

# Let's End Homelessness Together



Policy briefing:

A cross-government  
approach to ending  
homelessness



Homeless Link

## A cross-government approach to ending homelessness



*"It's cross departmental – solving homelessness by just housing isn't going to do it. Whatever policy is being considered – part of that process has to be looked at through a homelessness lens."*

- Homelessness service provider

Homelessness is not a single-department issue. Its drivers encompass health, welfare, the justice system, migration and more, and span across various government departments. People experiencing homelessness often interact with multiple statutory bodies as the policy levers that cause or relieve homelessness sit across many government departments. This fragmented system results in missed opportunities to identify and prevent homelessness before it occurs. Once someone loses their home, solutions tend to focus narrowly on housing rather than addressing any underlying support needs, leaving many individuals at high risk of repeat homelessness in future.

The new government's commitment to a cross-government strategy, working with Mayors and Councils, is very welcome. Here we set out in detail why this approach is vital and the key departments of government that must be involved.

However, ending homelessness is not an issue that can be solved by the statutory sector alone. Needs and priorities vary across the country and the voice of communities and people with lived experience must be heard. We agree that the new Strategy must be designed and delivered in partnership with Mayors and Councils as set out in your manifesto but ask that this is extended to include Civil Society and people with lived experience of homelessness.

We concur with your mission driven manifesto - "government is at its best when working in partnership with business, trade unions, civil society, faith groups, and communities." The development of the new Homelessness Strategy is an opportunity build more effective national partnership working around a shared goal.

### The current system

The fragmented and siloed approach to homelessness adopted by government departments presents significant barriers to effectively addressing, ending and preventing homelessness.

Contradictory policies, often developed to achieve distinct aims, can inadvertently lead to homelessness. For example, in August 2023, pressure to tackle the asylum backlog and reduce the number of asylum seekers housed in Home Office accommodation led to a change in process to the withdrawal of asylum support. This change resulted in a large number of refugees and refused asylum seekers becoming homeless.<sup>1</sup> This put enormous strain on local authority homelessness services, added to the growing number of people housed in unsuitable, costly temporary accommodation, and led to a sharp rise in street homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

Changes made to address a policy issue in the Home Office directly led to undermining efforts to end homelessness. Similar patterns can be seen with practice changes in other areas such as prison release or hospital discharge where efforts to tackle pressures can lead to increases in homelessness and rough sleeping. Other departments have made financially-motivated changes, such as the need to reduce the welfare bill leading to the freeze of Local Housing Allowance rates, which has led to ongoing rises in homelessness and an associated increase in local authority spending.<sup>3</sup>

Such government department policies too often lead to increases in homelessness. Any approach to preventing and ending homelessness must therefore encompass a cross-departmental strategy and whole-government accountability.

Furthermore, the siloed approach, where each department is primarily concerned with its own budget, obscures the true cost of homelessness across government. This fragmented perspective prevents a comprehensive understanding of the overall expenditure on homelessness and hampers the development of strategies to tackle it effectively. By failing to appreciate the interconnected nature of homelessness, opportunities to provide long-term security and stability for individuals at risk of homelessness are missed, leading to continued inefficiencies and inadequate support across the board in England.

At the same time interactions with different public bodies frequently present missed opportunities to identify and prevent homelessness before it occurs. Once someone loses their home, the solutions tend to focus narrowly on housing, neglecting the broader network of intersecting support needs such as health, social care, welfare, and legal assistance. This narrow focus leaves individuals at high risk of falling into

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<sup>1</sup> BBC (2024) *Asylum homelessness rises as refugees told to leave accommodation*, 30<sup>th</sup> April

<sup>2</sup> DLUHC (2024) *Ending Rough Sleeping Data Framework*, December 2023

<sup>3</sup> SAVILLS (2024) *Local Housing Allowance: what can claimants afford?*

repeated cycles of homelessness, as their underlying support needs remain unaddressed.

But just as much as policy and practice decisions in other departments can cause homelessness so too can these departments be part of the solutions to ending homelessness. Working collaboratively, across government, is the only way we will truly address the root cause of homelessness and look to prevent and end it for good.

### **A case for change**

Departments across the government have a responsibility – and an interest – in building a system that responds effectively to homelessness. To prevent and end homelessness for all, it is crucial to stop viewing it as a siloed, single-department issue. Instead, a collaborative, cross-departmental strategy must be adopted.

This strategy should not be driven solely by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, as has previously been the case. Rather, it should be developed in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care, Ministry of Justice, Department for Education and Skills, Home Office, Treasury, and Department for Work and Pensions. Only through such a comprehensive, joined-up approach can we address the complex, interrelated causes of homelessness and provide effective, lasting solutions.

For this strategy to succeed, continuous and collaborative efforts from all these departments is essential. Therefore, the establishment of a cross-government taskforce for homelessness is an essential way of requiring each department to not only participate in the creation of a homelessness strategy but also taking continued responsibility for their policies not inadvertently driving homelessness. This can only be achieved if all relevant government departments are involved in ongoing discussions and decision-making processes.

### **Key departments in the cross-government task force**

#### **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

The Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) will always play a core role in preventing and ending homelessness. They hold responsibility for a wide range of national policies on housing and homelessness, including legislative frameworks aimed at reducing housing insecurity and reducing homelessness.

MHCLG has oversight over of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which places a duty on local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for people at risk. They have also held responsibility for implementing the 2022 'Ending Rough Sleeping for Good' strategy and for the development of rental reform policies. MHCLG also decide on funding allocations for local authorities, who hold responsibility for the implementation and commissioning of homelessness services on a local level.

It is therefore essential that MHCLG play the central role in the cross-government preventing and ending homelessness task force.

### Department for Work and Pensions

Any strategy to end homelessness must consider the role that the welfare system plays in driving homelessness, and the financial burden that avoidable or extended homelessness causes to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Successive welfare policies have left people in receipt of benefits facing increasing housing insecurity as the costs of renting far outstrips the affordability of supply. Welfare policies such as the freeze on LHA rates, the benefit cap and the Shared Accommodation Rate all place people at higher risk of homelessness.<sup>4</sup> People experiencing homelessness may also find themselves at higher risk of welfare sanctions,<sup>5</sup> unable to access benefits they should qualify for,<sup>6</sup> or even forced to choose between finding a job and keeping their accommodation.<sup>7</sup>

As the department responsible for Housing Benefit, DWP have a vested interest in preventing and ending homelessness. Yet too often welfare policies are responsible for driving homelessness that would otherwise be avoidable. DWP must play a prominent role in the cross-government task force, ensuring value-for-money across the welfare bill and reviewing their own policies to ensure they support a country free from homelessness.

### Department of Health & Social Care

Losing your home should not mean losing your health. For too many people experiences of homelessness also mean stark health and care inequalities that can cause long-term conditions and a much shorter lifespan.<sup>8</sup> For some, experiences of trauma and multiple disadvantage are more akin to a chronic health condition than a simple housing problem. Despite this, the existing system is balanced towards bricks and mortar rather than support with holistic needs.

Currently, homelessness is rarely recognised as a health and social care need. Instead, stigmatising attitudes frequently mean that care needs surrounding homelessness are written off as a lifestyle choice, leading to insufficient support and huge disparities in

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<sup>4</sup> Crisis (2018). "Making welfare work". *Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain*.

<sup>5</sup> Reeve, K. (2017). *Welfare conditionality, benefit sanctions and homelessness in the UK: ending the 'something for nothing culture' or punishing the poor?* Journal of Poverty and Social Justice.

<sup>6</sup> Groundswell (2020). *Benefits for Health: Exploring the connection between welfare, health and homelessness*.

<sup>7</sup> Centrepoin (2023). *Making work pay in supported accommodation*.

<sup>8</sup> Aldridge, R. et al. (2019). *Causes of death among homeless people: a population-based cross-sectional study of linked hospitalisation and mortality data in England*. Wellcome Open Res.

health outcomes.<sup>9</sup> It has become a norm for charitable homelessness services to support people with intensive health and care needs in the absence of more appropriate services, even when these services are vastly under-equipped to do so.<sup>10</sup> Even where interventions such as Housing First are found to save money for healthcare systems and improve the wellbeing of residents with long-term support needs, these are frequently delivered by housing-focused services with little investment or involvement from health and social care teams.<sup>11</sup>

If we are to end homelessness in this country, DHSC must play a leading role in both improving the quality of services supporting those experiencing multiple disadvantage while also reducing disparities in health and care among those experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is a public health issue – it should be recognised and responded to as such, with the whole system working together to protect lives and improve health of people experiencing homelessness.

### Ministry of Justice

There is significant overlap between the justice system and homelessness, and the Ministry of Justice has a vital role to play in preventing and ending homelessness. People are too often made homeless as a consequence of entering the justice system, while experiences of homelessness can drive people to offend to meet their basic needs.

Short-term sentences can substantially increase the risk of homelessness as people may lose their tenancies due to the inability to pay rent while incarcerated.<sup>12</sup> Latest figures show that 14% of prisoners are released into homelessness, with the majority of these released directly to the streets.<sup>13</sup> When living on the street, recovery becomes much more challenging and the risk of re-offending is greatly increased, which often results in people cycling between homelessness and the justice system.<sup>14</sup> The trauma caused by this cycle can worsen support needs and push people further away from recovery. At the same time, this puts enormous pressure and financial strain on other public services including homelessness, housing, and health and social care.

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<sup>9</sup> Hertzberg, D and Boobis, S (2022). *The Unhealthy State of Homelessness: Findings from the Homeless Health Needs Audit*. Homeless Link.

<sup>10</sup> Martineau, S., Cornes, M., Manthorpe, J., Ornelas, B. and Fuller, J. (2019) *Safeguarding, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: An Analysis of Safeguarding Adult Reviews*. London: Kings College London.

<sup>11</sup> Abdul Aziz, S. and Boobis, S. (2024). *More Than a Roof: Exploring the holistic outcomes of Housing First*. Homeless Link.

<sup>12</sup> Mutebi, N and Brown, R (2023). *The use of short prison sentences in England and Wales*. UK Parliament.

<sup>13</sup> MoJ (2023). *Community performance annual, update to March 2023*. 27<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis (2019). *Criminal Justice and Homelessness: Introductory briefing for Prevention Review Group*.

It doesn't have to be this way. Interventions that recognise the interaction between homelessness and the justice system such as Through the Gate schemes,<sup>15</sup> more integrated supported accommodation or Housing First projects<sup>16</sup> have helped to reduce both those leaving prison with no fixed abode, and recidivism. It is therefore in the interest of the Ministry of Justice to invest in these schemes and hold a seat at the table when developing strategies that prevent and end homelessness.

### Home Office

As the department responsible for immigration and asylum, the Home Office plays a significant role in the national homelessness response. Whilst homelessness affects households across the country, non-UK nationals are more vulnerable to homelessness than people with UK citizenship, and those with limited or No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and/or unsettled immigration status even more so.<sup>17</sup>

Migrants are impacted by the same socioeconomic conditions that drive homelessness across the population. However, for many migrants, these challenges are compounded by conditions created by the immigration system. People with limited or No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) face unique challenges and barriers that trap them in destitution, and which make it almost impossible to move on from homelessness and rough sleeping.<sup>18</sup> This can include being locked out of the vital support services that exist to help people move on from homelessness, and denied assistance with other issues they may face, due to restrictions imposed on them because of their immigration status.

On top of all the systemic and structural barriers that migrants face, they are more vulnerable to the changing political environment and associated policies than any other: from the introduction of the hostile environment, to changes to asylum processing and decisions, to the Illegal Migration Act, these policies have all driven up homelessness and rough sleeping.<sup>19</sup> No strategy to end homelessness can be achieved without a plan to address the role the immigration system plays in driving homelessness, and as such Home Office must be a key part of any cross-government taskforce.

### Department for Education and Skills

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<sup>15</sup> UK Parliament (2021). *Through the Gate and the new Resettlement model*. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmjust/285/28507.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Aziz, S. and Boobis, S. (2024). *More Than a Roof: Exploring the holistic outcomes of Housing First*. Homeless Link.

<sup>17</sup> NRPF Network (2024). *Assessing and supporting adults who have no recourse to public funds (England)*. Available at: <https://guidance.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/reader/practice-guidance-adults/introduction/>

<sup>18</sup> Corbett, J (2022). *Unlocking the door: A roadmap for supporting non-UK nationals facing homelessness in England*. Homeless Link and NACCOM.

<sup>19</sup> Praxis and NACCOM (2023). *Impact of the Illegal Migration Bill on Homelessness and Destitution*.

The education system plays a critical and trusted role in the lives of many young people at risk of homelessness. Prevention of youth homelessness can significantly reduce exposure to further disadvantage in later life.<sup>20</sup> The Department for Education hold potential to play a significant role in preventing homelessness early and reducing inequalities in the long term.

Across the four nations and internationally, schools have led the way in homelessness prevention, delivering in-school screening to identify at-risk children who may otherwise have flown under the radar.<sup>21</sup> Schools also play an important role in supporting young people experiencing homelessness, with many already delivering additional support and poverty relief within their communities. Safeguarding young people in homelessness settings has also increasingly fallen to DfE, with the continued introduction of OFSTED regulations in young people's accommodation.<sup>22</sup>

The new government should therefore ensure that the Department for Education plays a role in the cross-government homelessness task force with a focus on both preventing youth homelessness and reducing its impact on young people already experiencing homelessness.

### Treasury

Ending homelessness is in everyone's interest, and the public purse is no exception. Evidence shows that every £1 invested in truly ending homelessness would generate £2.80 in value.<sup>23</sup> Treasury must be actively involved in delivering a homelessness system that works, delivering funds to approaches that work and avoiding the short-term, false-economy savings that have driven up homelessness in recent years.

The homelessness system urgently requires a more efficient approach to spending. The headline spend of £2.4 billion to relieve homelessness is just a fraction of the true spend, with loopholes in the Housing Benefit system leading the previous government to lose track of its true cost.<sup>24</sup> Poor regulation in the exempt accommodation sector means that unscrupulous private landlords are collecting rents directly from the welfare bill for poor-quality, and often directly harmful, 'supported' accommodation. Under the previous Labour government, the Supporting People programme delivered significant return on investment, with an estimated £3.41bn in net financial benefits against an overall investment of £1.61bn.<sup>25</sup> This history should act as a blueprint for the

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<sup>20</sup> Poursaeedi, D. (2022). *Beyond a number: The scale of youth homelessness in the UK*. Centrepoin.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis (2023). *Homelessness prevention by Llamau*. Available at: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/resources-for-practitioners/homelessness-prevention-guide/llamau/>

<sup>22</sup> DfE (2023). *Guide to the Supported Accommodation Regulations including Quality Standards*.

<sup>23</sup> PricewaterhouseCooper (2018). *Assessing the costs and benefits of Crisis' plan to end homelessness*. June 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee (2022). *Exempt Accommodation Report*. 19<sup>th</sup> Oct 2022 HC 21.

<sup>25</sup> Jarrett, T. (2012). *The Supporting People programme*. House of Commons Library.



new government to build a funding system that works, without the risk that it would be unpicked in the name of short-term savings.

For this to become a reality, Treasury officials must play a central role in discussions on ending homelessness. An efficient programme of funding is the core of a homelessness system that works, and Treasury should play a role as architects in this system.

### Recommendations

#### **A whole-government commitment to ending and preventing homelessness**

- Establish a cross-government taskforce led by the Cabinet Office and with representatives from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Justice, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health and Social Care, Home Office, and Ministry of Defence.
- Develop a cross-governmental strategy to tackling homelessness in conjunction with taskforce representatives.
- Civil society, lived experience, Mayors and councils should also be represented on the taskforce and in the development of the new strategy
- Require departments to complete a homelessness impact assessment as a standard part of the policy development processes to ensure new policies do not cause or increase homelessness.