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Interim Report

The COVID-19 crisis response to homelessness in Great Britain

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Executive summary

Introduction

This study delivers a comparative examination of responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis across England, Scotland and Wales, placing these Great Britain (GB) responses in an international context¹.

This interim report focuses on the period from the start of the initial national lockdown in the UK (March 2020), until the end of the year (December 2020), with a particular focus on policy and practice responses during the initial lockdown period. It offers preliminary findings in response to the following research questions:

- What have been the main components of the crisis response to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How have these crisis responses differed both between and within the three GB jurisdictions?
- What level of (additional) resources have been devoted to efforts to support homeless people during the crisis?
- What have been the discernible outcomes of these crisis interventions, both positive and negative?
- What impact has the pre-pandemic policy, legal and funding context for homelessness had on the scale and effectiveness of COVID-19 crisis interventions?
- What, if any, elements of the COVID-19 crisis response should be embedded in post-pandemic homelessness policy and practice?
- How do GB responses to homelessness during the pandemic compare with that of other Global North countries?

The research methods include: an international literature review; documentary analysis of relevant GB policy, funding and legal responses to the pandemic; and qualitative interviews with policy makers and service providers in England (n=15), Scotland (n=8) and Wales (n=8). Additionally, the report utilises qualitative and quantitative data from the Crisis funded *Homelessness Monitor* online survey of English local authorities (n=148) and 25 qualitative interviews with people who experienced homelessness during the pandemic, undertaken as part of a large-scale, mixed-method study of Destitution in the UK, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

¹ The geography of the study was limited to Great Britain due to fieldwork resource constraints.

International responses to homelessness during the pandemic

Currently there is only limited published scholarship on the responses of different nations to homelessness during the pandemic, and so the international literature review provides only preliminary insights into actions taken elsewhere. Four emergent themes include: a swift but diverse set of actions taken to accommodate people experiencing homelessness, especially those sleeping rough; the importance of strong leadership, funding and partnership working; workforce and frontline challenges; and the priority of moving people on to settled accommodation, not least due to a mushrooming of people in temporary accommodation.

The pre-COVID-19 homelessness policy context

Given that pre-existing policy processes and legal frameworks were likely to mediate responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic, the report provides a precis of key homelessness policy developments across the GB nations. Scotland is observed as an outlier, having abolished the 'priority need' criterion from homelessness legislation. This means that all 'unintentionally homeless' people in Scotland are entitled to be rehoused, unless ineligible under immigration legislation. In Wales and England, effective legislative developments have focused on homelessness prevention, where local authorities are under a duty to take 'reasonable steps' to prevent and relieve homelessness with all households. However, there remains no requirement on local authorities in Wales and England to provide temporary accommodation to most single people experiencing homelessness. It is particularly relevant to note that rough sleeping reduction was already a high policy priority in all three GB jurisdictions on the eve of the outbreak.

COVID-19 and homelessness: learning from crisis

Everyone in – an effective crisis response: The overarching conclusion across all three GB nations is that the immediate crisis response to homelessness during the pandemic was timely and effective. Underpinning this response was a shift in the perception of homelessness – it was conceptualised as a public health issue and this prompted interventions characterised by a sense of urgency and inclusiveness not previously witnessed in any GB nation response to homelessness.

Shifting homelessness population trends during lockdown: Most local authorities reported an increase in the numbers of both rough sleepers and single adults seeking homelessness assistance in the initial lockdown, as compared to the equivalent period the year before. Moreover, the pandemic brought to light pre-existing 'hidden homelessness'. Notwithstanding the extraordinary levels of homelessness activity associated with the Everyone In programme, and similar programmes in other GB nations, the initial COVID-19 lockdown period saw a marked drop in total (eligible) applicants assessed by English local authorities within the official 'statutory homelessness system'. The number of statutory homelessness cases in England resulting from the ending of both private and social tenancies plummeted as did those associated with institutional discharge. People accepted as homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of family/friend exclusions, and relationship breakdown or domestic violence, on the other hand, remained relatively stable throughout the initial lockdown quarter, despite stakeholder concerns that domestic abuse victims in particular may have been facing additional barriers in seeking help during lockdown. At the time of writing, there were no official statistics yet available in Scotland or Wales on homelessness trends since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic but well-placed key informants identified trends consistent with the English data.

Strong leadership: Ministers and civil servants across GB showed unprecedented leadership on the issue of homelessness in the early stages of the pandemic. Particularly in England and Wales, the government response was notable for its speed, clarity of direction, an injection of funding and a desire to work in partnership. The Scottish Government crisis response was characterised by a less sudden policy and practice shift because, we would contend, the pre-pandemic context was more inclusive, particularly in relation to the accommodation provided to single person households, and so there was less necessity for a large-scale emergency response. The direction handed down to local authorities at the outset (March 2020) was unambiguous that everyone should be accommodated and accommodation was expected to be single room wherever possible, and to allow for social distancing in all cases. In England specifically, while there was much praise for the early response from central government, as early as May 2020 key informants were flagging what they viewed as ‘mixed messages’ from MHCLG and this resulted in growing variation in local authority practice.

Partnership working: Collaboration between sectors and organisations became a defining characteristic of the crisis response, particularly at local level. Strikingly, too, homelessness during the pandemic appeared to be addressed as a cross-sectoral priority in all three GB nations, rather than just a ‘housing issue’. Yet, there were also examples of persistent SILOS and failures to effectively collaborate, for example in competition between Health and Housing to secure emergency accommodation.

Funding patterns and limitations: The significant and unprecedented injection of funding into homelessness services during the crisis, particularly in England and Wales, was unanimously welcomed and enabled local authorities and their partners in the third sector to deliver the achievements outlined in this report. However, there were specific issues raised in England and Wales, where new crisis investment was highest and needed the most. Concerns focused on short-term funding pots, which limited opportunity for investment in longer-term staffing and in England very fast turnaround bidding windows were challenging and focused overwhelmingly on rough sleeping.

Access to accommodation – new temporary provision but a stymied system: The commitment to get everyone in prompted an unprecedented response by the homelessness sector to secure sufficient, mostly temporary, accommodation, particularly in England and Wales where the gap between need and existing provision was greatest. Local authorities and their partners in national government, the third sector, RSLs, and the private sector took swift action to commission a very wide range of new temporary accommodation, including; hotels, B&Bs, holiday lets, university accommodation, and RSL properties. Whilst the major challenge was sourcing additional emergency accommodation, to a lesser extent some existing temporary accommodation also had to be decommissioned or adapted. While more common in larger cities in England, in Scotland and Wales too there were examples of accommodation with shared sleeping space in the immediate pre-COVID period. Changes introduced in this provision during the pandemic included shared rooms becoming single occupancy rooms, whilst some shelters were closed and people were moved into alternative accommodation. Following the initial focus on sourcing temporary accommodation, one of the most pressing issues to emerge was access to ‘move on’ or settled accommodation; a process stymied by a lengthy interruption of social housing allocations and moves within the PRS.

Challenges in accommodating people with complex support needs: Across much of England and Wales a lack of existing suitable accommodation and support services created particular challenges in accommodating people with complex support needs. For example, people with significant substance misuse, mental health and behavioural support needs were placed into B&B/hotel accommodation with limited support. Consequently, there were cases of antisocial and criminal behaviour in these accommodation settings and ultimately people’s health and well-being were put at risk. There were also challenges associated with hotel staff struggling to cope with complex needs for which they had no training. Meeting people’s basic needs, such as access to decent food, was also a major logistical challenge for local authorities and they responded effectively and at speed. In some accommodation settings, such as hotels, this meant paying the hotel to deliver three meals a day, whilst in other contexts, such as across B&Bs and some independent accommodation, volunteers were mobilised to deliver food parcels and basic cooking facilities. Other support, included providing mobiles phones and ‘boredom buster packs’.

COVID-related welfare and labour market measures: Measures such as the ‘furlough’ job retention and support scheme, the uplift in the standard allowance of Universal Credit and Working tax Credits by £20 per week until April 2021, and the increase in Local Housing Allowance rates to cover the bottom 30 per cent of private rents, were cited as beneficial in mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on employment, incomes and housing options. Other COVID-related measures that most English local authorities considered important in preventing or minimising homelessness in their area included the temporary suspension of benefit sanctions (cited by 74%), the pausing of (most) debt-related benefit deductions (67%), and the provision of additional Local Welfare Assistance funding (66%).

Workforce and working practices: Frontline homelessness service staff played a crucial role in the pandemic response; often going beyond their usual duties, adapting their working practices and facing personal risks. A very early change in everyday support services involved the shift to remote working wherever possible on the part of both local authorities and Third Sector organisations. Perceptions were generally very positive about the shift to remote/online working, believing it was more efficient, though some service users reported acute problems getting in touch with local authority services (albeit not necessarily homelessness services). Retaining opportunities for face-to-face support, especially for more vulnerable groups, was felt to be important. The positive accounts of a committed and agile workforce were accompanied by two main concerns. First, many services faced considerable difficulties accessing appropriate PPE at the very start of the pandemic. Second, the pandemic response had a notable impact on staff wellbeing. Frontline staff faced the fear of working in environments where they might contract the virus and there was potential for heightened vicarious trauma, whereby support staff continued to hear about and witness people’s life ordeals but previous mechanisms for supporting staff to reflect upon these experiences were disrupted.

The role of pre-crisis policy and legislation: Whilst there were similarities in the crisis responses of GB nations, there were also fundamental differences, particularly between Scotland and the rest of GB. The study highlights the central influence of the pre-COVID-19 context on the form of the emergency response. The distinctive position in Scotland, where the legislative framework confers rights to accommodation on all homeless households, meant far fewer additional households had to be temporarily accommodated and so there was less necessity for a large-scale emergency response of the form witnessed in England and Wales. Yet, according to key informants, relatively recent developments in England, particularly the HRA and RSI, laid the foundation of a more effective response to the COVID-19 crisis than would have been the case in the more hands-off ‘localist’ era under the Coalition Government. In both Scotland and Wales the pandemic also prompted moves to bring forward existing plans to end use of certain kinds of unsuitable temporary accommodation and to build upon rapid rehousing commitments.

On the horizon: Next Steps

Looking to the horizon and to the second phase of this study (January-June 2021), the research will explore ongoing responses, particularly in the wake of a second major period of lockdown which commenced in December 2020 and continued into 2021. The report will also examine any actions taken to address sector concerns relating to: the effectiveness of move on provisions for people temporarily accommodated during the crisis; the potential increase in homelessness that may emerge from job losses and a recommencement of evictions; and the potential ‘path dependencies’ being created through major investment in congregate forms of temporary accommodation in response to the crisis. Crucially, and on an optimistic note, the next report will investigate what has been done to ensure some of the positive crisis policies and practices will persist and evolve to enable the sector to ‘build back better’. It will also present our overall conclusions to the research questions.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted dramatically on the lives of homeless people, triggering radical changes in policy and practice in many countries across the globe. In the UK and elsewhere in the Global North, actors including national and local governments, as well as third sector and faith-based organisations, initially moved swiftly to accommodate people sleeping rough and those at risk, with street homelessness often treated as an urgent public health crisis for the very first time (Parsell et al, 2020; National Audit Office, 2021). There is widespread recognition amongst both statutory and third sector stakeholders that the unique lessons emerging from the current pandemic can, and should, be utilised to 'build back better' with respect to future policy and practice in this field (Fitzpatrick et al, 2020a).

This study is designed to support these efforts by delivering a comparative examination of responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis across England, Scotland and Wales, placing these Great Britain (GB) responses in an international context². It seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What have been the main components of the crisis response to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How have these crisis responses differed both between and within the three GB jurisdictions?
- What level of (additional) resources have been devoted to efforts to support homeless people during the crisis?
- What have been the discernible outcomes of these crisis interventions, both positive and negative?
- What impact has the pre-pandemic policy, legal and funding context for homelessness had on the scale and effectiveness of COVID-19 crisis interventions?
- What, if any, elements of the COVID-19 crisis response should be embedded in post-pandemic homelessness policy and practice?
- How do GB responses to homelessness during the pandemic compare with that of other Global North countries?

This interim report focuses on the period from the start of the initial national lockdown in the UK (March 2020), until the end of the year (December 2020), with a particular focus on policy and practice responses during the initial lockdown period. It offers preliminary findings on all of the questions above, and flags up areas for further exploration in the next phase of the study. The second and final report from this study, planned to be published summer 2021, will focus on relevant developments and outcomes between January 2021 and June 2021. This will include analysis of the lockdown which began at the end of 2020 and continued into 2021. It will also present our overall conclusions on all of the research questions posed above.

The structure of this report is as follows. In the next section (Section 2) we outline the methods deployed in the study. In Section 3 we review the (as yet very limited) international evidence base on crisis responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic before presenting, in Section 4, a summary of the key characteristics of the pre-COVID policy context on homelessness in each of the GB countries. Section 5 provides a detailed factual timeline of the relevant policy, legal and funding steps taken from March-December 2020 in all three GB countries, and in Section 6 we then present the interim research findings. Finally, in Section 7, we draw out preliminary conclusions based on our analysis and highlight the topics that we will drill down on in the remainder of the study.

² The geography of the study was limited to Great Britain due to fieldwork resource constraints.

2. Methodology

Broadly in line with the other projects being conducted as part of this COVID-19 CaCHE research programme, the core methods being deployed in this study include the following:

- an international literature review to set the GB experience in a broader context;
- documentary analysis of relevant GB policy, funding and legal responses to the pandemic;
- two waves of qualitative interviews with policy makers and service providers – with the first wave undertaken in mid-2020, to capture the early pandemic and initial national lockdown experience, and the second wave in early 2021, to capture experiences during the tiered lockdowns implemented over winter 2020/21 and, hopefully, commencement of the post-pandemic exit strategy;
- selective use of other relevant ongoing research.

The first wave of qualitative fieldwork conducted comprised eight interviews with policy makers and service providers in Wales (conducted mainly in June 2020) and another eight such interviews in Scotland (conducted in June-July 2020). These key informants were selected on the basis that they provided an appropriate balance between statutory and third sector insights on responses to homelessness during COVID-19, and were able to provide a mix of national and local-level insights on relevant issues. Interviews were fully transcribed, with permission, and analysed using NVivo software.

In addition, the study has drawn on interviews with 15 senior stakeholders conducted as part of the longitudinal Homelessness Monitor series, funded by Crisis³. This sample of key informants includes representatives of homelessness service providers, as well as other key statutory and third sector stakeholders with a national overview of relevant areas of policy and practice on England. Some of these research participants were interviewed in May 2020, during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, and others in October 2020⁴, as the second wave of the pandemic took hold (see also Fitzpatrick et al, 2020a, 2021).

Another strand of the Homelessness Monitor research utilised in this current study is the annual online survey of English local authorities. The main aim of the 2020 online survey was to understand how the housing, social security, labour market and other COVID-19 related policy responses were impacting on homelessness trends and responses at local level. In all, 148 (47%) of all local authorities in England responded to the survey with an even spread across all regions. As the survey provides considerable scope for open text responses from local authority respondents, this generated a rich qualitative as well as quantitative dataset broadly representative of the overall national picture. It should be noted, however, that in order to achieve this high survey response rate, amid the extraordinary crisis conditions engendered by the pandemic, a relatively lengthy time window for responses was allowed (from mid-July to mid-October). This variability in the precise timing of survey responses is taken into account in the interpretation of the survey results used in the analysis below.

Finally, in order to incorporate the perspective of people directly affected by homelessness in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we also draw to a limited extent on data from 25 qualitative interviews undertaken as part of a large-scale, mixed-method study of Destitution in the UK (Fitzpatrick et al, 2020c). These interviews, conducted by telephone in spring 2020 (late April-early June), focused on homeless participants' living and economic situation, their access to essentials, services and IT during the pandemic, and the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on their health, well-being and relationships. Interviews were fully transcribed, with permission, and analysed using NVivo software.

³ <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/>

⁴ We are particularly grateful to two interviewees who allowed us to interview them twice – in spring and again in autumn 2020 – in order to update us on how responses to the pandemic had unfolded over the course of the year.

3. International responses to homelessness during the pandemic

Currently there is only limited published scholarship on the responses of different nations to homelessness during the pandemic, yet it is useful to begin to situate the GB response within a wider international context. This brief overview draws heavily, though not exclusively, upon three sources: Parsell et al.'s (2020) examination of the Australian response; Pawson's et al's (forthcoming) research which also focuses on Australia but includes a brief overview of headline actions in Canada, New Zealand, and the USA, as well as UK; and a study by Seeley (2020) which attempts to compare responses in 22 cities across the globe⁵. This preliminary insight into actions elsewhere flags up four key themes: a swift but diverse set of actions taken to accommodate people experiencing homelessness, especially those sleeping rough; the importance of strong leadership, funding and partnership working; workforce and frontline challenges; and the priority of moving people on to settled accommodation.

Swift action to accommodate some homeless groups

In many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has elicited an historic swift and determined effort to ensure people were safely accommodated (Parsell et al., 2020; Pawson et al, forthcoming; Seeley, 2020). Parsell et al. (2020) conclude that the urgency and magnitude of this response can be attributed to a shift in discourse and framing of homelessness – it is currently conceived as a major public health emergency.

The emergency response has focused on two main groups: people living on the streets and people living in communal forms of accommodation, particularly those which include shared bedrooms, dormitories or other communal sleeping facilities (Pawson et al, forthcoming). The nature of the response appears to have diverged between cities and nations (Seeley, 2020) and they, arguably, fall into three cohorts. One cohort continued to use and expand shelter use, whilst introducing protective measures such as increased social distancing, PPE use, extending access for 24 hours, and eliminating communal meals (Seeley, 2020). Seeley (2020) identified two East European cities that adopted this response and Wilczek (2020), based on a survey of 83 institutions working with people experiencing homelessness in Poland, also documented this approach.

A second cohort continued to use communal shelters at the broadly pre-COVID level but also broadened their accommodation offer to include self-contained or single room accommodation and introduced new support services (Moses, 2020; Pawson et al, forthcoming; Seeley, 2020). Many cities in the USA lie within this cohort. Pawson et al (forthcoming) document how Continuum of Cares (CoCs) expanded provision by procuring hotel/motel rooms with this new provision generally prioritised for older adults and those with pre-existing medical conditions. They were also used to enable people to quarantine if they tested positive for COVID-19.

The GB nations lie within the third cohort where communal forms of accommodation were generally closed, on the grounds that they posed a transmission risk, and, along with people sleeping on the streets, users of this provision were usually offered alternative self-contained or single room provision. This additional accommodation was procured from across a wide range of sources, including hotels, B&Bs, student accommodation, and empty rental properties (Pawson et al, forthcoming; Seeley, 2020). Responses in some Australian states also conformed to this approach. Parsell et al (2020: 6) described how *'In one Australian state, the government leased an entire student accommodation building to empty the city's three large congregate shelters.'*

Reflecting on the early findings of the divergent crisis responses to homelessness, Seeley (2020) suggests that pre-COVID homelessness policy had a particular influence on the form of the COVID-19 response. In broad terms she argues that where policies were already 'calibrated to a housing-led methodology', or there was pre-existing commitment to this direction of travel, the crisis may have 'acted as an accelerant' to minimise the use of communal forms of accommodation and shift towards self-contained or single room provision (Seeley, 2020: 41).

Despite overall success, not all street homeless and shelter populations were accommodated (Lenskjold and Dalsted, 2020; Seeley, 2020). For example, in the European context, migrants without access to welfare benefits constituted a high proportion of those sleeping on the streets, and Lenskjold and Dalsted (2020) claim that in Denmark there were particular challenges in securing accommodation for these individuals at the onset of the pandemic. They explain that permission was not initially granted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the necessary suspension of laws to enable homeless migrants to be temporarily accommodated. They go on to describe that following a COVID-19 outbreak in a small private drop-in centre for migrants, access was eventually granted to quarantine sites.

Whilst the evidence is patchy, the final point to make regarding initial efforts to get homeless people accommodated is that in most countries the accommodation response was accompanied by some expansion of support provision. This often focused primarily on the supply of food to the places where people were accommodated – marking a shift in approach for those services that typically provided food on street settings (Pawson et al, forthcoming; Seeley, 2020).

Leadership, funding and partnership

Strong government leadership appears to have played a key role in shaping the nature of the crisis response to homelessness (Parsell et al, 2020; Seeley, 2020; see also Fitzpatrick et al, 2020b). In particular, in those countries and states that sought not only to end rough sleeping but also to end, or at least minimise, the use of communal forms of accommodation (the third cohort discussed above), this tended to result from a clear instruction from government. In contrast, the absence of such instruction, particularly at national level in countries like the US, meant these accommodation forms continued to play a key role in the crisis response, despite the transmission risk they posed. Another emergent facet of leadership during the crisis was a 'do whatever it takes' attitude. Parsell et al (2020: 6) cite the chief executive of a third sector organisation in Australia, who reported receiving a state⁶ government letter stating; *'Whatever you need to do to respond to COVID, you do it.'* This is a seismic shift in policy approach and appears to have been welcomed by local partners in the Australian example, and also in the UK, as we shall see below.

Funding was fundamental to the implementation of the crisis responses discussed above. Parsell et al. (2020: 7) talk of the *'unprecedented amount of funding'* invested in accommodation interventions for people experiencing homelessness at the onset of the pandemic. They provide a useful overview of the magnitude of national and state investment across several developed economies (Figure 1), although it is necessary to recognise this is only a snapshot in time and levels of investment are, in many countries, changing throughout the course of the pandemic. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to distil the extent to which monies are additional within the financial year. It is also important to bear in mind the widely varying scales of both the general and homeless populations between these countries, and also the differential level of 'business as usual' investment in homelessness services pre-COVID. This makes direct international comparisons, particularly with respect to expenditure levels, very difficult.

⁵ This masters dissertation is based on information derived from: Adelaide (Australia), Athens (Greece), Barcelona (Spain), Berlin (Germany), Bratislava (Slovakia), Brussels (Belgium), Budapest (Hungary), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Edinburgh (Scotland), Glasgow (Scotland), Helsinki (Finland), London (England), Los Angeles (USA), Moscow (Russia), New York City (USA), Rijeka (Croatia), Rome (Italy), Santiago (Chile), São Paulo (Brazil), Sydney (Australia), Tokyo (Japan), Vienna (Austria).

⁶ We have assumed this was a state rather than national government letter given the variability in approach across Australian states.

Figure 1. Reported additional spending on COVID-19 homelessness response in several developed countries, March – August 2020

Australia	\$229 million (AUS) committed to extraordinary homelessness expenditure by the five mainland state governments by September 2020.
Canada	\$157.5 million (CAD) additional expenditure on Canada's Homelessness Strategy in response to COVID-19 by the Government of Canada.
France	€50 million (EUR) to accommodate people who were homeless during COVID-19.
New Zealand	\$107.6 million (NZD) spent on temporarily housing rough sleepers in motels until permanent housing could be arranged.
USA	\$4 billion (USD) pledged to address homelessness under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (2020). Individual US states also committed funding.

Source: Parsell et al (2020)

There is emerging evidence of positive impacts of the pandemic on collaborative and partnership working. Parsell et al (2020) describe how the siloes within and between organisations were disrupted in Australia and departments and organisations coalesced around the goal of supporting everyone into accommodation. However, this was not the case in all countries; Wilczek (2020) pointed to the difficulties in Poland, where homelessness services continued to face difficulties accessing health services, particularly substance misuse support.

Workforce and frontline challenges

At an operational level, Moses (2020) highlights some of the challenges experienced by frontline homelessness service staff during the pandemic. The primary message is that staff, across a range of organisational roles, worked exceptionally hard during the crisis to secure accommodation and attempt to protect people's health, and their resilience was severely tested. However, in this US case study, 'employee shortages' was a major issue for two reasons, according to Moses (2020). First, more staff were needed because services were accommodating a larger volume of people and taking on additional duties, such as maintaining social distancing and placing people in quarantine when necessary. Second, some staff were unable to work, due to the need to self-isolate, caring responsibilities, or sickness. According to Moses (2020), the experiences of frontline staff were made more challenging across much of the US due to difficulties securing appropriate PPE.

Moving On

The focus of this report and the emergent grey literature is on the initial crisis response, which primarily sought to accommodate homeless people, especially those sleeping rough, safely. However, there is already considerable policy focus, and funding, targeted at supporting people to move on from temporary accommodation. For example, in Australia there is a drive to enable 'the hotel homeless' to transition into settled accommodation (Pawson et al, forthcoming). This is at least partly driven in Australia by concerns about a mushrooming of temporary accommodation, an increasingly pressurised social housing system, and continued new entrants into homelessness. Moreover, on the horizon there are major concerns about a rise in future evictions after the end of the evictions pause experienced in many countries (Pawson et al, 2020; Wilczek, 2020).

4. The Pre-COVID-19 homelessness policy context

As already noted, pre-existing policy processes and legal frameworks are likely to mediate responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore important to precis some of the key characteristics of this policy landscape in each of the GB countries before delving into the comparative findings on their responses to the pandemic.

Since 1978, and the coming into force of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, local authorities across GB have had statutory duties to rehouse homeless vulnerable adults and families with children. The legislative arrangements on homelessness have diverged between the GB jurisdictions in the post-devolution era, with Scotland taking a radically different approach to that in England and Wales (Pawson & Davidson, 2008). Most notably, the 'priority need' criterion incorporated in the original 1977 legislation, which excluded most single homeless people from entitlement to rehousing, was abolished in Scotland in a process completed in 2012. This means that all 'unintentionally homeless' people in Scotland are entitled to be rehoused, unless ineligible under immigration legislation.

More recently, new homelessness legislation which came into force in Wales in April 2015 mandated earlier intervention with households 'threatened with homelessness', alongside homelessness 'relief' duties that extend across all eligible homeless households, including single people (Mackie, 2015). While these duties require Welsh local authorities to take only 'reasonable steps' to assist single homeless households, rather than actually rehouse them, an independent evaluation found an 'overwhelming consensus' that this amended statutory homelessness framework had improved homelessness responses in Wales (Ahmed et al, 2019). The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) in England, which came into force in April 2018, introduced a very similar set of new prevention and relief duties to those first developed in Wales. An official evaluation of the HRA found that "The ethos and principles behind the Act were strongly welcomed by local authorities", but also that there was greater success and consistency with respect to English local authority practice on homelessness prevention than on relief (ICF, 2020).

Before commencing our analysis of COVID-19-specific homelessness responses, it is particularly relevant to note that rough sleeping reduction was already a high policy priority in all three GB jurisdictions on the eve of the outbreak. In England, growing public and official disquiet over rising levels of street homelessness, which had been on a sharp upward trajectory since the coming into office of the Coalition Government in 2010, prompted the Conservatives in their 2017 General Election manifesto to pledge to halve rough sleeping by 2022, and eliminate it altogether by 2027. The 2019 Conservative Manifesto then promised to 'end the blight of rough sleeping by the end of the next Parliament', effectively bringing this target date forward to 2024. A new Rough Sleeping Strategy was published in 2018, linked to a three-year Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) investment programme. This programme was considered a success in an internal evaluation conducted by MHCLG (2018) which identified a (slight) fall in the national numbers sleeping rough between 2017 and 2018, with a disproportionate reduction in areas which had received RSI funding.

In 2017 the Scottish Government appointed a short-life cross-sectoral Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) to 'recommend to Scottish Government Ministers the actions and solutions needed to eradicate rough sleeping and transform the use of temporary accommodation in Scotland', alongside announcing a five-year additional homelessness expenditure programme. HARSAG published four reports over the course of 9 months, and all of its recommendations were accepted in principle by the Scottish Government, and captured in some shape or form in its Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan, published in November 2018. Key implementation mechanisms included the introduction of local authority five-year 'Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans', to reduce the use of temporary accommodation, and a national Housing First Scotland pathfinder programme, to rehouse rough sleepers and other homeless people with complex needs. As noted below, HARSAG was briefly reformed in June 2020 and developed

an additional suite of 105 recommendations on tackling homelessness following the COVID-19 pandemic, with all of these recommendations again accepted by the Scottish Government (HARSAG, 2020).

In a similar process to that in Scotland, the Welsh Government set up an independent Homelessness Action Group tasked with identifying the framework of policies, approaches and plans needed to end all forms of homelessness. The group produced three reports in total. The first focused on immediate actions to address rough sleeping ahead of winter 2019 (published in October 2019) and the crucial second report, setting out the proposed framework to make homelessness rare, brief and non-repeated, was published on the eve of COVID-19 (March 2020). All recommendations were accepted in principle by Welsh Government. The group reconvened in July 2020 to update the third and final report, which focused on rapid rehousing and partnership working and situated previous recommendations in the COVID-19 context. Alongside the work of the Homelessness Action Group, Welsh Government published a very brief strategy for preventing and ending homelessness in October 2019. Across all these documents there was a clear intent to focus on prevention, and where homelessness cannot be prevented there should be rapid rehousing and a move away from the use of unsuitable temporary accommodation.

5. Policy, legislation and funding related to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis response involved sweeping changes to homelessness policy, legislation and funding across the GB nations. And, as the crisis evolved so too did the policy environment. Drawing upon publications and announcements on Westminster and devolved government websites, media reports, third sector websites, and key informant interviews, we have pieced together a bird's-eye view of the major government-led homelessness developments between March and December 2020 (Figure 2). Analysis of the key developments reveals five main domains of activity and these are used to frame the overview in Figure 2: funding; homelessness policy and legislation; rental sector policy and legislation; welfare policy; and immigration policy. Drawing direct comparisons between the nations proved particularly challenging due to the different starting points, and Figure 2 should be interpreted with caution, however we have described key differences where they emerged.

Funding: In March 2020, in all three nations, initial funding was made available to local authorities to enable them to get everyone in. The funding paths then diverged: Scotland focused on enhancing Discretionary Housing Payment funding and provided financial support for organisations working with people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF); the second phase of funding in Wales was significantly more than the first phase investment, included a large proportion of capital funding and focused on moving people on from temporary provision; in England there was a combination of bringing spend forward and specified new funding pots announced on an almost monthly basis.

Homelessness policy and legislation: In England and Wales there were clear Ministerial statements in March 2020 that all rough sleepers should be accommodated. The absence of a similar statement in Scotland reflects the very different starting point there, where rough sleepers generally have a legal entitlement to accommodation. In England and Wales there was also subsequent guidance on the Priority Need status of rough sleepers, with Wales adopting a clearer stance on the expectation that these individuals should be accommodated (this was unnecessary in Scotland, as Priority Need has been abolished). In all three nations there were early statements on the expectation that people with NRPF and sleeping on the streets should be accommodated. Finally, and again reflecting the different starting points of the nations, in Scotland and Wales post-crisis plans were produced. In Scotland this was more advanced and resulted from the reconvening of HARSAG and in Wales this built upon the work of the Homelessness Action Group – in both nations the focus is on rapid rehousing and a phasing out of night shelter type accommodation.

Rental sector policy and legislation: Early action in March 2020 saw a six-month moratorium on evictions in England and Wales with measures taken within the tribunal system to effect an evictions 'ban' in Scotland too. In all three nations, albeit at different time points, there was subsequent legislation to extend notice periods to six months until at least March 2021. Notably, this change was already in the pipeline in Wales in the Renting Homes (Amendment) (Wales) Bill.

Welfare policy: Several key changes were made across the welfare benefits system, with all changes initially in a supportive direction. Key changes included; a pause in work-related conditionality, sanctions and direct debt deductions (now restarted), the realignment of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates to cover the bottom third of private rents (though rates will not be uplifted from 2021-22 onwards), and a £20 a week increase in the Universal

Credit standard allowance. These changes impact all GB nations, though contextual (particularly housing market) variation means that their practical effects can vary.

Immigration policy: Immigration policy is non-devolved and two changes were particularly relevant to the pandemic homelessness response. At the onset of the crisis, evictions from National Asylum Accommodation were suspended (now restarted) and later in the pandemic an EU derogation relating to freedom of movement was suspended across the country to allow local authorities to accommodate homeless EEA nationals for up to 12 weeks if they were not in employment. However, in a move that appeared to pull in an opposing direction, on 1st December rough sleeping became grounds for losing the right to remain in the UK, albeit this excludes EEA nationals in the UK before 31st December 2020.

Figure 2. Policy, legislation and funding related to homelessness in Great Britain during the COVID-19 pandemic (March-December 2020)

UK

Welfare Policy (all UK)	Immigration Policy (all UK)
<p>30th March: 3-month pause in benefit sanctions announced</p> <p>1st April: Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates have been realigned to cover the bottom third of private rents</p> <p>3rd April: pause in direct deductions from benefit to repay third party debts and overpayments announced (advance payments of Universal Credit excluded)</p> <p>6th April: increase of £20 per week in the Universal Credit standard allowance for a 12-month period.</p> <p>1st July: benefit sanctions resumed</p> <p>7th July: debt deductions resumed</p>	<p>27th March: suspension of evictions from asylum accommodation across the UK (restarted in October)</p> <p>24th June: suspension of an EU derogation relating to freedom of movement, to allow local authorities to house EEA nationals for 12 weeks when not in employment, applied nationally until 31st December</p> <p>1st December: rough sleeping becomes grounds for losing right to remain in the UK. Excludes EEA nationals here before 31st December 2020.</p>

England

Funding	Homelessness Policy & Legislation	Rental Sector Policy & Legislation
<p>17th March: £3.2 million emergency funding to LAs to help people sleeping rough self-isolate</p> <p>24th May: Government announced bringing forward £161million out of an (increased) £433m four-year budget to provide 6,000 supported housing units for ex-rough sleepers. 3,300 of these units to be available in next 12 months.</p> <p>11th June: Government committed £63m in additional local welfare assistance funding for Councils in England (broader than homelessness)</p> <p>24th June: 'Next Steps' £105 million for interim accommodation announced (part of previously announced £433m)</p> <p>13th October: £10million Cold Weather Fund for rough sleepers announced, and £2million allocated to faith groups to enable them to make night shelters safer</p> <p>5th November: Government announce an additional £15million Protect Programme to areas with larger numbers of rough sleepers, prioritising those the clinically vulnerable</p> <p>25th November: Chancellor announces £151 million for LAs to spend on rough sleeping in 2021-22</p>	<p>17th Feb: Louise Casey appointed to lead Rough Sleepers Review</p> <p>25th March: MHCLG issue guidance about hotels staying open for vulnerable people</p> <p>26th March: Letter from Housing Minister to LAs stating that they are to accommodate all rough sleepers by 'end of the week'</p> <p>2nd May: Government Taskforce on rough sleeping during pandemic announced, headed by Louise Casey</p> <p>28th May: Letter from Housing Minister reminds LAs that they can only lawfully accommodate those ineligible for welfare benefits following an individual assessment of risks to life</p> <p>29th June: update in Homelessness Code of Guidance advises LAs to respond sympathetically to those made vulnerable as a result of the pandemic</p> <p>20th August: Louise Casey resigns as Chair of Task Force</p> <p>13th October: MHCLG issue guidance on reopening night shelters</p>	<p>18th March: suspension of new evictions from social and private rented accommodation announced</p> <p>25th March: moratorium on residential evictions commences</p> <p>28th August: notice periods for most tenants extended to minimum six months for notices issued from 29th August</p> <p>20th September: moratorium on residential evictions ends</p> <p>5th November: most evictions will not be enforced by bailiffs until 11th January 2021, and six month notice period remains in place at least until March 2021</p>

Scotland

Funding	Homelessness Policy & Legislation	Rental Sector Policy & Legislation
<p>March: £1.5m for third sector organisations to support people in emergency accommodation in hotels</p> <p>20th May: additional £5m for Discretionary Housing Payments</p> <p>1st September: 2020/21 Programme for Government announces an additional £3m for Discretionary Housing Payments and a £10m Tenants Hardship Loan Fund</p> <p>16th November: £278,784 distributed to organisations supporting people with NRPF to prevent destitution during COVID-19</p>	<p>20th April: Convention of Scottish Local Authorities issues guidance reminding LAs of public health duties to accommodate people with NRPF/ineligible for benefits who are sleeping rough during pandemic</p> <p>8th June: Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) reconvened</p> <p>14th July: HARSAG report published on tackling homelessness post COVID-19</p> <p>30th September: law changes to extend Unsuited Accommodation Order to cover all homeless households in temporary accommodation from 1st January 2021 (but with exemption till 31st January 2021 for emergency use during COVID)</p> <p>8th October: Scottish Government updated <i>Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan</i>, accepting all of HARSAG's new recommendations, and committing to scaling up Housing First more rapidly, increased social housing allocations to homeless people, and to phasing out of night shelters this winter</p>	<p>7th April: Emergency legislation extends notice period for most residential evictions to 6 months</p> <p>13th August: Scottish Government announces intention to extend six-month notice period for most residential evictions till end March 2021</p> <p>30th September: introduction of pre-action requirements for private landlords wishing to evict on grounds of rent arrears. Expected to last until emergency coronavirus legislation ends.</p> <p>3rd October: law changes to extend six-month notice period for most residential evictions till end March 2021</p> <p>3rd December: Christmas evictions ban announced, with enforcement of most residential evictions halted for a six-week period from 11th December – 22nd January</p>

Wales

Funding	Homelessness Policy & Legislation	Rental Sector Policy & Legislation
<p>20th March: Welsh Government committed £10m for emergency accommodation for people sleeping rough/ in emergency shelters. The Minister was clear the financial support was intended to 'go far beyond simply renting a basic room'. The Minister advised LAs to use alternative powers and funding to assist those with NRPF.</p> <p>28th May: Welsh Government announces £20m (revenue and capital) Phase 2 fund for councils to ensure that people helped into emergency accommodation since start of the pandemic don't return to streets (note: This includes the £10m March commitment – only £10m is new money)</p> <p>28th July: Welsh Government amends the value of the Phase 2 fund upwards to £50m (note: This is the total Welsh Government homelessness funding commitment between March and July)</p>	<p>19th March: Welsh Government published <i>COVID-19 guidance for homelessness and substance misuse services</i></p> <p>20th March: Welsh Government published written statement <i>COVID-19 Response – Homelessness and Rough Sleeping</i>. The Minister first accepted the latest Homelessness Action Group recommendations in principle. She then announced the £10m funding package.</p> <p>24th March: Welsh Government published new guidance on local authority support for people sleeping rough.</p> <p>28th April: Minister for Housing and Local Government published a letter containing guidance clarifying the Priority Need status of people sleeping rough. For the duration of the pandemic, people sleeping rough should be considered 'vulnerable' and entitled to accommodation</p> <p>15th May: Welsh Government published guidance on <i>Self-isolating in a hostel, night shelter or supported accommodation</i></p> <p>3rd June: Welsh Government published <i>Phase 2 Guidance on continuing to support homeless people during the coronavirus pandemic: local authority guidance</i></p>	<p>18th March: suspension of new evictions from social and private rented accommodation announced</p> <p>25th March: moratorium on residential evictions commences</p> <p>23rd July: Emergency legislation extends notice period for most residential evictions for a six month period until 30th September</p> <p>15th September: Extension of six month notice period for most residential evictions till end March 2021</p> <p>20th September: moratorium on residential evictions ends</p> <p>10th December: Welsh Government Regulations create 'winter truce' on evictions by preventing bailiffs executing eviction warrants between 11th Dec-11th Jan</p>

6. COVID-19 and homelessness: learning from crisis

This section constitutes the majority of the report and presents an analysis of the interview and survey data, alongside key government statistics where they are available. The analysis examines the impact of COVID-19 on homelessness trends and policy and practice responses before looking forwards to consider some of the challenges and opportunities that may lie on the horizon. The findings are discussed in relation to the following themes:

- Everyone in: an effective crisis response
- Shifting homelessness population trends during lockdown
- Strong leadership and partnership working
- Funding patterns and limitations
- Access to accommodation: new temporary provision but a stymied system
- Challenges in accommodating people with complex support needs
- COVID-related welfare and labour market measures
- Workforce and working practices
- The role of pre-crisis policy and legislation
- On the horizon

Everyone in: an effective crisis response

The overarching conclusion across all three GB nations is that the immediate crisis response to homelessness during the pandemic was timely and effective. Underpinning this response was a shift in the perception of homelessness – it was conceptualised as a public health issue and this prompted interventions characterised by a sense of urgency and inclusiveness not previously witnessed in any GB nation response to homelessness.

I think Wales' response to this pandemic in terms of homelessness has been fantastic... leadership at the top, funding and the hard, hard work and graft and the intelligence of people on the ground, there's not a lot to fault... overall the response here in Wales has been very positive and that's not just from one person or one bit of government, it's everyone pulling together, a real sense of unity, leadership and hard work. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

...the speed around the resourcing, the relaxation of benefits... and the kind of help to local authorities, the focus on no recourse to public funds and easing on that is absolutely... That's been really good, and there's been a real relaxation, of just let's get the job done whatever it takes. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

Significantly, this response was underpinned by a new conviction about what can and should be achieved. One interviewee described the shift in mindset in Scotland: *"there has been a kind of can-do attitude across the board, which has been from local authority, from Scottish Government and from the third sector, and from the private sector"* (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020).

Whilst the remainder of this report explores the nuances of responses to homelessness during COVID-19, both their strengths and weaknesses, one crucial measure of success has been the avoidance of a significant loss of life in the homeless population (ONS, 2020), particularly amongst those individuals with pre-existing health conditions living on the streets or in unsuitable shared accommodation. Overall COVID infection rates have remained low amongst homeless people in England at least (Lewer et al, 2020), in stark contrast to the position in parts of the US, for example, where it is reported that up to two-thirds of the shelter residents in some cities have been infected during the pandemic (Mosites et al, 2020). This outcome was of course welcomed by key informants across the board:

What we've not seen, one of the things we feared at the start of this pandemic was that the virus would spread within the homeless population and we would have more deaths and that hasn't happened...if we look at what we were worried about at the [onset of the pandemic]...this virus spreading through the homeless populations in our cities, we stopped that happening. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

The treatment of homelessness as an urgent public health issue and the apparent overarching success of the crisis response did prompt some frustration within the homelessness sector, however, particularly amongst third sector interviewees, regarding why it took a pandemic to prompt this type of response. An interviewee in Scotland commented: *'It's great that we had 250 people in our hotels every night of the week, but why in the hell could we not have done that up to now'* (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020).

Shifting homelessness population trends during lockdown

Most English local authorities reported an increase in the numbers of both rough sleepers (81%) and single adults (75%) seeking homelessness assistance in the initial lockdown, as compared to the equivalent period the year before. A smaller proportion of local authorities (38%) reported an increase in presentations from young people under 25.

Key informants across GB reported similar trends, which they attributed in part to COVID-19 specific pressures, and to the existence of the Everyone In programme in England and equivalents in Wales and Scotland. However, stakeholders often also emphasised the role that these initiatives had played in bringing to light pre-existing 'hidden homelessness', with many local authorities in England seemingly taken aback by the sheer scale of need that the pandemic uncovered (see also Boobis & Albanese, 2020; NAO, 2021), while similar sentiments were also expressed elsewhere in GB:

We're talking about people who are probably in the cohort that we would label as hidden homeless, people who were sofa surfing or living in all sorts of situations that were unsuitable, overcrowded etc, but they were just trying to get by and didn't see themselves as homeless in that sense, didn't see themselves as being entitled to presenting as homeless and getting assistance. I think what's happened during lockdown is that a lot of those arrangements have broken down and have been really strained by households in quarantine. So, there's an increasing number of people who feel forced to say I can't sleep on that sofa anymore or live in this overcrowded situation. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

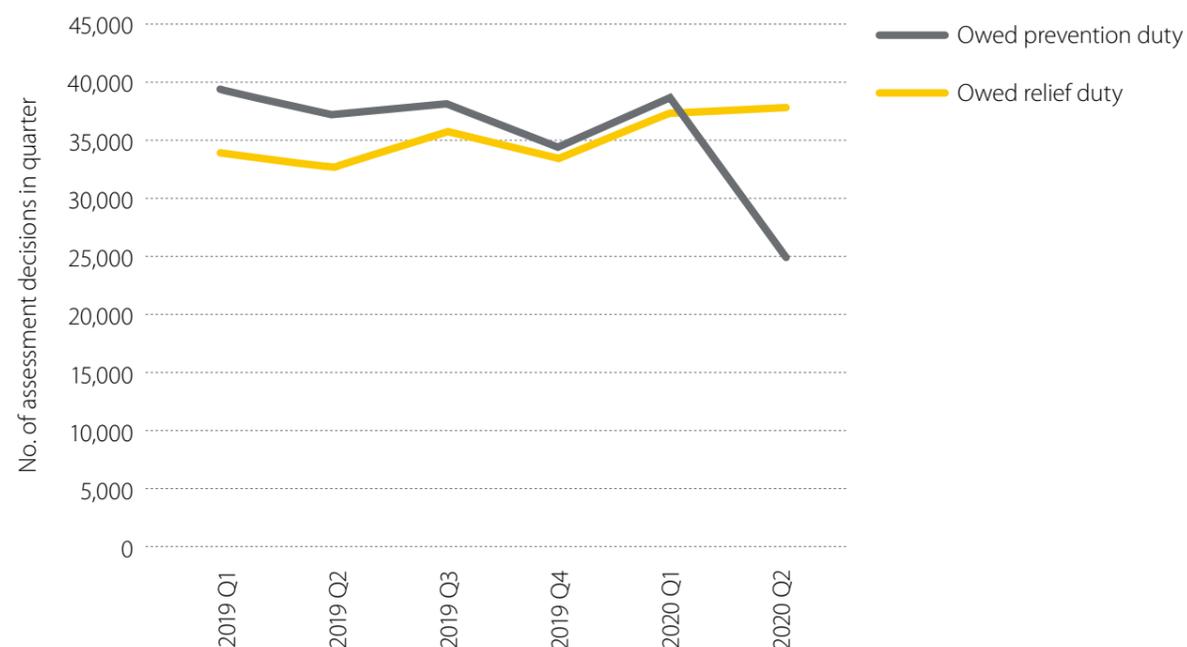
We've had most of the increases come from single person households, mostly male... So, people that have been sofa surfing or just staying with family and friends have been the biggest reason that people have come forward. Mainly because families don't want to keep people who have to sleep on their settee and increasing the impact of COVID. Some have been asked to leave because they haven't complied with the restrictions that have been placed on us in terms of lockdown, etc. So, it has been a significant increase for us. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

One key, but relatively geographically concentrated, group reported to have come forward for assistance in larger numbers than hitherto was EEA and other migrants lacking access to UK welfare benefits. In Scotland, it was reported that some homelessness EEA nationals had lost their job and also their accommodation as a result of COVID-19:

...EEA nationals... a lot of them... were ...in various forms of employment, both formal and informal... which carried some form of accommodation along with that. COVID triggered the loss of that employment. ...Around 40 to 50 percent of the [homeless] people that have come through the hotels in [Glasgow and Edinburgh] probably [had] no recourse to public funds. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Notwithstanding the extraordinary levels of homelessness activity associated with the Everyone In programme, the initial COVID-19 lockdown period saw a marked drop in total (eligible applicants) assessed by English local authorities within the official 'statutory homelessness system'. As Figure 3 below indicates, this was entirely due to a sharp reduction in households owed a 'prevention' duty (i.e. those threatened with homelessness within 56 days), with the numbers applying who were already homeless and therefore owed a 'relief' duty remaining fairly steady.

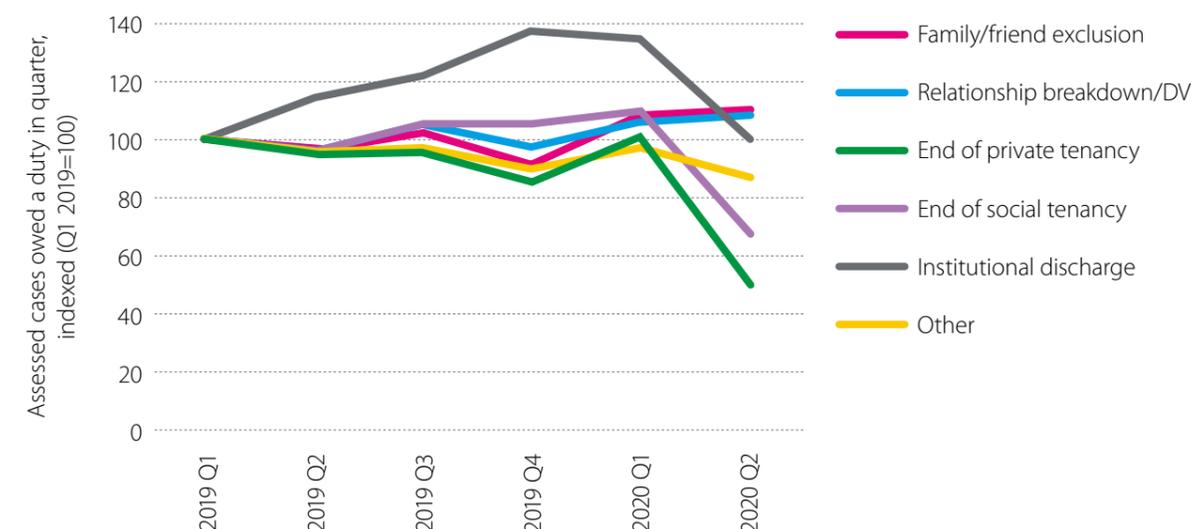
Figure 3. Recent trends in households owed prevention or relief duties in England, Q1 2019-Q2 2020*



Source: MHCLG homelessness statistics * Q1 and Q2 relates to calendar not financial quarters.

As Figure 4 reveals, the number of statutory homelessness cases in England resulting from the ending of both private and social tenancies plummeted as did, interestingly, those associated with institutional discharge (possibly reflecting this group accessing direct support via Everyone In without being formally assessed as statutorily homeless). People accepted as homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of family/friend exclusions, and relationship breakdown or domestic violence, on the other hand, remained relatively stable throughout the initial lockdown quarter, despite stakeholder concerns that domestic abuse victims in particular may have been facing additional barriers in seeking help during lockdown (see further below).

Figure 4. Households owed a prevention or relief duty in England: recent trends on main immediate reason for homelessness, 2019-20



Source: MHCLG homelessness statistics

These data make clear the crucial role played by the evictions moratorium in stemming the flow of households into homelessness during the pandemic. Key informant interviewees across GB concurred, with the moratoria and the extension of notice periods considered vital in avoiding a massive spike in family homelessness in particular during the pandemic:

It was essential to have the evictions ban... it would have been exceptionally difficult to find family-size accommodation for anybody during the pandemic... It was terrifying housing directors, the idea of that. So, it was essential... (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

The relevant piece was about pausing evictions from any type from renting, private, social renting and some of the changes to breaks in mortgage payments, all that kind of stuff. That's been incredibly useful for preventing more people becoming homeless, getting kicked out of their house. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

There are no official statistics yet available in Scotland or Wales on homelessness trends since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Well-placed key informants, though, identified trends consistent with the English data, including a continuation in, or even intensification of, homelessness pressures arising from domestic abuse, relationship breakdown, and family and friend exclusions:

I think generally in the first few weeks of lockdown there wasn't a remarkable increase of homelessness, and in many of the local authorities in Scotland there was actually quite a dip as people didn't present themselves as homeless. As lockdown has progressed... more and more people have been unable to maintain their interim temporary accommodation... with friends and family. We've certainly seen an upsurge in domestic abuse enquiries. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

So initially we saw a big drop off in applications, and then we've seen it come up... it's come up because of things like relationship breakdown and people just not being able to stay with friends and family anymore. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Strong leadership and partnership working

Ministers and civil servants across GB showed unprecedented leadership on the issue of homelessness in the early stages of the pandemic. Particularly in England and Wales, the government response was notable for its speed, clarity of direction, an injection of funding and a desire to work in partnership. The Scottish Government crisis response was characterised by a less sudden policy and practice shift because, we would contend, the pre-pandemic context was more inclusive, particularly in relation to the accommodation provided to single person households, and so there was less necessity for a large-scale emergency response.

The direction handed down to local authorities from Ministers in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London at the outset (March 2020) was unambiguous that everyone should be accommodated, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) or otherwise ineligible for UK welfare benefits and housing assistance. Moreover, accommodation was expected to be single room wherever possible, and to allow for social distancing in all cases. This new directive was a particularly significant departure from usual practice in England and Wales, where local authorities are not under a statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation to all eligible homeless households, as in Scotland. In all three nations interviewees perceived the direction and funding forthcoming from central government to have been a key pillar of the crisis response:

I think the fact that there was a clear directive was helpful in the first place, because at least it gave a very clear message to local authorities. Thinking about what was achieved in terms of accommodating people in a very short space of time, I think having that visible political leadership was important. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

I would say one of the big things that had an impact on that was a top down directive that said everyone has to be off the streets. So that was from the UK Government and then Scottish Government saying everyone off the streets backed by some grants, then there was money put towards that in terms of getting the hotel beds. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

I think leadership was really important. And I'd say at different levels, I think the leadership from the Minister, you know, she was unwavering in her support for this, but was also very, very clear about her expectations. At no point did it feel like a fudge in the phase one response, it felt like she responded very quickly, got the funding that was needed and had very clear direction for local authorities and support providers across Wales and that was invaluable really in a crisis situation. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

In England specifically, while there was much praise for the early response from central government, as early as May 2020 key informants were flagging what they viewed as 'mixed messages' from MHCLG. In particular, a letter to local authorities on 28th May reminded them that they could only lawfully accommodate people who were ineligible for benefits following an individual assessment of risks to life. Some councils appeared to have interpreted this communication as encouragement to take a tougher line on accommodating NRPF groups:

...although there was that very decisive initial response from MCHLG around the 'Everyone In' message, it almost feels now that there's been a step back from national government and very much like, 'Over to your local areas to now do it'... local authorities left to work out what to do with people who ordinarily they wouldn't be accommodating, so largely people with no local connection, people with no recourse to public funds. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

This perceived ambiguity in the central Government position resulted in growing variation in local authority practice across England as the crisis evolved, notwithstanding a change in the Homelessness Code of Guidance advising local authorities to respond sympathetically to those made vulnerable as a result of the pandemic:

So there are still some [local authorities] who are accommodating on the basis of we're still in a public health emergency, but a lot of [councils] have gone back to ... accommodating only in the cases of statutory homelessness. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

Local authorities and third sector organisations also played important leadership roles. In Wales, Cymorth Cymru, the umbrella body for homelessness organisations, became a focal point for guidance and the sharing of good practice on a range of COVID and homelessness-related issues, while Homeless Network Scotland spearheaded an 'Everyone Home' collective of thirty organisations to coordinate policy and practice development.

Operationally, interviewees in all GB nations described how Third Sector organisations stepped up and led on the delivery and adaptation of support services, including the development of new services:

And I think support providers have just massively impressed me during this. The speed of their response, the strategic thinking about risk scenarios and how they might respond to those sorts of things, making sure that staff were skilled up or had the equipment that they need, that they understood the risks and were protecting both people using services and people delivering services, that they were considering prioritisation of services, what to do in worst case scenarios, that they were actively sharing information with each other, that they were transforming and adapting services in a way that they never had to do so before. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

There was widespread praise for the commitment and resilience shown, too, by local authorities:

I didn't expect them to respond that quickly, I really didn't... Absolutely astonishing, and all credit to them. Usually it's very mixed, but pretty much every local authority rose to the challenge... that was amazing. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

Collaboration between sectors and organisations was a defining characteristic of the crisis response. As one interviewee in Scotland stated; *'I think what a number of people are reporting was very quick and improved collaboration within sectors, as well as across sectors. I've got no doubt that's going to be one of the things that will be drawn out of any learning that's going to come from this pandemic'* (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020). In Scotland and Wales government officials regularly convened meetings with key actors from across homelessness and allied sectors. However, it was at local operational level that partnerships were most visible, including in England, where MHCLG-employed advisers switched from an advisory to a *'hands-on'* approach, working closely with local authorities and the voluntary sector to secure emergency accommodation, including negotiating directly with hotel chains to secure rooms (NAO, 2021: 7).

Strikingly, too, homelessness during the pandemic appeared to be addressed as a cross-sectoral priority in all three GB nations, rather than just a 'housing issue':

Every local authority has a Cell Coordinator who generally has been Housing Options Manager... and they coordinate the work locally around getting everybody in, dealing with the homelessness response, working with all the partners... Now some have a meeting every week that actually virtually meets and they'll have health, police, mental health, substance misuse, probation, social services, housing, sitting on that group... and everybody in the meeting is saying this will carry on, this won't end after COVID, we are going to keep this going. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

I think during the crisis there has been a relaxation of professional boundaries... and a desire from heads of service... to say, okay we need to... focus on the most vulnerable... much more horizontal connections and collaborative working that we've seen and that's extended to housing associations... so that's been really positive and we can't lose that. If we do go back to more professional boundaries and siloed working that will be a barrier to progress, so I think there is a determination to not let that happen. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Yet, there were also examples of persistent SILOS and failures to effectively collaborate. For example, in at least one Welsh and one English local authority, Public Health and the local authority were competing to commission temporary accommodation. A key area of improvement reported in at least some areas of England was much closer relationships between the homelessness sector and local Public Health and NHS colleagues:

I think one of the strengths is the fact that health have been working with us, so... it's been fantastic in terms of being able to get people full health assessments... working with public health and with the NHS directly I think has been fantastic, and sets the ground for housing and health to come together much more. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

For some individuals who were homeless and facing alcohol and drug addiction the pandemic had a positive impact. Opportunities to generate income on the streets came to an abrupt end and drug supply chains across the UK were disrupted. This created an opportunity for substance misuse services to work hand in hand with homelessness services, overcoming pre-crisis delays and barriers to effective partnership working:

I think in [local authority], the figures that they've reported are around sort of 60 people started drug treatment with them in emergency accommodation which is absolutely fantastic. So I know that's one of the examples where the substance misuse services locally worked really closely with the Council and with the other partners to connect with those emergency accommodation sites to do that active engagement with people to take the opportunity to encourage people to start on that treatment pathway. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

It's the fact that you can't get any money on the street anyway [during lockdown]... It's the fact the public are not doing stupid things which perpetuate it... People who would never take scripts, for example, because they didn't have to, because they were earning enough money to have their substance of choice, are now taking scripts. So there are good things that have happened as a result of this. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

Volunteer and faith groups, which typically provide food and other provisions to people sleeping on the streets, have often operated in parallel and in conflict with local authorities and Third Sector organisations. However, during the pandemic they were either closed down or brought effectively into partnership, their activities coordinated to ensure people were provided with food and other essential goods in their accommodation:

In other authorities where you perhaps had a little bit more of an antagonistic relationship, so you've got some authorities where you've got these more grassroots humanitarian groups who love to give out tents and sleeping bags, and think the local authority's doing nothing, actually this has broken down some of those barriers a little bit and they've been in the tent a bit more, so that's been helpful. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

...when the decision to ask all of the groups that do soup runs and provide food in town to close – which came from the council and the police... mainly on a public health basis... Groups of people coming together and then leading, perhaps, what's called street lifestyles... that's gone... it's looking for that opportunity... to support people in their homes and not make people come into the middle of town and be served soup by people in yellow jackets and high-viz. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

Funding patterns and limitations

The significant and unprecedented injection of funding into homelessness services during the crisis was unanimously welcomed and enabled local authorities and their partners in the third sector to deliver the achievements outlined in this report. However, there were specific issues raised in England and Wales, where new crisis investment was highest and needed the most. In Wales funding was short-term and this caused problems for local authority commissioners who were hampered from committing revenue funds to much needed longer-term staffing:

I think for me it's just the funding issue, yet again, and you know this, we know this needs properly resourcing and continuous funding... so nobody would argue that the money's not going to be well received, and I'm sure we can spend it, but it's what you can do with something in six months, you can't plan anything, you can't do anything that's long term because you just don't know what's ... it's going to be very difficult to employ people because they have short term contracts... I get that we've got a new government coming in in May, but if a new government comes in one of the things that will be brilliant is to say right, this is your allocation for the next five years, this is the plan, this is where we're going, and let's fund it properly from the start, and that would be really good. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

In England, the proliferation of short-term funding pots, with very fast turnaround bidding windows, focused overwhelmingly on rough sleeping, was a key stakeholder concern (see also Boobis & Albanese, 2020). With regard to the Next Steps Accommodation Programme specifically, the imbalance between capital and revenue funding was a source of considerable disquiet, as was the requirement to spend the capital budget within a highly restricted timeframe (see also NAO, 2021). This meant, essentially, that the capital investments enabled by the programme were limited to acquisitions or renovations already in train, while only a limited expansion in staffing and support costs could be supported by the relatively small-scale injection of new revenue funding:

There's no way from getting around the fact that we need more supported housing and more revenue funding to go alongside those units... a lot of people who are in that higher needs group... people in need of supported, long-term accommodation... You can't just send these people off to the PRS. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

...the money has got to be spent really quickly, it has to be delivered really quickly... There's generally a very poor understanding still in government about capital projects... some things you... can't make happen in three months... I do think we feel it's a bit of a missed opportunity to do something a bit different... particularly with Housing First. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

Access to accommodation: new temporary provision but a stymied system

The commitment to get everyone in prompted an unprecedented response by the homelessness sector to secure sufficient, mostly temporary, accommodation. Local authorities and their partners in national government, the third sector, RSLs, and the private sector took swift action to commission a very wide range of new temporary accommodation. However, the move on process was stymied by a lengthy interruption of social housing allocations and moves within the PRS, though this did vary across the country and between landlords.

The urgent need to commission additional temporary accommodation was most pronounced in England and Wales, whereas in Scotland there was less of a gap between existing provision and newly identified need. In Scotland, the most frequently cited example of new temporary provision was in Edinburgh, where hotel accommodation replaced a shelter. By contrast, the types and volume of additional accommodation sourced across local authorities in England and Wales varied markedly, reflected local contexts, and included hotels, B&Bs, holiday lets, university accommodation, and RSL properties:

I guess what Welsh government kind of said to local authorities is get the accommodation that's available within your area and that looks very different depending on the local authority. So, in [local authority] they took over two big hotels, in [local authority] it was utilising the B&Bs. In some other areas of Wales, it was more looking at things like university accommodation or holiday lets that were clearly not going to be used during the pandemic, so it was quite localised in terms of the type of accommodation that was provided to suit each setting. And I think the guidance made it clear what sort of accommodation the Welsh government expected, but it wasn't prescriptive about a particular type. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

Commercial hotel rooms requisitioned for use by homeless people played an important role in many urban areas of England, where the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic made hotel rooms a more affordable option than would normally be the case:

...there is an offer for everybody, and it's not a shelter offer... Most authorities have taken over quite large swathes of decent quality hotels, so that people are getting a room, en-suite, three meals a day, somewhere to bathe, and there is some support there as well." (England, Third sector Interviewee, May 2020)

However, hotels were not local authorities' first choice; they were generally used in the absence of other, more appropriate (and cheaper) options:

We don't want to have anybody in hotels... we've put people in council tenancies, hostels, or private-rented sector tenancies with Housing First support... (South England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, Autumn 2020)

Early in the crisis many housing associations made their empty properties available on an emergency, temporary basis:

What some local housing associations have done, and I think this is quite generally across Scotland is they very positively said, "right we're sitting on empty properties, local authority you need temporary accommodation, can you use them for a period of time". So that's been really positive. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

However, securing this extraordinary volume of additional temporary accommodation during a pandemic was not without its challenges. There were accounts of some local authorities facing particular difficulties commissioning hotel accommodation, due to issues such as insurance liability, rooms already being booked out – often by health services, and hotel owners being uncertain about whether they were able to remain open. Ultimately, the lack of temporary accommodation options meant that there were instances, at least in England and Wales, where not everyone was accommodated swiftly. There were also challenges associated with the suitability of the emergency accommodation for particular population subgroups – this is discussed in the next section of the report:

It was really hard at the start because I was ringing up [hotel]...to see if we can book it out. What I kept hearing was that...they've put a stop on us letting any rooms which I understood because they were unsure whether they would be using it for workers, or patients, or whatever. That then meant that we were really running out of options. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Whilst the major challenge was sourcing additional emergency accommodation, to a lesser extent some existing temporary accommodation also had to be either decommissioned or adapted. Across GB the majority of the existing temporary provision is not large-scale communal, shared sleeping space provision that would create particular challenges for complying with social distancing requirements. However, just over half of local authorities (52%) in England reported at least some dormitory-style homelessness accommodation in their area pre-pandemic. Such accommodation was usually provided/managed by faith groups, or by national or local charities, and was often opened only in winter or severe weather. Public Health England declared such accommodation unsafe for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis, but has agreed that shelters could be reopened in winter 2020/21 if transformed to offer self-contained sleeping arrangements. Subsequent MHCLG guidance made clear that, even if reconfigured in this way, night shelters should only be used as a last resort, where more appropriate accommodation cannot be sourced. Only 13 English local authorities (9%) surveyed in summer/autumn 2020 expected that facilities with shared sleeping arrangements would be used in their area beyond the pandemic. Those that intended to reopen such accommodation explained that they had little choice for legal or financial reasons:

Once Public Health England guidance allows for night shelters to operate safely there will be a need to have this resource for those with NRPF. (London, Statutory Sector Interviewee, Autumn 2020)

Assuming that Public Health guidelines allow it, we would return to Winter Night Shelter model using shared sleeping arrangements, because we have no other alternatives available that are financially viable. (South England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, Autumn 2020)

While more common in larger cities in England, in Scotland and Wales too there were examples of accommodation with shared sleeping space in the immediate pre-COVID period. Changes introduced in this provision during the pandemic included shared rooms becoming single occupancy rooms, whilst some shelters were closed and people were moved into alternative accommodation:

So we run a shelter and... when we got a live COVID case in staff and a live COVID case with a guest early on in March, we said look, we probably need to close because you can't say to the mass of the population who have got the privilege of accommodation go self-isolate, but then this lot you just keep sleeping cheek by jowl in those places, in the shelters, it's not acceptable. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

So it wasn't that services were necessarily shut, but they weren't allowed to operate in the way that they'd done so before, so floor space was ended and some of the shared room spaces were either ended or there were fewer numbers and units. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

Following the initial focus on sourcing temporary accommodation, one of the most pressing issues to emerge was access to 'move on' or settled accommodation. Social housing allocations in many areas largely halted at the onset of the pandemic. Contributory factors were said to include the evictions moratorium, which had contributed to a downturn in lettable vacancies, as well as lockdown restrictions.

Similar points were made in Scotland and Wales, where interviewees described how letting activity largely paused. Even where empty properties were identified, there were many barriers to a successful move on, including; lack of access to white goods and furniture, lack of removal services, furloughing and subsequent lack of maintenance staff, and difficulties sourcing building materials for housing repairs.

And then with RSLs some stopped doing allocations altogether unless it was an emergency, often furloughing maintenance staff, a lot of maintenance staff and keeping just a skeleton crew, but things then like plasterboard suddenly went like really scarce and other building materials, so you couldn't turn over a void because you couldn't get hold of the stuff, so really weird things like that that you probably wouldn't think of. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

So most of those smaller end certainly and maybe medium size RSLs have literally shut down their businesses during the lockdown because they didn't have the means to continue letting properties, they're reliant on smaller contractors who had to shut down as well. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

However, the situation seemed to evolve as the crisis unfolded, with social landlords working hard to re-commence lettings, and in many cases giving additional priority to homeless people as they did so. Examples were given of amended allocation policies that gave increased or overwhelming priority to homeless households, usually for a time limited period:

Initially most of the social landlords shut down so it was impossible to access social rented accommodation apart from a very few exceptions. However, quite quickly the landlords worked very effectively with us to make direct nominations for homeless customers to help address the large increase in homelessness caused by COVID and now (end July) we are almost back to normal with social rented housing access. (South England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, Autumn 2020)

This Council embarked with partners on a project to allocate all voids to homeless clients for a limited period. (North England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, Autumn 2020)

So what they [RSLs] were doing was making 100 percent of their void properties available to their local authorities for essentially housing people who would otherwise become homeless as a result. (Wales, RSL Interviewee, June 2020)

Interviewees elsewhere in GB gave examples of local authorities continuing to make new social lettings available to homeless households, albeit at a reduced scale and pace relative to pre-pandemic. Also, some of the temporary provision made available through housing associations in Scotland will be 'flipped' to a Scottish Secure Tenancy if households wish to remain. And, in some parts of the country, including London, the PRS has become a more viable option due to an increase in LHA rates (discussed in more detail later in the report) and new lettings becoming available due to reductions in local demand for short-term rental properties associated with tourist markets.

We have still managed to get people into private rented properties but it has required a lot of planning but we've done in different ways. Landlords have videoed the properties themselves, sent photos into the team, they've shared it with people, the team have gone in and carried out an inventory separately, so, it can be done. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Despite some positive move on experiences, the dominant picture across GB is one of limited and/or patchy access to settled accommodation and a burgeoning population living in temporary and uncertain situations.

Challenges in accommodating people with complex support needs

Across much of England and Wales a lack of existing suitable accommodation and support services created particular challenges in accommodating people with complex support needs. For example, people with significant substance misuse, mental health and behavioural support needs were placed into B&B/hotel accommodation with limited support. Consequently, there were cases of antisocial and criminal behaviour in these accommodation settings and ultimately people's health and well-being were put at risk. There were also challenges associated with hotel staff struggling to cope with complex needs for which they had no training:

We need to be able to support these individuals in the right way, but the accommodation settings don't lend themselves to that, we haven't got the accommodation settings, we haven't got the level of support that we need to do it with... We weren't ready were we, we weren't geared up to it. But one of the big things that I think really hit, and I don't think we've really bottomed out yet, is the behaviour, some of the anti-social behaviour, and I think that's really, really hit staff. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

[We] had a really, really high number of evictions early on...lots of people who came in early on, it was a quick turnaround, quick mobilisation. We didn't have the support in place mostly around drug and alcohol... you're the hotel manager or you're the staff, and you've got these guys coming in off the streets in states that you've never seen before. [Hotel staff] tolerance levels early on were extremely low, so that kind of combination was quite toxic I think, but almost unavoidable because of the speed...Unfortunately... we had a week of spitting, people spitting at staff and security, so those people will not be coming back in. Where it's things like kicking off/aggressive behaviour where you can tie it into some of the wider support needs and that person recognises it and is committed to not doing it again [that's different]. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

The absence of appropriate accommodation and support to some extent reflects the status quo prior to the epidemic: in England and Wales there was no duty on local authorities to provide temporary or settled accommodation to these individuals. In Scotland, where homeless people with complex support needs are routinely entitled to temporary, and indeed permanent, accommodation (even if in practice not all local authorities always honour this duty, see Watts et al (2018)), this challenge was less apparent.

A small proportion of individuals with complex support needs were not accommodated, largely due to a refusal to leave the streets. In these cases, a harm reduction approach was generally pursued. In Wales, outreach teams provided information to individuals on specific actions they could take to reduce physical contact, whilst also continuing to pursue efforts to get people in. A similar strategy was adopted in England, but local authority estimates suggest that substantial numbers also returned to rough sleeping having abandoned or been evicted from hotel and other emergency accommodation (NAO, 2021):

...there was probably about six seconds in London where you had almost everybody in... Now those numbers are back to around 500 across London, of people who are thought to be sleeping rough, which is a mix of entrenched rough sleepers who have left hotel accommodation...and new flow... (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

...we've provided accommodation to everybody, but they've gone back to the streets for four nights, five nights, during that week, to beg or to socialise or whatever... Some of these were the most hardened rough sleepers, out sleeping for ten, 15 years... To try and get them in accommodation was bloody difficult... [and] they don't sleep there all of the time, they'll go back to the streets. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

However, a different take on the cohort leaving emergency accommodation was offered by this well-placed national observer:

If you look at who has been leaving the hotels, including quite early on, it was people with a high level of need at one end, and at the other end people who didn't really want to be in the hotels anyway and probably didn't need them, so as soon as things had calmed down, they went back to staying with their mates... (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

Of the three interviewees in the Destitution study who were accommodated in commercial hotels as part of the Everyone In initiative, one interviewee was still living in this accommodation and reasonably content with it at the point of interview; another, who had been sleeping rough for years, had returned to streets, having disliked the constraints of living inside; while the final interviewee found the hotel environment chaotic and distressing and has been very glad to be moved on to a calmer environment in supported accommodation:

I was put in [a hotel] that was nice... they made it out as if, 'Oh, we've got you a lovely place to go, don't worry, there's no rats. Brand-new environment,' kind of thing, which is what I was looking for to change my life and just have a normal lifestyle without surrounded by all these different bad characters... It just became a big, horrible shambles. (Male, 25-45)

As this quote highlights, getting 'everybody in' to accommodation was only the initial challenge; supporting people to remain inside required significant further action. At the most basic level, without easy access to decent food, residents would not have been able to remain in their accommodation. This was, therefore, a major priority and a logistical challenge to local authorities and their partners in all three GB nations. The narrative emerging from this study is that local authorities, in collaboration with the Third Sector, responded effectively and at speed. In some accommodation settings, such as hotels, this meant paying the hotel to deliver three meals a day, whilst in other contexts, such as across B&Bs and some independent accommodation, volunteers were mobilised to deliver food parcels and basic cooking facilities, such as microwaves, were also sometimes provided:

We had to completely reconfigure our food programme so that we would, so we were a FareShare franchise holder, so we increased the levels of delivery of food, surplus food to over 180 community organisations from about 10 tonnes a week to about 50 tonnes a week, we converted our training kitchen into a production kitchen and are cooking and delivering about 1,000 meals a day. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

We increased costs in B&Bs to cover three meals a day, again to relieve people needing to leave the establishment... So, some of the food parcels were going into hostels, some of the food parcels were going to people living in their own homes, or if we'd made arrangement for somebody who was NFA (No Fixed Abode) to stay there, we would support that arrangement with a food parcel. So, again, trying to provide as much support as we can. The microwaves and things just went out to everybody that was in temporary accommodation. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Early in the pandemic response, local authorities realised action would need to be taken to support and encourage people to remain in their accommodation – it would not be possible to rely on the legal deterrents and public health notices instructing people to remain inside. People experiencing homelessness were living in very different contexts to the majority of the housed population, with few of the attractions of home that might encourage a person to remain:

In London, getting those hotels set up was a real challenge, but as soon as they were set up, we were then trying to move people through as quickly as possible, and the reason we wanted to do that was because it's really hard for people to stay in a hotel when in essence there's somebody knocking on their door three times a day to give them a meal, but that's all that can happen. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

In response, local authorities, with support from third sector partners, delivered activities and items – sometimes referred to as 'boredom buster packs'. For some people, this included providing a phone, a particularly important intervention given that access to GPs and many other support services were remote at that time. The effectiveness of these specific interventions is yet to be evaluated but interviewees generally perceived them to be useful.

COVID-related welfare and labour market measures

The successive "furlough" job retention and support schemes have been vital in mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on employment and incomes. They provided much more generous support than income maintenance welfare benefits and helped to prevent the UC system being overwhelmed administratively. The initial furlough scheme was also, according to our English local authority survey, crucial in mitigating homelessness risks during the pandemic: 80% of respondents considered it 'very' or 'somewhat' important in this regard.

UC was the main safety net for people who lost jobs during the initial lockdown but were not benefiting from the government's furlough scheme, as well as for low-income groups more generally. The government's decision at the start of the pandemic to increase the standard allowance of UC and Working Tax Credits by £20 per week until April 2021 was widely welcomed across GB, though concerns were expressed about the 'cliff edge' when this ended (no equivalent uplift has been made to legacy benefit rates).

What has made a positive difference, from what I hear, is the – for existing UC claimants, the extra money that's come through UC at the moment... Certainly our support workers in North Wales are finding that things are easier, but the worry is that people are going to get too dependent on that higher rate, and then when it goes back down they're going to struggle again... (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Particular importance was attached to the increase in LHA rates to cover the bottom 30 per cent of private rents:

The raising of the LHA rates is a game changer, this is really helpful. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

However, the benefits of the LHA increase were undercut for some households by the offsetting effect of the total benefit cap, which particularly affects the support available to larger families living in more expensive housing markets areas:

We were pleased about seeing the LHA increases and it did help... But... the amount of households now caught by the total benefits cap has just skyrocketed, and that's becoming the key limiting factor to securing accommodation for a lot of people. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

But the bit that has brought everyone together as a concern, is the effect of the benefit cap, and the idea that the 30th percentile change might increase the amount of money that people can get, but some people are then falling foul of the benefit cap, so it's either no net effect, or in some cases it's been worse because of the way the rules are operating, because they hit the cap. So, that's been a change that I guess it was always there... as part of that accumulative impact, but I think it's a more specific priority for us now, it's something we'd like to see changed. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Other COVID-related measures that were widely considered important in preventing or minimising homelessness included the temporary suspension of benefit sanctions, the pausing of (most) debt-related benefit deductions, and the provision of additional Local Welfare Assistance funding. Note that both sanctions and debt deductions have now resumed, but when interviewed in the midst of the initial lockdown, UC recipients with experience of destitution and homelessness conveyed their relief at the relaxation of benefit conditionality:

They sent me a message saying we'll keep paying your Universal Credit and all that, but don't do anything, just stay indoors. Like I said, they've pretty much relaxed everything, but just made everyone aware that they're still going to be paying and all that. (Male, 25-45)

Workforce and working practices

Frontline third sector homelessness service staff played a crucial role in the pandemic response; often going beyond their usual duties, adapting their working practices and facing personal risks, in order to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Interviewees heaped praise on these key workers:

In terms of our staff, I think it's the one time... I've been rendered speechless on a regular basis in the last 13 weeks or 14 weeks, about how to actually articulate what people have done and how willing they have been to do so. We've had a huge commitment from staff... all of that investment in that values-based culture over many years, was never more evident. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

... getting up every day and basically putting themselves and their families at risk from a global pandemic because they care deeply about providing support to people. Absolutely extraordinary... they've worked longer shifts so that a lot of them have adapted shift patterns in order to work the lockdown guidance or to make sure that they're operating within work bubbles so that there's not overlap of different groups of staff. So they've changed shift patterns, despite having kids that are home schooled and their partner working and all the rest of it. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

There was also praise for the role played by frontline local authority staff from their managers:

The [LA] has responded to the crisis in an extraordinary way... throughout the pandemic we have met the housing needs of the city, including temporarily housing rough sleepers and ensuring essential homeless services continue. However, this only has been possible due to the commitment and drive of our staff. Staff capacity has been pushed to the limit, almost non-stop for months, with particular strain in our rough sleeping and housing options teams. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

I feel [authority] has responded superbly to this pandemic, although it has been extraordinarily difficult and some staff have had a much harder time than others... (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

A very early change in everyday support services involved the shift to remote working wherever possible on the part of both local authorities and Third sector organisations. Local authority survey respondents were generally very positive about the shift to remote/online working, feeling that it was more efficient and had few if any negative consequences for service users, though the need for some continued face-to-face capacity for more vulnerable service users was acknowledged:

Homeless officers have been working from home since the pandemic and will continue to do so until further notice. This has worked well and customers have been happy with a telephone service. This will continue and we will look at ways of improving our remote service. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

We do not see staff returning to the office in the near future and expect to continue to deliver services online and via telephone for the majority of our customers going forward. Vulnerable customers will still be able to access face to face. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

Against this, many service users in the Destitution study reported acute problems getting in touch with local authority services (albeit not necessarily homelessness services) when council offices were closed, and specifically with authorities' use of telephone lines for customer services which many interviewees found expensive to use. The loss of face-to-face contact with health and other services certainly seemed to impact much more negatively on homeless people with complex support needs:

It's normally about my mental health problems I want to talk [to] them about. Talking to them over the phone is not the best way. (Male, 25-45)

I used to go to Narcotics Anonymous. They're not doing those groups anymore. They're doing them on the computer, but I don't really talk when I go to a group because I'm new to it, so I wouldn't really feel comfortable talking one-on-one. (Female, 25-45)

For frontline third sector support services this shift to online working meant swift action to ensure both support workers and people being supported had access to the technology that would enable remote support. While the message from frontline services was that any changes to post-pandemic working practices must still include face-to-face support, especially for more vulnerable groups, the quotations below illustrate some of the positive impacts of this enforced shift in working practice:

So I think the main thing was a lot of services going to virtual delivery... Obviously a bit of work had to be done around projects and people that didn't have the digital services that they needed to do that. I know that services, well, first of all had set up a load of their staff to do digital delivery, make sure they had the equipment, make sure they had the access to files and systems online but also some projects that might not have had wi-fi, get that installed, purchase or get donated smartphones or things like that for people using the services so that they could stay in touch. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

Yeah, so there're some other things which have been really interesting. So, for example, getting folk mobile phones and starting to do remote support actually has had some pluses as well as some downsides. I mean clearly you don't want to go right to remote support, but making sure that people have that kit with the right level of data means that you can talk more often and provide actually more instant support than the model of simply being about face to face meetings... And, interestingly, in our Conflict Resolution Services we've found that young people in particular are in some ways engaging more through the conversations, digital conversations than they would do otherwise, partly just because it's their world so they're much more used to digital conversations. (Scotland, Third sector Interviewee, June 2020)

The positive accounts of a committed and agile workforce were accompanied by two main concerns. First, many services faced considerable difficulties accessing appropriate PPE at the very start of the pandemic and where PPE could be secured there were uncertainties about its suitability. It seems homelessness services were not always given the same priority as other health and social care services.

The PPE was a real challenge, and the testing regime was a real challenge, so there was a long time where we were struggling to get PPE, and as far as I'm aware there wasn't a level of stockpiling that there should've been, and the routes in were difficult. Again there was a bit of gatekeeping around well you can get it when symptoms are being shown, and we're saying no, no, no, this is a virus that it can be around when there are no symptoms, and that was a particular challenge... staff needed to be in PPE and that was a huge challenge. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Second, the pandemic response had a notable impact on staff wellbeing. Frontline staff faced the fear of working in environments where they might contract the virus and this caused further worries about potential impacts on their families. There were also worries about heightened vicarious trauma (Waegemakers Schiff, 2019) whereby support staff continued to hear about and witness people's life ordeals but previous mechanisms for supporting staff to reflect upon these experiences were disrupted. These traumas, when combined with the exhaustion of working in different ways and often without any significant period of leave, led many to conclude that the frontline of homelessness services is likely to be exhausted and at breaking point – echoing narratives surrounding other frontline health and social care services:

The staff who have been delivering digital support are still hearing about quite traumatic issues, but are not able to go back to the office, have a cuppa with their colleagues, unload, get some peer support. Instead they're sat in their kitchen listening to someone, talk about self-harm or domestic abuse or childhood abuse and then they're just sat there and that's their day. That's really hard. I know organisations have been trying really hard to put in support for staff and those who are better resourced through fundraising have been able to put in access to the counselling or psychologists, but most don't have the budget for that. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

...we had staff who were saying that they were getting very distressed by it, they were saying it felt like they were putting their lives at risk, and when you combine that with also them trying and struggling with trying to get folk to comply which of course was causing the problem in the first place because if people were isolating it would be less of an issue, then that was hugely stressing so we would have staff going off, kind of feeling burnt out by it. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

...the sector's workforce, the effect it's had on them. I suppose as [Third Sector] chief execs, their concern is... we're all exhausted, we don't know if we can do it again. Mental health kind of impact, but just general capacity. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

The role of pre-crisis policy and legislation

As noted above, the role of pre-existing policy priorities and legal frameworks shaped the COVID-19 response to homelessness across the GB countries.

Some key informants in England felt that both the HRA and RSI laid the foundation of a more effective response to the COVID-19 crisis than would have been the case in the more hands-off 'localist' era under the Coalition Government (Fitzpatrick et al, 2020b):

...we're building on a really strong foundation here, because for a couple of years, MHCLG have been funding expert advisors, rough sleeping advisors, and advisors in the homelessness advice and support team, the team responsible for the implementation of the HRA. Across the country, there's these really strong relationships between... advisors and the local authorities... and... funding... in 2020/21, there's £112 million of RSI money... that was in place prior to [COVID] happening... so that [all] really helped to make sure that the [COVID-19 emergency accommodation] hotels were set up quickly. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

It was argued by several key informants that the COVID-19 response to single homeless people in particular had benefited from these wider policy and legal developments:

...those singles, are much more in plain sight, than they ever would have been had there been no HRA. I think that that will have helped. (England, Third Sector Interviewee, May 2020)

English local authorities offered a mixed but on balance positive assessment of the role played by the HRA in enabling effective homelessness responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. One quarter (26%) judged it to have been beneficial in this respect, 6% had an entirely negative assessment, and the remainder reported a more neutral or varied response. The respondents who were positive about the HRA role tended to highlight the legislation's pivot towards more preventative, earlier interventions, while its critics focussed on what they viewed as the excessive nature of the associated paperwork and bureaucracy:

The HRA encourages single people to be assisted through prevention and relief work the same as families. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

The Homeless Reduction Act has meant more time spent on the computers for staff, producing HCLIC stats so less time meeting and supporting rough sleepers ... Given that we have always tried to reduce rough sleeping, this is ... an additional burden. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

Consistent with the official statistics discussed above, there was a general perception on the part of both councils and key informants in England that the COVID-19 crisis had drawn local authorities and their partners away from their wider prevention activities under the HRA (though it should be noted that to some extent this was a positive outcome of the decline in family homelessness cases as a result of the evictions moratorium):

The work has shifted a lot more into crisis management, especially around the rough sleepers and more complex cases as we have had to redeploy staff to assist with the management of the temporary accommodation we stepped up. This has reduced capacity for effective prevention and relief work. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

The report has already highlighted the important role of the Scottish legislative framework in protecting homeless households against the potential impacts of the pandemic, resulting in less marked changes relative to England and Wales. At the same time, legal and practice flexibilities that emerged during the pandemic were often viewed as positive and worth retaining in the longer-term, not just in Scotland but across all three GB nations:

I think the local connection issue ... [has] been overlooked as well in practice in the last 8 to 10 weeks, so in practice people are getting temporarily accommodated even without local connection. So all of these systemic barriers ... charities are delighted to see these shifts. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

In Scotland there was, in addition, a sense on the part of at least some key informants that the policy moves set in train by HARSAG had been critical in promoting more effective responses during the pandemic, albeit that these policies themselves then needed reshaped in light of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis:

...if we hadn't had rapid rehousing transition plans in place it would have been much more difficult to respond effectively to the crisis. So that's been a real positive, but now we recognise because of the COVID crisis and recovery plans we need to re-engineer the rapid rehousing transition plans over the next few weeks. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

The reconvening of HARSAG during the crisis, alongside the establishment of the voluntary-sector led Everyone Home Collective, were considered key steps in establishing a more coordinated homelessness response:

the ...[policy asks] of the Everyone Home Collective of good homes for health, no evictions to rough sleeping...were all reflective of what was in HARSAG and in the Homelessness Plan, and it's helping really push the rapid rehousing agenda, so I think the revival of HARSAG has been very helpful. (Scotland, Voluntary Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

In Wales, elements of existing and 'in development' legislation, policy and practice shaped the COVID-19 response. In relation to rental sector legislation, there was already a commitment to extend notice periods to six months and so this was a relatively straightforward development during the crisis. The homelessness legislation also helped to defend people's rights to accommodation, although it is interesting that it was not the preventative elements of the legislation that proved crucial; instead it was the safety net of a duty to secure accommodation for households in Priority Need:

He was a really vulnerable – he was coming out of prison... he had learning disabilities, he had some really unpleasant health conditions, and he was sleeping rough on the streets of [X] because [X local authority] said they lack resources.... Do people have legal rights during COVID or is the legislation out of the window? The Welsh Government said very clearly people have rights. They have rights now and they have rights before, and we can't just throw the legislation out of the window. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

One clear positive impact of pre-existing practice was judged to be the continuation of multi-agency approaches:

We've done a bit of work with that department [Substance Misuse Policy & Delivery Team, Welsh Government] over the past couple of years around homelessness and substance misuse, so we had a really close relationship with them anyway. They're very keen strategically to join the dots between the homelessness policy and we've started to see that come through in the mental health and substance misuse delivery plans, so they were very forthcoming and very willing to be around that table at that time. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

Prior work of the Homelessness Action Group and existing Welsh Government strategy also shaped the crisis response. They clearly informed the Phase 2 Planning Guidance published by Welsh Government, particularly in relation to a shift toward rapid rehousing. In both Scotland and Wales the pandemic prompted moves to bring forward existing plans to end use of certain kinds of unsuitable temporary accommodation (albeit in the Scottish case with an exemption made for emergency use during the COVID-19 outbreak):

So there were certain things that... [we] were not comfortable being part of our future homelessness response... I think what the pandemic did was move us to where we wanted to get to much more quickly. So it was all of a sudden because of public health reasons, you know, that was unacceptable but I think in lots of people's minds that's never what we wanted homelessness services to look like. I think it was a situation that we'd found ourselves in because certain service models had been developed over the decades... And that's absolutely no disrespect to organisations... commissioned to deliver the kind of floor space and pods provision and they do their best with that type of provision, but I think lots of people didn't want to see that in the future of our homelessness provision and I think COVID maybe sped up that focus really. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

On the horizon

Looking forwards from mid-2020, interviewees were asked to identify opportunities and challenges on the horizon. In Scotland, there was coalescence around the importance of a 'triple lock' future response based on the work of the Everyone In Collective: 1] **no returns to rough sleeping** amongst those accommodated during the pandemic; 2] **no evictions into homelessness**, particularly of households protected by the moratorium; and 3] **more homes** where they are most needed. This framework provides a useful starting point for the structure of this section as it captures the majority of ideas that emerged across GB, although we broaden 'no evictions into homelessness' to include concerns about potential increases in other triggers of homelessness (domestic abuse and sofa surfers being asked to leave), and we also discuss 4] **future partnerships**.

No returns to rough sleeping

In line with government commitments across GB, there was a strong emphasis amongst interviewees across GB on the importance of ensuring nobody who had been temporarily accommodated during the pandemic should have to return to inappropriate temporary accommodation or street homelessness:

I think we have to say that nobody from these hotels can just be chucked back on the streets. We then need to say, as I said earlier, from the experience and the evidence we've gathered from the support that's put in place, what insight does that give us as to what it looks like going forward to prevent rough sleeping and to make sure that that learning is applied. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

People placed under Everyone In have a plan for next steps so will be unlikely to re-present to homeless services unless the plan breaks down or they left the provision in the interim. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

In England one quarter of respondents (25%) anticipated a surge in re-approaches from people assisted under the Everyone In initiative and there are numerous potential barriers that may undermine the ability of local authorities to prevent returns to rough sleeping. There was widespread uncertainty surrounding the future outcomes for households with NRPF and other migrants without access to benefits. The crisis response, including legislation and funding, enabled local authorities to temporarily accommodate these households, and some key informants emphasised that the provision of effective legal advice had reduced the numbers affected by an NRPF status. Nonetheless, concerns remained for those remaining NRPF households, with the homelessness sector unsure about the future of these Westminster-led decisions:

For me the biggest thing that's just not been dealt with in the long run, although they lifted the ban caused by no recourse to public funds so that all those folk can be in hotels that are paid for by public funds, unless that is extended for at least another 12 months you're going to have a whole bunch of people... and it could be actually worse than it was before. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

I think the no recourse to public funds legal situation continues to be a worry because although the minister here said you can use the £10 million and people were like, fantastic, we'll get people into accommodation, there is no certainty about what's going to happen once this is no longer a designated pandemic, because once that happens, the Public Health legislation will not apply anymore and all of a sudden we've got a bunch of people who have no entitlements to that accommodation. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, September 2020)

High numbers of rough sleepers are still being temporarily accommodated in hotels at the expense of cash-strapped local authorities, after MHCLG reneged on repeated assurances to cover the cost. There is no workable accommodation solution for NRPF rough sleepers. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

Another potential barrier to ensuring no returns to homelessness is the uncertainty that surrounds people's interactions with street economies. Interviewees were very aware that the absence of street economies during lockdown created new opportunities to engage with people living on the streets and it is possible that the current shift towards cashless payments could impact on the viability of the street economy. However, the return of footfall and drug sales to the streets is likely to make it difficult for local authorities and their partners to prevent some people from returning to the streets:

The big driver around street begging was the lack of revenue and that actually encouraged people to engage in treatment because they weren't able to generate revenue from street begging. It encouraged them into treatment and that's pretty anecdotal at the moment. But there's no doubt that there's a risk that, as we see street begging revenue availability starting to increase as the public return to the streets, we're already starting to see an increase in street begging again. That's a really tricky area for us to manage as we go forward. (Scotland, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

The gap in the Phase 2 plan for me was that it didn't address the behaviours that draw people out onto the street and that's a concern because as soon as the shops reopen, begging is going to start again. As soon as there is more traffic going unnoticed on our roads, the drug supply is going to go up, quality is going to go down, all of that sort of stuff which will mean that people have to earn more. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Evictions and other triggers of homelessness

Metaphors of 'cliff edges' and 'tidal waves' were used to describe the anticipated increase in homelessness on the horizon. Interviewees pointed to the potentially problematic combination of an end to the evictions moratorium, an end to furlough, a recession and associated growth in unemployment and household debt, all of which are likely to result in evictions and repossessions. Whilst the 'cliff edge' metaphor is perhaps unjustified given court capacity would act as a bottleneck to evictions, these metaphors do illustrate the perceived magnitude of the concern within the sector. Preventing evictions and the anticipated rise in homelessness was perceived to be perhaps the most pressing priority amongst interviewees and survey respondents:

Furloughing, redundancy, reduced salaried hours will lead to more PRS renters being in arrears and being evicted. This will be spread out by the MHCLG's winter and other special measures but it is hard to envisage there not being an increase... COVID-19 will impact people who previously would never have been at risk of homelessness... or at risk of needing statutory support – i.e. those on median to higher incomes. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

I am realistic, but I'm quite fearful that there will be a significant homeless surge as we go through an economic recession, and as more and more people are made unemployed... We need to think about how we can support people through economic recession practically with money to try and avoid them losing their accommodation, that would be a disaster. That's certainly something that we're putting our minds to and HARSAG 2 recommendations will help us focus on. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

One of the big worries of local authorities is that they don't know what's coming down the road, but they're very aware of the fact that lots of people have been furloughed, that's not going to be indefinite, businesses are going to go through so people could lose their jobs which means they could lose their accommodation, you know, evictions, repossessions, you know mortgage repossessions, and this idea that we'll see a whole new cohort of people coming to homelessness services that have never accessed them before. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

While there was acute concern about what would happen as the evictions moratorium unwinds, the point was made that the effects are likely to take some time to filter through into evictions and, ultimately, to homelessness:

We'll see a long, slow flood [of evictions]. We won't see a tsunami, because of the six-month [notice] thing they've got in at the moment, but most importantly, because of the court capacity. (England, Statutory Sector Interviewee, October 2020)

Despite the stable nature of statutory homelessness cases associated with domestic abuse during the pandemic, most English local authorities expected rising numbers of victims/survivors of domestic abuse to present as homeless post-pandemic (reported by 78% of councils in England):

Those who are victims of domestic abuse will likely have some level of freedom denied to them during lockdown and will be more able to seek assistance, although there will be likely to be a shortage of refuge spaces. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

Also, just over half of English councils (55%) anticipated rising applications from sofa surfers:

Due to pressure on family during lockdown we would also expect to see an increase in sofa surfers and people leaving the family home. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

Other authorities, however, took the opposite view at least at the point in the year when lockdown restrictions were easing:

Sofa Surfers no longer at risk of being asked to leave as a result of social distancing may reduce number of presentations. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

We don't expect a further increase in sofa surfers, or people being asked to leave the family home – unless the country goes back into another full lock down – at which point tensions in overcrowded households could lead to more friends and family evictions. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

More homes where they are most needed

There was a desire to see some of the emergency housing responses continue after the pandemic. Moreover, given the difficulties many local authorities are having sourcing appropriate move on accommodation, the crisis has also brought into focus the importance of more affordable homes where they are most needed.

Focusing initially on the temporary accommodation response, there was a strong desire to see no return to the use of inappropriate forms of temporary accommodation:

What we're trying to demonstrate is that shelters are never good enough but particularly within the type of situation that we're now in and who knows what second, third or whatever waves are going to come our way. But these are not... They just can't be acceptable or appropriate... Within that, as you'll understand, there's all different types of views, from those that just think they can close them tomorrow to those, particularly that provide them, who say well, we'll stop providing the shelter once local authority starts accommodating everybody. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

I'm very hopeful that we're going to see an end to the worst types of emergency accommodation, like floor space, for example. Which, obviously, we've known is a barrier to accessing services and has been for a long time. So, it would be great if we could see some basic improvement with that in line with kind of dignity and ability to keep yourself safe. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Continuing in this vein, the crisis response necessarily resulted in the commissioning of many units of temporary accommodation in hotels, B&Bs and similar provision, and in Scotland and Wales, interviewees recognised that this growth runs counter to the pre-existing policy direction focused on Rapid Rehousing and Housing First. There was a hope that the crisis response has not created a direction of travel whereby this quantity and type of temporary accommodation remains a part of the response to homelessness:

I've got this sort of low-level fear, constant fear that there's a risk we could end up in that situation in Wales where we successfully get a lot of people off the street, but then they all end up in quite poor quality temporary accommodation for a long time, whilst they're waiting for the future prospect of a more permanent home... For me that transition point is really important, like how we kick-off the process of transitioning, rewiring the system to one that rapidly rehuses people, and how you don't make future problems for yourself by investing in certain ways of doing things now, just because it's easy to do now, and then you almost make a problem that's quite hard to unpick later. (Wales, Third Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

...we're stuck in a position between what we would like to happen versus what we fear is the reality... so should we be having communal living, for example? Shouldn't every supported accommodation have self-contained units? ...Obviously it's also an opportunity to... look at Housing First, how we can accelerate some of that work. In reality, we know we've got a government that is still very committed to ending rough sleeping, so there is a risk of... [not] moving in the direction we would want. I guess the obvious example being that we'll expand shelter provision... we would argue that is a backwards step. (England, Local Authority Survey, summer/autumn 2020)

The second thing that we wanted to do is to really protect, I guess, the principles that need to guide our route out of lockdown so that we don't end up in a position that we go backwards. For example, when you're looking to step down the use of hotels, the real fear for us is that some of those calls for things like opening up disused buildings that actually, any of that gains any traction or momentum. What we want to really do is try and protect against the principles that existed before the pandemic, which was about a direction of travel in Scotland in terms of homelessness policy and practice, which is toward ordinary housing in ordinary, mainstream communities. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

Prompted by a 'route map' produced by the Third sector-led Everyone Home Collective⁷, there is now a cross-sectoral agreement in Scotland to design out the use of traditional night shelters altogether, replacing them this winter with 'rapid rehousing welcome centres' for people who would otherwise be sleeping rough.

Across all three GB nations there is both an immediate, short term need for urgent access to settled accommodation for homeless households accommodated during the pandemic, and a longer term need to address long-standing social housing supply problems in those parts of the country where they exist.

I think going forward we're going to need a bit more of everything. We're looking at expanding now, but we are looking at whether the Council buys properties in order to increase our stock. We're looking at working with the RSLs to look at them leasing properties and I think they're quite on the board with doing that. There's quite a bit of focus with the Welsh Government around MMC [Modern Methods of Construction] and so we've looked at some of those options. (Wales, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

The real thing that relieves the pressure here is a commitment to ongoing social house building... We know exactly how many homes we need to build and where to build them, there's needs to be a political commitment to do that. (Scotland, Third sector Interviewee, June 2020)

It is notable that in England, where affordable housing supply issues are by far the most acute, particularly in London and the South, there has been no commitment by Government to increase the supply as part of the COVID-19 stimulus package, in contrast to the response to the 2008 financial crisis. The Chancellor's Summer Statement and the November One Year Spending Review reaffirmed the levels of housing investment announced earlier in the year, with the balance of investment shifting, unhelpfully, away from renting and back towards ownership, and away from London towards the rest of England (Fitzpatrick et al, forthcoming 2021).

In Wales, the 2019 Independent Review of Affordable Housing Supply⁸ concluded that housing needs in Wales are not being fully met. However, the delivery of social housing is a Welsh Government priority; it has committed to increase supply and has a target to deliver 20,000 affordable homes in the current term of office (2016 to 2021) and up to the onset of the pandemic it was on track to meet this target. In fact, in February 2020 an additional £24m was invested to boost building rates ahead of the target date in early 2021.

Future partnerships

From the perspective of the homelessness sector, there was a will and desire for the positive partnership working that emerged between organisations and sectors during the pandemic to continue beyond the initial crisis response. In particular, there was hope for a continuation of the improved collaboration with health services, albeit a recognition of the challenges in sustaining this in the longer-term without wider systemic and institutional change:

So I think that focus on vulnerable people has been renewed in local government, and we can see the same in housing associations and charities, so very, very high levels of collaborative partnership have come to bear in the last 12 weeks that we were talking about before the crisis and this has given us a new common purpose, so it's actually gelled people together and actually working better together. I think that's something that we can't lose going forward through recovery, we can't retreat to silos, it's about much more collaborative working, and that's the norm rather than the exception. (Scotland, Statutory Sector Interviewee, June 2020)

⁷ <https://everyonehome.scot/pdf/everyone-home.pdf>

⁸ https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-04/independent-review-of-affordable-housing-supply-report_0.pdf

7. Conclusion

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic there were widespread fears that people experiencing homelessness, particularly those staying temporarily in communal accommodation or living on the streets, were at heightened risk of infection and potentially fatal outcomes. We consequently witnessed a shift in the framing of homelessness – it became a public health emergency. This interim report has presented preliminary findings of a systematic, comparative examination of the responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis across England, Scotland and Wales.

The overarching conclusion across all three GB nations is that the immediate crisis response to homelessness during the pandemic was swift and effective, with almost everyone accommodated safely, albeit there were particular challenges in housing those with the most complex support needs. The study documents the importance of five emergent trends during the crisis, including; strong central government leadership, generally appropriate levels of funding, crucial changes to welfare and labour market policy, collaborative working between sectors and organisations, and a workforce that adapted and rose to the unprecedented challenges.

Whilst there were similarities in the crisis responses of GB nations, and some of the trends were also evident internationally (Pawson et al, forthcoming; Parsell et al, 2020; Seeley, 2020), there were also fundamental differences, particularly between Scotland and the rest of GB. The study highlights the central influence of the pre-COVID-19 context on the form of the emergency response. The distinctive position in Scotland, where the legislative framework confers rights to accommodation on all homeless households, meant far fewer additional households had to be temporarily accommodated and so there was less necessity for a large-scale emergency response of the form witnessed in England and Wales.

Looking to the horizon and to the second phase of this study (January-June 2021), the research will explore ongoing responses, particularly in the wake of a second major period of lockdown which commenced in December 2020 and continued into 2021. The report will also examine any actions taken to address sector concerns relating to: the effectiveness of move on provisions for people temporarily accommodated during the crisis; the potential increase in homelessness that may emerge from job losses and a recommencement of evictions; and the potential 'path dependencies' being created through major investment in congregate forms of temporary accommodation in response to the crisis. Crucially, and on an optimistic note, the next report will investigate what has been done to ensure some of the positive crisis policies and practices will persist and evolve to enable the sector to 'build back better'.

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