



The impact of COVID-19 on people facing homelessness and service provision across Great Britain.

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Executive summary

The homelessness response to the pandemic has seen extraordinary action taken across Great Britain to get everyone into safe accommodation during the outbreak. People experiencing homelessness, especially those rough sleeping, are among the most exposed to risk of coronavirus. The pandemic is also exerting sudden pressure on people already pushed to the brink by low wages and high rents.

To anticipate and track the ever-changing dynamics of the pandemic, Crisis has conducted a short piece of research to understand the experiences of frontline services across Great Britain during the pandemic and the changing support needs of people facing homelessness between March and September 2020. Based on survey responses with voluntary sector organisations and in-depth interviews with local authorities across Great Britain, the research shows the range of challenges and responses to homelessness as a consequence of the pandemic and the short, medium, and long-term solutions to end homelessness for good.

- Across all three nations there has been a continued new flow of people experiencing homelessness since the start of the pandemic.
- Local authorities and voluntary sector services have reported both an increase in need but also demand for their services since the beginning of the pandemic. 53 per cent (68) of services across Great Britain reported an increase in homelessness in their area, with a further 73 per cent (95) stating demand of their services had increased since the start of the pandemic.
- During the first few months of the pandemic the increase was driven by those already experiencing homelessness - people who were sofa surfing and living in dangerous and transient accommodation – who became more visible as their living situations forced them to access help. In some areas, there was also an increase in people fleeing domestic abuse - 58 per cent (42) of services reporting that they had seen an increase in people fleeing or experiencing domestic abuse requiring support.
- Towards the second wave of the pandemic there have been bigger increases in England in families and across all three nations from people who are experiencing homelessness for the first time, people who have been furloughed and those who are newly unemployed.
- Homelessness among people with No Recourse to Public Funds has been a continued issue throughout the whole of the pandemic. The instruction

to local authorities to support everyone who was rough sleeping or in accommodation where they could not self-isolate into safe emergency accommodation meant that all local authorities reported an increase in support being provided for people with No Recourse to Public Funds including EEA nationals without entitlements to benefits. In some cases, local authorities reported accommodating quite significant numbers of individuals but with an awareness that the support they were able to offer, beyond emergency accommodation was limited.

- Relationship breakdown, both between partners and wider familial relationship breakdown, was also highlighted by both services and local authorities as an increasing cause of homelessness. While historically this has always been a large driver of homelessness the pandemic has forced more people to leave their family home and in multi-generational households young people not seen to be adhering to the lockdown rules have increased numbers of people approaching for help.
- An increase in support needs by people approaching for help was seen consistently across the research. The two main support needs highlighted were loneliness and isolation and mental health issues. In the first phase of the research the most pressing support needs related to emergency basic needs, such as lack of food and digital exclusion – the latter becoming increasingly important and vital over the last seven months. In contrast in wave 2 of the survey we started to see more cumulative issues coming through like rent arrears.
- Services also spoke about the need to adapt their provision very quickly in response to social distancing new safety measures. For some this was an overnight shift from being in an office one day to working from home, while for others there was a more gradual shift or an intent to maintain some ongoing physical presence to allow for face to face contact. This included distributing mobile phones and recognising that housing options assessments do not need to be conducted in person.
- The most significant intervention that governments across all three nations made was the instruction to bring 'Everyone In' or provide emergency accommodation for everyone rough sleeping, at risk of rough sleeping, or in accommodation where they could not self-isolate throughout the pandemic. This was an enormous undertaking for local authorities and the challenge of this was reflected on by local authorities. This intervention has clearly saved lives during the pandemic, with infection rates and deaths amongst people experiencing homelessness at extremely low levels compared internationally.

- In England, there was an overwhelming need to utilise commercial hotels, in Wales there was a more varied mix of hotels, B&Bs and existing temporary accommodation stock, and in Scotland outside of large city centres where commercial hotels were needed, this was mainly provided through current stock. Student accommodation and other forms of available self-contained housing was also used.
- One of the most impactful changes that local authorities highlighted in terms of being able to support people from hotels through the system into more permanent and secure accommodation was temporary changes to housing allocation policies. This meant suspension of choice-based lettings and a move to direct lets, and in many local authorities a priority given to homeless households.
- Most local authorities spoke about the need to continue some form of hotel provision for the immediate future. Local authorities in England felt conflicted about the current and future need especially in relation to a second wave of the pandemic versus the reality of getting continued central government funding to sustain this. In Scotland, authorities felt more reassured by the spending commitment to continue emergency provision for at least up until the new year.
- NRPF groups caused more concern for the local authorities we spoke regarding uncertainty on funding for these groups and inconsistent national policies that made medium to long term planning extremely difficult.
- There was recognition of the positive effect government policies have had on levels of homelessness during the pandemic, particularly the pause in evictions and temporary uplift in local housing allowance. However, there were concerns across all areas about the temporary nature of these changes and the impact these may have on homelessness in the future. Local authorities across each nation were concerned about newly emerging need for their services as they started to see the impacts of the wider economic context and the cumulation of rent arrears in their local area.
- One of the biggest challenges facing local authorities is the ability to successfully move those housed in emergency COVID-19 accommodation into permanent and secure housing. The structural barriers that existed before the pandemic, including a lack of housing supply and a welfare system that does not address the underlying causes of homelessness have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Across the three nations local authorities and voluntary sector providers stress the need for a range of

appropriate tenures to meet differing support needs. At the heart of this was delivering new affordable housing supply and long term financial support within the welfare system to address underlying causes of homelessness.

- The existing policy frameworks in tackling homelessness in each nation have had an impact on the medium to long term planning for each nation and how effective their homelessness response has been since March. In Scotland, the pandemic has injected a sense of urgency into housing led provision based on Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans and the need to work with local authorities to ensure the necessary funding to scale up Housing First across Scotland more rapidly. In Wales, the introduction of phase 2 funding has led local authorities to think more longer term about their offers for people moving through their homelessness systems, not just exclusively in the context of the pandemic. In England, the process of Everyone In and identifying support needs as part of this has been used to examine who would benefit from different housing solutions. However, there was still a reliance on supported accommodation and longer-term hostels to move people out of hotels and other emergency accommodation with a question mark over the extent to which recent funding announcements can meet the ongoing need for permanent long term tenancies.
- There was also concern over funding a homelessness response in the immediate future. In England local authorities and voluntary sector organisations were concerned about the sustainability of funding emergency accommodation over winter. In many areas they had already overspent and even with additional funding announcements from MHCLG it is not clear if the procurement of temporary accommodation can continue at this pace. In Wales, there was less concern than in England about whether the initial funding was sufficient to cover costs of providing emergency accommodation, but there were growing anxieties around funding for their phase 2 planning, beyond the commitment to March 2021, and making sure they were able to sustainably plan their provision for people moving through from emergency accommodation. In Scotland there was significantly less concern specifically around homelessness spend and reflected that they had in the most part been able to access the emergency monies that they needed.
- There have been positive effects of the pandemic in terms of greater collaboration. The huge shift in way of working across statutory and voluntary services and the demand to provide an unprecedented level of support was a massive undertaking, that in many areas of the country it led

to a pulling together of the sector and a strengthening of relationships that are hoped to endure may be a significant positive legacy of the pandemic.

Chapter 1: Introduction and policy context

The homelessness response to the pandemic has seen extraordinary action taken across Great Britain to get everyone into safe accommodation during the outbreak. By the end of September in England 10,566 people were still living in emergency accommodation as a direct result of the 'Everyone In' initiative and nearly 18,911 people have been moved into other forms of accommodation¹. In Wales, by the 28th June 407 people have been moved off the streets and at least 1,859 people have been helped into emergency accommodation.² In mid-July Scottish Government reported that there were as few as 20 to 30 people who remained rough sleeping.

As well as addressing existing homelessness, there has been a need to tackle a new flow of people onto the streets and those at risk of losing their home. While data is not comprehensive, we know that in England between April and June 63,750 households were owed a homelessness duty (prevention and relief)³ and in London between July and September 3,444 people were recorded as rough sleeping in the capital and nearly 2,000 were new to the streets⁴. The latest figures from the Scottish regulator show that there have been over 2,000 homelessness applications each month consistently since April with 2,901 in September.⁵ In Wales in August 974 people who presented as homeless were placed in emergency accommodation in August.⁶

The emergency measures put in place were a direct response to a public health need. People experiencing homelessness, particularly those who are sleeping rough, are among those who are most exposed to the risks of COVID-19. Not only do they not have a safe home to self-isolate in or follow sanitation guidance, but people experiencing homelessness are also three times more likely to experience a chronic health problem including respiratory conditions. It was therefore critical that everyone who was rough sleeping, or in other

¹ Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: September 2020*

² Welsh Government (2020) *Homeless and Rough Sleepers in Emergency Accommodation in COVID-19 crisis (management information)*

³ MHCLG (2020) *Statutory Homelessness April to June (Q2) 2020: England*

⁴ Greater London Authority (2020) *CHAIN quarterly report, Greater London, July to September 2020*

⁵ Scottish Housing Regulator (2020) *COVID-19 Monthly Report - September 2020*

⁶ Welsh Government (2020) *Homelessness accommodation provision and rough sleeping: August 2020*

acute forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing or communal hostels, had access to accommodation where they could self-isolate and protect themselves from the risks of COVID-19.

There have also been wider economic impacts of the outbreak, and as detailed below, new and emergency policy interventions by governments across all three nations have protected large numbers of people who would otherwise have been pushed into homelessness or living in dangerous situations. To anticipate and track the ever-changing dynamics of the pandemic, Crisis has conducted a short piece of research to understand the experiences of frontline services across Great Britain during the pandemic and the changing support needs of people facing homelessness between March and September 2020. This report outlines how statutory and voluntary sector homelessness services have responded to the global pandemic and the changing policy responses across England, Scotland and Wales. Chapter 2 looks at homelessness trends and access to services for people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of government policies in England, Scotland and Wales in the period between March and September. In the final chapter the research examines perspectives on future planning and responses to homelessness by local authorities and voluntary sector services in light of the economic impacts and second wave of the pandemic.

1.1. Policy context

England

At the beginning of the first lockdown a letter was sent by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to all local authorities in England instructing them to move everyone sleeping rough and in communal shelters into a safe place, ideally in self-contained accommodation, over the following two days.⁷ Now widely referred to as the 'Everyone In' initiative, it was initially backed by £3.2 million targeted funding to local authorities, alongside £3.2 billion overall for councils to assist people classed as vulnerable.

Two months later on 24th May the Government brought forward £160 million of a £433 million four year budget to provide 6,000 new supported housing units for ex-rough sleepers, with 3,300 of these units becoming available over the next

⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): letter from Minister Hall to local authorities on plans to protect rough sleepers*, Online: MHCLG.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-minister-hall-to-local-authorities>

12 months. £91.6 million of the 'Next Steps' funding has now been allocated to 276 schemes across England, including 38 in London, which are due to provide interim accommodation specifically for people rough sleeping.⁸ Bids have also been submitted for £161 million support to help secure 3,300 tenancies but the guidance for the funding stream has placed an emphasis on short term accommodation, with tenancies not lasting longer than three years.⁹

On the 13th October updated guidance was published on the use of night shelters in England which states it they can be opened over winter as a last resort. This was accompanied with £10 million for a Cold Weather Fund to support councils get rough sleepers off the streets during the winter by helping them to provide more self-contained accommodation and an additional £2 million for faith and community groups to help them provide secure accommodation for rough sleepers.¹⁰

Since the second wave of the pandemic and lockdown period in England, a further £15 million has been allocated to provide accommodation for rough sleepers.¹¹ Called the 'Protect Programme', it has been targeted at 10 areas in England¹² deemed to need additional support over winter.

Focused on policies to address more upstream prevention, there was a pause on evictions from both the social and private rented sectors, initially announced for a three-month period till 25th June 2020¹³, and later extended 20 September¹⁴. In response to the second lockdown there has been further restrictions put in place to stop bailiff enforcement action taking place during the national restrictions or over the Christmas period.¹⁵ Notice periods for most tenants have also been extended in this period. Where landlords are not seeking to evict a tenant for anti-social behaviour, serious rent arrears, or where the tenant has no [right to rent](#), a minimum six months' notice period applies for notices issues

⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) 274 councils set to receive housing support for vulnerable people. Online <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/274-councils-set-to-receive-housing-support-for-vulnerable-people>

⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Next Steps Accommodation Programme: guidance*

¹⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) Rough sleepers to be helped to keep safe this winter. Online <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/rough-sleepers-to-be-helped-to-keep-safe-this-winter>

¹¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) Jenrick launches 'Protect Programme': the next step in winter rough sleeping plan. Online <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/jenrick-launches-protect-programme-the-next-step-in-winter-rough-sleeping-plan>

¹² The 10 areas in England are London, Bristol, Brighton and Hove, Cornwall, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Manchester, Salford, Oxford, Leicester and Birmingham

¹³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Government support available for landlords and renters reflecting the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak*, Online:

MHCLG <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/government-support-available-for-landlords-and-renters-reflecting-the-current-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

¹⁴ House of Commons library (2020) Coronavirus: Ban on evictions extended to 20 September. Online: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/coronavirus-ban-on-evictions-extended/>

¹⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) New protections for renters over duration of national restrictions. Online <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-protections-for-renters-over-duration-of-national-restrictions>

from 29th August 2020. These notice periods will remain in force until 31 March 2021.

There was also a suspension of evictions from asylum accommodation across the UK for three months from 27th March,¹⁶ and the Government has temporarily suspended an exemption to the EU derogation relating to freedom of movement, to allow local authorities to provide up to three months of emergency accommodation and floating support to EEA nationals who would not otherwise be eligible for support. In 2019 this suspension was applied in areas of the country with high levels of EEA migrant homelessness and is now being extended nationally as of 24th June 2020.¹⁷ This will end on 31st December 2020. Counterintuitive to this announcement, new rules due to come into force on 1st December¹⁸ outline that rough sleeping will become grounds for refusing or cancelling someone's right to remain in the UK.

There have been increased investment in the welfare system which have prevented many people losing their homes. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates across the UK have been realigned to cover the bottom third of rents for 12 months¹⁹, and there has been an increase of £20 per month in the Universal Credit (UC) standard allowance²⁰. Practical changes have also been made to pause deductions for benefit overpayments, and to ensure no one is sanctioned during the public health emergency,²¹ though both sanctions and deductions have now resumed.

Scotland

As an initial response to the pandemic, the Scottish Government, local authorities and charities also moved quickly to get people off the streets and into safe accommodation to protect people's health. Scottish government provided an unrestricted £350 million to local authorities to support throughout the pandemic which was accessible for homelessness provision, and an additional £1.5 million specifically for voluntary sector organisations supporting in hotels in Edinburgh and Glasgow.²² This quick response meant that people sleeping

¹⁶ On 27th March 2020, the Home Office Minister Chris Philp sent a Letter to the British Red Cross announcing that for the next three months people will not be asked to leave their asylum accommodation.

¹⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) *Letter from Minister for Rough Sleeping on funding for emergency accommodation during the pandemic, and support for EEA rough sleepers*. Online: MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-letter-from-minister-hall-to-local-authorities-on-funding-support-for-those-in-emergency-accommodation-and-eea-rough-sleepers>

¹⁸ The Home Office (2020) *Statement of changes to the Immigration Rules: HC 813, 22 October 2020*. Online <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statement-of-changes-to-the-immigration-rules-hc-813-22-october-2020>

¹⁹ Social Security (Coronavirus) (Further Measures) Regulations 2020 (SI.No.371/2020). www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/2020/371/made

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Department for Work and Pensions (2020) *Recovery of Benefit Overpayment Suspended*. Online: DWP. www.gov.uk/government/news/recovery-of-benefit-overpayment-suspended

²² Scottish Government (2020) *Ending homelessness together: updated action plan - October 2020*

rough or staying in congregate shelters were supported into self-contained accommodation during the immediate crisis. In addition, the Scottish Government decided to bring forward changes to the Unsuitable Accommodation Order from April 2021 to October 2020, fast-tracking provisions intended to protect all households from long stays in unsuitable temporary accommodation, although with an exemption up to 31st January if unsuitable temporary accommodation is being used to enable self-isolation or if pressures due to providing COVID-19 emergency accommodation has limited their temporary accommodation stock. .

In recognition that those with no recourse to public funds were particularly at risk of rough sleeping, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) issued guidance making it clear that local authorities have statutory public health duties to provide emergency accommodation to all people with NRPF who are roofless or rough sleeping during the pandemic, and that local authorities can provide financial support, food or other emergency assistance.

Similar to England and Wales, the Scottish Parliament passed emergency legislation which included an extension of notice periods for most evictions from both social and private rented sector accommodation of up to 6 months. This has since been extended until March 2021. As further protection for tenants, the Scottish Government introduced a £10m tenant hardship loan fund, and regulations were also passed by the Scottish Parliament which create pre-action requirements for private rented sector landlords wishing to evict on the grounds of rent arrears, initially until March 2021. Furthermore, the Scottish Government also announced additional funding for Discretionary Housing Payments to support tenants under severe financial pressure during the outbreak.

In June 2020 the Housing Minister Kevin Stewart asked the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG)²³ to reconvene and look at what can be done to tackle homelessness right now and into the future, including changes to the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan. The group convened two meetings in June and a report was published with a further 104 recommendations²⁴.

In response in October, the Scottish Government updated its Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan²⁵. The plan focused on the need to prioritise

²³ The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) was appointed by the First Minister and chaired by Jon Sparkes from Crisis

²⁴ Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (2020) *Tackling homelessness in Scotland following the coronavirus pandemic - Recommendations from Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group*
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/corporate-report/2020/07/homelessness-and-rough-sleeping-action-group-final-report-tackling-coronavirus/documents/harsag-final-report-on-homelessness-after-coronavirus/harsag-final-report-on-homelessness-after-coronavirus/govscot%3Adocument/200819%2BHARSAG2%2BCOVID%2Breport.pdf>

²⁵ Scottish Government (2020) *Ending homelessness together, updated action plan – October 2020*

prevention, ensuring maximal settled housing options in every sector including social housing, Housing First and the private rented sector, mainstreaming equalities and ensuring the homelessness system itself is response and person centred. It also included commitments to phase out night shelters this winter and replace them with rapid rehousing welcome centres for people who would otherwise be rough sleeping²⁶. Other commitments include scaling up Housing First more rapidly, significant increases in social housing allocations to people experiencing homelessness, addressing recommendations about a new prevention duty in Scotland, and exploring alternative routes to reduce migrant homelessness.

Wales

The Welsh Government's response to the pandemic took place immediately following the Homelessness Action Group's²⁷ recommendations to set an ambitious goal of ending homelessness in Wales. The Housing and Local Government Minister, Julie James MS, accepted in principle the recommendations of the Action Group, which set out a framework of policies, approaches and plans to ensure that homelessness only happens very rarely, that when it does happen it is brief, and that once it has happened to an individual or family then it is prevented from happening again.²⁸ The Minister also committed to agree an action plan to deliver the recommendations in practice.²⁹

In the early phase of the outbreak the Welsh Government committed £10 million for partners to work closely to quickly re-accommodate hundreds of people across Wales who were sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation that could be a public health risk during the pandemic. The Welsh Government guidance to councils also set out that the funding could be used for helping people with no recourse to public funds into emergency accommodation.³⁰ This was significantly more funding per local authority in Wales when compared to the COVID funding response for homelessness in England.

As the outbreak continued, the Welsh Government issued guidance that people at risk of sleeping rough during the pandemic should generally be treated as vulnerable for the purposes of assessing priority need for re-accommodation and there would need to be a "robust evidential basis" for not doing so.³¹

²⁶ Scottish Government (2020) Night shelters to be phased out. Online <https://www.gov.scot/news/night-shelters-to-be-phased-out/>

²⁷ The Action Group was a task group of 13 members, chaired by Jon Sparkes from Crisis, and reported to Welsh Ministers

²⁸ *The framework of policies, approaches and plans needed to end homelessness in Wales (What ending homelessness in Wales looks like)*, Report from the Homelessness Action Group for the Welsh Government, March 2020

²⁹ <https://gov.wales/working-prevent-homelessness-minister-accepts-principle-new-recommendations-end-homelessness-wales>

³⁰ <https://gov.wales/10-million-emergency-support-rough-sleepers-wales-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

³¹ https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-04/guidance-for-local-authorities-in-supporting-people-sleeping-rough-covid-19_0.pdf

Local authorities and their partners from the public, private and third sectors are moving into phase two of the strategy, so “no one need return to the street”. This was initially backed by “one-off” Welsh Government funding of £20 million and subsequently increased to £50 million³². Each local authority has been asked by the Minister for Housing and Local Government to develop a plan which will form the basis of a funding bid, and the plans to start adopting a ‘rapid rehousing’ approach to homelessness³³

Protection for renters were also introduced in Wales, a longer notice period was initially announced for a six-month period till 30th September 2020, it was later extended until 31st March 2021 unless the reason for giving notice relates to anti-social behaviour or domestic abuse.³⁴ The announcement was also accompanied by a wider measures of support including a new low interest loan for private rented sector tenants in rent arrears or struggling to pay their rent arrears because of Covid-19 and a private rented sector helpline run by Citizen Advice Cymru.

As recommended by the Homelessness Action Group, temporary changes saw people sleeping rough in some areas treated as being in priority need so rough sleeping could be tackled areas where it was most prevalent. More recently a review³⁵ of priority need has been published which sets out four options for Welsh Government to consider, from all-out abolition of priority need to maintaining the status quo.

1.2. Methodology

The research took place between April and October 2020. Two online surveys were conducted with voluntary sector services working in the area of homelessness. The first these had a response rate of 150 and asked questions about the activity between March and end of May. A follow up survey took place between July and September to track change in responses to need and the external context, the response rate was low (31 usable responses) so a comparison has been used as indicative only. More detail on the size and focus of organisations who responded to the survey is available in the appendix.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 local authorities (10 in England, 5 in Wales, 4 in Scotland). These were selected to provide a range of

³² Welsh Government (2020) Welsh Government unveils package of support to keep people in their homes and end homelessness. Online <https://gov.wales/welsh-government-unveils-package-support-keep-people-their-homes-and-end-homelessness>

³³ Welsh Government (2020) Phase 2 – Planning Guidance for Homelessness and Housing Related Support Services. Online <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/planning-guidance-for-homelessness-and-housing-support-services-coronavirus.pdf>

³⁴ Welsh Government (2020) Temporary increase in the notice period for eviction to be extended. Online <https://gov.wales/temporary-increase-notice-period-eviction-be-extended>

³⁵ Mackie, P., Gray, T., Hughes, C., Madoc-Jones, I., Moustery, V., Pawson, H., Spyropoulos, N., Stirling, T., Taylor, H. and Watts, B. (2020) *Review of Priority Need in Wales*, Welsh Government

geographic coverage but also areas with acute need with regards to levels of rough sleeping and use of communal homelessness accommodation.

A wide range of research has been conducted and published on the impact of COVID on homelessness, the report also draws on other sources of data to verify the key themes throughout the report.

Chapter 2: What happened to the scale of homelessness and access to services during COVID-19?

2.1. Scale of homelessness

In the immediate aftermath of government announcements to accommodate all rough sleepers in the face of the pandemic, and as the country headed into the first lockdown there was an immediate increase in pressure and demand on local authorities and frontline services. The expectation was to accommodate all people experiencing rough sleeping or in unsafe accommodation where self-solation wasn't possible, but a continued flow of people newly at risk of rough sleeping throughout the early months of the pandemic led to a constant pressure on services.

In May 2020 MHCLG reported that 14,610 people in England had been provided emergency accommodation in response to the pandemic, with an estimated 6,000 people sleeping rough at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶ Of the 14,610 people housed an estimated 7,000 had been sleeping rough before they were accommodated and 5,000 were at risk of rough sleeping. These numbers highlight the continued flow of people newly experiencing the worst form of homelessness during the first months of the pandemic and is further supported by the data available from London's Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN). The April – June data for CHAIN shows that 2,680 people slept rough in London for the first time, an increase of 77% from the same time period in 2019. What the data is showing is the scale of people who were extremely vulnerable to the risk of rough sleeping and the immediate pressures of the pandemic and associated lockdown pushed them to needing emergency help.

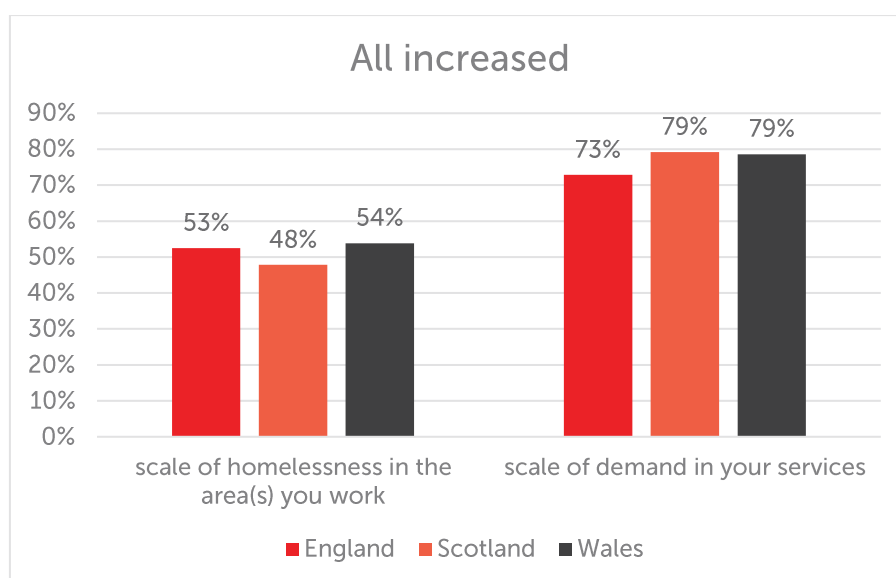
³⁶ Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: September 2020*

In Scotland, monthly reports from the Scottish Housing Regulator show that between April and September 2020 there has been a steep increase in people being placed in temporary accommodation from 12, 261 to 14,229 households due to the response to the pandemic.³⁷

In Wales 407 people have been moved off the streets and at least 1,859 people have been helped into emergency accommodation by the 28 June.³⁸ The latest publication of homelessness statistics by the Welsh Government show that 987 people who presented as homeless were placed in emergency accommodation in August and there were around 101 people still rough sleeping.³⁹

Responses from the first wave of the sector survey support this assertion of an increase in visible homelessness during the first few months of the Coronavirus pandemic. 53 per cent (68) of services across the country reported an increase in homelessness in their area, with a further 73 per cent (95) stating demand of their services had increased since the start of the pandemic. These trends were echoed across all three nations.

Chart 2.1. Percentage of survey respondents who reported an increase in scale and demand of homelessness



Local Authority interviews and the statutory data for April – June 2020 also support this showing the increase in demand came overwhelmingly from single males, who may have not been entitled to main duty support in England and Wales due to lack of priority need. In England between April and June 2020 there

³⁷ Scottish Housing Regulator (2020) *COVID-19 Monthly Report - September 2020*

³⁸ Welsh Government (2020) Homeless and Rough Sleepers in Emergency Accommodation in COVID-19 crisis (management information)

³⁹ Welsh Government (2020) Homeless and Rough Sleepers in Emergency Accommodation in COVID-19 crisis (management information)

was a yearly 14 per cent increase in households owed the relief duty, with a 41 per cent increase for single males.⁴⁰

"I think what we've seen through COVID is the single people who wouldn't have had a priority need previously. That's certainly been an increase for us." (LA Wales)

"We saw an increase in singles...I suspect there's a lot of singles out there...sofa surfers, those who sort of are paid cash in hand who live on friends' floors or living in makeshift accommodation, back of sheds let's be honest about it. And, I think that drew a lot of people because of the, I suppose the dangers and the fear and the anxiety, I suspect they would not normally turn up at our doorstep, but they have." (LA England)

However, over the months since the start of the pandemic and the initial lockdown local authorities have observed an ongoing change in trends with families now starting to rise in their presentations to Housing Options.

"We've certainly seen more families coming through the last two to three weeks." (LA Wales)

There is yet to be sufficient statutory data available across the three nations to fully explore how the trends in presentations across families and singles has changed since June 2020, but many local authorities suggested that the impact of the pause on evictions was supporting with the reduction in families requiring support, and that as this policy ends it may reverse the trends seen earlier in the pandemic.

"We were looking at whether or not it was to do with the suspension of eviction because a lot of families that come to us are either in private rented accommodation and they're getting an eviction notice." (LA England)

"We did see a slowing down, of course, in the private rented sector stuff, because of the stays in courts, and because of the extension of notice periods; we've just done some analysis on our levels of presentations, and early on within the pandemic, presentations were down by about 60% but are now back up, firmly, to where they were, and increasing." (LA Wales)

"Despite the kind of ban on evictions, call it what you will - the delay on evictions, it's more realistically called a delay on evictions than a ban – it's just storing up a huge potential problem in the waiting which we are going to struggle to deal with." (LA England)

⁴⁰ MHCLG (2020) Statutory Homelessness April to June (Q2) 2020: England

Data from England shows that the numbers of people sleeping rough who required support also did not slow down from May. MHCLG figures released in September showing that 29,477 had been accommodated through the Everyone In scheme, a 48 per cent increase on the numbers supported by May.⁴¹

2.2. Impact on specific groups

Sofa surfers

Findings from the sector survey and the Local Authority interviews suggest that many of the people supported in this initial period were already experiencing homelessness, albeit more hidden forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing or overcrowded accommodation. People sofa surfing were highlighted as being particularly in need of support during this period with 60 per cent (59) of services stating they had seen an increase in demand from sofa surfers. Likewise, local authorities reported seeing increases.

"The sofa surfing, you know, came more to the fore once we had lockdown, obviously because people were saying, "I don't feel comfortable with them being here," or whatever else. So, we had a spike, like I'm sure a lot of councils did, with that sort of thing, having to try and manage that one." (LA England)

"Well, we know there's a lot of sofa surfing in [local authority area]...but I think the whole Coronavirus situation has kind of shone a bit of a spotlight on how incredibly tenuous those situations are and, again, this could lead to people, and probably has led to a certain number of people landing on the streets that wouldn't have done before." (LA England)

"We're aware that we've got a sofa-surfer culture in [local authority area] ... you know, and those certainly were breaking down, you know, perhaps a single parent living home with mum, you know, when you're locked down for 16 weeks, relationships can get a bit fraught." (LA Wales)

We would expect that people sofa surfing would be particularly vulnerable to the changes caused by lockdown as family and friends became more conscious of the space within their homes, or the pressures of confined living ended temporary arrangements, but the scale of numbers of people requiring support shows how many people are living in such precarious situations and are so close to being pushed into rough sleeping.

People fleeing domestic abuse

Domestic abuse was highlighted as a significant area of concern early on in the pandemic with domestic abuse services flagging rises in pressures on their

⁴¹ MHCLG (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: September 2020*

services, in June Refuge reported an 80% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.⁴² As one of the leading causes of homelessness a rise in domestic abuse led to anticipation of a rise in associated homelessness. These concerns were reflected in the findings of the survey with 58 per cent (42) of services reporting that they had seen an increase in people fleeing or experiencing domestic abuse requiring support.

There was however a more mixed picture from local authorities. While some local authorities stated that they had seen an initial increase in domestic abuse others reported that, while anticipated, they hadn't seen a change in the numbers of people seeking help.

"The proportion of the total that were related to domestic abuse was slightly higher." (LA Scotland)

"Again, with the domestic abuse, yep, there's a little bit of a spike. It did settle down, fortunately." (LA England)

"Obviously there is some really incredibly upsetting news throughout COVID about an increase in homicides through domestic abuse and the more serious incidents and so on, which our experience so far is that hasn't manifested itself in requests for help, which is actually really worrying." (LA England)

However more consistently across local authorities was the increase in people fleeing domestic abuse accessing support the longer that lockdown continued.

"At first we saw no increase at all but as time went on and the lockdown became further and further, we went further and further into lockdown, the numbers of domestic abuse rose incredibly." (LA England)

"We've seen over the last couple of weeks an increase in presentations because of domestic violence. Where we didn't see that right at the beginning, we're certainly seeing that now." (LA Wales)

As lockdown measures continue and increase the pressures on individuals experiencing domestic abuse, the need for local authorities to ensure there are no barriers in place that would limit their abilities to be able to move quickly and responsively to supporting those fleeing their home becomes imperative.

No recourse to public funds and EEA Nationals

In wave 1 of the sector survey 53% of respondents reported that they had seen an increase in people with NRPF requiring support, and 33% had seen an increase in EEA nationals specifically. In wave 2 while the NRPF proportion had stayed

⁴² BBC (23 July 2020) *Coronavirus: Domestic abuse helpline sees lockdown surge* [online] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53498675>

roughly the same with 52% of services reporting an increase, the numbers of EEA nationals had increased to 44%. In this context it is worth noting that this is a continued reported increase, with wave 1 and wave 2 highlighting increases across different time periods from the beginning of the pandemic.

While the suspension of evictions from asylum accommodation was identified as one of the most beneficial interventions with 87% of respondents in wave 1 and 100% in wave 2 stating that it helped in supporting with homelessness, there was still concerns around the support available for those not currently in asylum accommodation.

The instruction to local authorities to support everyone who was rough sleeping or in accommodation where they could not self-isolate into safe emergency accommodation meant that all local authorities reported an increase in support being provided for people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), including EEA nationals without entitlements to benefits. In some cases, local authorities reported accommodating quite significant numbers of individuals but with an awareness that the support they were able to offer, beyond emergency accommodation, was limited.

For EEA nationals in particular there was an emphasis on the link between employment and homelessness, and specifically in the context of tied accommodation within both the hospitality and agricultural industries.

"There was a Romanian chap from an agricultural setting who was getting cancer treatment and lost his job and his accommodation on the farm and he was getting treatment in [local hospital] and that was really difficult because he spoke no English at all and he, because of the chemo that he was getting, they couldn't get him to test negative – he caught COVID in hospital and they couldn't get him to do a negative test, so we had a real difficulty getting accommodation for him." (LA Scotland)

"Definitely we've had people coming onto the streets from accommodation that accompanied a job and definitely we've had people coming from backpackers, for example, that were, you know, particularly EEA nationals who were working, living in a backpackers, the backpacker closes and that kind of thing" (LA England)

"It's normally more EEA nationals without entitlement because of the agriculture and fishing industries" (LA Scotland)

The ongoing challenges of supporting people with NRPF throughout the pandemic is discussed in more detail in sections 3.3 and 5.1.

Relationship breakdown

Relationship breakdown, both between partners and wider familial relationship breakdown, was also highlighted by both services and local authorities as an increasing cause of homelessness. While relationship breakdown is traditionally one of the leading causes of homelessness it is perhaps not unexpected that the increased pressures of lockdown would be a driving factor behind more people seeking local authority support.

"There were people that we found sleeping in cars because their partner's thrown them out because they couldn't live in the same house on lockdown all the time." (LA England)

"I was incredibly shocked by the number of asked to leave by family and friends, I mean that's more than doubled in the – well it's about double isn't it, 91 to 185, it's an incredible jump from the same period." (LA England)

"Just the issue of everybody being in the same building the whole of the time on lockdown I think has caused rifts in families and people unable to live with each other." (LA England)

However, what is notable is relationship breakdown driven specifically by factors related to the pandemic. This was particularly highlighted in the context of multigenerational households where younger members were not adhering to social distancing rules.

"What we were finding behind sort of those presentations, in some cases, it was, again due to issues at home, because that youngster was not adhering to COVID guidelines to stay in and self-isolate." (LA Wales)

"There are relationship breakdowns that have come out of the pressures that have existed for families and households around COVID; young people who have been flouting the lockdown rules, and that's been the final straw for Mum and Dad or Gran and Granddad, who are feeling very vulnerable." (LA Scotland)

Economic drivers of homelessness

While the immediate economic impact of the pandemic on homelessness was starting to become evident in the first wave of the sector survey, it is in the second wave and local authority interviews that the wider impact starts to become apparent.

In the first wave of the sector survey 60 per cent of respondents reported that they had seen an increase in people who were recently unemployed requiring support from their services. However, this was the only economic driven cohort identified in the areas with the highest increase with the majority being those detailed above such as sofa surfers, those fleeing domestic abuse, and relationship breakdowns. Conversely in wave two the top three groups that have

seen an increase were all related to broader economic trends particularly in the labour market: people who are recently unemployed (81%), people who have been furloughed (69%), and people experiencing homelessness for the first time (68%).

Local authorities also reported on this shift in profile of those seeking support as the months from the start of the pandemic progressed and those losing jobs, or who were furloughed started to struggle with their housing costs.

"I think we've seen people now who were furloughed, and were maybe just about getting by, but now they're being advised that they... There was another one I was dealing with today where one of my Options officers was telling me about this chap who worked at the local arts theatre in [local authority area], and his job is going, now; whereas, I think he was getting something like 80% of his salary up until now – so, yeah, that's a fairly common experience as part of the stories that we're getting for people." (LA Scotland)

"Whilst people are furloughed and getting 80% of their salary, that is okay. But we have got lots of people who haven't been able to access that, lots of people in the gig economy and self-employment who probably haven't been well-supported through the relevant schemes that the government have for those people." (LA England)

Likewise, local authorities across the country reported growing concerns with rent arrears, both within their own housing stock but also concerns around what was unseen in the private rented sector:

"Our rent arrears as an authority are increasing, have increased quite significantly over the last few months" (LA Scotland)

"We know our own rent arrears within the council has gone up, but the council are a bit more resilient than a private landlord, just in terms of being able to absorb some of those rent losses, and understanding the bigger picture of the cost of homelessness as opposed to the cost of just looking at it as unpaid rent." (LA Wales)

Research from Joseph Roundtree Foundation (JRF) in October found that an estimated 700,000 households were already in rent arrears, and 2.5 million renting households across Great Britain are worried about meeting their housing costs between October and January 2021.⁴³

The future anxieties and how anticipation of wider economic impact of the pandemic and impending recession is discussed in section 4.2. However, what is

⁴³ Baxter, D., Casey, R and Earwaker, R. (2020) *Briefing: Struggling renters need a lifeline this winter* York: Joseph Roundtree Foundation

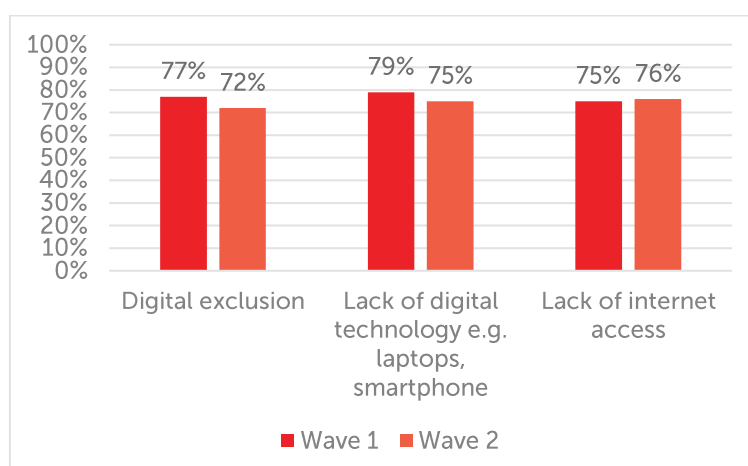
evident from this research is that while the initial increase in homelessness likely came from people who were already particularly vulnerable to being pushed into street homelessness, such as those already in precarious housing situations such as sofa surfers, as time has progressed the wider impact of the pandemic on the economy is increasing the number of people at risk of homelessness. Without the structural factors that support people from being pushed into homelessness, such as a welfare system that ensures people cover the cost of rent and sufficient affordable housing, there is a real risk of a significant increase in homelessness across the country as the economic impact of the pandemic hits.

2.3. Support needs

In both waves of the sector survey respondents reported an increase in support needs among the people that they were seeing within their services: with an 88 per cent increase in wave one and a 77 per cent increase in wave two.

Unsurprisingly, in both waves the two main support need highlighted are loneliness and isolation, and support around mental health. These are endemic issues across the general public throughout the pandemic but in the context of individuals living in hotel rooms, or insecure and poor-quality housing the increased impact on mental health must be considered. Likewise, in a time when peer support became increasingly important across the population a lack of strong social networks that provide that support heighten the challenges facing people experiencing homelessness. In this context how support provided around digital inclusion has become an increasingly important part of service provision amongst organisations supporting people experiencing homelessness. In both waves of the survey issues relating to digital exclusion were overrepresented in the most significant areas of support, with both lack of access to digital technology such as laptops and smartphones, and lack of internet access highlighted as particular support needs.

Chart 2.2: Percentage of sector respondents reporting an increase in issues relating to digital access

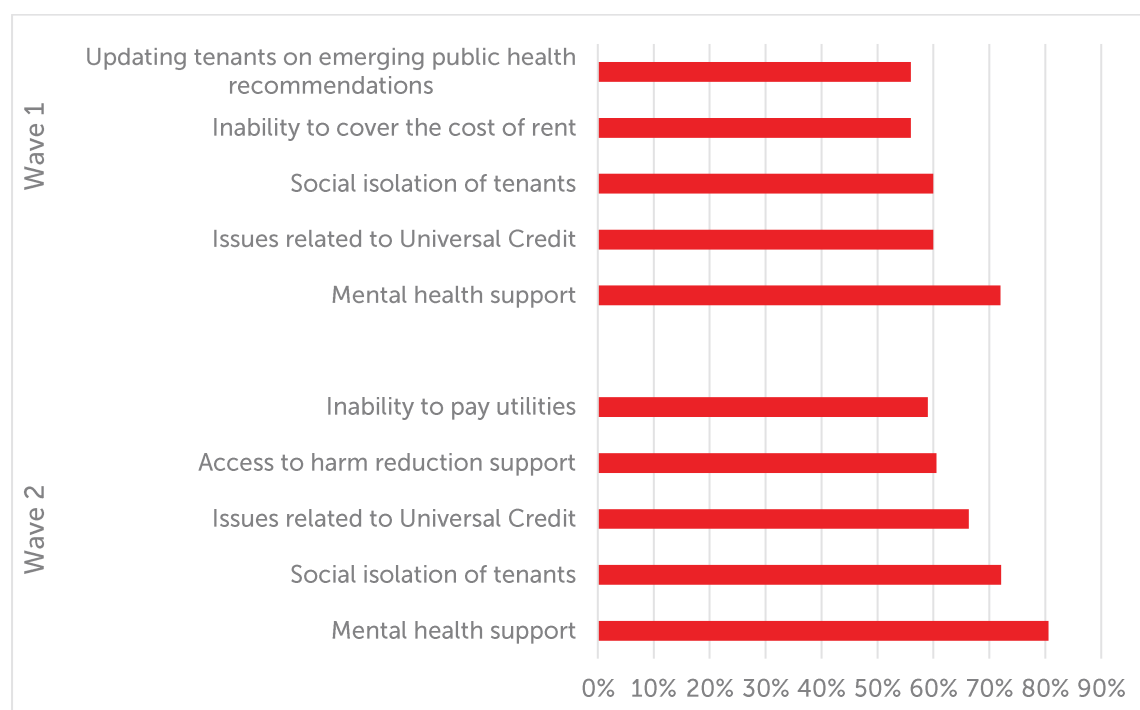


Consistent with what we know about the profile of people experiencing homelessness during the earlier months of the pandemic, and the emergency nature of the response aside from digital exclusion, in the first wave of the sector survey the wider support needs were related to more pressing crisis support, particularly around access to food. In the first wave of the survey 82 per cent of respondents said their primary support focus was on helping people to access basic needs and services such as food supplies and items for basic hygiene needs. With 78 per cent stating that wider services such as reduced access to food banks had caused challenges in the support they were able to offer.

Conversely in the wave two survey, while digital needs remain consistent, respondents started to identify support needs that suggested more cumulative economic issues such as rent arrears (84%) or financial and debt needs (80%). Again, this is representative of what is known about the changing profile of people experiencing homelessness as the pandemic has progressed.

In relation to supporting people who are at risk of homelessness but are currently housed the support needs remained consistent between the two waves of the survey with much of the need focussed around housing affordability and issues related to benefits.

Chart 2.3: Top five reported challenges related to supporting people currently housed and at risk of homelessness



In terms of homelessness prevention, local authorities also echoed concerns around Universal Credit, particularly in the context of those who were newly moving onto benefits:

"If people have been made redundant, then obviously they have the opportunity to claim Universal Credit. The housing element – we know that there's delays in the process built-in, so people are automatically going to fall into rent arrears" (LA Wales)

"And increasing numbers of people claiming Universal Credit, so the inherent delays in that process. And whether or not we have direct payment arrangements for rents and whether those residents are able to meet their rent liabilities; they get payment of their Universal Credit direct to themselves, you know, are they able to meet their rent liability amongst all the other challenges that they may face at the moment?" (LA England)

Chapter 3: Local authority response

3.1. Remote working

The immediate impact on Housing Options services across the country was the shift to remote working. For many local authorities this was an overnight shift from being in an office one day to working from home, while for others there was a more gradual shift or an intent to maintain some ongoing physical presence to allow for face to face contact.

"The challenge around non-face to face work has been huge for us because we have a lot of support services, we have what we call enhanced Housing Options workers who go out and support people. We've had our commissioned prevention services that are not doing face to face work. We can't have as many people in the office. So therefore everybody's homeworking and that comes with its own challenges. Particularly in this field because we're so used to having case discussions and you bounce off other people about individual cases or bits of the law or how are we going to look at ways that we can deal with that. So those have been really, really big issues to us, you know." (LA England)

What this meant was developing whole new systems of access, applications and assessments that could be carried out remotely. In most cases this has meant a shift to a telephone-based service.

"So, my staff just all started working from home, just invented a way of people applying without having to see anyone face to face and have just gone to a telephone and email-based service." (LA England)

"What we also did very early on, was again, we didn't know how many staff could become ill, so we created a new phone contact number, as well, we were split into six different housing offices, and there was that same concern about our contact centre as well, you know, becoming limited in what they could do, so we created our own housing options and homelessness phone number, and it rings on every single member of our team's phone...So that helped as well, because it meant that we always knew we'd be able to provide a consistent phone service to people without having to go through lots of hoops or wait in queues to get through to us." (LA Scotland)

"Obviously we are sort of under pressure to get all the information that we can over the telephone in terms of risks etc. So, we are developed sort of new assessment forms, new risk assessments, new ways for clients to be able to communicate with us quickly and effectively." (LA Wales)

Shifting to remote working while developing new processes to ensure that those needing help from Housing Options services were not missing out on support was a significant undertaking for local authorities and while there is acknowledgement that it

was not a perfect transition, there has been considerable learning from local authorities around what this might mean for future practice.

"Taking homeless applications remotely was a significant change for us, so previously, folks would have travelled to their nearest office to be seen face-to-face to complete a homeless application, make a homeless presentation, but we now do it over the phone, which is, I think we'll be carrying on doing that." (LA Scotland)

Local authorities did approach this with creativity exploring not just telephone lines but how to use alternative means of communicating to ensure that people were able to access support:

"We just wanted to make sure that there was an option for folk, so we set up a WhatsApp business, WhatsApp for Business on a phone that I monitor, and that was advertised on the website and widely, and it just gave folks advice that it was manned from eight in the morning until eight at night, and it was just a way, an additional way of contacting us, and it has been used and it continues to be used." (LA Scotland)

There was acknowledgement that remote access either via telephone or email was not accessible to everyone who might require support and there were different approaches to tackling this, from keeping physical presence in specific services, to working through outreach partners, or distributing phones so that individuals were able to contact Housing Options:

"We have a hub which we did actually manage to keep open that provides a range of services for rough sleepers. We kept it open for a while on a reduced scale but still as drop-in and then I can't remember when but fairly quickly we closed it to drop-in and opened it as appointment-only because social distancing was becoming nigh on impossible. But we kept it open with appointments throughout which I think, given that our Outreach Team was working at 60% capacity at its best and lower at some points, was as pretty impressive achievement." (LA England)

"We've issued in excess of 300 burner mobile phones which has meant that we've maintained very good contact" (LA Scotland)

While the focus on remote working for local authorities has been around setting up accessible services for people requiring support there were acknowledged positive unanticipated consequences around flexibility and collaborative working. These included more joined up and quicker referral processes and implementing 'real time' multi agency working using digital platforms:

"So whereas before we might have gone down to, say, for example, the X Project, which is a place in [local authority area] which kind of provides a safe space for female sex workers, and we would have gone down there for a couple of hours every week, and they would have kind of arranged for some of their women to be there to speak to us. There was a level of ineffectiveness to that, because we would be there, the women might show up, they might not show up, and the workers might be busy, they might not be busy. And we're now in a position where we can say, "Well actually, if you've got a woman with you, no matter when it is, if it's during opening hours, just give us a ring and

we'll do the assessment there and then, we'll do a three-way call with you on the phone, and then we'll stay in touch and follow up." (LA England)

"In the old days, so pre-COVID when you'd spend most of your life going to meetings and – actual meetings, sitting in a room etc. so that, we had all sorts of partnerships with that but during the pandemic everything's switched on to Microsoft Teams for a start which is a lot easier, once you get used to it. And, we've a couple of examples, so our Violence Against Women Partnership that I participate in, that's a multi-agency group that used to meet quarterly-ish in a sit-down meeting. We've now got a weekly catch-up meeting with all the partners through that on Microsoft Teams which is great because it's kind of real time information that you're discussing, it's real time problem solving. It's a bit more operational than the old meeting would be, it was slightly more strategic but the, over the period of doing that once a week, the relationships with all these providers, third sector and police etc. have definitely been strengthened, there's no question about it." (LA Scotland)

3.2. Emergency accommodation

The most significant intervention that governments across all three nations made was the instruction to bring 'Everyone In' or provide emergency accommodation for everyone rough sleeping, at risk of rough sleeping, or in unsafe accommodation throughout the pandemic. This was an enormous undertaking for local authorities and the challenge of this was reflected on by local authorities.

"But the major challenges we've had are this massive channel shift that we had to do overnight, and the pressures created by the Everyone In policy" (LA England)

"I suppose for us it's when the government change the guidance to say that everybody has to be placed – that created huge problems for us. We've only limited units of temporary accommodation; we've got about 62 units of temporary accommodation ... and just at shutdown, you know, they were always full. So suddenly then to everybody ... because we've always recognised in [local authority area] we've got a sofa-surfing culture... and obviously that started breaking down at lockdown or just as lockdown was happening and going, the first couple of weeks of lockdown ... suddenly all these relationships were breaking down and we had an influx then of single-person applications and not just single, we've had single parents, relationship breakdowns, we've had a mixture and suddenly to find accommodation for all those, that was really difficult for us." (LA Wales)

Nevertheless, local authorities approached their responsibility under the respective governments' instruction seriously with a varied approach to providing housing that did have distinct trends across the three nations. In England there was an overwhelming need to utilise commercial hotels, in Wales there was a more varied mix of hotels, B&Bs and existing temporary accommodation stock, and in Scotland outside of large city centres this was mainly provided through current stock, although this did include stock that was being phased out in anticipation of the Unsuitable Temporary Accommodation Order. Student accommodation and other forms of available self-contained housing was also utilised.

"All the rough sleepers were placed in emergency accommodation. And that was, we'd got two hotels and a large student block and then a smaller student block for people with no recourse to public funds." (LA England)

"We'd obviously had our existing B&B provision and an additional three hotels which is now four which will soon be five hotels that we've continued to manage." (LA Scotland)

"We were quite fortunate that at the start of all this, we had lots of empty properties in our temporary accommodation portfolio sitting, so we had quite a lot of capacity to work with and we didn't really need to take on any, well we didn't take on any additional units." (LA Scotland)

"On a week-to-week basis, were keeping pretty much in front of the demand for emergency temporary accommodation – but that's probably been more on the back of, we've got much better at moving people through from temporary emergency accommodation, so what some people would call bed and breakfast." (LA Scotland)

The sheer scale of the numbers that local authorities supported through this policy was highlighted repeatedly, with local authorities remarking that it was far in excess of what they would normally anticipate seeing.

"I think [in that initial] that six-week period, we saw 500 which is way beyond what we'd normally see" (LA England)

"You can appreciate the fact that throughout lockdown from day one to now [September] we probably averaged about 30 new requests for emergency accommodation per week." (LA Scotland)

"We find ourselves in the position where, for us, we had a 400% increase in the number of people in TA, more at times. Our average is 30 to 40, and at the peak of the Everyone In, we had 230 people in TA. And the cost of that and the work involved in managing that is something that we haven't had to do for sort of seven/eight years. So there was a really significant challenge." (LA England)

"I think at the height of the COVID we were having about 35 presentations a week, and we are usually about around the 20 mark." (LA Wales)

One of the biggest concerns local authorities flagged with Everyone In was the manner in which it was communicated to them, particularly in England, with a feeling that it was not communicated to the right people effectively, nor was the guidance followed through with in a timely manner.

"The Everyone In letter went to all Chief Executives of local authorities but as you know that could have been sat on their desk for weeks before they even looked at it. I think that the clarity around the bid and where the money's come from as been really poor and it's not been really clear around what's happening." (LA England)

"You know the funny thing, well not the funny thing, I mean we didn't get the letter from government did we really? I mean we got it because Sky News told us all about it and that was the first bit of indication that we had, because this was the Thursday wasn't it, I

remember it, it was the Thursday before the weekend and all of a sudden we were hearing all this, "Every rough sleeper has to be accommodated" (LA England)

"I think some of it is muddled, some of it just gets rushed out. Some of it doesn't make a lot of sense and personally, I'm not quite sure they really know what they're trying to do. I think this is just, and that's probably being slightly unfair because I'm sure they're trying to work as hard as they possibly can, but for me there's nothing with great clarity. There's a lot of, "We'd like you to do this, we'd like you do that" but there's no real sort of like, what I would call a strategic plan in place coming from them that enables you to do that. So, I think whilst there's a lot of rhetoric coming out and stuff that they would like, I think local authorities are pretty much being left to their own devices to a degree." (LA England)

Frustrations with ongoing communication from MHCLG was also highlighted in the Homelessness Monitor England: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing (Fitzpatrick et al. 2020) in which it was reflected that the government was reverting to a more passive stance.⁴⁴

In Wales the reflections on communication were less around the expectations of what they needed to do but that there was a feeling that Welsh Government were not appreciating the scale of the task that was expected of them:

"The government changed the rules, you've got to place under COVID, you've got to place under COVID, and we expect you to place. And that again was challenging when you're trying to explain to individuals and the services that yes, we understand that we have a duty but at this point in time we've got nothing suitable for them so you're going to have to work with us ... and that's, you know, that became very difficult to manage and very frustrating because suddenly the word COVID was being thrown at us all the time. And it wasn't ... it was just an expectation that the local authority has got the responsibility and that is it, it's over to you." (LA Wales)

Because I do think sometimes, you know, I'm not sure whether Welsh Government appreciates the complex situation the local authorities have been in ... and it's great to say, you know, well there's £20 million and then there's £10 million for homelessness and another so many million to get rough sleepers off the street ... but how you manage those individuals as well. If that resource comes to an end, how are we as the local authority going to fund it? (LA Wales)

Despite the challenges local authorities faced in delivering emergency accommodation to everyone experiencing rough sleeping the intervention was undoubtedly a success, not only in the achievements of local authorities to be able to accommodate so many people so quickly but also the public health impact. ONS data reported that of the 26th June 2020, 16 people had died of coronavirus whilst homeless in England, and there had been zero coronavirus deaths in Wales.⁴⁵ A study published in the Lancet estimated that the interventions carried out had prevented hundreds of additional deaths from COVID-

⁴⁴ Fitzpatrick, S, Watts, B., & Simms, R. (2020) *Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing*. London: Crisis.

⁴⁵ ONS (2020) *Coronavirus and deaths of homeless people, England and Wales: deaths registered up to 26 June 2020*

19, and had managed to maintain an infection rate of only 4 per cent amongst the population of people experiencing homelessness.⁴⁶ In contrast, internationally where such far-reaching measures were not taken an estimated 40 per cent of the population experiencing homelessness in Paris has had COVID-19,⁴⁷ and in New York the age adjusted mortality rates for people experiencing homelessness and living in shelters was 321 deaths per 100,000 people, compared with a citywide average of 200 deaths per 100,000.⁴⁸

The ongoing pressures on local authorities to continue to accommodate and support individuals into permanent housing should not be underestimated, but nor should the immense success of the scheme in saving lives and preventing a public health crisis. With increasing numbers of people going back on to the streets including new people rough sleeping⁴⁹ the importance of maintaining the support for people at risk of, or experiencing rough sleeping as Great Britain enters the second wave of the pandemic and winter approaches is evident.

3.3. Disapplying of eligibility rules

As part of the urgency to ensure all rough sleepers were accommodated throughout the pandemic governments in England and Wales suspended priority need requirements, and the Westminster government gave instruction to accommodate all people sleeping rough and in unsafe accommodation. This included accommodating people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). In Scotland, where there was already no priority need restrictions, Scottish government specified that local authorities should support those with NRPF, alongside those who would have had their statutory duty discharged.

The question on the impact of the lifting priority need was only asked in the second wave of the survey where 94 per cent responded that it had been helpful in supporting people experiencing homelessness. Likewise, there was a very positive response to local authorities being able to accommodate those with NRPF, with 82 per cent of wave one respondents, and 95 per cent of wave two respondents responding positively to this change.

For local authorities in England and Wales the lifting of priority need overnight had a significant impact both in the way that they operate and the number of people they now had to accommodate:

"I mean obviously it had a huge impact because the focus went to getting everybody in very quickly and I'm talking about within hours. One minute we were doing priority need

⁴⁶ Lewer, D., Braithwaite, I., Bullock, M., Eyre, M. T., White, P. J., Aldridge, R.W., Story, A., Hayward, A. C. COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study, *The Lancet*, Published September 23, 2020

⁴⁷ The Independent (12 October 2020) Coronavirus: Four in 10 homeless people in Paris region have Covid [online] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-paris-homelessness-second-wave-france-latest-b988785.html>

⁴⁸ Routhier, G and Nortz, S (2020) *COVID-19 and Homelessness in New York City: Pandemic pandemonium for New Yorkers without homes* Coalition for the Homeless

⁴⁹ Fitzpatrick, S, Watts, B., & Simms, R. (2020) *Homelessness Monitor England 2020: COVID-19 Crisis Response Briefing*. London: Crisis; Greater London Authority (2020) *CHAIN quarterly report*, Greater London, July to September 2020; Guardian (8 November 2020) *Anger, fortitude and fear: the workers left homeless by the UK's Covid pandemic* [online] Anger, fortitude and fear: the workers left homeless by the UK's Covid pandemic

assessments and the next minute we were doing priority needs assessments but we were still placing and putting everyone in. I think that's had a big impact." (LA England)

"I would suggest that those singles that are now in our temporary accommodation, which has increased significantly, they were probably the ones that pre-Covid, would have been owed a duty by the local authority to assist them to look for accommodation and source accommodation. However, they wouldn't have been not entitled to or we wouldn't have had a statutory obligation to provide them with temporary accommodation then." (LA Wales)

This was even more impactful when looking at those with NRPF with local authorities across the country highlighting how this changed their approach, although some authorities had started moving on this prior to any official announcement:

"We decided before there was any government guidance about the recourse to public funds that we would take a position of moral responsibility rather than statutory requirement in terms of recourse to public funds." (LA Scotland)

Interestingly although the broader perception may be that the Everyone In or equivalent schemes in Scotland and Wales have been drawing to a close the majority of those local authorities interviewed reported that they were still accommodating people regardless of eligibility requirements and continuing to support people regardless of prior legislative rights:

"Yeah, we're still doing Everybody In. We're absolutely covering the government line which says there is still a line that says Everybody In." (LA England)

"So, we've just taken the approach that anybody who's been given a duty since the Covid lockdown up until now, it will continue unless we are told otherwise, that they do get a Section 75 [a duty on councils to secure accommodation for applicants in priority need]." (LA Wales)

"That approach is still in place at the moment, because we would still class ourselves as being under an emergency health situation; that's not been lifted, so that situation would still be the case, yeah." (LA Scotland)

However, this was not universal with some local authorities in England reporting that they were starting to introduce stricter eligibility for those seeking help:

"So, we have begun to tighten that a little bit and we are now being a lot more robust with homelessness checks, which we were told we shouldn't be doing at the very beginning – it was just, "Accept if someone said they had nowhere to go." And we are saying to people who are not in priority need, we're not going to accommodate them in the first instance." (LA England)

For many local authorities there is growing anxiety around how long the expectation of providing emergency COVID-19 accommodation will continue for and how they are expected to maintain this level of support without additional move-on options or funding for increasing their temporary accommodation stock:

"and nobody knows when the right time is going to be to stop that and to kind of then say, "Right, that's it, let's stop putting people in and let's start managing those people that are in," in readiness for them – what date do we decide is going to be the date they all have to leave?" (LA England)

The increasing disparity between local authorities as time progresses appears to mainly be down to lack of communication from government. In Scotland local authorities were consistently aware that the public health emergency that required the intervention in March was still ongoing and therefore they were to continue. The updated action plan from HARSAG published in June 2020 explicitly stated that while the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing local authorities were to continue to ensure that any household that needs it will be provided with self-contained emergency accommodation instead of sleeping rough or in a congregate night shelter.⁵⁰ In Wales where there has been significant communication around phase 2 there was no inconsistency between the local authorities spoken to, all were aware that they were to keep accommodating people as they progressed to planning their move-on from emergency accommodation. However, in England there was an increasing lack of universal approach to 'Everyone In' with some local authorities stopping entirely, some increasing eligibility restrictions, and some continuing as they have been doing since March.

"Well in [local authority area] our plan will be to keep the hotels and to taper them off with the last one closing for use in March 2021." (LA England)

"In terms of the current situation as is, I suppose we're in a position now where to some degree, our access into temporary accommodation is returning to normality, so it's less than Everyone In, and more a general, you know, normal, "Do we owe a duty?" but with the same caveats we'd kind of always had, that we discussed previously around people, you know, if they are going to rough sleep, we'll kind of accommodate them." (LA England)

The consequences of this lack of clarity means that where local authorities are stopping Everyone In, or reducing the extent to which they are delivering the scheme, the numbers of people experiencing rough sleeping will continue to increase, whilst in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic and as winter approaches.

3.4. Move on and housing need

One of the biggest challenges facing local authorities is the ability to successfully move those housed in emergency COVID-19 accommodation into permanent and secure housing. It is positive to see in the MHCLG statistics release for England that in September 2020, 18,911 people have been moved either into settled accommodation or a rough sleeping pathway. This is nearly two-thirds (64%) of the reported number of people housed through the Everyone In scheme in England. However, there are still significant numbers remaining in hotels or other emergency accommodation, and with continued flow of people requiring support the importance of effective move-on pathways is paramount.

⁵⁰ Scottish Government (2020) *Ending homelessness together: updated action plan - October 2020*

For many local authorities the approach to move-on was assessment of support need and developing appropriate pathways accordingly:

"Basically what we did is when we got the high number in of the 230-odd, we split them into four groups – low needs, which we looked, we went into private rented, with or without support; medium needs, where we looked at social housing with support; high need, where we looked at supported housing, and then what we called kind of our extreme complex cases, which, you know, were never more than kind of a dozen at a time, where we were making quite individual plans for those people and maybe looking at kind of spot-commissioning, that kind of stuff." (LA England)

"The low-level needs people we will be looking for private rented or for a normal council or registered provider let for them." (LA England)

One of the challenges highlighted has been the historic blockages in the system that have clogged up pathways whereby, for example, affordability issues in the private rented sector have prevented someone in supported housing from moving out and therefore preventing someone housed through COVID-19 emergency provision from moving into supported housing.

"I've never known the pathway services be under such pressure as they are now. I would normally expect about 10% of the beds to be kind of empty on any one day because of turnover of people and I think that at the end of last week there were maybe 10 beds that were empty and all of them had someone's name against them to be moving into them. So the system is actually going to be literally full maybe by the end of this week and obviously we're going to do a major exercise to try and move people on to create spaces but, you know, I come back to the point I made about affordable move-on, you know, that is a real challenge. So, people use the word 'unprecedented' quite a lot in relation to what's been going on over recent months but certainly in relation to pathway services it's an unprecedented situation." (LA England)

"The pathway's full and we need to move people out of the pathway to get the people from the hotel into the pathway and finding affordable move-on accommodation is a challenge." (LA England)

One of the most impactful changes that local authorities highlighted in terms of being able to support people from hotels through the system into more permanent and secure accommodation was temporary changes to housing allocation policies. This meant suspension of choice-based lettings and a move to direct lets, and in many local authorities a priority given to homeless households.

"What the partnership agreed, anything that was void like from the 1st of June would come to homelessness applicants. What we've done then, I worked with the RSLs and identified applicants who were in the priority banding under homeless against the property size. So, we've managed to rehouse quite a lot" (LA Wales)

"We've communicated and sent out correspondence to the 68 social landlords that was also signed by the council ... for a request that registered social landlords can maximise offers to homelessness people between now and March next year as a priority in terms of

freeing up accommodation and on top of that as well, the Housing Access Board submitted a letter asking that registered social landlords wherever possible can try and strive to offer up to 90% of their lets to homelessness households.” (LA Scotland)

“Previously we’ve had a choice-based lettings system, people bid for properties, priority, all that jazz. We introduced an emergency lettings panel, which met, for a long time, every day. And as properties became available within our own stock, we matched those to the most serious needs of people that were being placed, for example under Everybody In. So, we had a much more direct access route into social housing than we would have done previously. And that was, you know, a formal change to our policy that had a time limit on it. So, we still had social housing, but we had probably a more direct access route into social housing than we would have done via the old choice-based lettings system, which has now been reintroduced.” (LA England)

“That is not something we at [local authority area] do much of because social housing is in massive demand and limited supply. The normal exit from the pathway is into private rented sector. There are certain cohorts who are prioritised for social housing, such as older people that need kind of disabled access accommodation upon leaving the pathway but it’s going to be very difficult to find in the private rented sector so they can of course be prioritised for social housing allocation, but that’s not the majority of people. But nonetheless in a bid to grab the bull by the horns we’ve already made a number of direct offers to residents of the pathway hostels of social housing and will be helping them to move out shortly when it’s safe for them to do so.” (LA England)

The ability to be make direct lets into social housing rather than being solely dependent on either supported accommodation or private rented sector lets opened up pathways for people housed in emergency accommodation allowing for more flow through the system, and in some cases ensure that they did not have an increase in occupancy within temporary accommodation.

“We put a system in place to prioritise, to obviously prioritise homeless people because that’s what the Scottish Government guidance told us to do but within that also to prioritise people in temporary accommodation to move on. Because that then gave us that unit of temporary accommodation to use for somebody else. So, we managed to keep that flowing through the system and if we hadn’t done that, we would have had to create more temporary accommodation ... so, we’ve come through this with the same portfolio that we had at the start, a slightly higher occupancy rate than we did in March but otherwise, everything is pretty much as it was.” LA Scotland

Challenges within finding appropriate housing within the private sector both in terms of supply and affordability were highlighted as being barriers to moving people out of emergency accommodation and increasing the pressure on local authorities, particularly in areas where there is a time limit on hotel provision.

“There’s a very small private sector in [local authority area], especially for single applicants under the age of 35 ... so that is a huge pressure for us.” (LA Wales)

"The challenge is around affordability in [local authority area]. It's quite expensive and trying to keep something affordable and for people to keep their accommodation is a tricky one, it's hard. So, that would be, that's the major challenge." (LA England)

"It is our supply of accommodation that is the limiting factor to a certain extent, however much advice and information we can give people, if they are in desperate need and we can't find them accommodation because it is just not available. Then, obviously, it is failing at that point." (LA England)

Another issue that local authorities faced was pre-existing provision that was not appropriate for the pandemic in that it was focussed around shared facilities, and therefore reduced the stock available to them.

"The other issue was we've got a lot of commissioned services in [local authority area] that are quite old and legacy supported housing providers and therefore a lot of those properties were shared facilities, shared kitchens and bathrooms. We've had to look at that." (LA England)

"The flat-share thing's not been great. I was just talking to somebody about that today, because we pretty much just said, well, we can't fill a vacant room in a shared flat, because it goes against the spirit of the social distancing regulations. We couldn't ask somebody to have a new household living with them, and we're, I think, at a point where we really need to look at: how do we do that with flat-shares? – because the level of urgency around COVID comes and goes, and as it waxes and wanes, I think we need to have a way where we can still use shared flats safely for people." (LA Scotland)

The housing pressures local authorities are facing in terms of identifying appropriate options for people to move into are not new. Lack of social housing and issues around affordability in the private rented sector have been causing challenges for local authorities for many years. However, the intensity of the support provided during the pandemic has really heightened both the need for more affordable housing options, and demonstrated the strain that a lack of affordable housing puts on the homelessness system. Without sufficient housing supply local authorities will be left either continuing to accommodate people in often unsuitable temporary accommodation for long periods of time, or in the worst-case scenarios ending their support whilst individuals remain homeless.

"It kind of feels as if, admittedly, COVID has arrived within a short space of time, but the housing crisis has been brewing for 20/30 years plus, and we're now really – as we are in the midst of this crisis – now feeling the real fall-out. We've talked for years about a shortage of social housing, and the general housing crisis; now we are feeling it even more, because we've got more people in than we have done previously, and we need to support those people onto long-term settled accommodation, so I think, yeah, that's the big pressure point." (LA Wales)

For those with NRPF there are very limited move-on options. In the case of EEA nationals the focus is around employability for those who are work ready.

"What we are doing at the moment is doing some work with the DWP because they've got some employability money to see if we can bring in some work coaches so that we can get people into work before March 2021 but also all our other cohorts are people that are in emergency accommodation if we can actually sort of get some work coaches in and do that work because we've got a captive audience and people are engaging with us at the moment." (LA England)

However, for those who are not work ready or who are not allowed to work there are increasing challenges for local authorities - this is explored further in section 5.1.

3.5. Funding

Each government across Great Britain allocated resource differently to the emergency housing of people experiencing rough sleeping. And the variation in this is echoed across local authorities' perceptions of how effectively they have been supported financially.

In England there was significant concerns raised around funding, and how initial output for the Everyone In phase was not sufficient and therefore all subsequent funding is catching up with previous outlay.

"When we first had Everybody In the government allocated a sum of money to each local authority that they could bid for. Ours was £xx,xxx. We probably spent that in a week." (LA England)

"So, the resources while welcomed are nowhere near enough to actually help us. We're not a particularly cash rich local authority so we are struggling and we will have to struggle on and try and make and prioritise where we can going forward and that would include homelessness in particular." (LA England)

"Any funding we get will pretty much be to cover the cost of the accommodation, and ancillary costs. So, for example, a large unexpected cost for us was security. We had to have 24-hour security on every site that we were using. That is way more expensive that you would think, it really, really is...So the bulk of the money that we get to meet the costs will go to accommodation costs and will go to the ancillary costs to run things like security. And then will go to the rehousing costs." (LA England)

Frustrations were also raised with the short-term approach to subsequent funding pots announced and the expectation of what was required to turn around the necessary bids.

"And then there's the two new pots of money that have just come out. And to be quite frank, what they're asking for and the timescale with the money that they've got is how anybody can make anything fit I don't know." (LA England)

"It's really impossible to plan and work on short-term funding. You know, every time a funding stream is announced it's for a year or the rest of the year and they want you to actually put in place really quickly. And it's almost like you're making your services fit the funding ask rather than saying, "Actually as a city this is what we need" (LA England)

There was also concern raised around the feasibility of what was required of local authorities to deliver on funding expectations, particularly around the Next Steps funding:

"But the Next Steps funding they're asking for 3,500 more bed spaces to become available for rough sleepers and they have to be built and you have to be able to refer rough sleepers to go into them by March 2021. So, they're saying it can be new build but I do not know any local authority who can new build something from nothing in that short space of time. You can do a refurbishment or an acquisition of property. You can do a long lease. Or you can look at a registered provider who can provide property." (LA England)

"There is an announcement of funding, but only fairly general ones, and it is relatively short-term. I think the message from us would be, let's have some long-term commitment, some long-term strategies, so that we can actually commit to doing things. It is very difficult for local authorities to instigate some capital programmes at very short notice, you know, particularly accommodation-based where you have got to acquire properties, get planning permission, do renovations, whatever you need to do. That is not something that can happen overnight...A longer term, more balanced approach, from our point of view, would allow us to get those plans in place and to see long-term funding arrangements in place, as well." (LA England)

In Wales, there was less concern than in England about whether the initial funding was sufficient to cover costs of providing emergency accommodation but there were growing anxieties around funding for their phase 2 planning beyond the commitment made to March 2021, and the sustainability of their plans to make sure they were able to move people through from emergency accommodation.

"I think, if we don't receive long-term continuation of funding, it's going to be a challenge, isn't it? We're working with more people in a more intensive way, which is what we want to do, so that people don't return to homelessness, or are less likely to come back through – then we need to offer more support, which is going to cost money." (LA Wales)

"I do think sometimes, you know, I'm not sure whether Welsh Government appreciates the complex situation the local authorities have been in. It's great to say, you know, well there's £20 million and then there's £10 million for homelessness and another so many million to get rough sleepers off the street but [it's] how you manage those individuals as well. If that resource comes to an end, how are we as the local authority going to fund it? Because all our Housing Support Grant is committed to the support services. Yes, we can reconfigure some of our support services but we're never going to be able to manage the number of cases and clients' needs." (LA Wales)

For some local authorities the opportunities presented by phase 2 funding have enhanced the offers that they will be able to provide beyond the pandemic:

"COVID as a whole has given us the opportunity to apply for different funding for different things, like phase 2 plans for instance ... we've put 6 plans in there and we've been given full allocation for that. So, for the first time in forever in [local authority area]

we will have money to provide extra supported units, and that's what we're lacking very much so. So, if you're looking at it from that side, we'll have something at the end of COVID that we didn't have before." (LA Wales)

In Scotland there was significantly less concern specifically around homelessness spend and reflected that they had in the most part been able to access the emergency monies that they needed.

"Emergency funding generally went much more into the council as such, you know, so we've been charging various things to a Covid code, and so things like additional hotel rooms, for example, block booking rooms and stuff, or if properties were lying empty or stuff like that has all been going to a Covid code, we'll be looking to recover that from emergency funding." (LA Scotland)

"This opportunity for us to work within the hotels ensures that we're able to actually now respond to the treatment and care needs as well as assess risk and vulnerability of individuals as well so that's principally how we are going to be taking forwards our response to managing the population just now, we've also given a financial commitment just now. Now I know we're at that kind of cusp of COVID spend from the Scottish Government [that] was effectively up until the beginning of October... I suppose what we have got is a financial commitment at the moment will be picked up by the Health and Social Care Partnership" (LA Scotland)

These reflections were tempered by longer term concerns about the financial situations of local authorities post the pandemic:

"I think you'll see, going forward, that councils will have to make very, very wide-ranging cutbacks, because they're all in such financial difficulties. And there's no doubt, we can't say, "Well, you know, we're more important than somebody's education," or, "We're more important than something else," you know, so I think you'll find that councils will end up being asked to make the same kind of cuts across all services, unless something was ringfenced to protect it in some way." (LA Scotland)

Although expressed to different degrees, local authorities across all three nations emphasised the need for long term funding commitments that allowed them the reassurance needed to develop sustainable and strategic plans that meet their local needs.

3.6. Local partnerships

Something highlighted across all local authorities spoken to was the value of local partnerships in managing to continue to deliver support throughout the pandemic and ongoing planning into the winter. Collaborative working varied from joining up to provide support within hotels or emergency accommodation, supporting outreach efforts, or wider cross-sector involvement bringing in other health and social care services. As highlighted in section 3.1 in many cases the benefits of remote working were identified as helping to facilitate partnership working.

"We've got a silver command cell group, it was set up in the early days, very much at the start of the pandemic, where we were meeting up with partner agencies via Zoom or Teams or Skype... And that involved our partners and ourselves, our third sector providers, probation, police, mental health services were dialling in, so when we were having tricky situations, let's say complex situations, we were obviously, on a daily basis, we were trying to put the support in or try and resolve the situation as promptly as possible." (LA Wales)

"We've been known to have 60 agencies in that one Zoom meeting to actually make sure that we give wraparound support to everybody who's in that position. So, yeah, we've done a lot of collaboration. We've done joint papers to the CCG and our sort of decision-making structure around virtual consultations with doctors and nurses. We've done joint papers with community safety about extra police help. So, yeah, it's been great. And I think one of the really, really good things that we've got to do is just keep that going really in some form or another." (LA England)

"There was a case yesterday, it wasn't particularly out of the ordinary but it was fairly obvious there was a need for a sort of professionals meeting to discuss because there was input from different agencies, social work, housing. It was a care experienced young person that it was about and under the old way of doing things, we would have set a professionals meeting up for that but the difference is that we would have had to check everybody's calendar, would need to book a meeting room, realistically it was fairly urgent but even with that, it would probably have been certainly some time next week, possibly towards the end of next week or even the following week, whereas we were able to just arrange that for today and have that discussion pretty much straight away [on zoom], do you know what I mean? So, it's just – it's great." (LA Scotland)

Encouragingly it is not just local authorities who are perceiving increased partnership working with services across both waves of the sector speaking positively about the collaborative working in their local area. In wave one 70 per cent of respondents said that they had been part of a local co-ordinated approach to supporting people experiencing homelessness, in wave two this had increased to 81 per cent. In wave two respondents were asked specifically about their perceptions of the longevity of these relationships with a 91 per cent reporting that they felt the partnerships would sustain beyond the pandemic.

The huge shift in way of working across statutory and voluntary services and the demand to provide an unprecedented level of support was massive undertaking, that in many areas of the country it led to a pulling together of the sector and a strengthening of relationships that are hoped to endure may be a significant positive legacy of the pandemic.

Chapter 4: The effect of government policies on homelessness during the pandemic

Governments across Great Britain moved to enact policy changes that looked to both support people who were currently homeless and to try to prevent homelessness amongst those at risk. As chapter 3 has explored, these interventions were hugely substantial in moving to accommodate all rough sleepers amongst other changes, and were some of the most significant actions taken to support people experiencing homelessness in the world during the pandemic. Within both waves of the survey all of the policy changes were perceived beneficially, although some were seen to have had a more significant impact than others.

Chapter 3 explores local authorities approach to delivering emergency accommodation for all people experiencing rough sleeping. The following section explore the additional policy changes made by government.

4.1. Welfare

There were a number of welfare related interventions announced in the weeks following the start of the pandemic: Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates across the UK have been realigned to cover the bottom third of rents for 12 months, there has been a temporary increase of £20 per month in the Universal Credit (UC) standard allowance, and practical changes were also made to pause deductions for benefit overpayments, and to ensure no one is sanctioned during the public health emergency. Deductions and the ability to impose a sanction has since been resumed.

The majority of survey respondents in both the first and second wave of the survey responded that specific welfare changes had been helpful in supporting people experience homelessness. In particular relaxation of Universal Credit conditionality and suspension of deductions for benefit overpayments were seen as the most beneficial intervention by respondents from the first wave of the survey, with 91% (93) of respondents reporting that these changes had helped.

The increase in LHA was also perceived to be helpful by 82 per cent of respondents in the first wave of the survey, rising to 89 per cent in the second wave. However, there were mixed perceptions on the impact of the LHA rate increase by local authorities. Whilst some local authorities reported that it had been solely beneficial:

"In relation to the LHA rates, my manager that runs all the private sector initiatives, has commented that that's helpful in terms of the LHA rates being a little bit more generous, it terms of getting people in to the private sector." (LA Scotland)

However, many respondents highlighted issues with increased LHA rates pushing people into the benefit cap and therefore, although beneficial to some extent reducing the impact of the changes:

"Yeah, the government giveth and taketh away don't they, on the same hand. And whilst I'm more than happy with the uplift, the trouble is it just pushes more families in to benefit cap world and so obviously a lot of our families that come to us are ben capped and so actually when it comes to accessing two and three bed properties, then it hasn't been helpful." (LA England)

"So, increases in LHA can mean that if someone's rent increases up to the LHA level, they are then subject to the benefit cap. So, they are effectively no better off with an increased rent liability. So, it is not a panacea. It does make things a little bit easier when we are trying to secure accommodation with landlords and it is better for those that aren't impacted by the benefit cap." (LA England)

"Although LHA has gone up, the benefit cap has not been removed, so for many people, PRS within [LA area] is going to be unaffordable" (LA England)

Another issue highlighted with the LHA increase was that it was not helping under 35 years olds subject to the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR):

"the LHA rate increasing was great, that's fine, but what we're finding is when you've got youngsters, for instance, coming your way, who are under 35, it doesn't really matter what you do with the LHA, that under-35...really, really helpless situations" (LA Wales)

Although it was emphasised that allowing COVID-19 emergency accommodation to be utilised to exempt under-35s from the SAR had been very beneficial to local authorities in being able to support people out of hotels or other forms of temporary accommodation:

"I think the only difference is around anybody who – and I only found this out very recently – is that anybody who's been in the emergency accommodation as a COVID-19 placement and if you're under 35 won't be subject to the single person [rate]... But we'll get under 35s and I think that, particularly people with low needs who we don't need to provide much support to. Then we'll benefit from that, putting people into private rented." (LA England)

"I've got a lot of single people who are all in shared but there we are and then of course we've got the new changes to the Housing Benefit regulations which is nice, so rough sleepers over 26 to 34, we know that's a – that's a wonderful bit of change" (LA England)

4.2. Evictions

A pause on evictions was introduced across Great Britain as an intervention to reduce the risk of people becoming homelessness and supporting a more preventative approach. The time frame for this pause did vary by nation as the length of time that

pandemic lockdown measures would be required became apparent. In Scotland and Wales an initial extension to eviction notice periods was given until September 2020 and then latterly extended until March 2021, and in England the pause expired in September 2020. Despite the pause having ended in England there is clear evidence throughout the research that the pause has had a significant impact on reducing homelessness.

In both waves of the sector survey the greatest decrease in demand amongst support services was amongst private renters threatened with eviction, with 18 per cent of respondents in the first wave and 36 per cent in the second wave reporting a decrease in demand. 47 per cent of respondents in the second wave saw a decrease in renters who had been evicted requiring support.

As set out in section 2.1 local authorities attributed much of the decrease in families requiring support to the pause in evictions. They also discussed benefiting from the increased time bought by delayed evictions to increase prevention activity or plan meaningful alternative accommodation.

"I think certainly the cessation of the evictions...I think what it has done is it allows us breathing space as well to actually try and do some negotiating, mediation as well particularly if circumstances were around about the eviction if it was probably more so to do with defaults from payments rather than behaviours then we could look at that. It also enabled us to look at alternative options, support folk, to move folk into a supported accommodation wherever possible particularly if it meant that they required more supports." (LA Scotland)

"The people who would have come to us when they got the notice served still have come to us, the work that we would have done to save that tenancy or to look at move-on has still be possible." (LA England)

However, there is increasing concern about the build-up of households waiting to be served notices as the pauses are lifted across Great Britain – this is discussed further in section 5.2.

Chapter 5: Next steps and future planning

The research has highlighted that for the vast majority of services and local authorities, the response to homelessness since March has been of an emergency nature. This chapter examines the next steps being planned at a local and national level in relation to the second wave of the pandemic and thinking about systemic changes needed to meet future need.

5.1 Winter and ongoing emergency provision

Most local authorities who were interviewed spoke about the need to continue some form of hotel provision for the immediate future. However, the ability to fund this on an ongoing basis was raised by every authority we spoke to. Local authorities in England felt conflicted about the current and future need especially in relation to a second pandemic versus the reality of getting continued central government funding to sustain this:

"but again, it's the public purse and we all have to be mindful of that, you know. So, it can't just carry on forever because there's been a pandemic, someone's still got to pay for it." (LA England)

Whilst in Scotland authorities felt more reassured by the spending commitment to continue emergency provision for at least up until the new year:

"I know we're at that kind of cusp of COVID spend from the Scottish Government was effectively up until the beginning of October...what we have got is a financial commitment at the moment will be picked up by the Health and Social Care Partnership depending on discussions with the Scottish Government around about maintaining the hotel population at least until the end of the year and I suspect going in to the New Year as well so that we can make sure that we're exiting any of the hotels in a planned way so there's no expectation that we're closing hotels and expecting people to either find their own accommodation temporary fix or rough sleep so that's certainly something that is not an intention." (LA Scotland)

The need for continued funding was also met with a sense of doing the right thing for people in the hotels in their area. Most authorities where funding had not been confirmed into winter did not want to appear to be the first area to stop providing emergency accommodation:

"We're certainly not going to make [LA x] stand out above other councils as being the ones that stopped doing it first, by any stretch of the imagination, but it is an ongoing worry because there's an ongoing, you know, commitment of money that's having an impact on the budget, over and above everything else" (LA England)

"Positively, no borough has done that yet. I think every borough is slightly worried that they don't want to be the first one to sort of, politically to go, "Oh no, not doing that anymore". (LA England)

In some high-pressure local authority areas in England, they were considering how to open winter night shelters again safely based on central government guidance that has been issued. These were mainly looking at how they could transition from shared building arrangements to individual multi-site rooms to cater for increased demand of services they were planning for over winter.

People with no recourse to public funds were repeatedly discussed in the interviews regarding the ongoing emergency provision that had been provided for them but also how they could be safely transitioned into more sustainable forms of accommodation and not evicting people back onto the streets:

"I think one of the concerns we have is with obviously the No Recourse to Public Funds cases and how we go about transitioning and having pathways there. But, I think that it's a cost to the local authority, isn't it? For instance, if it's not through the homelessness side, it's the cost to the local authority in terms of trying to support the clients even if it's through Adult Social Care, but also about work, you know tackling worklessness. So, I think that actually there's a need for cross-government working isn't there, in terms of how we get the successful outcomes" (LA England)

"We will do our best, we won't be tipping people back on to the street because that's just not what we do but it's going to be very difficult for us in terms of, because you've got the legal constraints as I said around No Recourse to Public Funds but then when does the pandemic disappear?" (LA England)

NRPF groups caused more concern for the local authorities we spoke regarding uncertainty on funding for these groups and inconsistent national policies that made medium to long term planning extremely difficult:

"there's an enormous amount to do, it's going to be extraordinarily challenging and the funding position really isn't clear, especially when it comes to things like no recourse to public funds, but I think the government has almost no intention of investing any additional money in helping homeless people with no recourse to public funds." (LA England)

This was also reflected in responses to the second wave voluntary sector survey: *"A major effort was made by X council and the voluntary sector getting "everyone in" regardless of immigration status. However, this is resource driven and I fear that many individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds will be made street homeless in the next few months." (Voluntary sector, England)*

"The City Council cannot afford to accommodate people with NRPF and have been expressly forbidden from using central government funding for this purpose. Some temporary workarounds have been possible, but these are already ending" (Voluntary sector, England)

"So frustrating that we proved that we could make a significant impact on homelessness but, in the case of destitute asylum seekers are now going backwards" (Voluntary sector, England)

Whilst the suspension of derogation policy in England was welcomed as a short-term help for EEA nationals, many local authorities we spoke to found that 3 months was not long enough to work with individuals to get them into work and find sustainable accommodation in the PRS.

In Scotland, the local authorities we interviewed were very conscious of the inter relationship of addressing NRPF homelessness with the Home Office and DWP policies. Whilst the COVID funding had been able to provide temporary accommodation there was uncertainty on what could happen longer term with people in this group:

"I think from our end we're playing a kind of game of cards just now with the Scottish Government and the Home Office, I think there's real issues for us,... I think the issue for us is the unknown elements around about where we are both centrally and obviously devolved responsibility for councils and obviously Scotland...No recourse of public funds for me is probably a significant issue both in terms of the balance between the moral human element to this along with the legislative requirements that we have to try and adhere to." (LA Scotland)

"I think 'decided' is the wrong term, but we've looked at the government guidance around this, and it seems to be telling us that we still need to take a homeless application from the individuals concerned, and give them a homelessness decision, you know: are they homeless, are they unintentionally homeless, and do they have a local connection? So, they will have that. The difficulty, yes, is if they haven't found employment or they haven't somehow found a way to be seen as a genuine work-seeker again, in terms of how the DWP view them, then the 'COVID fund' goes, and that's keeping the roof over their head; so the only thing we can do is, on a case-by-case basis, be telling people that that's the situation for them, and trying to find ways to see what it is they want to do." (LA Scotland)

5.2. Future planning and homelessness trends

The majority of interviews with local authorities were conducted as the first lockdown in England was coming to an end, and restrictions were beginning to ease in Scotland and Wales. Consequently there was a lot of discussion about the need to plan for the second wave of COVID-19 and the likely impact this had on homelessness levels. There were huge concerns about the economic impacts of the pandemic and the furlough scheme coming to an end:

"I think post furlough my anxiety is about the economic impact of COVID and the likely surge of people who might be presenting as destitute, homeless and/or who have lost their jobs, their rented flat and/or certainly their accommodation certainly from the point of view of the economic impact never mind the public health impact so probably one area that we're also kind of mindful of is that potentially the economic impact is going to then have an additional wave of pressure on services in terms of folk being eligible for accommodation." (LA Scotland)

"I guess we've got this second wave of homelessness that's going to come, significantly from the private rented sector, and potentially owner-occupation, as people's debt levels go through the roof, and they aren't protected under the six-month notice and the stays in the courts and stuff – so it's not just about how we support people who we've got today, but what additional capacity is being built in to support the people who are future customers, who are probably rumbling away in the communicate, struggling to make ends meet now, trying to decide between paying the rent and putting food on the table for themselves and the kids. What are we going to be doing about them then, because that's an absolute train-wreck, ready to hurtle down the track and hit us in six months, twelve months, whenever that may be." (LA England)

This was mirrored in the wave 2 findings of the voluntary sector survey (full findings in chapter 2) which show emerging demand for homelessness services from newly unemployed people and those on the furlough scheme.

Across England, Scotland and Wales there was recognition of the positive effect government policies have had on levels of homelessness during the pandemic, particularly the pause in evictions. However, there were concerns across all areas about the temporary nature of these changes and the impact these may have on homelessness in the future. Timings on the eviction ban is of course staggered across Great Britain but rent arrears and the financial reliance of households were a concern for all.

"It's those financially resilient people who are going to be very badly affected by COVID in terms of being made unemployed, furloughed or otherwise have had their income dramatically impacted negatively so they can't pay their rent." (LA England)

"We just don't know what we're going to be dealing with in three months' time, when the courts starts going back in ...we know we've got probably double figures of people under section 21 notice which have been suspended ... we're working with them under prevention ... so we know they're going to come through to us. We know there's been some invalid notices being served ... If the RSLs are going to start evicting clients now for rent arrears, and we've got the impact of furlough coming to an end, employment coming to an end ... and we can see that the pressure's going to come on households. How are they going to maintain their rent and mortgage payments?" (LA Wales)

In areas where job losses were already happening and there was a reliance on one or two large employers, the links between economic decline and increased homelessness were an acute concern for housing options teams forward planning for their services:

"I'd say that's the biggest challenge with a lot of the COVID risk recovery stuff – is, we know that there are massive risks out there, but pinning it down to how significant that risk is in our local authority area is quite a challenge. We know that we've got employers such as xxx who are a huge employer in the local authority catchment area; What is the knock-on effect of that, and how does that trickle its way through the housing market, leading through to homelessness? (LA Wales)

The 12-month uplift in LHA had opened up more of the market to voluntary sector services and local authorities using the PRS for homelessness prevention and move on. Again, the temporary nature of this change raised questions for local authorities and

voluntary sector organisations about how sustainable it was going to be to meet ongoing and future demand. There were also some groups where this change has not been of help as much of the market is still not affordable – young people under the SAR and families in high rent areas affected by the benefit cap:

"Yeah, the government giveth and taketh away don't they, on the same hand. And whilst I'm more than happy with the uplift, the trouble is it just pushes more families in to benefit cap world and so obviously a lot of our families that come to us are ben capped and so actually when it comes to accessing two and three bed properties, then it hasn't been helpful." (LA England)

"Under 35s against the rents what they charge here is totally unreasonable for our single-person application under 35." (LA Wales)

The ability to continue with homelessness prevention services had its challenges. Local authorities talked about the need to continue this alongside emergency temporary accommodation measures but structural and funding barriers, including writing off arrears and finding alternative affordable housing options were a challenge:

"So, our biggest kind of concern, anxiety, fear, and it's probably quite real, is that those sorts of people might end up being made homeless and not being able to resolve their problem in the way they would've been able to do before and having to come to us for help. things like DHP will barely scratch the surface of that and we don't have a huge pot of money to pay off people's arrears and things like that even if it's the obvious thing to do" (LA England)

There was also an overall concern by local authorities about how the impact of increased levels of homelessness coming out of the first wave of the pandemic into a second wave/spike on staff working in homelessness services. As a lot of teams were still working remotely, this posed an additional burden on their ability plan a service remotely and support teams to respond to increased demand for their services:

"if we do suddenly have a huge spike of people, you know, coming through the doors, even though they're not coming through the doors, but, you know, coming out of the woodwork and what have you, then that will impact on them as a team because obviously their caseloads will increase, that gets harder, and that interaction with people is still all the time – we can't go into work." (LA England)

"But I'm suspecting as we go on and the with issues in the economy and either coming out of lockdown and if we have a second wave I cannot believe for one minute that homelessness is not going to spike at some point in the near future." (LA England)

In general, there was a sense of increasing anxiety amongst local authorities about anticipated increases in homelessness ahead, and their inability to plan for this:

"I worry that once furlough lifts and it transpires that those businesses, those places of employment, don't reopen because they just won't be able to, even with government help it's probably just not been enough, or they've taken the decision, "You know what, I'm going to cut my losses here, it's going to be too difficult, I think we will then see the fallout" that's my biggest fear actually going forward." (LA England)

"I think it's inevitable there will be an increase, I mean there has to be just through the passage of time if nothing else but there's also the other part about putting people out there that are, have been affected – had their jobs and income affected and potentially not paid their rent." (LA Scotland)

"It's like, you can feel and hear that there's something coming over the hill in the next few months, that it's going to be a huge challenge. There's, I think, a real concern that we don't know quite what's going to hit." (LA England)

"I think it's just, for us, it's just the unknown, the, you know, that anticipated increase in homeless presentations that we expect will happen when the current kind of arrangements are changed, and just a...just the unknown aspect of that, you know, and being able to respond and to deal with any significant increase." (LA Scotland)

5.3 Housing led models and move on

Whilst all nations in Great Britain were required to provide emergency accommodation for everyone experiencing rough sleeping divergences in devolved housing policy did lead to differences both in initial approach, and perhaps more significantly in move-on options.

The most apparent difference was seen in Scotland where local authorities attributed relative success in move-on pathways and managing their flow of people needing support to the existing work that had been done through their Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans and in planning for the extension of the Unsuitable Temporary Accommodation Order. Whilst for many the pressure of COVID-19 increased the timescales for delivery, that the pathways had already been developed facilitated an easier delivery.

"You didn't know that you were needing to think about it for COVID, but the actuality was that a lot of what was going to be involved were the same; different timescales and different reasons for doing what we were doing" (LA Scotland)

"If your starting point is that you've already got loads of people in temporary accommodation, you don't have much capacity, you've got a big backlog of homeless people waiting on a permanent offer. If that's your starting point then the only thing that can possibly happen is that the situation gets worse in the pandemic...[you] have to solve that problem first before you can get anywhere near rapid rehousing. So, we had already done all that so the fact that we had lots of capacity in our temp portfolio at the start of the pandemic which, that was a huge asset so, and that's really the thing that meant we never had to even think about using B&B. So, we had properties sitting there ready to go. We didn't – our number of, our starting point at the beginning of the pandemic for the number of homeless people waiting on a permanent offer was about 90. It's still about 90, so we've not added to that." (LA Scotland)

In Wales the introduction of phase 2 funding has led local authorities to think more longer term about their offers for people moving through their homelessness systems, not just exclusively in the context of the pandemic:

"We are looking at our sort of phase two bid, incomes that...funding that we've had, to try and look at rapid rehousing and permanent options, and we are actually looking at what we've got in temporary accommodation and whether they could be repurposed into actually supported housing." (LA Wales)

"I think it's recognising that we have to change our housing profile. There is now a need for more shared supported housing schemes...I think that's certainly something that we've recognised that we're missing and that's what we wanted to develop. And that's been part of our phase 2 plan going in as well, is to do those smaller supported housing schemes until people are able to live independently as well especially when we've recognised and seen over the last couple of months, you know, the complex needs and the vulnerabilities of some people." (LA Wales)

"Through our Phase 2 plan, we've got some additional staff who are designated as rapid rehousing officers, who are there to work with people who are currently in temporary accommodation, just to help them to prepare for a move, explore opportunities for moves when moves come about, help them with the logistics of moving; so we've got some dedicated officers there." (LA Wales)

More positively some local authorities reflected on what they had taken from the response to the pandemic and use to improve their homelessness provision and practice in the future. There were notable changes regarding the use of accommodation in Scotland and Wales and being responsive to the opportunities of the pandemic to bring forward change. In Scotland, the underlying policy framework of rapid rehousing transition plans had meant move on plans for people in temporary accommodation and the increased scaling up of Housing First had been assisted to move at greater pace. The authorities we spoke in Scotland talked about the pandemic injecting sense of urgency into housing led provision.

"That the Housing First project almost coincided with the COVID situation arising, and it was put on hold, but it is now up-and-running, and we've got just about the full caseload of ten Housing First individuals assessed and working towards their tenancies, and I think two of them are actually in their tenancies now. So, that's moved on in spite of COVID and the risk management/risk assessment, about how you manage the supervision and reassurance of those households now, being out in the community and trying to get on with a Housing First outcome for them. If COVID hadn't happened, I don't think we would have done it, do you know? I don't think we would have been keen to go with any form of the Housing First set-up that didn't involve fairly intensive, almost daily visits, to the tenancies that were involved – and they've not been able to do that." (LA Scotland)

In England, the process of Everyone In and identifying support needs as part of this has been used to examine who would benefit from different housing solutions. There was still a reliance on supported accommodation and longer-term hostels to move people out of hotels and other emergency accommodation.

"The fact that people are not moving through the system as quickly means that our workers have got far higher caseloads than they're used to because we've got people that haven't moved on or they're housed in temporary accommodation." (LA England)

"overall since lockdown, we've had about 500 singles come through that we've assessed properly and some of them have gone in to the supported sector, some of them with low support, we've opened up where we can, as I said, it's been difficult but opened up our own one bedroom properties to enable people to move through in to that from other services."

"One of the major challenges, is that a significant proportion of the people in that hotel really need to move into supported housing, need to move into the pathway. The pathway's full and we need to move people out of the pathway to get the people from the hotel into the pathway and finding affordable move-on accommodation is a challenge." (LA England)

Whilst funding released by MHCLG as part of the Next Steps programme seeks to address some of these move-on challenges there was still concerns amongst local authorities that this was not sufficient to meet the time pressured demands they are currently facing (see section 3.5). Funding provided through MHCLG and the Rough Sleeping initiative had in some areas been used to set up PRS access schemes. There were mixed views on the ability to procure and access accommodation in local areas:

"Well, we've got money from a PRS action scheme bid, so again financially we're in a position to help people whether they're priority or they're not priority. And then there's, you know, the simple fact if there's not a great deal of accommodation out there, with the best will in the world, you can say to somebody, "You're a single person, we're happy to help you with whatever it needs, rent in advance, deposit." We've got a ringfenced amount of our DHP pot so, you know, it's not – the issue isn't so much the money, it's the accommodation." (LA England)

"the actual provision of accommodation, that move on accommodation, we have limited supply at this point" (LA England)

In Wales authorities reported the benefits of accessing additional funding from the Welsh Government to set up tenancies to move people on from temporary accommodation:

"We have resources from Welsh government to provide extra support; that will start on the 1st of October. They're putting ... many of our partners have agreed to come and help us to provide the normal support we provide so we can concentrate on moving the people onto permanent properties ... and the phase 2 plan will play a part in that as well." (LA Wales)

One local authority in Scotland was using the opportunities presented by the pandemic to look at how best to use the PRS, a tenure that is not widely used to address homelessness currently in Scotland:

"We are looking at how we can make better use of the private rented sector in terms of identifying permanent accommodation. We appreciated that that's a sort of an opportunity that as yet, isn't fully tapped up by us, and that to basically increase the supply, we can't meet the demands just within our own stock, and our RSL partners seem to be having the same challenges as we do in terms of the types of properties that they

have available, or that they're developing, to fully be able to assist us in our response to homelessness." (LA Scotland)

With the unanticipated pressures on the temporary accommodation system in Scotland, with numbers accommodated increasing by 22 per cent from 11,665 in March 2020 to 14,229 in September 2020, the importance of exploring the PRS as a valid tenure option for move-on becomes more importance.

As discussed in section 3.4 changes to housing allocation policies made a significant impact on being able to support people from hotels through to permanent accommodation. Whilst in Scotland direct lets were already possible, and for most local authorities in England choice-based lettings have now returned, in Wales there were signs of how to make some of these changes longer term to support with increasing suitable housing supply for those in emergency accommodation:

"Also, we're in discussions with RSLs on allocations and they have agreed to look, to provide ... well, we're in discussions at the moment to get them to hopefully agree to look at 50% of allocations to those who are in temporary accommodation at the moment because of COVID." (LA Wales)

"We've got a temporary variation to our common allocations policy, which all of our housing partners have signed up to, and we've got 50% nomination – so 50% of all social housing that becomes available in [our local authority area] is offered to the local homeless team, for us to allocate to our COVID cohort – we've had some good results in terms of that. During the pandemic, I think we've moved on about 50 households from temporary accommodation. 26 or so of those came via social housing during the first three months of the interim variation policy, with the vast majority of them being one-bed households, but there is now a challenge in the sense that... that accommodation is drying up." (LA Wales)

The biggest barrier to successful move-on from the emergency accommodation provided during the pandemic is housing supply. Across the three nations the need for a range of appropriate tenures to meet differing support needs is evident. The differing infrastructure for move-on that existed prior to the pandemic has been emphasised further during this period, with the impact of the work done in Scotland to develop Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans evident. Whilst local authorities have reflected on their local needs and what that means for a transition to a more housing-led approach, this must be supported by sustained investment to allow for a commitment to delivering appropriate affordable housing.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

The research has highlighted the ongoing changes during the pandemic to the scale, profile and response to homelessness made by local authorities and voluntary sector services. Insights gathered have highlighted the ongoing and acute pressures experienced by services to adapt frontline provision to meet this need and support people facing homelessness during the past seven months.

Once there was direction by respective governments across GB, the response by local authorities and the voluntary sector has been quick and focused on the immediate emergency and ensuring everyone living in dangerous and unsuitable living conditions had somewhere safe they could self-isolate. The instruction to accommodate everyone rough sleeping and in unsafe accommodation, including lifting of restrictions for groups of people who would not normally be eligible for help has enabled frontline services to provide assistance to support ongoing need. Notable groups include NRPF and people rough sleeping in England and Wales who would ordinarily not be eligible for assistance under priority need.

The research has shown the positive effect of clear government policies to ameliorate the impacts of the pandemic on homelessness. The pause on evictions has prevented large numbers of people coming forward who are at risk of homelessness from the private rented sector and the survey with voluntary sector organisations highlighted very few presentations from this group. The divergence in policy on evictions across Great Britain going forward is an area that needs monitoring. Across GB local authorities were concerned about the new profile of people at risk of homelessness who are part of the furlough scheme and have been accumulating rent arrears.

There is a question over funding a homelessness response in the immediate future. In England local authorities and voluntary sector organisations were concerned about the sustainability of funding emergency accommodation over winter. In many areas they had already overspent and even with additional funding announcements from MHCLG it is not clear if the procurement of temporary accommodation can continue at this pace. In Wales, there was less concern than in England about whether the initial funding was sufficient to cover costs of providing emergency accommodation but there were growing anxieties around funding for their phase 2 planning and making sure they were able to move people through from emergency accommodation. In Scotland, there was significantly less concern specifically around homelessness spend and reflected that they had in the most part been able to access the emergency monies that they needed.

The findings also reflect the existing policy frameworks in tackling homelessness in each nation have had an impact on the medium to long term planning for each nation. In Scotland, the pandemic has injected a sense of urgency into housing led provision based on Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans and investment in Housing First already being in

place. In England, the process of Everyone In and identifying support needs as part of this has been used to examine who would benefit from different housing solutions. However, there was still a reliance on supported accommodation and longer-term hostels to move people out of hotels and other emergency accommodation.

The best way of tackling homelessness is to stop it happening in the first place. Prior to the pandemic over one billion pounds was being spent on temporary accommodation and this has continued under the emergency COVID measures. There is a long-standing need for more housing to provide people on low incomes with security, decent living conditions and rents they can afford to prevent people being pushed into homelessness. The research has highlighted a number of gaps in the current homelessness system. To achieve the goal of ending homelessness where it is rare, brief and non-recurrent the following principles must be in place:

- Ending homelessness through a rapid rehousing approach – swift action must be taken to move people quickly into permanent affordable housing with person centred support to meet their needs. This must include Housing First for all those who need it
- Ensuring prevention measures are embedded to stop people experiencing homelessness in the first place – the welfare system and public bodies all have a role in ensuring people do not experience homelessness in the first place
- Safe emergency provision is accessible for all as long as it is needed – homelessness can result in an urgent need for accommodation. This must be safe, clean and ensure people are treated with dignity.

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