to see them get to the point of having section 21 notices, so we would like to do all we can to relieve that for them.

Sir Steve Bullock: This is one of the areas where we are clear that prevention work is labour-intensive. It requires a lot of staff who are trained in the right way. It goes back to the financing of this. That will not come cheap. If we can do that, we would hope that we can prevent homelessness and avoid notices.

Q33 **Helen Hayes:** I just wanted to come in on that. Section 21 is different to other reasons why people become homeless, because it is the provision on which councils can initiate eviction proceedings for no reason



other than their own whim. This is not about tenants who have got into arrears or tenants who have broken the terms of their tenancy; it is about tenants who are subject to a process initiated by their landlord, at their landlord's will. I just wonder whether it would be of help to local authorities—and I think it would—if it was harder for landlords to initiate that process under the terms of a tenancy, when there are already adequate reasons and circumstances in which a landlord can get their property back, if they need to do so. I wonder whether section 21 adds to the burden of local authorities unnecessarily.

Sir Steve Bullock: I think it does. I am not a landlord and I do not talk to that many landlords, but it is clear that, for some landlords, this is part of their business model, so anything that made that harder would be helpful.

Q34 **Chair:** For local authorities, however, is this going to mean a real change in how they treat people who have a section 21 notice served? Currently, many authorities appear to ignore the existing codes, and the advice you get, if you can call it advice, is, "Wait for the bailiffs to turn up" or, at least, "Wait until it goes to court. We will not really deal with you until then because we are not sure you are going to be evicted". We are going to get away from that sort of approach, are we?

Cllr Eburne: We are very much looking towards the spirit of this legislation in being preventative, so working very hard to not get to that point and certainly to do everything that we can. It is a huge change; it is a change in culture and it is a change in skill sets, and there will be a significant level of liaison. More than that, we do welcome this legislation, so we will be working hard to get there.

Sir Steve Bullock: One of the fundamentals to implementing the Act in the spirit that it was created is for us to be better able to understand who is vulnerable to becoming homeless. As part of what we try to do more in my authority, we are trying to understand the data so that, the sooner we can identify who is at risk, the sooner we begin to intervene, rather than, as you say, waiting until the last minute. I am not saying that that is going to be easy, because we are looking at huge amounts of data that we have, but that will be typical of how we go about this: how can we get ahead of the curve so that, over time, we know who is at risk and we can then intervene? That will also be what will help with the cost over time. We talk about prevention but what that means is knowing who is at risk and being able to do something about it early.

Q35 **Chair:** We would expect the department to be monitoring how the Act eventually is implemented. Are the LGA going to do anything in terms of advice to members, or training courses trying to establish good practice and spreading it around?

Cllr Eburne: Yes, absolutely. We worked to put the voluntary agreement together for the previous code of guidance, and we will be working with councils on this. In terms of your Committee, if I may say, in terms of



monitoring and holding Government to account on that front, we welcome any input from you on that. Yes, we will be continually talking to councils to see how they are working with this, particularly in terms of the different types of approach, because there will be very new approaches taken, and the finances that councils are having to expend on this. We want it to be a success.

Chair: Thank you both very much for coming to give evidence to us.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Marcus Jones MP and Val Keen.

Q36 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for coming. We were not aware that you were bringing an official with you. That is absolutely fine, but could introduce her, that would helpful as well?

Mr Jones: Mr Chairman, I certainly will. I have here Val Keen, who is the head of implementation for the Homelessness Reduction Act work we are undertaking.

Q37 **Chair:** Do you want to say a few words of introduction at the beginning?

Mr Jones: If I may briefly say a few words, Mr Chairman, first, thank you for inviting me along today and allowing me to bring Val Keen with me to discuss the implementation of this landmark piece of legislation. The Homelessness Reduction Act will mean that more people across the country get the help and support that they need to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place, and those already experiencing homelessness will be able to access more meaningful help and support, whether or not they hold the ability to access services through the priority need.

The contribution of this Committee in supporting the passage of the legislation has been invaluable—in particular, your pre-legislative scrutiny—and that ensured that the Bill benefited from the expertise of this Committee. I would particularly like to pay tribute to Mr Blackman for his immense hard work and dedication in bringing this legislation to the House and taking this legislation forward. It was a challenge at times but it was a real privilege to be able to work with Mr Blackman and the various charities.

As you well know, Mr Chairman, the Act will come into force in April and we are absolutely clear that we will support local authorities to meet that challenge, not only through funding but also through advice, guidance and practical support. The revised code of guidance, which we are here to discuss today, will be absolutely key to delivering that. We have also worked with local authorities in the production of this code of guidance, and organisations such as Crisis and Shelter. We have also involved



others with particular interests, such as the Residential Landlords Association and the National Landlords Association. We are determined that we get this right, and the current consultation that is taking place is absolutely key. We look forward to considering the views of the Committee today, Mr Betts, as we take this Bill forward.

There are a number of other things that came forward in the Budget to support the drive to deal with the issue of homelessness. I will not go into those. I may elaborate on those things as we go forward in today's deliberations, but once again I just want to say that I look forward to working with the Committee as we take this important part of the implementation of this legislation through.

Q38 Chair: Thank you very much indeed for that introduction. Let us begin at the sharp end, then: money. If you had been in a few minutes earlier, you would have London Councils say, "£72 million—that will do us just as London Councils for a year, not the whole country for two years". There is a bit of a gap, is there not, between what local authorities think it is going to cost and what the Government think it is going to cost?

Mr Jones: When Mr Blackman initially brought the legislation forward and we started doing the work in terms of what the new burdens would be for local authorities, what I can say, Mr Betts, is that we have done extensive work with the Local Government Association and with London Councils and other interested organisations. We are confident that the new burdens assessment was robust and we have tested significantly the assumptions that have been made. We have fully committed not just to reviewing the Act within two years but, as the LGA asked for, we have fully committed to reviewing the new burdens of the cost of the Act within two year as well.

We do think that some of the disparity between some of the figures that have been put forward initially was due to some of the things that may have been in the Bill that were then removed from the Bill. "Nowhere Safe to Stay" is a prime example of that. The other thing is that we feel that significant savings are to be gained through the reduction in the use of TA, and particularly the use of bed and breakfast. What we are seeing, which the trailblazer area of Southwark already demonstrates, is that there are significant savings to be brought from the reductions in the use of temporary accommodation that will lead to a reduction in the cost of dealing with homelessness at local authorities.

Q39 Chair: The National Audit Office simply said that there are many assumptions in looking at the extra costs involved—or, indeed, the savings—that will need to be revisited as things start to work through. Does the Government accept that, and will you be coming back and having another look, when the evidence is clearer, at what the costs are and what the savings are going to be?

Mr Jones: We will certainly monitor what happens and, as I say, we are fully committed not just to reviewing the Bill but also reviewing the new



HOUSE OF COMMONS

burdens funding within two years of the implementation. Just to pick up on what I said about what we are finding from Southwark, which is, I am sure you will all agree, one of the highest-value housing areas in the country, is that they have found, through implementing the Act and the work that they have done, that, as of 30 June this year, they have seen a 34% decrease in the use of bed and breakfasts from the same period in the year before. That is one of the things that we have based our assumptions on: the significant savings that also can be drawn from this, and not just the fact that people will be helped far more quickly.

Q40 Chair: There will be a review in two years, but, as things stand, there is no money at all in 2020. The money has been allocated just for the first two years, so where does that leave local authorities in 2020?

Mr Jones: The way in which the funding has been allocated, Mr Betts, is for the first three years, so there will be a period over which the funding is paid, in that sense, and we will be able to get a feel for it within that period, but the review will be done two years after the implementation.

Q41 Chair: Looking beyond three years, what potential costs are there in the fourth, fifth and sixth years?

Mr Jones: We need to cross that bridge when we come to it, Mr Betts, but clearly, by reviewing the new burdens funding, we are clearly undertaking to look at what things look like once we have had chance for this legislation to be implemented and bed in. Of course, by way of review, we could find that we are absolutely right with our assumptions and we are starting to see savings in that third year, but we may not be. That is the point of doing a review and we have been quite clear, Mr Betts.

Q42 Helen Hayes: Could I just ask: what percentage of the funding that has been allocated will have been spent by the time the Government get to looking at whether they will make any further commitment to future funding?

Mr Jones: What I will do at this point is bring in Val, just to go through the way in which the funding is profiled. You do, however, make a good point because we have £71 million to implement the Act, as such, and it is important that, when we do come to the point of review, we are able then to consider very carefully whether or not any additional burdens that we did not expect have been created.

Q43 Helen Hayes: If I can just ask a further question in order to inform that response, I suppose the concern is that local authorities will be taking on additional staff to support their implementation of the Act and that some of them might be left in the situation where they are starting to have to initiate redundancy proceedings because of the lack of certainty on the funding going forward, so I would just welcome some reassurance as to the timescale, so that we can be confident that local authorities are not going to get into that situation.



Mr Jones: I will bring Val in in one second, but just in terms of the staff of local authorities, there is no doubt that many local authorities will need to employ new staff as a result of the Act coming into place, but also there will be a situation where members of staff who already work in a Housing Options team for local authorities will find their role changing from the current way of working to the role of being in a far more preventative mindset than once was the case. There will, then, be new staff who need to be employed, no doubt, in many areas, but also many other staff we expect to be repurposed. On that point, I will bring Val in.

Val Keen: The new burdens funding, as you will be aware, covers the financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20, and part of that funding has been pulled forward, following discussions with local authorities, to help them implement, because they want to make investments to get ready in advance of April 2018. The commitment to complete the review is that that review will be completed prior to two years rather than after two years, so the review will be completed within two years of the commencement of the Act. As you know, the new data that is being implemented in the same timeframe will provide much stronger information to help us with that review process. The timing of the review itself and when it will be completed has not been formally agreed yet, but we will certainly take into account the issues that you raised.

Q44 **Fiona Onasanya:** Just touching on what you were saying about new staff needing to be hired, that will involve training and things like that. Do you think that a realistic timescale has been given in which local authorities will be required to implement the Act, given that implementation is next year?

Mr Jones: Within the work that our Department is doing, we have employed a team of nine advisers to help towards the smooth implementation of the Act. They are going around the country assisting and supporting local authorities in implementing the Act. In regard to their work, there have already been 500 members of staff from 250 local authorities across the country who have already had training, advice and guidance sessions with those advisers. As we go forward, we expect there to be more people within local authorities who get that support and advice. In regard to staffing, you are absolutely right: local authorities will need to take on new staff, and that is one of the reasons why we are putting to funding to local authorities well before the implementation of the Act in April, so that they can start with that.

There is also an issue and a challenge in relation to skills around staffing within local authorities, because there are many extremely good staff in local authorities who are already in Housing Options teams. As I said before, some of those people will be repurposed into roles that support this Act, but undoubtedly there will need to be people employed. Just to use some examples of what they have done in Southwark, where they have been an early implementer, they have used this as an opportunity to employ new staff through the apprenticeship system. Some of those



people who have come through are people who have been homeless themselves, which has given them a significant insight into the problems and difficulties faced by individuals, and it has put those people in a very good position to be able to advise people and support people in the roles that we are expecting.

Q45 Fiona Onasanya: Given the timing, however, do you think it is realistic? I understand what you are saying about the people and the staff who would need to be in place, and the training; however, given the timing, do you think it is realistic that they will be able to implement?

Mr Jones: I do think it is realistic, and I say that from a standpoint of the situation that this Act went through the House as a Bill starting around this time last year. It received Royal Assent before the general election, or pretty much at the same time as the general election was called, so local authorities have had a significant time to plan. They knew what was coming down the track and our department was quite clear in terms of when we would start providing funding towards this. We are also looking, in addition, at supporting a piece of work particularly around the situation in London, where we know that London authorities may need more people than many other authorities to support this important programme that we are bringing forward.

Q46 Fiona Onasanya: My concern is that there are still a number of gaps in it. I know that when you are rolling something out and you are seeking to train people, if there are things that still need to be modified or amended, yes, they would have been aware because of, as you have talked about, the process, but the concern is the implementation of it with gaps that still remain, and the short timeframe. That was why.

Mr Jones: Yes, I hear what you say in that sense but, through some of the trailblazers and particularly through the early implementer in Southwark, we are able to learn from what they have done and what they have achieved. I have been on a visit to Southwark and I would say that, having met with a number of the people in the Housing Options team, the enthusiasm there was palpable. They all thought that what they were achieving was a massive step change in helping people. They were receiving a lot fewer people asking for reviews in terms of decisions that had been made, because people were being helped earlier in the process. In that sense, there is a lot that other areas can learn from what has been done in places like Southwark.

Certainly, I was made aware that a number of other local authorities that were not so far down the track as Southwark were visiting and having meetings with senior officers within that council to learn from them and implement, based on some of the stuff they have done, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel.

Q47 Helen Hayes: I just want to come back briefly because you mentioned Southwark, Minister, which, as you know, is one of the local authorities that cover part of my constituency. I agree with you that the work that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Southwark is doing is absolutely excellent in this regard. They are using trailblazer funding, which is not available to every local authority, and they have employed substantial numbers of both new staff and apprentices. They have been absolutely clear in the conversations I have had with them that that is not a sustainable level of staffing, unless Government commit to more funding.

The point is just to say that all that local authorities are asking for is that, with the good work that they are putting in place to implement this Act, they can have confidence that it will be sustained. In terms of some of the things around the reduction in resources, in Southwark the cost of the private rented sector just keeps going up and up, so they are looking forward and they are just seeing the pressure from that particular cause not decreasing in the short term. There is this uncertainty, and it feels as if, very quickly, we are going to be hitting the end of the current funding that is committed, without any commitment going forward. All that authorities like Southwark are asking is that they can have the confidence that that very good work that they are doing can be sustained.

Mr Jones: Just on that point, within this two-year period, Southwark has received £1 million as early implementers of the Act. They will receive £1.3 million over the next two years, but that, as Val has said, will be split over the three-year period. As we have also said, within two years we will be doing that review on the implementation of the Act and the new burdens funding. I do, however, hear your concerns in relation to continuity, and I do not think that what you say is unreasonable in terms of us trying to balance that continuity against what we believe will be a reduction overall in the cost of providing homelessness reduction services as we go forward. It is very important, however, that we try to ensure continuity.

Q48 **Mary Robinson:** Minister, a key element of the Act is the introduction of the requirement for local authorities to conduct an assessment of applicants and develop a personalised housing plan. However, both the prevention and relief duties can be brought to an end if an applicant deliberately and unreasonably refuses to take any of the steps that they agreed to take. What clarification will the regulations bring to the meaning of the phrase “deliberately and unreasonably refuses to co-operate with the local authority”?

Mr Jones: What we are trying to achieve here is to set the bar for non-co-operation at a fairly high level. As you have said, applicants must deliberately and unreasonably refuse to take any of the steps that they have agreed to take. In relation to that, the applicant can ask for a review of the reasonableness of the steps that have been set out in the personal housing plan. Before ending the prevention or relief duty, a council will need to, first, warn the person as to the consequences if they continue to unreasonably and deliberately refuse to give due deference to the plan. They, at that point, will also have the right to review. In terms of that right to review, we are also looking to put in the guidance that there will also be a safeguard in relation to that review, where that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

review could be double-checked by another pertinent officer within that particular local authority who has not been directly dealing with the case.

- Q49 **Mary Robinson:** The review will be helpful, but hearing from Shelter and Crisis earlier, they were raising issues where perhaps an applicant may have a sick child or they may have a conflicting appointment to go to the Jobcentre at the same time as a housing appointment is given to them, and that might force them to make a choice. That could be deemed to be unreasonable. Is that something that needs to be clarified?

Mr Jones: If there is some confusion in that sense, we may need to clarify. What I can say, however, Mrs Robinson, is that what we were trying to achieve there was to set out some examples where we would not expect a local authority to take what is quite significant action against an individual, and we were trying to clarify that in that sense. If, however, there are concerns, bearing in mind that this is a consultation period that we are in, there is no reason why we cannot look at that again to see how we make it clearer and how it will make what we are trying to achieve clearer.

- Q50 **Mary Robinson:** That would be helpful, so that there is a chance that that might be something that would be strengthened and that there would be more clarity for local authorities. Will there be sufficient safeguards, then, to ensure that vulnerable people are not unfairly refused the support in the first place? Is this where we are getting to?

Mr Jones: Vulnerable people are extremely important in this process, and we make sure that they get all the help and support they need as early as possible. Hearing what you say, the bar that we are setting does give not just a number of opportunities for which the reasonableness of what local authorities do can be tested; it is also subject, as I said, to a second review. If there is anything further that you would like to bring in, Val, in relation to that, I would be grateful, but my first thought, Mrs Robinson, would be that, above anything else, we need to make sure that vulnerable people are protected very strongly within this process.

Val Keen: Just to elaborate a little bit further on this provision, there are a couple of important protections for people in the primary legislation, in addition to the ones that the Minister has already mentioned. First, if the prevention duty has ended due to non-co-operation, that does not have any effect on the local authority's decisions about further duties owed, if the person did subsequently become homeless. Also, for those eligible for assistance and homeless through no fault of their own, and have a priority need, as you will know, there is a safeguard in there that ensures that they would still receive an offer of accommodation. Those were two of the important decisions that were made during the course of the passage of the Bill.

One of the things that the draft of the code of guidance does is guide local authorities to work closely with applicants but also any agencies that are supporting the applicant to co-operate together and to support that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

person and, if there are issues around co-operation, to try to gain the applicant's co-operation and ensure that they understand the implications of not co-operating and bringing people back around the table. That is one of the things that we think would be very helpful for local authorities to be doing. Of course, during the consultation, we are very keen to hear other views on that.

- Q51 Helen Hayes:** There is considerable evidence that the wider landscape of welfare policy at the moment is contributing to homelessness. If we go back to Southwark, just 12% of Southwark's council tenants accumulated £5.3 million of rent arrears over the pilot period. What consideration have Government given to the need for wider welfare reforms to support local authorities to meet the new prevention duty? I might add reform of the private rented sector in addition to welfare reforms.

Mr Jones: You are making an important point in that sense. In regard to the social rented sector, as you know the plan to implement the local housing allowance to social rents has been changed and we are no longer implementing that. In terms of the Budget last week, the fund which we expected to receive from the implementation of the LHA rate on private sector accommodation to create a targeted affordability fund has been increased from 30% of the savings to 50% of the savings, so 50% of the savings that are made in relation to the LHA rate being implemented on the private rented sector will be diverted back into targeted affordability for the highest rental areas in the country.

There are a number of changes to universal credit in the Budget, which were extremely important in relation to this particular issue, particularly around people migrating from housing benefit across to UC and still being eligible for two weeks' rent, for example when they have been migrated across. The other thing is in terms of reducing the seven-day waiting period to zero, which will help. There is also, of course, the £900 million across this spending period that is being put into discretionary housing payments.

- Q52 Mike Amesbury:** How will you ensure that local authorities will not find ways around the new section 21 requirements in the new code, as some currently do?

Mr Jones: You are referring to providing help and support 56 days before somebody becomes homeless rather than waiting until the bailiffs are at the door, Mr Amesbury. This whole piece of legislation and the strengthened provisions in the code of guidance are all geared towards helping people at an earlier stage and helping people well before the bailiffs are knocking at the door. Therefore, the changes to the code of guidance reflect that. As we have been clear, we are going to, within two years, look at how this has been implemented.

By that time, we will also have far more data from local authorities, and the big change in the data that we are going to receive from local authorities is that, rather than aggregated data across all of the cases



that a local authority has through the P1E form, they will be providing data through the new system on a case-by-case basis, which means we will have far better evidence of what has happened in a particular area. We will then be able to consider, when we review the implementation of this legislation, how the various areas around the country have acted and implemented the legislation.

We have been absolutely clear, from the committee stage of the Bill, when we brought the legislation forward, that we will look to other ways, if local authorities do not step up to the plate and meet the requirements of this legislation. One of those ways may be through a code of practice, for example, which, within the legislation, the Secretary of State does have the provisions to implement without recourse to further primary legislation.

Q53 Bob Blackman: Minister, thank you for your kind remarks in your introduction about me and about the Committee. Could I look at data issues for a moment? The first is that, in our report that preceded even the legislation, we were quite critical of the department in relation to recording hidden homeless numbers. Clearly, there are large numbers of people who are either sofa-surfing or may be living with friends. There are all sorts of reasons why people are not on the official statistics. Can I ask what the department is doing to get a real handle on the number of people that are in this position? The reality is that a large number of those are likely to end up going to local authorities now, saying, "We are homeless and have been homeless for quite a long time". That starts to size the extent of the problem.

Mr Jones: That brings me back to the answer I gave to Mr Amesbury. The data that we are going to seek to collect will be far stronger than we have had access to hitherto. It will not be aggregated data. As I said, it will be case-by-case-level data. We will be able to see how many people are coming through that are owed the statutory duty to be housed, for example, and how they are dealt with. We will also be able to see the people that are coming through that are not necessarily owed the duty to be housed. We expect far more support, help and guidance to get them into a sustainable situation in terms of accommodation.

Is there anything that you would like to add to that, Val?

Val Keen: That broadly covers it. One of the key things, as the Minister said, is that because the duties in the new legislation cover a much wider group of people, and our new recording system reflects that, we will learn a lot more than we currently know, particularly about single homelessness. Also, because of the nature of the new data that we will be collecting, we will understand more about where people were staying before they sought help, the causes of their homelessness, what activities happen, and what the outcome is at the end of that process. Because it is individual-case-level data, we will also begin to build a picture of whether people come back through the system as well, experiencing repeat homelessness. Over time it should make a big difference.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Jones: There are several areas at the moment that are engaged through the trailblazers in terms of obtaining a greater level of detail in terms of the data. I would cite Newcastle as a particular example where, through that, they are trying to work out what the drivers of homelessness are in their area. By tracking what the drivers of homelessness are, they are able to intervene before certain people have approached the Housing Options team. They know that certain people have been through their system two or three times before, and they have a good idea as to why that may well be. They have been working with those people to try to prevent their further homelessness.

Q54 **Bob Blackman:** Taking the examples of the trailblazers, what has been the experience about the hidden homeless now approaching the local authority that hitherto would not have been given any help at all? We have new duties. Given that is the circumstance, what is the increase in the numbers?

Val Keen: In Southwark, they have seen a 29% increase in caseload after the first year. That is what they have reported to us.

Q55 **Bob Blackman:** Are there any others? You mentioned Newcastle.

Val Keen: Southwark is the only authority that is trialling the provisions in the Act in that way. Other trailblazers are doing a range of different things, but Southwark provides the best example.

Q56 **Bob Blackman:** Southwark is the example. Can we look at the comparison to what they were getting, in terms of applications of their normal duties that are currently in the law, compared to what they are seeing now? You are saying it is a 29% increase. Is that all single homeless people, or is it an increase in the numbers of homeless people coming through? Can you clarify?

Val Keen: My understanding is that is their overall caseload. It is probably also important to clarify that now, prior to the legislation, there is quite a lot of variety in the services that single people receive. Lots do receive a service. I know that Southwark works with lots of single people currently and did do prior to the trailblazer. It is a bit of a mixed picture in that respect.

Q57 **Bob Blackman:** There is another issue on data. You have agreed to fund more data being provided by local authorities. How are you going to roll that out, in terms of the requirements on local authorities under the provision?

Mr Jones: We are funding them to enhance their IT systems to capture the data that has not hitherto been captured. We have been working with local authorities and the IT providers themselves in relation to bringing forward this new system. In most cases we expect that will be in place for the commencement of the Act. We will be able to start collecting that data straightaway, which will be important in relation to



assessing how the Act is working, but also looking at the situation that we have discussed at some length around new burdens.

Val Keen: One of the other important factors around the data is that the data we are asking local authorities to send to the department, as they deliver the homelessness legislation, is not information that they would not need to collect in the course of delivering their services. It is about the customer journey through services. Local authorities will need this for their own management information and their own recording.

What we are doing, and through our work with the HAS team and our data team in discussions with local authorities, is trying to support them to develop that approach. They can then have case management systems that help them deliver a customer-friendly service, provide the data off the back end of that and any more data that they want to collect for their own purposes. We see it as an integrated piece.

Q58 **Mary Robinson:** During the course of our inquiry, it appeared that young people leaving care were increasingly vulnerable to becoming homeless and finding themselves in that sort of situation. Are you aware of any data or any work that has been done in terms of the pilots or trailblazers that is specifically looking at this group of people?

Mr Jones: Before I bring Val back in on that, I would like to reiterate some of the work that was done following the comments that were made by this Committee. Our department then set about working with the Department for Education, who were particularly keen that we reflected the challenge of care-leavers within the legislation. As you know, Mrs Robinson, the Act therefore contains provision to make sure that we disapply the local connection to care-leavers, so that they are able to choose where their local connection lies. This is rather than a situation where they could be given the inappropriate area that may not suit their circumstances.

Val Keen: The department has worked very closely with the Department for Education over quite a long period of time to support local authorities in the way that they work with both young people approaching the end of their time in care and who have left care, and also young homeless 16 or 17 year-olds. That is in terms of support for young people who do not necessarily have a lot of parental support. We know that lots of local authorities have quite detailed strategies and support pathways in place for young people. Part of that has been through commissioning an organisation called St Basils to deliver a lot of that work on the department's behalf.

The Minister mentioned the homelessness advice and support team that we are putting in place. We are saying there that there will be two people within that team who are focusing specifically around young people, including young people leaving care. One of those posts is funded by the Department for Education.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Department for Education are also working quite closely with local authorities' implementation of other reforms. You might be aware that the law has recently changed so that young people will have a right to have a personal adviser until they are 25 instead of just until 22. That is implementing from April as well. We are working closely with the department so that we can make sure that young people have planned transitions. The goal is that care-leavers never come near the homelessness system, that they have planned moves towards independence and that that is done as part of their pathway planning and ongoing support within their local areas, but it is here as a safety net if they do.

Q59 Liz Twist: I want to look at strategies, please. The Government require each local authority to have a homelessness strategy, but consider what is in the strategy to be a local matter. DCLG is not monitoring that. In the context of rising homelessness, is that light touch appropriate?

Mr Jones: What I would say in relation to this is, yes, you are absolutely right that every local authority is supposed to have a strategy in relation to homelessness. That is reiterated in the new code, as you have probably noticed. There are also a number of strengthened and clarified procedures within the new code of guidance that we are proposing. The expectation is that the strategy that local authorities adopt does truly reflect that code of guidance that was put in place. That reflects the very clear steer that the Government have given, in terms of us wanting prevention to be at the heart of homelessness services within a local authority area.

Coming back to the point I made earlier on to Mr Amesbury, we are going to review this after two years to ensure that local authorities are doing what we are looking for in this regard. Within that period, our team of advisers will also be there to help and guide local authorities around this very type of issue. They will be able to advise councils in that sense. We have backstop provisions in relation to the code of practice if we needed to, although, taking that as a consideration, we also need to consider that there are parts of the country where they are doing things well. Getting best practice and broadening that out is an extremely important part of this.

We know where places are doing things well, and that sometimes they are going above and beyond what is in the code of guidance that we currently have. They have developed partnerships with outside organisations and other public-sector bodies, for example, that aid their quest to reduce homelessness. There are a number of things that we can do along the way, but there is also the review, which is an extremely important part of this.

Q60 Liz Twist: Would it not be reasonable to set out from the start to check that local authorities are following the spirit and the letter of the law, and the code of practice, by monitoring the plans?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Jones: As we have said, we will have case-by-case-level data. Through that, we will be able to see what is happening from one local authority area to another. One of the other elements of this that will be extremely important is what other advice and support we can provide. We are providing an online portal for local authorities to be able to access information and support. We are also helping local authorities through employing external organisations, such as Shelter, to give advice and guidance. There are a number of things that we can do in this space to make sure that councils are as well-equipped as possible to deal with the implementation of the Act.

As I said before, we have a backstop position, and we expect, through this process, local authorities absolutely to follow and implement the code of guidance that we are putting forward. That said, that is subject to consultation at the moment. Therefore, we are listening carefully not just to local authorities but also to the various charities to make sure that we get the code of guidance right, it is workable and will deliver what we are all looking for in this room. That is to help people earlier, overall to reduce the number of people that are homeless, in the statutory sense, and the number of rough sleepers.

Q61 **Liz Twist:** I want to come on to the code of guidance in a minute. On this matter of strategy, are you saying that basically there is support there that local authorities can avail themselves of, but it will be only at the review stage that you will see whether that has worked?

Val Keen: It is worth again referring back to the work that we are doing through the homelessness advice and support team. Their time is going to be quite focused. For example, they are already getting together groups of local authorities where there are particular issues, or where they are facing particular challenges. There is an event very shortly bringing together authorities who have higher numbers of families in bed and breakfast accommodation, for example. Looking at homelessness strategies is one of the things that that team is doing to help identify where to direct the support and challenge that they have been put in place to deliver.

I have to say that so far local authorities are engaging extremely positively and actively with that team. We have had almost 500 representatives of 250 of the 326 housing authorities in the country come to the first tranche of events. We have another event planned so that others can join. We have visits in place for authorities who have not managed to make those events. Those conversations start from homelessness strategies and implementation plans for the Act. There is a lot of engagement with that process, with local authorities wanting to get it right, draw on one another's experience and take the help that is offered.

Q62 **Liz Twist:** Yes, I am sure. It seems like the HAS advisers have a lot of work to do, running around the country and offering advice as well as doing this higher-level stuff.



Val Keen: Yes. It is a planned programme of work and they have a clear set of objectives that have been put in place. There is no doubt that they are busy—that is definitely the case—but there is a work plan that fits the resources we have available. We have nine people in place so far, and we are in the process of recruiting three more people to join that team. While part of the role is universal, to work with all local authorities, to share information and support people with their planning, the targeted work will be around the authorities that need or want that most. We will target the resources to where they are most helpful.

Q63 Liz Twist: As you said, Minister, the draft code of guidance is still subject to consultation. The consultation paper says it focuses more tightly on the legislation, with less attention to general practice guidance. Does this risk giving local authorities too much flexibility over a homelessness strategy?

Mr Jones: It is quite clear, in terms of the revised code of guidance, which is obviously subject to consultation, that there are many areas within that where the guidance is strengthened quite significantly. As such, it is a far stronger document in relation to setting out what we expect from local authorities than was the case previously. As I have said, we have wanted to retain an element of flexibility, because sometimes there are local circumstances that require a bit more flexibility. It then allows for local partnerships and other pieces of work to emerge that perhaps in many cases we can learn from.

Q64 Liz Twist: One of the issues raised with us earlier by the charities was about particular groups that may not be covered well enough. One of those was, for example, victims of domestic abuse. Are there any proposals to look at that again and ensure that advice is available?

Mr Jones: We have been absolutely clear that the victims of domestic abuse should receive the help and support they need at that particular time. That could be in the sense of getting away from the particular setting or area that they are in. That then relates to other authorities not turning people away in relation to the fact that they have not resided in that authority area previously, and those types of things.

We are also doing a wider piece of work in that sense with regard to social tenancies, for example. We are looking at how social tenancies work, with a view to trying to make sure that they work in favour of the victim and not the abuser. A number of pieces of work are going on in relation to that. We also take very seriously comments that are made through this process from the various charities that support victims of domestic abuse. If there are any things that have glaringly been omitted from this code of guidance, we will look very carefully to see what we can do to make sure it works. Our overriding thing is that we want victims of domestic abuse to get the support and help that they need.

Q65 Liz Twist: So there may be an opportunity to strengthen that guidance.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Jones: There are probably lots of charities, not just on the domestic abuse side but also in a wider sense, that are likely to come forward with suggestions. I did catch a little of the beginning of this session, where you had charities making their views clear, both Crisis and Shelter. There were several suggestions made in terms of areas of clarification and suggestions. Throughout this process, right from the start when Mr Blackman brought the legislation to the House, we have sought to work with all parties involved to make sure that we get the best product that will help people.

Q66 **Andrew Lewer:** The Chairman referred to the National Audit Office earlier on. They also had to say that the department's recent performance in reducing homelessness could not be considered value for money. They recommended that the DCLG draft and publish a strategy for dealing for homelessness. Is that something you are intending to do?

Mr Jones: What I would say, Mr Lewer, is that, over the last 18 months or so, we have been very clear with a number of programmes, including the Homelessness Reduction Act, the prevention trailblazers, the rough sleeper programme we have put forward and the implementation of the flexible homelessness support grant. We have been very focused on delivering practical measures that will help to reduce the number of people who are homeless. We can now see that work is coming through at some pace.

I have heard what has been said by the NAO. We take their comments very seriously. We have not ruled out a strategy. In regard to rough sleeping, we have made a clear commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022, and eradicate it by 2027. We have to make a consideration on that as to whether we bring a strategy forward to deal with that issue. As you know, we have also announced in the Budget last week the wider work that we are doing across Government with the task force. They will be charged with the very strong and ambitious commitments that the Government have made in this area.

Q67 **Andrew Lewer:** Could you regard the Homelessness Reduction Act itself, the provisions within it, as the core of a strategy for the department in dealing with homelessness?

Mr Jones: I would not say that is the only string to our bow. What I would say is it has been widely acknowledged that it is the most transformative piece of legislation in a generation—for 40 years, in fact. Therefore, it does give us a very good platform. If we get the implementation right, which is what we are setting out to do, it gives us a very good platform to build on.

Q68 **Chair:** Picking up on the National Audit Office point, specifically they said that the Government had not fully assessed the impact of welfare reforms on homelessness since 2012. Quite a lot of changes had been made on welfare issues since then. Are you now going to assess the impact of welfare reforms on homelessness?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Jones: We are working very closely with the DWP in a number of areas. We have seen that recently in relation to the announcement that was made on the LHA rate. We have seen that in regard to the wider situation on supported housing. What I can say to you, Mr Betts, is that, while I have not got anything to announce in relation to a wider piece of work that may be undertaken, I would not today sit here and rule out the possibility of further work being undertaken between the two departments.

Q69 **Chair:** That is helpful. That recognises the changes that are not going ahead with regard to linking supported housing cost of the LHA, or indeed social rents to the LHA. The NAO drew specific attention to LHA in the private sector and said there that this was causing additional problems by making rents more unaffordable, and would potentially lead to homelessness. It is in that context I was asking about a review.

Mr Jones: I accept that. As I have said previously in today's session, we have been working very closely with the DWP. The DWP have looked at the situation. That is why, through the Budget, 50% of the savings that are going to be made through the implementation of the LHA rate in the private sector will be repurposed into targeted affordability funding in the highest-value areas. That is also why the amount of discretionary housing payment was uplifted significantly, to £900 million, during this spending period. This helped people where they had short-term challenges that needed to be overcome, so that they could either be kept in the accommodation that they were in or found further accommodation.

There is another thing that we have done in the Budget in that sense. I do not want to give Mr Blackman too much praise in one session, but he is willing me to. You will no doubt be aware Mr Blackman was calling for significant action in terms of access to the private rented sector and what more the Government could do in relation to helping people get access into the private rented sector, where they were struggling to do so because of their own means. As a result of that, in the Budget £20 million has been allocated for that very purpose.

Q70 **Chair:** These measures are welcome on their own, as individual measures, but what the NAO was saying was that it would be helpful to see them in the context of the Government having looked at the impact of welfare reforms, and that these were joined-up thinking about how you address welfare reforms and the link to homelessness, rather than just individual measures by themselves.

Mr Jones: Taking on board those comments, as I said earlier, we are looking at that whole area. We have not ruled out the possibility of doing a joint piece of work between the two departments, as has been suggested.

Q71 **Bob Blackman:** Can I start off with a slightly negative view? If you caught the first element of this session from both Shelter and Crisis giving evidence, there was some concern that the tone of the guidance



could be more positive, rather than being more formal and possibly not as helpful as in the intentions. Without giving any specifics, could I suggest that you might want to review the content of what was said earlier and respond to it as part of the consultation process?

Mr Jones: As you probably heard in my opening comments, Mr Blackman, I very much came to this Committee today in the spirit of co-operation and working together. That is how I feel we have approached this from the beginning, at the point where you put forward your Private Members' Bill. I did catch a short period of the first part of the evidence that was given by Crisis and Shelter, but I did not catch all of the sentiment that was made, by the sounds of what you are saying. We will review what has been said within the evidence that has been put forward from the various sessions that you are holding on the code of guidance. We will look at that in the context of the final code.

Q72 **Bob Blackman:** You mentioned the measures in the budget. I want to run through those very quickly. How are you going to assess the performance of the Housing First projects that are initiated in the West Midlands, Manchester and Liverpool?

Mr Jones: The ultimate guide to success in that sense will be how many people are not on the street from the work that is done in regard to Housing First in those three pilot areas.

Q73 **Bob Blackman:** How many are we expecting not to be on the streets in those pilots?

Mr Jones: What we have done is look very carefully at what has happened in other countries. As you know, I am sure, our Secretary of State has visited Helsinki to see how this operates there. From the work that we have seen in that country, where, through this method, they have eradicated rough sleeping, we are confident that this is a very important part of the overall package that we are going to put together.

In relation to evaluation, you may have noticed that we have come forward with a number of evaluations on schemes that we have previously brought forward as a department. We are currently considering how that may work in relation to Housing First.

Q74 **Bob Blackman:** When will you make that decision?

Mr Jones: I would guess that we will be making further announcements shortly in relation to how Housing First will be implemented.

Q75 **Bob Blackman:** Will that be before the start of the financial year?

Mr Jones: I have been to this Committee a number of times.

Bob Blackman: So have your colleagues.

Mr Jones: When I have said "shortly" it has normally been a reasonable assumption and assessment of the situation. What I will have to say at



HOUSE OF COMMONS

this point, Mr Blackman, is it would probably be safer on my part to write to you further in regard to that, and copy in the Chair of the Committee.

Bob Blackman: That would be very helpful.

Chair: So you are going to write shortly.

Mr Jones: Shortly, yes

Q76 **Bob Blackman:** Can I then move on to, as you quite rightly alluded to, the help to rent projects? The application was for £31 million. £20 million was granted. How is the department going to make up the shortfall?

Mr Jones: What I will do in a moment is bring Val in. What I would say is that we looked very carefully at the proposal that was on the table. In that regard, and as you well know, Mr Blackman, what you first put in for in relation to any bid may not necessarily be the final outcome. What I would say is that we are now going to look very carefully at how that funding is spent and distributed to get the best out of it.

Q77 **Bob Blackman:** The clarity that I seek is about whether we are going to be seeing the entirety of the proposal on help to rent and also the national rental deposit scheme, but just with less money, and therefore potentially fewer people being helped. Or are elements of that proposal being dropped completely? That would be a very bad mistake.

Mr Jones: My understanding is that we are currently considering how we are going to bring forward the proposal now we have that funding. I will bring Val in, who may well be able to elaborate, Mr Blackman.

Val Keen: Yes, that is right. The commitment in the Budget outlines that this funding is there to help people access and sustain tenancies in the private rented sector. We have not yet said specifically how that will happen. We will be working up that detail and continuing to talk with stakeholders to identify that. Clearly, different stakeholders will have different views about what will be the most effective in relation to that.

Q78 **Bob Blackman:** We had some very clear projects that were outlined in the submission. I am worried that, as per usual, you may make a submission and you do not get everything you want, but I want to be clear about what the department's view is on what it is going to do. Is it going to look to do the whole element of the various different schemes that made up that bid, or is it going to pick and choose?

Mr Jones: Now we have the funding, we are going to consider that. Obviously, in relation to the work that you have done so far, no doubt you will want to give your views on a one-to-one basis in relation to the work that we take forward.

Q79 **Bob Blackman:** Finally from me, what is the remit of the Homelessness Task Force that was also announced in the Budget? What are they aiming to do in this whole process?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Jones: The Government have set out a number of ambitions, particularly halving rough sleeping by 2022 and eradicating it by 2027. That task force will be made up of Ministers from across Government. It will have a secretariat. As with the usual Government task forces, there will be milestones and things for the relevant Ministers in each department to report back on. Given that it is a cross-Government task force, with an array of Ministers, it will give us the ability to look at the situation, not just in the context of the work we are doing on homelessness and housing supply, which are two very important elements, but the underlying issues as well. We all know that there can be an absolute array of things that cause homelessness and rough sleeping—things like relationship breakdown, drink and drug dependency and mental health challenges. The idea of this task force is to get under the skin of those issues.

The other important part of it is that there will also be an expert group that will sit below the task force. That will be made up of professionals from various charities and the local government sector. They will also be there in a capacity to advise the task force on various issues.

Q80 **Bob Blackman:** It sounds quite complicated. When will we see this task force start? When can we expect to see some action?

Mr Jones: May I say that there will be an announcement made shortly?

Bob Blackman: I thought that was going to be the answer, but I had to ask.

Mr Jones: As I have said and maintained a number of times, Mr Blackman, when I have generally said “shortly” we have quite often delivered.

Bob Blackman: Correct.

Mr Jones: That has sometimes been ahead of expectations, so I am hoping that “shortly”, or “very shortly” maybe, will be a good way of putting it.

Q81 **Bob Blackman:** Before Christmas?

Mr Jones: You are tempting me, Mr Blackman, but I will stick to what I have already said.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence today. Thank you.