

Research report

Locked Out:

Youth Homelessness during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic



centre
point

give homeless
young people
a future



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About Centrepoin

Centrepoin is the leading national charity working with homeless young people aged 16 to 25. We are a registered social housing provider, a charity enterprise and a company limited by guarantee. Established 50 years ago, we provide accommodation and support to help homeless young people get their lives back on track.

Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified many of the challenges already faced by young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It has highlighted just how a lack of suitable accommodation options, insecure employment and challenges with the benefits system are affecting young people across the UK.

This report is based on a survey of English councils, analysis of Centrepoint's Helpline data, and interviews with local authority and Centrepoint staff.

An increase in homelessness

More than three quarters of council respondents (78 per cent) across England have seen an increase in homelessness in their area since the start of the pandemic. More than four in ten (42 per cent) have seen a significant increase.

Calls to Centrepoint's Helpline have increased by almost 50 per cent since the beginning of lockdown, with a greater proportion of calls since the lockdown relating to young people facing homelessness due to family and relationship breakdown.

The number of young people contacting Centrepoint's Helpline who are sleeping rough has doubled since the lockdown. Due to the lockdown and social distancing measures in place, more young people have been forced to sleep on the streets rather than sofa surf.

Accessibility of services

While councils have quickly responded to the pandemic and instituted new ways of working to limit the spread of the virus, there have been significant accessibility challenges for young people seeking housing support and assistance.

Eight in 10 (80 per cent) councils report closing their face to face homelessness services during this time, with many moving to remote ways of providing advice, information and homelessness applications.

The pandemic has exacerbated what is in many cases already a difficult and unclear process to apply as homeless and seek support from a local authority. This has led to vulnerable young people unable to access help in a time of need, and with no way of getting emergency accommodation.

Support during the pandemic

The effort and coordination taken by national and local government, charities, housing providers and businesses to secure self-contained accommodation for rough sleepers is a great achievement and shows the impact that coordination, resources and political will can have in responding to crisis.

Central government interventions, such as the Everyone In scheme, the suspension of evictions, and changes to the benefits system have been effective in supporting people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in the immediate term, and councils say these have made a positive impact on their efforts to tackle homelessness during this time.

However, the focus on those sleeping rough overlooked people who were sofa-surfing, living in overcrowded housing and faced with the threat of eviction and loss of a place to live. It seems that Everyone In did not extend beyond those sleeping rough at the beginning of the lockdown, including those who subsequently became homeless because of the pandemic.

Fewer than a quarter (23 per cent) of authorities say that these measures went far enough to support young people, and that other groups vulnerable to homelessness, such as care leavers, victims of domestic abuse and workers in insecure employment, have not received the protections they need.

A majority of councils (58 per cent) said that the funding they have received during this time is not enough, **with almost half of councils stressing that this funding is nowhere near enough to properly prevent and reduce homelessness in their area.**

Beyond the pandemic

Without addressing the structural factors which have meant so many people are facing homelessness in the first place, the longer term impacts of Covid-19 are likely to worsen the housing and homelessness crisis that the country is facing.

Almost three quarters (74 per cent) of councils foresee an increase in levels of homelessness due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fewer than a quarter (22 per cent) are confident that they will be able to accommodate all those currently in emergency accommodation due to the Everyone In scheme. Many highlighted the overall shortage of affordable housing in many parts of the country, challenges arising from low paid, insecure work and restrictions within the benefits system, and a lack of resources available to provide support to those with complex needs.

Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated many of the deep housing problems in the UK today – from overcrowded and unsafe housing to a lack of security and stability across much of the private rented sector. However, the pandemic also gives government the opportunity to tackle these challenges and ensure that steps are taken to prevent and reduce homelessness in the longer term.



Recommendations

1. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

should provide local government and housing associations with the resources to deliver a new generation of social housing, utilising public land and modern methods of construction to ensure the long term supply of secure and affordable accommodation.

A shortage of suitable genuinely affordable accommodation – particularly one and two bed properties – in many areas leaves councils struggling to move people on from homelessness. To seriously tackle the homelessness crisis, the government must direct more investment to genuinely affordable, social rented housing.

2. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

should establish a centralised portal for accessing local authority housing services, and work with authorities to guarantee minimum standards of accessibility and clarity for those seeking support.

The Homelessness Reduction Act has been a step change in empowering people to access the support and advice they need. However, the pandemic has exposed just how difficult it can be for young people to find out where to seek support or present as homeless at many local authorities when in crisis.

3. MHCLG should ensure that all local authorities have resources to access a supply of age-specific supported accommodation and housing options for young people facing homelessness.

Many councils raised how a lack of youth-specific housing options made it difficult to respond to youth homelessness and minimise risks to young people during the pandemic. The government should commit to new funding for young peoples' supported accommodation or ensure that part of the money brought forward as part of the Rough Sleeping Initiative is used for this purpose.

4. MHCLG should establish a long-term ringfenced fund for local authorities to provide homelessness prevention and housing-based support, such as floating support and Housing First, based on local needs.

Pots of money and specific interventions from central government are very welcome, but councils need financial security to plan ahead. A focused fund would give local authorities the ability to adapt support to local needs, while ensuring that this money is guaranteed to help people avoid or move on from homelessness.

5. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should immediately bring forward the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) exemption for homeless under-25s and care leavers announced in the March 2020 budget and review the SAR in light of the pandemic and a projected increase in homelessness.

To free up bed spaces in supported accommodation and help move-on beyond the pandemic, the government must ensure that young people who have experienced homelessness can access the financial support they need.

6. The DWP should commit to a long term linking of state support to actual market rents, by increasing the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in line with the Retail Price Index, and review an increase beyond the 30th percentile in light of any projected increase in homelessness due to Covid-19.

Effective move-on beyond the pandemic is constrained by benefit restrictions that block off much of the private rented sector to people on low incomes. By ensuring LHA rates are linked to actual rents, the private rented sector can be a much more effective tool in tackling homelessness.

7. The DWP should amend regulations to count time spent in a hotel or emergency accommodation due to the Everyone In scheme as being in 'homelessness accommodation' for the purposes of being exempt from the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR).

Eligibility criteria for the SAR exemption requires people to have lived in homelessness accommodation for three months or more. However, time spent in hotel accommodation is currently not counted. The government must fix this to ease successful move-on beyond the pandemic.

8. The DWP should raise the UC standard allowance for under-25s living independently to match the amount over-25s are entitled to.

As well as facing lower entitlements to housing costs, young people without financial support from family or friends face a lower standard allowance of Universal Credit for no reason other than their age, leaving them at greater risk of financial insecurity and homelessness.

9. MHCLG and the DWP should urgently put together a package of support for tenants who have accrued rent arrears due to Covid-19, though a new fund or through use of existing measures such as Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs).

In order to avoid a cliff edge of evictions and homelessness when the suspension of evictions ends, the government must ensure that there is financial support in place to help tenants and landlords manage any rent arrears accrued during the pandemic.

Introduction

Coronavirus has been an unprecedented challenge for charities working to support homeless people. Since MHCLG rolled out the Everyone In initiative at the end of March, approximately 5,400 rough sleepers have been placed in emergency accommodation.ⁱ The instruction was clear - 'focus on people who are, or are at risk of, sleeping rough, and those who are in accommodation where it is difficult to self-isolate, such as shelters and assessment centres.'ⁱⁱ

This initiative has been a momentous success and has undoubtedly safeguarded some of the most vulnerable people in our society. However, accommodating rough sleepers is only part of the story. There are other forms of homelessness,

particularly for young people who are more likely to be hidden homeless.¹ The scale and speed of the response to rough sleeping during Coronavirus shows the potential for change if the necessary resources are in place. As we enter the next phase of the pandemic and restrictions ease, we urge the Government to think about homelessness beyond rough sleeping.

This report looks at the impact of measures taken to support homeless people during the pandemic, and how these may have affected young people in particular. It explores what councils see as the main barriers to preventing and tackling homelessness in the longer term, and the policy and practice changes that are needed beyond the pandemic.

¹ 'Hidden homeless' is the term used to describe those without stable accommodation but who do not show up in official figures, such as people sofa surfing or living in squats or other insecure accommodation.



Methodology

This research was conducted between May and July 2020, using the following methods:

- **A survey sent to councils across England**, asking about changes to levels of homelessness in their areas since the pandemic, if and how they had adapted their services to manage during this time, and what changes they thought would be needed moving forwards.

A total of 125 councils responded to this survey, from every region in England.

Region	No. responses	%
East Midlands	14	11%
East of England	14	11%
London	12	10%
North East	5	4%
North West	14	11%
South East	32	26%
South West	12	10%
West Midlands	12	10%
Yorkshire & the Humber	10	8%
	125	100%

- **Analysis of Centrepoint's Helpline data**, with a focus on calls made in the ten weeks leading up to lockdown and the ten weeks after lockdown had been announced.

- **Interviews with practitioners and experts** to explore in more detail some of the key themes and emerging findings from the survey.

Five interviews were conducted over the phone, Zoom and Microsoft Teams, comprising of two London Boroughs, a metropolitan authority in the East Midlands, a group video interview with a housing team from a district authority in the South West, and an interview with a member of Centrepoint's helpline team.

Centrepoint Helpline - 0808 800 0661

The Centrepoint Helpline provides housing advice in England to young people aged 16-25 or their family and friends over email, webchat and phone. We listen to young people and provide them with advice and details of services they can access.



The Centrepoint Helpline is currently open Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm.

To find out more, please visit

www.centrepont.org.uk/youth-homelessness/get-help-now/



Youth Homelessness in context

Over 110,000 young people aged 16-25 sought help from a local authority as they were homeless or at risk of homelessness in 2018/19.ⁱⁱⁱ

Just under half (49 per cent) of homeless young people approaching a local authority had lost a place to live due to family or friends being no longer willing to accommodate them, while almost a fifth (18 per cent) were homeless following the end of a tenancy.

These numbers, however, only show part of the picture. Many young people are 'hidden homeless' – such as sofa surfing between extended family or friends, or sleeping rough in hidden locations – and so do not show up in official statistics.

Homelessness is a highly destabilising experience which is proven to have significant long-term impacts on mental and physical health. For younger people especially, having nowhere to call home massively disrupts education and employment prospects, while a lack of any secure accommodation can put vulnerable young people at a significantly increased risk of exploitation and abuse.^{iv}

Young people without financial support also face a range of additional barriers to accessing independent accommodation. Lower wages and higher rates of insecure employment make it difficult for this group to access rented accommodation, while many landlords are reluctant to let to young people on low incomes who are often seen as riskier tenants.

Restricted benefit rates, both for living and housing costs, mean that the financial support young people can access does not meet the actual costs of renting across large parts of the country. A critical lack of social rented housing is compounded by difficulties accessing social tenancies and affordability criteria. Younger households are also often not seen as a priority, so this kind of accommodation is out of reach for many young people experiencing homelessness.

Covid-19: Impacts on younger people

While younger people face fewer physical health risks from Covid-19, many of the measures taken in response to the pandemic have had significant impacts on this group. The lockdown and closure of most education and workspaces has exacerbated inequalities and exclusion felt by many young people across the UK – from challenges accessing education to not having adequate rights and protections at work.

There is already clear evidence that young workers have been particularly hard hit, with a much greater proportion working in industries such as retail and hospitality compared to the general working population; sectors which were among the first to close due to the pandemic and where remote working is often not an option.^v

Analysis by the Resolution Foundation in May found that nine per cent of employed 18 to 24 year olds had lost their job due to Covid-19 and lockdown measures, compared to only three per cent of workers across all age groups.^{vi} ONS data shows that the proportion of people aged 16 to 24 claiming Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit with work search requirements has increased by more than 120 per cent during the pandemic.^{vii}

The mental health and wellbeing of young people across the UK has also been impacted by Covid-19 and lockdown measures. The mental health of young adults has again disproportionately suffered during this period, with young women reporting the most serious impacts on their mental health.^{viii} Other data highlights that many young people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities have disproportionately experienced poor mental health.^{xi} Even within this age group, there is again clear evidence that the impact of the lockdown is not being felt evenly.

Emerging evidence shows that school closures impact most negatively on already disadvantaged students, widening the attainment gap and reversing progress made in recent years raising concerns about the education and employment prospects and longer term financial security of this cohort.^x

Research also highlights how groups already experiencing higher rates of housing insecurity and homelessness have suffered disproportionately from the health impacts of Covid-19. Analysis by Inside Housing has suggested that areas with higher rates of overcrowding, homelessness, households in temporary

accommodation and social housing shortages have also seen higher rates of infections and deaths due to the pandemic.^{xi}

While not creating these poor conditions, the pandemic has arguably exposed and exacerbated the impact of housing insecurity on young people already facing poverty and exclusion.

The response taken to the last major shock to the British economy – the financial crash of 2007/8 – had a significant impact for a generation of young people. The trebling of tuition fees, the removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and services for young people such as Connexions and the Future Jobs fund, and the wider impacts of welfare

reform and retrenchment in the public sector, such as cuts to local authority youth services, have all impacted on the wellbeing and development of young people.

The National Youth Agency has highlighted the impacts Covid-19 is already having on the youth sector. Almost a fifth of youth services thought permanent closure was likely due to the financial impact of the pandemic.^{xii}

While the lockdown may be easing, the risks to young people are not as we enter the deepest recession in living memory. It is critical that any long-term response to the impacts of Covid-19 provides young people with the support and assistance they need.

Youth Homelessness during the pandemic

There is a growing body of evidence around the impact of coronavirus on levels of homelessness and housing insecurity in the UK.

Centrepoint's survey of councils across England found that more than three quarters (78 per cent) had seen an increase in levels of homelessness in their area since the beginning of the pandemic.

Four in ten councils (42 per cent) have seen levels of homelessness increase significantly.

“There's been a general increase in [homelessness] presentations but in terms of people becoming homeless right now, it's young people, lots of family eviction situations and domestic abuse that's increased.”

Rough sleeper project lead, Unitary Authority, South West

Centrepoint's Helpline, which provides free information and guidance to young people on housing issues, has seen an increase of almost 50% in the number of contacts received when compared to the period before the pandemic.

When comparing data from the ten weeks of lockdown from March, to the ten previous weeks, our helpline saw that:

- **The proportion of young people experiencing homelessness as a result of family breakdown increased from 53 to 60 per cent.**
- **The proportion due to relationship breakdown increased, from six to 10 per cent.**
- **The proportion of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness due to eviction decreased, from 17 to 11 per cent.**



Even with the measures put in place by government, Covid-19 is already having a significant impact on the housing situation of young people across the country. Our figures suggest that while the current suspension of evictions could be protecting young people from eviction in the immediate term, the emotional and interpersonal pressures of life in lockdown are leading to an increase of family and relationship breakdown.

Many of the commonly understood drivers of youth homelessness, such as family breakdown and domestic abuse, have been made worse by the impacts of the pandemic. Across Europe, the lockdown has been linked to a spike in reported cases of domestic abuse, while the NSPCC have reported a 32 per cent increase in calls relating to concerns of

domestic abuse involving children and young people over this period.^{xiii xiv}

A survey by Crisis of over 150 homelessness charities and support providers found that more than half had seen an increase in homelessness during the pandemic, with almost two thirds (60 per cent) of organisations seeing a rise in sofa surfers.^{xv}

The most recent data from Centrepoint's Helpline shows that calls from young people increased even more dramatically by the end of May, when lockdown restrictions had begun to be relaxed. The seven weeks immediately following the lockdown announcement saw an average of 50 weekly calls, while the three weeks following the first announcement of lockdown relaxation saw average of 68 calls.

Several local authorities highlighted the impact of the lockdown on family breakdown during this time:

"We have experienced a significant increase in applications as a result of the family evictions as a result of Covid-19 measures, which in some cases has exacerbated tensions within the homes and created more rough sleeping in this [16-24] age group. 30 per cent of our approaches are family/friend evictions."

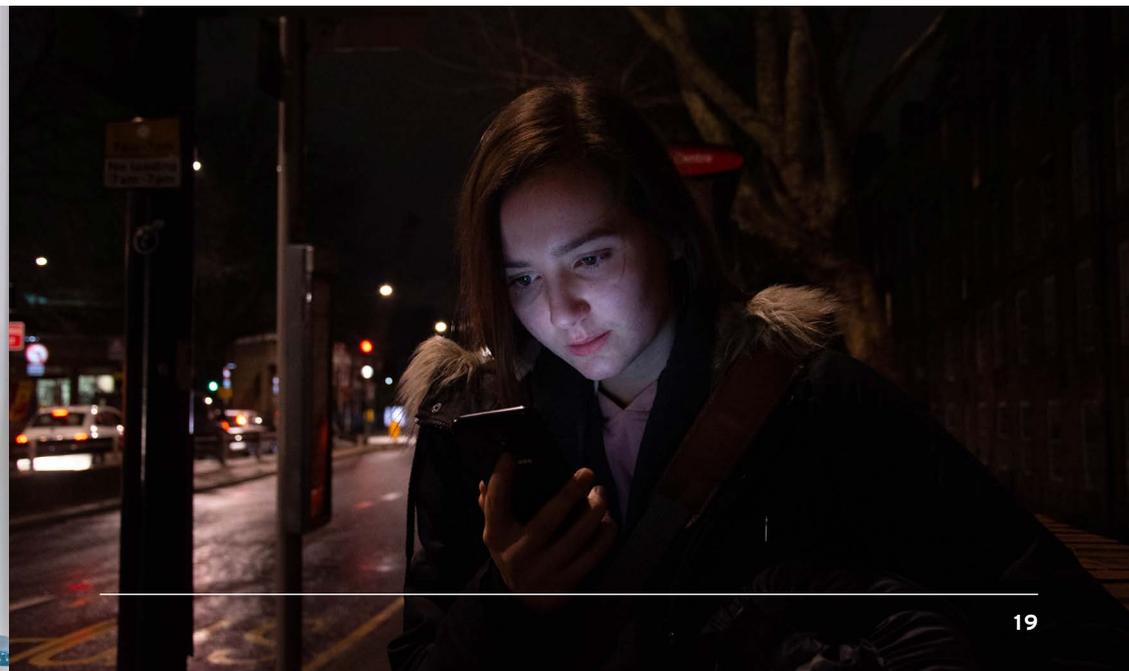
Survey respondent, Unitary Authority, East of England

Staff from Centrepoint's Helpline noted that due to the lockdown and social distancing measures, it had become more difficult for young people to find accommodation with family and friends. In several cases older family members

having to shield meant that a young person could not stay in the household. In many cases, this meant that the few options available to young people in crisis were reduced even further, leaving them to face the worst forms of homelessness.

"...because there are so many people who would have maybe stayed at their Gran's for a few nights or their friends house, but those people might be shielding or vulnerable, the options for sofa surfing have been massively affected. That's probably the thing we've noticed most for those people who would have had a little bit of leeway. That's been removed, meaning that there isn't much between someone having a room and someone rough sleeping."

Centrepoint Helpline Worker



Access to services

Along with businesses and services across the country, local authorities have closed or reduced opening times for offices and physical spaces normally open to the public.

More than nine in ten councils surveyed had closed their face to face housing options services, with many citing that this was done to observe social distancing measures and to keep staff and the public safe. A minority (18 per cent) said that face to face services were suspended due to staff needing to stay home to care for children and other dependents.

Almost all councils reported moving information and application processes to telephone and online provision. More than three quarters (76 per cent) accepted applications over the phone, while 56 per cent had used an online process for homelessness applications.

Several authorities reported that street outreach teams had continued to identify and support those sleeping rough, while two reported using new tools such as Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp to provide support and advice and conduct initial assessments via video call.

Councils also reported offering a range of services and support to those who

fell outside of the Everyone In scheme, such as people sofa-surfing or at risk of eviction. These included providing initial assessments under the Homelessness Reduction Act, general advice and information, support to access and sustain tenancies in the private rented sector, access to emergency accommodation, benefits and financial advice, and 'main duty' assessments under the Housing act.

Several housing teams also highlighted providing additional support during this time, such as mediation and family negotiation, as well as the direct provision of food and emergency supplies to vulnerable households.

It is clear that in this time of unprecedented crisis, where traditional ways of working and delivering services are not feasible, local authorities across the UK are working to provide housing support, advice and accommodation in the face of huge challenges and growing need.

However, moving to remote services raises issues of access and quality of service, especially for those who are most excluded and marginalised. Evidence from Centrepoint's Helpline found that for young people across the country, a lack of any physical space to seek help and present as homeless to a council meant they were unable to access support.

"There is much less of a safety net, there are people facing rough sleeping for the first time and in the worst context as there aren't even day centres... for someone to get advice or food or a shower or clothing. At least a physical place to feel safe and link in with support. Even if it's just for a few hours during the day, they aren't open."

Centrepoint Helpline Worker

Alarming, the number of calls to the Helpline from young people sleeping rough has doubled when comparing the ten weeks either side of the lockdown.

"...the demographic of those rough sleeping is changing, there are a lot of people who are new to it for the first time because they would have had a few more options, be that sofa surfing or even things like emergency night shelters or night stop."

Centrepoint Helpline Worker

Centrepoint staff stressed that even before the pandemic, many authorities' processes were difficult to navigate and risked excluding vulnerable young people from getting help in a time of need. From not having a clear address to which someone could present as homeless, to not having a freephone number to seek help and advice.



Additional measures to support homeless people

Everyone In

On the 23rd of March, Housing, Communities and Local Government secretary Robert Jenrick wrote to all local authorities in England directing them to find accommodation for rough sleepers. Within days, thousands of people had been taken off the streets and out of temporary accommodation where social distancing was impossible, and accommodated in hotels, bed and breakfasts and other forms of accommodation where they could safely self-isolate.

“If somebody had said to me a year ago that we would solve the rough sleeping problem in [borough] and get everybody off the streets... if somebody had told me that I would have laughed at them. It shows if you are given the resource you can do things.”

Cabinet Member, London Borough 1

Councils across the country have risen to this challenge, working with partners across a range of sectors to secure emergency accommodation. However, this was not always easy. Almost eight in 10 (78 per cent) authorities reported that this process had been difficult, with several respondents citing challenges arising with securing accommodation,

negotiating with certain hotel providers, and engagement from individuals.

However, the overall sense was that the process had been positive and allowed councils and their partners to engage with rough sleepers, as well as providing space for them to self-isolate.

“What has helped us, is that we have had a very cooperative hotelier who has been fantastic. It would have been far more difficult if we didn't have that.”

Head of Housing, Unitary Authority, South West

“During those initial months of the pandemic it very much helped us to take the strain off services and it really helped people who were in need- I don't think there was any any doubt about that.”

Cabinet Member, London Borough 2

A small minority – 13 councils – reported that they had continued to use eligibility criteria, such as immigration status, in deciding whether to support people to access emergency self-contained accommodation. Even though the Secretary of State wrote to authorities instructing them not to use criteria, it could be unclear exactly who was entitled to what support:

“...the idea was that priority need and no recourse to public funds was put aside, but they were saying this young person wasn't priority need so they couldn't accommodate them... because it wasn't law, it was guidance that they dropped the eligibility criteria. Some interpreted it as they saw fit and there was nothing we could point to to say they needed to do that.”

Centrepoint Helpline Worker

However, the majority (81 per cent) have not used any criteria in supporting people through the Everyone In scheme and have found accommodation for those who may not usually qualify for homelessness assistance. While this has helped to ensure that those in need of accommodation could access it, there are considerable numbers of people who would not otherwise be entitled to support in emergency accommodation, such as those with no recourse to public funds who cannot usually access financial support from the state.

Unless comprehensive move on plans are in place or national policy is amended, there is a real risk that these people will have little alternative other than a return to homelessness and/or rough sleeping once they are moved on from the hotels, bed and breakfasts and other sources of emergency accommodation.

Alongside the Everyone In scheme, the UK government announced a range of interventions to support vulnerable citizens at this time. These measures included:

- Legislation to extend the notice period required for a landlord to seek possession from two to three months
- A 90 day suspension of all possession actions from the 27th March, which was then extended up to the 23rd August
- A 12 month restoration of Local Housing Allowance to the thirtieth percentile of local market rents.
- An increase in the standard allowance of Universal Credit by £20 a week, or £1020 a year
- A three month suspension of certain deductions from benefits claims, such as rent arrears and overpayments
- Relaxation of conditionality in the benefits regime, with claimants not required to fulfil job search obligations or attend the Jobcentre

Our survey found that these measures had impacted on councils' attempts to prevent and reduce homelessness locally. Almost three quarters (72 per cent) said that the suspension of possession actions had helped the situation – although many authorities were concerned that the suspension was simply storing up problems and that

tenants, particularly those facing a loss of income due to the pandemic, were at risk of eviction and homelessness once it ended.

Almost half (48 per cent) said that restoring LHA to the thirtieth percentile had made preventing and relieving homelessness easier, and 52 per cent said that reforms to Universal Credit, such as the £20 a week uplift and the suspension of the conditionality had also helped.

“We can now say to people ‘there is a property in [borough], or near [borough], where you may actually be able to get housing benefit to cover the cost of.’ That was not the case before.”

Cabinet Member, London Borough 1

Early evidence from Crisis in Edinburgh has shown that the restoration of the LHA rates has significantly increased the amount of accommodation available to support people to move on from homelessness.^{xvi} However, there are concerns that policies such as the overall benefit cap are limiting the positive impact of the LHA and UC uplift, especially in areas of high housing costs.

The measures outlined above have been far-reaching and have protected thousands of people from hardship and destitution. Many councils, however, expressed concerns that certain groups of people would not be sufficiently protected by these new policies:

Fewer than a quarter (23 per cent) of councils thought that these measures went far enough to protect and prevent young people from homelessness during this time.

When asked why this was, several councils noted that the government’s focus on rough sleepers and those in shared temporary accommodation had not taken into account the specific needs of homeless young people and there was a lack of any specific guidance or additional specialist accommodation available. Other youth homelessness charities and Centrepoin’s Helpline staff highlighted that in some cases, young people had been advised to sleep rough or make themselves known to street outreach teams to be referred to emergency accommodation:

“If young people aren’t rough sleeping the council won’t even assess them, they’re telling them to go out and sleep rough for a few nights and then hopefully an outreach team will pick them up and they might assess them. It’s a reverse way of doing things, you’re telling a young person to put themselves in danger first.”

Centrepoin Helpline Worker

Several authorities raised concerns around young people, including care leavers, being accommodated alongside older people with very complex needs, putting young people at risk of exploitation and abuse:

“...due to limited move on options and supported housing for young people, particularly those with more complex needs, we have had to place young people with a large cohort of older clients with multiple needs; this feels unsafe for the young people being placed, some of whom have become involved in risky behaviour and exposed to lifestyles and behaviour which they could be further drawn into.”

Survey Respondent, District Council, South East

Similarly, only a minority of respondents (23 per cent) felt that measures went far enough to protect care leavers, with councils again highlighting the shortage of age-specific supported accommodation and that benefit restrictions made accessing the private rented sector difficult for this group.

One authority highlighted that as Covid-19 was primarily a public health issue, the government’s response in finding self-contained accommodation for rough sleepers was perhaps more about limiting the spread of the virus than addressing housing need:

“There has been little if any direction from central government with regards to [young people] who are at risk of homelessness. This may be because young people are deemed to be a low risk category of contracting and developing serious health complications from covid-19.”

Survey Respondent, Unitary Authority, East Midlands

Only a minority of authorities thought that measures went far enough to protect people in overcrowded accommodation (30 per cent), families with complex needs (22 per cent), and people suffering from or at risk of domestic abuse (37 per cent).

“Message is to stay put, and multigenerational families are finding this increasingly difficult the longer it goes on”

Survey Respondent, District Council, East of England

However, more than half of respondents (57 per cent) thought that the measures above went far enough to protect private renters at risk of eviction at this time – but again were concerned about plans for renters in the longer term, particularly if covid-19 resulted in an economic downturn and job losses.

“A cliff edge of the end of June has been created. The suspension of arrears payments has also simply kicked an issue down the road.”

Survey Respondent, Unitary Authority, South East

Since the survey was launched, the government announced an extension to the suspension of possession actions until 23rd August. However, without a clear and fair way of supporting tenants who fall into rent arrears during this time, there is still the risk that large numbers of people will be facing eviction and homelessness once the suspension ends.

Several councils spoke about the risks of illegal eviction and landlords ignoring the law during this time, but that licensing schemes, oversight over the local private rented sector and communication with landlords all helped to minimise this activity.

Financial Support

The Government initially made £3.2m available to cover local authorities costs in finding emergency accommodation, alongside a wider £3.2bn in additional funding to support authorities to meet any additional pressures arising from the pandemic. This ranged from accommodating and supporting rough sleepers and victims of domestic abuse, to ensuring councils could meet their adult and children's social care duties.

With the money intended to cover a wide range of responsibilities and local needs, many councils reported that only a small amount would be spent on homelessness services specifically.

More than half of respondents said that less than 30 per cent of their allocated funding would be spent on alleviating homelessness, while more than a third said that this sum would be less than ten per cent.

When asked whether this funding was enough for local authorities to meet their homelessness duties at this time, a clear majority (58 per cent) said that this was not. **More than two in five councils (44 per cent) stressed that this funding was nowhere near enough to properly prevent and reduce homelessness in their area.**

It is clear that in the face of the most severe public health crisis in living memory and the massive economic impact that this is already having, local authorities will need much greater resources to maintain services and support and safeguard their most vulnerable residents on the heels of a decade of austerity and underinvestment in public services.

“...our income has dropped like a stone – our income from rent, from tax, from leisure centres, parking permits... we're going to run out of money to run services at this level unless we get the pay we're due, the deficit is going to get worse and worse.”

Cabinet Member, London Borough 1

Alongside local authorities, charities and organisations such as Centrepoin also provide critical support and accommodation options for people experiencing homelessness. However, due to a drop in income for many charities during the pandemic, there is a real risk that they may be not be able to provide these services during a time when need is greatest. Government support has been critical, such as the £6m fund for frontline homelessness organisations, yet many organisations are facing significant financial challenges at a time when a major economic downturn is predicted.

Moving On

As discussions turn to the end of lockdown, charities have begun to spell out what changes are needed to support people in the longer term.

The government has made a commitment that there will be no going back for those people accommodated due to the Coronavirus crisis. It announced bringing forward investment announced in the March 2020 budget to provide 6,000 units of move on supported accommodation, with 3,000 to be made available in the next 12 months, increasing funding available for both acquiring property and providing longer-term support.

The commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 also remains in place, and the government has set up a rough sleeping taskforce and committed significant funding to tackle this form of homelessness.

Since the survey closed, the government have announced a further £85 million of investment to provide interim housing while this supported accommodation becomes available. This fund is intended to provide access to student and other forms of interim accommodation, and to provide tenancy deposits and support to access the private rented sector.^{xvii}

However, without addressing many of the structural factors behind homelessness and rough sleeping, there

is a real risk that this target will not be achieved and people across the UK will continue to face homelessness.

Almost three quarters (74 per cent) of councils foresee an increase in levels of homelessness due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

“...because of the furlough schemes, mortgage holidays and suspension on eviction in all sectors it kind of feels like everything's on hold... we're all a bit worried about what happens when those holds are lifted- when landlords can evict people again, when banks get tougher, when people start losing their jobs. It's concerning to think what that might do to homelessness figures.”

Cabinet Member, London Borough 2

Fewer than a quarter of councils (22 per cent) surveyed were confident that they would be able to secure longer term accommodation for those currently housed under the Everyone In scheme.

When asked why this was, many councils reported pressures from an overall lack of affordable accommodation options in their areas, particularly units for single people, and that high rents and low benefit entitlements, even with the LHA uplift, made the private rented sector largely inaccessible for people moving on from homelessness.

Other authorities thought it would be difficult to find accommodation for those with complex needs such as substance use and mental health issues. Private landlords, and increasingly even social landlords and supported housing providers, were often resistant to taking on these groups of tenants. Several highlighted that these pressures were even more acute for young people, where the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR), which caps the amount of housing support through the benefits system for most under 35s at the amount needed to rent a room in a shared house - limited options even further for this group.

“We do not have sufficient provision locally for single homeless clients with complex needs; we are working with our partner agencies to support move on but the supply comes nowhere near to meeting demand and our supported housing providers are very risk averse to accepting our clients with the most complex needs... we are also trying to assist people into PRS where appropriate but this has proven difficult, particularly for younger people.”

Survey Respondent, District Council, South East

While the government announced a much-welcomed exemption to the SAR for under 25s who have experienced homelessness in the March 2020 budget, this measure will not come into force until 2023. With a looming

homelessness challenge brought on by the economic impacts of Covid-19, it is critical that the government brings this exemption forward now to ensure that young people going through homelessness have a chance to find an affordable place to live, and that supported housing and emergency accommodation is freed up to support those most in need.

Those authorities which were confident (22 percent) about housing people in the longer term highlighted factors such as good partnership working with local charities, landlords and housing providers, increased housing stock through development and regeneration schemes, and low overall levels of homelessness.

When asked about which policies would help local authorities prevent and reduce homelessness in the longer term, seven in ten (70 per cent) said that greater investment into social rented housing was needed, with almost one in five councils saying this would most help. A smaller number (62 per cent) thought that greater investment into other kinds of affordable housing, such as affordable home ownership, would also help to reduce homelessness.

“It’s a really basic thing but there just needs to be more accommodation, more options that someone could be referred into. More emergency and short term accommodation.”

Centrepoint Helpline Worker

Almost eight in ten authorities (78 per cent) supported greater investment into local authority housing services and homelessness prevention. Several specifically raised the Supporting People fund and highlighted that some kind of ring-fenced financial support was needed to ensure that the resources were available to assist people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

“There is an avalanche of need out there, so if the government gives us a chunk of money as a housing lead I will fight my corner for that money to be used for temporary accommodation, but there are competing other needs as well. Some councils don’t like ringfencing, but if you don’t ringfence it rough sleepers won’t get the money.”

Cabinet Member, London Borough 1

One authority wanted to stress that reliable, long term funding was necessary to plan and provide support in the long term:

“The work that has gone into and beyond ‘Everyone in’ is fantastic and long may that work continue. But we would like some permanency in funding... you’re never quite sure what the next six months is going to bring for you. To have longer term certainty and security for staff, for your projects, for your leasing schemes, that’s what you need... The difficulty is, you end up just managing special initiatives money here, there and everywhere. Before you know it that could all come crashing down like a house of cards.”

Head of Housing, Unitary Authority, South West

More than three quarters (77 per cent) of authorities said that restoring LHA rates to the 50th percentile of local market rents would help efforts to prevent and reduce homelessness.

It is clear that in order to make a significant difference in preventing and reducing homelessness in the longer term, the government must commit to a step change in the delivery of genuinely affordable housing, as well as address the barriers that are preventing too many people from accessing and sustaining a place to live.

Conclusion

“The speed with which we accommodated all these people was magnificent and it makes me think if it could be done, it can be done. Why does it need to go back to the way it was before?”

**Housing Strategy Officer,
District Council, East Midlands**

The Coronavirus crisis has exposed many of the deep fault lines in British society, and has brought into sharp focus the insecurity in which millions of people in the UK are living – whether by working in precarious and unprotected employment, living in overcrowded housing or facing the threat of eviction brought on by a sudden loss of income.

However, the response to the crisis has also shown the strength of solidarity and compassion within communities and the dedication of millions of key workers and people providing support to their neighbours and friends. It has also shown what can be achieved with the right combination of resources, coordination and political will, with the steps taken as part of the Everyone In scheme helping to ensure that thousands of vulnerable people were able to safely self-isolate.

This same energy must now be brought to tackling the longer-term emergency of homelessness. Without addressing the structural problems which led to thousands of people needing to be accommodated as a public health emergency – such as a severe lack of affordable accommodation, insecure and low-paid work, difficulties accessing services and a social security system which has become uncoupled from the real costs of living – there is a real risk that for too many, a return to normal will mean a return to the streets.

Stable, long-term accommodation and the opportunities to access employment, training and education will be critical to support both young people and help the UK to recover from the pandemic. By grasping these challenges now, the government can use this period as an opportunity to make much needed changes to help young people across the country to succeed.

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