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COVID-19: housing people sleeping rough

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Summary

The Everyone In initiative is a considerable achievement: the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (the Department), alongside local authorities and the voluntary sector moved at speed and with decisiveness to house people sleeping rough in spring 2020. In the first wave of the pandemic these actions may have avoided some 20,000 transmissions of COVID-19, while limiting deaths among this highly vulnerable population to an estimated 16. The scale of this achievement increased over the year, as growing numbers were helped under the initiative: by January 2021 the number of those who had been helped into accommodation had reached more than 37,000.

Nevertheless, this initiative has also exposed gaps in the Department's approach to tackling rough sleeping. The Department has a target to end rough sleeping by May 2024, but does not have a strategy for achieving this outcome or maintaining it once met; nor does it have a clear understanding of how it will measure and report on progress. The scale of effort required to achieve this target may also be greater than previously suggested: the number of people accommodated in the first ten months of Everyone In (37,430) was nearly nine times the number of rough sleepers recorded in the Department's last official snapshot before the start of the pandemic (4,266). This also raises further questions about whether the Department's funding of local authorities to achieve its objectives is adequate and sufficiently long-term.

In some areas the Department lacks transparency and clarity in its communications. Despite carrying out joint planning with the Home Office, it has not offered clear guidance on the policies it expects local authorities to take in respect of non-UK nationals who have no recourse to public funds. This includes those who have been temporarily housed under Everyone In, which is up to 50% of those staying in hotels in London. The Department has sometimes shown a disappointing evasiveness regarding the data it holds on key trends; for example, it has failed to publish the updated figures it has been collecting on numbers of people sleeping on the streets. In other cases it has failed to collect or study data it should be monitoring—for example, whether it is on track to provide the 3,300 homes for people sleeping rough it has promised by the end of the 2020–21 financial year.

Introduction

On 26 March 2020 the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (the Department) launched its Everyone In initiative. Everyone In required local authorities to take urgent action to house people sleeping rough and those at risk of rough sleeping in order to protect them and stop wider transmission of COVID-19. This was in recognition both of the greater vulnerability of this population, given the prevalence of underlying health conditions, and the practical barriers to self-isolating within communal shelters. By mid-April, 90% of the then estimated population of people sleeping rough had been made an offer of emergency accommodation, often staying in hotels that had been block-booked by local authorities. In the first wave of the pandemic, the deaths of only a relatively small number of people sleeping rough, and those who had been rough sleeping, were linked with COVID-19 (16 people as of 26 June 2020). By the end of January 2021, there were 11,263 people staying in hotels and other emergency accommodation, and a further 26,167 people who had been helped to find more settled accommodation.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Everyone In initiative succeeded in its objective of protecting public health in the first wave of the pandemic, averting more than 20,000 infections.** Despite not having a national pandemic plan in place for the rough sleeping population, the Department acted swiftly, in conjunction with local authorities and charities, to ensure that people sleeping rough were supported off the street through Everyone In in the first wave of the pandemic. Recognising the additional demands from the pandemic on its capacity, it invited Baroness Casey to run its Rough Sleeping Taskforce. The Department then showed flexibility in rapidly reorganising its activities, in partnership with charities and local authorities. However, maintaining a heightened level of intensity for a prolonged period impacted on its resilience, as well as that of charities and local authorities. Delays in the awarding of funding in autumn 2020 may be signs that the Department's capacity was being stretched.

Recommendation: *The Department should, in seeking to learn lessons from what made Everyone In a success in the first wave of the pandemic, assess what additional staff capacity it needs to be able to sustain its response and its support for local partners, as the pandemic continues.*

2. **The Department still does not have a plan for achieving its target of ending rough sleeping by 2024, and risks failing to capitalise on the successes of Everyone In.** Following the general election in December 2019 the government began this Parliament with a manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by May 2024: only three years from now. This brought forward the government's previous commitment, which had been to end rough sleeping by May 2027. In February 2020 the Department commissioned a review of its 2018 rough sleeping strategy towards meeting its new target but, owing to the prioritisation given to dealing with the pandemic, this has not yet been conducted. Not only does the Department not have a plan for ending rough sleeping by 2024, it also has not worked out how to define what 'ending' rough sleeping means or how it will measure and report on progress in a meaningful way. To end rough sleeping will certainly involve addressing the wider lack of availability of supported housing and affordable housing. The Department's evidence shows that 80% of rough sleepers have mental health needs and a significant majority have substance abuse which underlines the importance of providing appropriate wraparound care to provide a sustainable pathway out of rough-sleeping. In 2017 this Committee recommended that the Department launch a cross-government strategy for addressing homelessness in the round, which could have helped it to address this issue, but it has so far failed to do so.

Recommendation: *The Department must, before summer recess, publish at least a draft strategy for how it will achieve its goal of ending rough sleeping by 2024. This should set out its definition of 'ending' rough sleeping, how it will measure and report progress in achieving and maintaining this goal, and the capacity of supported and affordable housing required to reduce the flow of people onto the streets towards zero for the long term.*

3. **The size of the rough sleeping population and those at risk of rough sleeping is far higher than the snapshot the Department is relying on, exposing the inadequacy of its current approach to data collection and reporting.** One consequence of

Everyone In has been that for the first time the Department has publicly acknowledged the scale of the rough sleeping population over the course of a year. The number of people assisted under Everyone In from the end of March 2020 to the end of January 2021 (37,430) is nearly nine times the number in its official snapshot of the number of people sleeping rough on one night in autumn 2019 (4,266), its last such measure before the pandemic. This illustrates that there is a churn of people moving onto and off the streets during the year, something which cannot be captured by a single snapshot. In spite of the Everyone In initiative (and other measures, such as a ban on evictions in the private rental sector), this churn continued during 2020, with Data collected by the Department from local authorities apparently showing numbers of people on the streets growing again over the summer, although the number recorded in the official snapshot taken in autumn 2020 was 2,688, a reduction of 37% on the 2019 figure. In February 2021 the Department began publishing monthly rolling estimates of rough sleeping numbers, which should belatedly improve Parliament's capacity to monitor the Department's performance. The Department's most recent snapshot shows that rough sleeping has fallen 43% with 2,688 people estimated to be sleeping rough on a single night in autumn 2020, compared to 4,677 in 2018. The Department must continually scrutinise and improve its own data collection system to make sure it is up to date in monitoring the rough sleeping population.

Recommendation: *To support proper accountability, the Department must ensure it continues to publish its monthly data on numbers of people sleeping rough. Drawing on this information, it should report back to this Committee on a quarterly basis on its performance against its target for ending rough sleeping.*

4. **The Department has provided a number of different funding streams to local authorities to cover the pandemic response for people sleeping rough, but many are short-term and reactive, and the Department does not have a cohesive long-term funding plan for its commitment to end rough sleeping.** Local authorities expect to spend £192 million on rehousing people sleeping rough by the end of March 2021. The Department provided £4.6 billion between March and October 2020 to cover additional costs resulting from the COVID-19 response, but rough sleeping is only one of a number of priorities covered by this un-ringfenced funding. The Department also brought forward and augmented existing funding, with a total of £700 million available to local authorities for tackling homelessness in 2020–21. More recent funding announcements have seen a series of smaller amounts allocated as a reaction to immediate priorities, rather than to address a more strategic long-term plan, which would provide more certainty to the many small organisations in the voluntary sector working with people sleeping rough. These groups also face high levels of bureaucracy when applying for relatively small ad-hoc grants.

Recommendation: *To inform the review of its strategy, the Department should reassess the level of funding required to meet its target of ending rough sleeping and align all individual streams of funding for tackling rough sleeping to this end. This should address the importance of multi-year funding certainty for local authorities and the voluntary sector. In doing so, it should state how it will assess the long-term value for money of its spending on rough sleeping and*

homelessness, focusing on interventions which do most to reduce the long-term public costs associated with both rough sleeping and housing people in temporary accommodation.

5. **The Department has provided mixed messages to local authorities on how to support people sleeping rough who have no recourse to public funds, and has no long-term plan for those who have been taken into hotels.** Local authorities are generally not permitted to support non-UK nationals who legally have no recourse to public funds, or are otherwise ineligible for benefits, other than where there is a risk to life. At the outset of the pandemic the Department provided clear advice that, because of the risks to public health, local authorities should provide accommodation for all people sleeping rough irrespective of immigration status. Over the course of the year, however, the messaging it provided to local authorities became more ambiguous, and the approach they took to these cohorts of people became increasingly divergent. In particular, it appears that local authorities in London and the West Midlands are facing practical and financial difficulties regarding their support for these cohorts, with around 50% of those staying in hotels in London being recorded as having no recourse to public funds at the beginning of winter 2020–21. The Department has not been able to say what actions local authorities should take with respect to this cohort of people once the pandemic has abated, nor has it provided clarity on the implications of its recent work with the Home Office on plans to address immigration issues related to rough sleeping. The Department must do more to support those with no recourse to public-funds.

Recommendation: *Within two months the Department should publish details of its agreed plans with the Home Office to address rough sleeping and immigration issues together, and provide clear guidance to local authorities on what this means for the support they offer this cohort, including those staying in hotels under Everyone In.*

6. **It is uncertain whether the Department will meet its objective of providing 3,300 homes for people sleeping rough by the end of March 2021.** Under its Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme, the Department has distributed £161 million funding against bids from local authorities for the provision of 3,300 homes for housing people sleeping rough. Contrary to what it previously told us, the Department expects the majority of these homes to involve the leasing or purchasing of existing buildings (though sometimes involving significant renovation), rather than new additions to the housing stock. It expects people to stay in them on average for two years. The Department has not published or provided us with details on how these homes will contribute to its target of ending rough sleeping, or what further accommodation will be available for people to move into once their stay in these homes comes to an end. At the time we took evidence, in late January 2021, the Department was unable to provide any figures on the number of homes that had already been provided and occupied, nor how many it was on track to provide by the end of the financial year.

Recommendation: *The Department should write to us within two months on the progress it is making in securing 3,300 homes under its Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme, and include details on how it will ensure the availability of the supported and affordable housing required for people to move into, once their stay in these homes comes to an end.*

1 Rough sleeping strategy

Introduction

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (the Department).¹ We also took evidence from Baroness Casey, who temporarily led the Department's pandemic response in respect of people sleeping rough in spring and summer 2020.

2. People sleeping rough—‘people sleeping [...] in the open air, or people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation’²—often suffer from poorer health than the general population, with many experiencing a combination of mental health, substance abuse, and physical health needs.³ Because of the prevalence of underlying health conditions among this population, people sleeping rough have been recognised as being particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.⁴ In addition, in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, where people sleeping rough occasionally took shelter in communal settings, such as night shelters, and were unable to self-isolate and found it difficult to practise social distancing, risking transmission of the virus.⁵

3. In recognition of these public health risks, on 26 March 2020 the Department launched its Everyone In initiative.⁶ Everyone In required local authorities to take urgent action to house people sleeping rough and those at risk of rough sleeping in order to protect them and stop wider transmission of COVID-19. By mid-April, 5,400 people (90% of the then estimated population of 6,000 people sleeping rough in England, according to unverified estimates by local authorities) had been made an offer of emergency accommodation, often staying in hotels that had been block-booked by local authorities.⁷ Over the rest of the year local authorities both continued to take people into emergency accommodation and helped them move into more settled accommodation. By the end of January 2021, there were 11,263 people staying in hotels and other emergency accommodation, and a further 26,167 people who had been helped to find more settled accommodation.⁸

Maintaining the achievements of the Everyone In initiative

4. The Department conceived of Everyone In primarily as a public health measure, aimed at reducing the risks of COVID-19 to a vulnerable population, and at preventing

1 C&AG's Report, *Investigation into the housing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Session 2019–21, HC 1075, 14 January 2021.

2 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Guidance: Homelessness data: notes and definitions*, 3 April 2018.

3 C&AG's Report, para 1.3.

4 D Lewer et al., 'COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study', *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, vol. 8 issue 12, December 2020, pp. 1181–91.

5 C&AG's Report, para 1.4.

6 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Letter from Minister Hall to local authorities on plans to protect rough sleepers*, 26 March 2020.

7 These figures are not directly comparable with the Department's official snapshot of rough sleepers (4,266), taken on one night in autumn 2019. This is partly because the methodology used to produce them is less robust, and partly because the figure of 6,000 rough sleepers includes those sleeping in night shelters, who are excluded from the annual snapshot. C&AG's Report, paras 1.9, 1.12.

8 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: January 2021*, 25 February 2021.

wider transmission.⁹ In the first wave of the pandemic, it appears to have made a successful impact. According to one study, by closing night shelters and taking other actions to reduce transmission, Everyone In may have helped to prevent more than 20,000 infections and 266 deaths among the homeless population in the first wave.¹⁰ In terms of recorded deaths, as at the end of June 2020, of people whose deaths were registered as involving COVID-19, only the relatively small number of 16 were identified as having been homeless.¹¹

5. The Department had not previously prepared a national pandemic plan for people sleeping rough for it to consult at the outset of this crisis.¹² However, once the scale of the pandemic became apparent, in mid-March 2020, the Department rapidly adapted, redeploying staff around this new priority.¹³ In recognition of the sudden demands on its capacity, a key element of the Department's response was bringing in Baroness Casey—who was due to work for the Department in an alternative capacity, leading a review into its rough sleeping strategy—to lead its pandemic response in respect of people sleeping rough.¹⁴ The Department also believes that investments it has made in recent years, in both personnel and relationships with local authorities, helped it to organise Everyone In successfully.¹⁵

6. For all concerned—staff at the Department, local authorities, and voluntary groups—implementing Everyone In meant maintaining a heightened level of intensity for a prolonged period.¹⁶ This has clearly tested the resilience of both staff and organisations which is also affected by the short term nature of funding.¹⁷ As a potential sign of such pressures, the Department's awarding of funding for its Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme was delayed in autumn 2020, due in part to workload demands overstressing staff capacity.¹⁸

7. Notwithstanding the evident successes of Everyone In in the first wave of the pandemic, the National Audit Office noted that the Department's response to the resurgence of COVID-19 in autumn and winter 2020 did not appear as comprehensive as in the spring. The NAO suggested that the Department would need to keep under close review whether it was protecting vulnerable individuals as decisively as in the early stages of the pandemic.¹⁹ Emerging data from the second wave of the pandemic is concerning, with reports of a sharp rise in cases of COVID-19 among the rough sleeping population in London in December 2020 and January 2021.²⁰ Anecdotal reports suggest a contributory factor may have been an apparent rise during the second wave in the use of—and occupancy rates within—hostels with some communal facilities.²¹

9 Qq 3, 16; C&AG's Report, para 1.15.

10 D Lewer et al., 'COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study', *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, vol. 8 issue 12, December 2020, pp. 1181–91.

11 Office for National Statistics, *Coronavirus and deaths of homeless people, England and Wales: deaths registered up to 26 June 2020*, 10 July 2020.

12 Q 15; C&AG's Report, para 1.10.

13 C&AG's Report, para 1.10.

14 Qq 14, 17–18.

15 Qq 15, 20.

16 C&AG's Report, para 1.12.

17 Qq 19–20.

18 C&AG's Report, para 2.20.

19 C&AG's Report, para 20(c).

20 [Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, University College London].

21 [Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, University College London].

Rough sleeping target and strategy

8. The Department's current Rough Sleeping Strategy was launched in August 2018, with a commitment to end rough sleeping by 2027.²² In December 2019 the new Government was elected with a manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by May 2024, three years earlier than the previous target.²³ Following the adoption of this accelerated target, the Department recognised the need to review its existing strategy.²⁴ In December it successfully asked Baroness Casey to lead a review; this was announced in February 2020, with work expected to get underway sometime after Easter 2020.²⁵ Owing to the prioritisation given to COVID-19 from March 2020 onwards, plans for this review were put on hold, and have not since been revived.²⁶ The Rough Sleeping Strategy, accordingly, remains out of date.²⁷

9. In our evidence session the Department was unable to define exactly what it meant by the commitment "to end" rough sleeping; nor was it able to state clearly whether it was on track to meet this target, or how it would measure and report on it.²⁸ This is a failure on the Department's part, for which it cannot blame the pandemic. While the new target date for ending rough sleeping may only have been established in December 2019, the overall target to end rough sleeping had been in place since the launch of the Rough Sleeping Strategy in summer 2018. Essential elements, such as how the target was to be defined and success measured, should all have been established then.

10. Tackling rough sleeping on its own without addressing homelessness as a whole may even worsen other measures of homelessness, if it means only placing more people in temporary accommodation, thereby adding to the number of homeless households.²⁹ Baroness Casey told us that, in her opinion, not only was a review of the Rough Sleeping Strategy still needed, but there should be a more expansive review which took into account "wider aspects of homelessness, particularly families in temporary accommodation".³⁰ This would be in line with both the previous recommendations of this Committee and the Department's commitments in response. In 2017 this Committee recommended that the Department "publish a cross-government strategy for reducing [...] all measures of homelessness".³¹ The Department accepted this recommendation, announcing its plans to publish a strategy for rough sleeping as only a first step, and promising subsequently to "develop a broader strategy to ensure progress is made on wider issues relating to all forms of homelessness and homelessness prevention".³² It has yet to implement this commitment. That the Department's 2024 target is explicitly framed as *ending* rough sleeping implies not just the housing of all those on the streets at a particular point in time, but a long-term, sustainable reduction in factors which have historically caused people to start sleeping

22 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Rough Sleeping Strategy*, August 2018, Cm 9685, para 1.

23 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, "Prime Minister pledges new action to eliminate homelessness and rough sleeping", press release, 23 December 2019.

24 C&AG's Report, para 2.21.

25 Q 14.

26 C&AG's Report, para 2.21.

27 C&AG's Report, para 18.

28 Qq 70–71.

29 House of Commons Library, *Statutory homelessness in England*, Briefing Paper 01164, 26 November 2020, p 3.

30 Q 67.

31 Public Accounts Committee, *Homeless households*, Eleventh Report of Session 2017–19, HC 462, December 2017, conclusion 1.

32 HM Treasury, *Treasury Minutes: Government response to the Committee of Public Accounts on the Fourth to the Eleventh reports from Session 2017–19*, Cm 9575, March 2018, p 30.

rough. Given this, it would seem clear that meeting this target must involve the wider availability of supported housing and affordable housing, which are themselves key to tackling the wider problem of homelessness in the round.³³

The scale of rough sleeping

11. The Department publishes one official measure of rough sleeping, its annual snapshot, which estimates the number of people sleeping rough on one night every autumn.³⁴ The latest annual snapshot of figure before the pandemic, taken in autumn 2019 was 4,266.³⁵ In contrast, the number of people assisted under Everyone In after ten months (from the end of March 2020 to the end of January 2021) was 37,430, nearly nine times higher.³⁶ The Department told us it was not surprising that there was a significant difference between the two numbers: the 4,266 snapshot is a measure of the “stock” of people sleeping on the streets at that particular moment in time, whereas the 37,430 figure captures the “flow” of people moving onto the streets (and then into emergency or settled accommodation) over a period of months.³⁷ Another reason for the discrepancy is that the 37,430 figure includes those who would otherwise have been bedding down in communal night shelters, as well as others who were adjudged to be at risk of sleeping rough, groups who are excluded from the snapshot figures.³⁸ The Department was clear that the snapshot provided a robust measure that allowed for year on-year comparisons, but that it did not reflect the total population of people sleeping rough over the course of a year.³⁹

12. In June 2020 the Department began regular data collections from local authorities on numbers of people sleeping rough in their area.⁴⁰ In spite of the Everyone In initiative (and other measures, such as a ban on evictions in the private rental sector), there were reports of increasing numbers of people sleeping on the streets over summer and autumn 2020.⁴¹ The data gathered by the Department apparently confirms the upward trend over this period.⁴² At the start of December the Department told us it was considering potential options for publication of this data.⁴³ It has not published any of this data covering the summer or autumn of 2020, but in February 2021 it began publishing monthly data for rough sleeping numbers, beginning in December 2020. At our evidence session, the Department was confident that at the time the most recent snapshot was taken, in autumn 2020, the numbers of people sleeping rough were significantly lower than in 2019.⁴⁴ This was confirmed, in February 2021, when the 2020 snapshot was published: this recorded rough sleeping figures of 2,688, a reduction of 37% from the 2019 snapshot.⁴⁵

33 Public Accounts Committee, *Homeless households*, Eleventh Report of Session 2017–19, HC 462, December 2017, conclusions 3–4.

34 C&AG’s Report, Figure 1.

35 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2019*, 27 February 2020.

36 C&AG’s Report, para 2.1.

37 Q 47.

38 Q 47; C&AG’s Report, para 2.3.

39 Q 47.

40 C&AG’s Report, para 2.9.

41 Q 54; C&AG’s Report, para 2.8.

42 C&AG’s Report, para 2.9.

43 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Letter from Jeremy Pocklington CB to Meg Hillier MP, 2 December 2020.

44 Q 6.

45 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2020*, 25 February 2020.

2 Funding and policy implementation

Funding during the pandemic

13. As of January 2021, local authorities said they were expecting to spend an extra £192 million in the 2020–21 financial year, in respect of additional spending on homelessness and rough sleeping as a result of the pandemic.⁴⁶ The Department considers that it has reimbursed local authorities for the costs paid out so far, with funding provided as part of wider support to local government and their finances over the past year.⁴⁷ As of December 2020, the Department had distributed £4.6 billion in un-ringfenced funding to local authorities to cover all of their additional spending related to the pandemic, although we note that rough sleeping is just one among several other priorities to be covered by this funding.⁴⁸

14. In addition, the Department is providing around £700 million for rough sleeping and homelessness in 2020–21, with the majority of this funding distributed through local authorities.⁴⁹ Before the pandemic, the Department had planned to spend £495 million in 2020–21, as announced in previous spending rounds and the 2020 Budget.⁵⁰ The Department told us that, as a result of the crisis, it had increased the funding available with £225 million of new money. This is a combination of money brought forward to 2020–21 that it had planned to spend in future years, and additional funding provided as part of its Next Steps Accommodation Programme.⁵¹ The Department has confirmed that it will make £750 million available to Local Authorities for tackling homelessness in 2021–22.⁵²

15. Since October 2020, the Department has made a series of smaller funding commitments for the winter months, including a £10 million Cold Weather Fund, £12 million Protect Programme and £10 million in January 2021 for extra COVID protection for people sleeping rough.⁵³ The Department told us that in its consideration local authorities had adequate funding to protect people sleeping rough over the winter months, but was keeping this under review.⁵⁴ We heard from local authorities and voluntary organisations that, while this money would address immediate priorities, the short-term nature of the funding plus the bureaucracy and process involved in applying for grants, meant it was difficult for organisations to plan the support they could offer with any certainty.⁵⁵ Baroness Casey also noted that announcing larger sums over a strategic period of time was much easier for the voluntary sector than “£10 million here and £10 million there”.⁵⁶ The Department recognised that providing more certainty of funding over a longer time scale was important, as it understood the importance of continuity and stability for the voluntary sector. It asserted it was doing the best it could within current constraints, pointing to the Rough Sleeping Initiative funding, which it has confirmed

46 Q 21.

47 Q 21.

48 C&AG’s Report, para 1.13.

49 Qq 4, 21.

50 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2020-documents/spending-review-2020>

51 Q 24.

52 Q 5.

53 C&AG’s Report, Figure 5.

54 Q 1.

55 Qq 5, 25.

56 Q 18.

will not reduce next year. It told us that announcements covering funding over a longer time-scale would be made in the Spending Review next year.⁵⁷ The Department also considered that providing the majority of its funding through local authorities (i.e. rather than directly to voluntary groups) remained the best approach, as it enables councils to tailor their approach to tackling rough sleeping to best fit the needs of the local area.⁵⁸

Non-UK nationals

16. The immigration status of people sleeping rough who are non-UK nationals can affect their legal entitlement to benefits. In some cases these are immigrants from countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA), whose visas impose the condition that they have ‘no recourse to public funds’.⁵⁹ Other sub-groups of non-UK nationals may also be legally restricted from claiming certain benefits, and are also often referred to under the heading ‘no recourse to public funds’ (although strictly speaking they do not fall within that category).⁶⁰ Local authorities may legally bring people sleeping rough from all these groups into emergency accommodation if, following an individual assessment, they understand there to be a risk to life, such as during extreme winter weather.⁶¹

17. At the outset of Everyone In, the Department gave a clear message to local authorities that, as this was a public health emergency, they were to bring *everyone* in (“whether they are from Bromley or Portugal”), irrespective of immigration status or entitlement to benefits.⁶² At the end of May, however, this messaging became more ambiguous, with the Department writing to local authorities to remind them that they could only legally accommodate people who were ineligible for benefits following an individual assessment of risks to life.⁶³ The Department denied that it had in mind a particular number, in terms of a reduction in support for people with no recourse to public funds, that it wanted to achieve by sending this letter.⁶⁴ From this point, however, the support offered by different local authorities to these cohorts of people became increasingly divergent, with some ceasing to take in new people or seeking to move on those who were already in emergency accommodation.⁶⁵ The Department implied to us that this divergence purely reflected the differing progress of the pandemic in different parts of the country, rather than differing approaches taken by local authorities within the same area and faced with similar levels of demand.⁶⁶ Some local authorities, meanwhile, experienced difficulties in supporting people from these cohorts to move into more settled accommodation, because of their ineligibility for benefits: this meant they were unable to receive Local Housing Allowance and other assistance to move into the private rental sector, for instance.⁶⁷ Baroness Casey confirmed to us that, under current rules, local authorities were unable to help these cohorts of people to move into more settled accommodation.⁶⁸ At the end of September, there were around 2,000 people staying in hotels and other emergency accommodation in London

57 Qq 25, 5.

58 Q 3.

59 C&AG’s Report, para 2.10.

60 Q 33; C&AG’s Report, para 2.10.

61 C&AG’s Report, para 2.10.

62 Q 44.

63 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *Letter from the Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing to local authority chief executives*, 28 May 2020.

64 Q 38.

65 C&AG’s Report, para 2.11.

66 Q 37.

67 C&AG’s Report, para 2.12.

68 Q 44.

who were ineligible for benefits, around 50% of those in emergency accommodation at this time.⁶⁹ There are also reports of a significant number of people with no recourse to public funds in emergency accommodation in the West Midlands region.⁷⁰

18. At our evidence session the Department was unable to answer several of our queries about these cohorts. It told us it believed that people sleeping rough with no recourse to public funds would be eligible to receive vaccinations against COVID-19, but that it was not leading on this issue, and had not focused on these cohorts in particular in planning for people sleeping rough to be vaccinated.⁷¹ The Department did not have any information about how much money local authorities had spent on supporting these cohorts since the start of the pandemic.⁷² Nor did it have any data on how many from these cohorts was currently being supported in emergency accommodation.⁷³ Once the immediate threat to life had lifted, the Department suggested there might be a range of options available to local authorities to support people who had been staying in emergency accommodation, but it was unable to provide general advice on what local authorities could lawfully do.⁷⁴ The Department did not provide us with any details when we asked about what would change as a result of the joint planning it has been carrying out with the Home Office to help end rough sleeping among the non-UK population.⁷⁵

Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme

19. Under its Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme, the Department has distributed £161 million funding against bids from local authorities for the provision of 3,300 homes for housing rough sleepers.⁷⁶ In October the Department led us to believe the majority of these homes would be new housing, that is, additions to the housing stock.⁷⁷ In our recent evidence session, however, it clarified that the vast majority would be acquisitions or refurbishments of existing housing (albeit some would be refurbishments of “moribund stock”).⁷⁸

20. The Department described these 3,300 homes as “move-on” accommodation, although it made clear its assumption that residents would stay for an average of two years before needing to move on somewhere else. It did not clarify what its plans were for where they would move on to at the end of this period.⁷⁹

21. As of September 2020 the Department was reasonably confident that all 3,300 homes would be completed by its target date of 31 March 2021.⁸⁰ In our evidence session the

69 C&AG’s Report, para 2.12.

70 Q 41.

71 Qq 31–2.

72 Q 34.

73 Q 40.

74 Q 42.

75 Q 46; C&AG’s Report, para 2.13.

76 C&AG’s Report, para 2.19.

77 Public Accounts Committee, Oral evidence: Starter Homes, HC 88, 22 October 2020, Qq 3–7.

78 Q 56.

79 Q 57.

80 C&AG’s Report, paras 2.19–20.

Department told us it was its aim to have the vast majority of these homes to be ready by this date.⁸¹ However, it was unable to state how many were already completed, nor to provide any figures for how many it projected would be ready by the end of March.⁸²

81 Q 50.

82 Qq 55–6, 58.

Formal minutes

Monday 8 March 2021

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown	Craig Mackinlay
Barry Gardiner	Sarah Olney
Peter Grant	James Wild
Mr Richard Holden	

Draft Report (*COVID-19: housing people sleeping rough*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 21 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Forty-ninth of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Thursday 11 March at 9:15am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 25 January 2021

Jeremy Pocklington, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; **Baroness Casey of Blackstock**, Former head, COVID-19 Rough Sleeping Taskforce, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; **Penny Hobman**, Director for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

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Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

HRS numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 COVID-19 Review Observatory, Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham ([HRS0004](#))
- 2 Changing Lives ([HRS0002](#))
- 3 Crisis ([HRS0007](#))
- 4 Homeless Link ([HRS0011](#))
- 5 Local Government Association ([HRS0005](#))
- 6 National Housing Federation ([HRS0003](#))
- 7 Shelter ([HRS0010](#))
- 8 Solace Women's Aid ([HRS0008](#))
- 9 O'Neill, Stephen ([HRS0001](#))
- 10 The Passage ([HRS0009](#))
- 11 The Riverside Group ([HRS0006](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2019–21

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1st	Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities	HC 85
2nd	Defence Nuclear Infrastructure	HC 86
3rd	High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update	HC 84
4th	EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign	HC 131
5th	University technical colleges	HC 87
6th	Excess votes 2018–19	HC 243
7th	Gambling regulation: problem gambling and protecting vulnerable people	HC 134
8th	NHS capital expenditure and financial management	HC 344
9th	Water supply and demand management	HC 378
10th	Defence capability and the Equipment Plan	HC 247
11th	Local authority investment in commercial property	HC 312
12th	Management of tax reliefs	HC 379
13th	Whole of Government Response to COVID-19	HC 404
14th	Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak	HC 405
15th	Improving the prison estate	HC 244
16th	Progress in remediating dangerous cladding	HC 406
17th	Immigration enforcement	HC 407
18th	NHS nursing workforce	HC 408
19th	Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster	HC 549
20th	Tackling the tax gap	HC 650
21st	Government support for UK exporters	HC 679
22nd	Digital transformation in the NHS	HC 680
23rd	Delivering carrier strike	HC 684
24th	Selecting towns for the Towns Fund	HC 651
25th	Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme	HC 683
26th	Department of Work and Pensions Accounts 2019–20	HC 681
27th	Covid-19: Supply of ventilators	HC 685

Number	Title	Reference
28th	The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's management of the Magnox contract	HC 653
29th	Whitehall preparations for EU Exit	HC 682
30th	The production and distribution of cash	HC 654
31st	Starter Homes	HC 88
32nd	Specialist Skills in the civil service	HC 686
33rd	Covid-19: Bounce Back Loan Scheme	HC 687
34th	Covid-19: Support for jobs	HC 920
35th	Improving Broadband	HC 688
36th	HMRC performance 2019–20	HC 690
37th	Whole of Government Accounts 2018–19	HC 655
38th	Managing colleges' financial sustainability	HC 692
39th	Lessons from major projects and programmes	HC 694
40th	Achieving government's long-term environmental goals	HC 927
41st	COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme	HC 689
42nd	COVID-19: Government procurement and supply of Personal Protective Equipment	HC 928
43rd	COVID-19: Planning for a vaccine Part 1	HC 930
44th	Excess Votes 2019–20	HC 1205
45th	Managing flood risk	HC 931
46th	Achieving Net Zero	HC 935
47th	COVID-19: Test, track and trace (part 1)	HC 932
48th	Digital Services at the Border	HC 936