

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a silver key in a Yale brand door lock. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with the thumb and index finger gripping the key. The door is painted a vibrant blue. The background is a textured blue wall. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor or well-lit outdoor environment.

Crisis

Together
we will end
homelessness

Moving on

Improving access to housing for
single homeless people in England

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Homelessness is on the rise in England. The number of households accepted by councils each year as homeless and in 'priority need' has increased by 40% since 2010,¹ while the number of rough sleepers has increased by 130% over the same period according to official counts.² Although the available evidence points to sustained recent increases in homelessness among single people, data on the actual scale of single homelessness is hard to source.³

This study has been produced to inform a wider programme of work being carried out by Crisis to improve the availability of homes that single homeless people can afford in both the social and private rented sectors.

It provides new estimates on the number of single homeless people in England to inform discussion about how to meet the housing requirements of this group. It also examines evidence on the main tenure destinations for homeless people when they find housing, and the barriers encountered by single homeless people seeking

to gain access to housing. While the report notes the evidence on access problems in the private rented sector, the difficulties single homeless people face gaining access to social housing are a particular focus. The report draws on new evidence from Crisis's own services, as well as our analysis of secondary data sources, to examine the barriers faced.

While single homeless people have a wide spectrum of needs, the subject of this report is the need for mainstream accommodation for people with low or no support needs; those for whom any need for support tends to be short term, of low intensity, and associated primarily with gaining access to housing. Being unable to gain access to housing is the main reason for homelessness amongst this group. It may include those who have at some point been judged as having a priority need under the homelessness legislation, but are now ready to live independently in mainstream housing, as well as those considered non-priority.⁴ While there is evidence that the barriers to accessing housing

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/613765/Statutory_Homelessness_and_Prevention_and_Relief_Live_Tables_2016_Q4.xls

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/593685/Rough_Sleeping_Autumn_2016_Final_Tables.xls

³ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2017) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2017*. London: Crisis/JRF

described in this report are common to other types of homeless household, the focus of this report is the particular impact for single homeless adults of working age. These are adults who typically fall outside the protection of the housing duties provided by the current homelessness legislation.⁵

In focusing on access to social housing for single homeless people it is not the purpose of this report to call for a redistribution of a declining social housing stock to the detriment of others in housing need. Instead, the purpose is to highlight the disproportionate impact of structural barriers to housing, and the steps needed to tackle these. The barriers to accessing social housing identified by this report need to be understood against the backdrop of the fall in England's stock of social rented housing.⁶ While the focus of the report is access to housing, it is clear that the underlying shortage of homes that those on the lowest incomes can afford is strongly implicated in the access problems that all homeless people face.

The evidence of this report reaffirms the case for national Government to adopt a joined-up approach to reform of policy on access to housing, rent setting, housing supply and the role of Housing Benefit. It also points to the need to review the framework for ensuring all local authorities and social housing providers play their part in providing a supply of homes for those on the lowest incomes.

But while acknowledging that an increase in affordable housing supply is of critical importance to tackle all forms of homelessness, the evidence presented here highlights the risk that boosting affordable housing supply may not, of itself, improve the availability of housing for homeless people. This is because eligibility restrictions prevent some homeless people from joining housing registers, while problems with the affordability of social housing mean that even those who meet eligibility criteria may be unable to afford rent or the up-front costs of moving into an affordable home. To improve the availability of housing for homeless people both the shortage of housing supply and barriers to access must be addressed.

Key findings

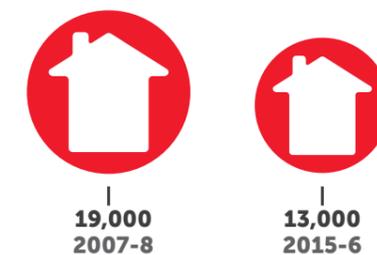
- The number of single people who experience homelessness in England each year – often termed the flow – is around 200,000, with a minimum estimate of 120,000 and a maximum of 345,000.⁷ The average number of single people experiencing some form of homelessness on any one night (the stock) is estimated to be 77,000 – with a low estimate of 52,000 and a high estimate of 111,000. This group refers to a much wider cohort than those who are sleeping on the streets. It also contains people living in homeless accommodation projects (often referred to as hostels), including a growing proportion unable to move-on because of a lack of access to affordable housing, people living in squats and other makeshift arrangements and staying temporarily with friends and family because they have nowhere else to go.

- Around two-thirds of single homeless people have support needs that mean their immediate destination should be some form of housing with tailored support such as supported housing or a Housing First solution. The rest have no acute support needs⁸ and the primary barrier to ending their homelessness is housing. It is difficult to precisely identify this group, but this report estimates that 75,000 single people with low or no support needs experience homelessness each year, with a minimum estimate of 40,000 and a maximum estimate of 140,000. The average number of single people with low or no support needs who are homeless on any one night is 26,000, with a low estimate of 17,000 and a high estimate of 38,000. These are people whose main cause of homelessness typically results from the shortage of genuinely affordable homes and reduced availability of Housing Benefit.
- The report examines data on the tenure of housing accessed by homeless people. As the relative size of the social rented sector has fallen, the private rented sector has doubled its share of households from 10% to 20% in less than 20 years,⁹ and the number of people living in poverty in the latter has also doubled.¹⁰ As it has grown, the sector has become increasingly important as a source of housing for homeless people, accounting for roughly a third of mainstream housing for this group.¹¹

properties to homeless people, and it is difficult for those on the lowest incomes to save the money needed to cover rental deposits and rent in advance.¹²

- While private renting is often the only housing available to single homeless people, social housing still plays a critical role, although the number of lettings available to new tenants has been falling. An analysis of trends in lettings specifically to single homeless people of working age finds that since 2007-08 the number of new lets to this group has fallen continuously. This fall is disproportionate when compared to other household groups.
- Social lettings to single homeless people in England fell from 19,000 a year in 2007-8 to 13,000 in 2015-16. The proportion of new lettings to single homeless people relative to the number of new lettings overall has fallen, from 12% to 8% of all new lettings over the same period. Although this reflects a broader long-term decline in the proportion of social lettings to all homeless households, since 2011 the proportion of lettings to homeless families has stabilised somewhat, while the proportion of lets to single homeless households has continued to decline.

Social lettings to single homeless people have fallen by almost a third



- Homeless people face particular barriers when they try to access private housing. Many private sector landlords are reluctant to let their

4 The priority/non-priority designation does not drive the definition of single homelessness with low support needs used in this report. The problems associated with applying the priority/non priority distinction in practice are explained in previous Crisis reports, such as Dobie, S., Sanders, B. & Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away: The treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

5 Crisis (2016) *The Homelessness Legislation: An independent review of the legal duties owed to homeless people*. London: Crisis

6 Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. and Williams P (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016* Briefing Paper Coventry: CIH

7 This is based on analysis detailed in chapter 1 and methodology section which presents high, medium and low estimates for the stock and flow of single homeless people.

8 Support needs are identified as having at least one of the following issues: mental ill-health, physical health issue or disability, alcohol dependency or drug dependency

9 Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M., Williams, P. (2017). *UK Housing Review 2017*, CIH

10 JRF Website (accessed 14th June 2017). Numbers in poverty by housing tenure. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/data/numbers-poverty-housing-tenure>

11 Crisis calculations based on P1E returns and CORE data.

12 Gousy, H. (2016) *Home no less will do. Improving access to private renting for single homeless people*. London: Crisis

- An examination of the reasons for this recent disproportionate decline in access to social housing for single homeless people identifies changes in policy on the allocation of social housing as a factor for some households, alongside problems caused by the reducing affordability of social housing, restrictions on Housing Benefit entitlement, and housing providers' response to these. The impact of these factors is as follows:

- **Restrictions on social housing eligibility and allocations.**

Councils are encouraged by national guidance to restrict access to social housing to those with a local connection, and some councils and housing providers are using powers granted by the Localism Act (2011) to exclude applicants with a history of rent arrears, antisocial behaviour or criminal convictions (though such practices are not universal). Evidence suggests that where such restrictions exist and are enforced without consideration of applicants' individual circumstances, they can significantly affect homeless people and make it more difficult for them to find stable housing and take steps to find and sustain work. Blanket policies which exclude categories of applicant from eligibility for social housing and prevent people in housing need from joining housing waiting lists risk undermining homelessness prevention activity.

Such restrictions increase the risk of households sleeping rough or getting stuck in temporary supported housing, at significant cost to the individual and to society. In this context, the value of such rationing measures in areas of low housing

demand is particularly open to question. As councils prepare for the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) this is an opportune time to address the impact of social housing eligibility restrictions and adjust policy and practice.

- **Restrictions related to household income and affordability**

There is evidence that the use of affordability and other financial eligibility criteria by some housing providers has the effect of screening out those on the lowest incomes.¹³ While this reduces providers' exposure to the risks caused by higher rents and a sometimes-inadequate Housing Benefit safety net, it also reduces the supply of housing to those on the lowest incomes, including single homeless people. At times social housing providers have little choice; the impact of restrictions on Housing Benefit eligibility can mean that in parts of the country low income households are literally unable to pay their rent. The introduction of the shared accommodation rate (SAR) to social housing looks set to extend this problem to many more single people aged under 35.¹⁴ While there are some established shared housing schemes in the social sector and more social housing providers are now considering or piloting shared schemes, many social housing providers have adopted a very cautious approach towards this type of housing.¹⁵ If restrictions on the availability of Housing Benefit for the under 35s are indeed introduced for social housing in 2019, homelessness prevention strategies will need to prioritise the delivery of more shared or self-contained housing within SAR limits.

- Allocations policy and financial/affordability restrictions that limit access to social housing for homeless people exacerbate the underlying impact of the continued decline in the size of the social rented sector and the supply of homes available at social rent levels. Far fewer new tenants are getting access to social housing. There has been an absolute and proportionate reduction in social lettings to all homeless households which predates the policy changes introduced by the 2010 Coalition Government. The longer term declining trend in lettings to homeless people is likely to have been influenced by the increased focus on homelessness prevention since 2003 and associated changes in allocations practice in the years preceding the Localism reforms, as well as decreasing social housing supply.
- Lettings to single homeless people have, however, declined disproportionately in recent years, suggesting that they have been particularly affected by the combined impact of the reducing overall supply of social lettings and changes in allocations policy and practice. As a consequence, some single homeless people are stuck, unnecessarily, in temporary supported housing or other temporary, insecure shelter with no route out of homelessness.
- Crisis' evidence suggests that these restrictions affect single homeless people's access to social housing to at least some degree in all the areas in which Crisis operates, including areas of both low and high housing demand. It is particularly disappointing though that eligibility restrictions are restricting access in neighbourhoods with lower levels of social housing demand and a more

readily available supply of social homes.

- The access problems identified are not universal; some social housing providers, including those working with Crisis members, are continuing to enable single homeless people to gain access to social housing. The experience of Crisis members demonstrates that with the right assistance, single homeless people can successfully navigate the system and secure sustainable tenancies and employment.

Next steps

- The Government should take urgent steps to ensure there is a supply of housing available to single homeless people as well as others in housing need. In its recent Housing White Paper, the Government acknowledged that more needs to be done to tackle our dysfunctional housing market, and to help households currently priced out of the market.¹⁶ While it identified a range of measures to stimulate affordable housing supply and tackle the most severe problems with private renting, it needs to go much further to improve access to housing for single homeless people and others on the lowest incomes.
- The evidence presented in this report helps explain why the Government's proposals to stimulate the supply of affordable rented, but not social rented, housing are likely to have only a marginal direct impact on the supply of homes available to single homeless people in many parts of the country.¹⁷ It also highlights the risk that current approaches to social housing allocations will undermine the Government's aim of preventing homelessness.

¹³ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2017) *The homelessness monitor: England 2017*. London: Crisis/JRF

¹⁴ National Housing Federation (2017) *Research briefing: Impact of applying Local Housing Allowance rates to general needs social tenants*; Cole, I., Green, S., Pattison, B., Reeve, K., Wilson, I., (2017) *Capping aspiration: the millennial challenge*, Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University.

¹⁵ Reeve, K. et al. (2017). *Capping aspiration: the millennial housing challenge*. Sheffield Hallam University; Crisis (2017) Spare to Share https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237291/crisis_spare_to_share.pdf

¹⁶ DCLG (2017) *Fixing our broken housing market* London: DCLG. A commitment to deliver measures to boost housing supply set out in the White Paper was included in the 2017 Conservative Party Manifesto.

- This report identifies a cohort of in the region of 26,000 single homeless people with low or no support needs across England as a whole who require permanent housing on any given night. People move in and out of homelessness – around 75,000 people with low or no support needs will experience homelessness at some point over the course of a year, so the number who are homeless on any one night is likely to fluctuate.
- A key challenge for Government now is to ensure that there is an adequate supply of homes across the social and private rented sectors to meet the needs of this group as well as others in housing need.
- Translating the number of single homeless people identified here into an estimate of additional housing requirements is beyond the scope of this report. But national and local government must ensure that the specific needs of single homeless people are considered alongside the needs of other groups in their assessments of local housing requirements,¹⁸ and are reflected in affordable housing policy requirements for new housing provision as well as in local housing and homelessness strategies. While some of this present need could be met in the existing stock by addressing the barriers to access to both social and private rented housing examined in this report, to reduce the flow of newly arising homelessness the underlying problems of housing affordability, and related supply issues, need to be addressed. Wider debates about rent setting, Housing Benefit entitlement, and public subsidy for “bricks or benefits” are not the subject of this report, but they do provide the context within which the recommendations below have been formulated.¹⁹ Crisis is carrying out further work to identify cost-effective solutions to boost the supply of affordable housing that meets the needs of single homeless people, and will report separately on this.
- In the short-term, and in view of the declining availability of social lettings to single homeless people at a time of continued recent rises in rough sleeping, there is a case for national government, working with local authorities or city regions, to set targets or quotas to ensure a supply of homes is available for single homeless people as well as others in housing need in every locality. At local level such targets would reflect the availability of lettings in both the social and private rented sectors (for example via help to rent schemes or social lettings agencies), taking account of local housing market conditions.
- Registered housing providers are currently required by the Homes and Communities Agency Tenancy Standard to co-operate with local authorities, helping councils to meet their homelessness duties. The evidence of this report suggests that some housing providers are doing more than others to address the

mainstream housing needs of single homeless people. Government must also acknowledge and address the significant challenges councils and social housing providers face in ensuring single homeless people can pay their rent against a backdrop of cuts to Housing Benefit entitlement and particularly the application of the Shared Accommodation Rate to mainstream social housing from April 2019 in the context of the affordable rent regime.

Recommendations

- Improving access to the private rented sector is of critical importance to provide homes for homeless people unable to gain access to social renting. Crisis has previously called on Government to improve access to privately rented housing for homeless people by:
 - Providing a funding stream to support the delivery of “Help to Rent” projects (providing pre- and in-tenancy support) and a nationally funded tenancy deposit scheme to increase access to private renting for homeless people.
 - Addressing deficiencies in the Local Housing Allowance regime which mean that rent levels are increasingly out of step with the amount of Housing Benefit that can be paid.
 - Ensuring local authorities are resourced and incentivised to develop their market stewardship role, providing effective oversight of the lower end of the private rental market and supporting their role in homelessness prevention.

- In addition, there is an urgent need to increase the supply of homes at rent levels those on the lowest incomes can afford and which, critically, are within Local Housing Allowance rates. Government must enable councils and other social housing providers to build new homes at social rent levels (or an equivalent formula set with reference to the National Living Wage or other appropriate measure of low earnings), and must set national and local/city region targets for this genuinely affordable supply.

- To address the additional barriers to social housing for single homeless people identified in this report, and to enable local authorities to ensure effective implementation of their new duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017):

1. National government must end the use of blanket housing register exclusions that shut out people in housing need.

Government must revise national policy on social housing allocations in the light of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) to ensure that single homeless people and others in housing need are not prevented from joining housing registers.

2. National government must ensure there is a supply of mainstream housing that single homeless people can afford.

To achieve this Government must instruct the new homelessness reduction task force to:

- Set targets for the adequate supply of housing that is accessible and affordable to single and other homeless

¹⁷ The Conservative Manifesto included a commitment to building more council and housing association homes, and in a press statement the Prime Minister committed to “a new generation of homes for social rent” see Birch, J., May 14 2017 The Conservative manifesto plan for housing. <https://julesbirch.com/2017/05/14/the-conservative-manifesto-plan/>). Subsequently however the then Housing Minister suggested that the intention was instead to build more homes for affordable rent – not social rent – see Barnes, S. 2 June 2017 Inside Housing, *Barwell: New homes for ‘social rent’ will be let at affordable rent levels*: <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/barwell-new-homes-for-social-rent-will-be-let-at-affordable-rent-levels/7020225.article#>

¹⁸ In the Housing White Paper - DCLG (2017) *Fixing our broken housing market* London: DCLG- the Government indicated its intention to consult on proposals that will deliver a more standardised approach to assessing housing requirements.

¹⁹ Webb, K. (2012). *Bricks or benefits?*: London. Shelter; Capital Economics, Building new social rent homes (Capital Economics, London), 2015.

people. This should include targets for the supply of shared housing accessible to single homeless people aged under 35 within the Shared Accommodation Rate.

b. Review arrangements for ensuring that all Registered Housing Providers fulfil their responsibilities to co-operate with local authorities specifically to assist the latter in meeting their homelessness duties.

3. City regions and local authorities, working with social housing providers, should:

a. Monitor and report publicly on the flow of social housing lettings to single homeless people and other categories of household within Annual Lettings Plans, taking account of the outcome of nominations to social housing providers. This should be an integral part of the process of reporting on implementation of and outcomes achieved through councils' Homelessness Strategies.

b. Review the impact of social housing eligibility restrictions and restrictions related to affordability on the flow of lettings to homeless people, and consider whether adjustments are needed to policy and practice to ensure effective implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017).