

# EVERYONE IN – PROTECTING PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH ACROSS ENGLAND DURING THE PANDEMIC

During lockdown in the UK, the government showed great ambition and will in partnering with charity organisations to house rough sleepers who would have otherwise been extremely vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. Now that this scheme is coming to an end, it is important to think about providing long-term solutions to those that were given shelter, instead of regressing and leaving them to return to the streets.



By **Matt Downie**, Director of Policy and External Affairs, Crisis UK

## THE IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

It was in March that the number of Coronavirus cases started to increase rapidly across the UK, and the Westminster government implemented more severe 'lockdown' rules across the country to try and reduce infection rates. The strapline used by the Government during this time was 'stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives' but for many of us working with people who are homeless across the country, we knew 'staying home' simply wasn't an option.

People who are homeless are three times more likely to have a chronic health condition such as asthma and COPD, meaning many face an increased vulnerability to coronavirus and the brutal effects it has on a person's health. As you can imagine, if you are living on the streets, socially distancing and regularly washing or sanitising your hands can prove incredibly difficult. Life only became harder for those rough sleeping across the country as places on the high street such as cafes, libraries and public toilets started to shut, which so many rely on in their day to day life.

People sleeping rough weren't the only ones at high risk. Many hostels and night shelters also faced issues adhering to the government's guidance. With many still providing 'dormitory' style sleeping arrangements and shared bathrooms, residents were not able to distance and isolate properly if needed.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF 'EVERYONE IN'

The most severe lockdown rules from the government were announced on 23 March; people were told to stay at home wherever possible. While the week before, the government had announced some emergency funding to help rough sleepers to self-isolate, there remained no coordinated national plan to ensure people who are homeless were protected across the board.

However, just a few days later, 'Everyone In' was born. The same week as the country went into lockdown, the government wrote to all local authorities in England asking them to house all people sleeping rough- including those in hostels and night shelters - by the weekend. In a landmark moment that spanned just a few days, we saw local authorities and homelessness charities across England working together to help secure emergency accommodation.

The results were extraordinary – in a matter of weeks close to 15,000 people across England were able to access this accommodation. This will have also had a huge impact in a way figures can't show – we'll never know how many lives were saved by protecting the health of thousands.

In most areas, a lack of existing emergency accommodation meant local authorities turned to hotels that otherwise would have been empty in lockdown to house those facing homelessness, renting these out for the following months. These hotels became a hive of activity, where staff and volunteers from organisations like Crisis and St Mungo's would work with residents to get them the help they needed.



Food was delivered to people's rooms, prescriptions collected, mobile phones provided for people to stay in touch with friends and family, as well as activities organised to help residents keep busy. We have heard compelling stories of people who slept on the floor with all the windows open when they first came to the hotel, unable to get used to a bed and warmth after so many years sleeping on the streets. There are also so many examples of residents who, when given the respite of a place to call their own, have seen their mental and physical health improve vastly.

## THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF 'EVERYONE IN'

Providing this kind of wrap-around care has not only meant people have been physically protected from the pandemic, but also that they have been able to get closer to leaving homelessness behind for good, with many having done so already. Every day staff and volunteers have been able to help residents with important issues like applying for EU settled status or Universal Credit, looking for employment or helping to sort more long-term accommodation. All these things are so much harder to do when people are rough sleeping, living hand to mouth and moving from place to place. Providing unconditional accommodation first and support after has enabled many people to thrive.

One of the remarkable things about the Everyone In scheme was that emphasis on everyone – the principle that all rough sleepers should be helped. This meant that people who are typically locked out of the usual avenues of support have not been left to fend for themselves

during the pandemic. One example of this would be people originally from outside the UK who have a 'no recourse to public funds' condition attached to their immigration status here, meaning that if they are unable to work and support themselves, they will not be entitled to any support such as housing benefit or universal credit. Circumstances like these, in which so many have lost their jobs and are unable to work, have shone a light on the counterproductivity of this policy which causes people to be left facing destitution with no way out. Some of our clients in this situation have been able to move out of rough sleeping for the first time in years and have been given the breathing space to really start planning for the future rather than living day by day.

## GOING FORWARD

We now turn to how we support people who are homeless going forward. Many of the contracts with hotels ran out at the end of July, leaving local authorities stuck between a rock and a hard place – wanting to do right by those who are newly homeless but having provided only piece-meal funding to do so. As a result, we are seeing a resurgence in the number of people sleeping on our streets. This is a situation we only expect to worsen over the coming months as the economic effects of the pandemic force more people to the brink of homelessness and in need of support.

We stand at a crossroads: we can build on the incredible progress that has been made by helping everyone move into a secure and permanent home; or we risk seeing thousands of people returning



to the streets or to uncertain, unstable and sometimes dangerous living situations. While government has put place some short-term measures, such as extending the eviction ban by a few months, this isn't enough to stem the tide. We need something far more comprehensive and ambitious if we are to ensure that this recession doesn't lead to a sharp increase in homelessness.

What we at Crisis have proposed, with the support of many others in the sector, is emergency homelessness legislation to protect people over the next 12 months, backed by funding to ensure local authorities have the resources to provide accommodation to those who need it. By amending the law to ensure, for example, people with no recourse to public funds can access universal credit and suspending the benefit cap for the next 12 months, we will be able to protect

so many people from facing homelessness in the first place. There is no doubt that 'Everyone In' has helped thousands of people and shown us the power that lies in offering accommodation first and the support needed after this. This is certainly a principle we hope to see at the heart of Westminster homelessness policy for years to come.

In the shorter term, with the cold winter months ahead and cases of coronavirus increasing, we need to see the government setting out in law the need to protect all those facing homelessness while this public health crisis is ongoing. Their response needs to match the ambition and energy shown at the start of the outbreak. The solutions are already there: tried and tested. No longer can anyone call homelessness an unsolvable problem. We've seen what can be achieved when the political will is there.

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