



homeless link

# Homelessness Provision for the Future:

Best practice from the homelessness  
sector during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Executive Summary

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For the homelessness sector, COVID-19 presented a new, but familiar crisis. Accustomed to working in situations of incredible adversity, uncertainty and mounting pressure, the voluntary sector and local authorities were able to capitalise on unprecedented levels of support by central government to not only get through the pandemic but come out stronger.

This report highlights many of the themes across best practice as we come out of the pandemic, building on the findings of a survey (n=158) and interviews (n=8) from key individuals from across the sector, in addition to information gathered through Homeless Link's informal and formal networks. It should be read in conjunction with the findings presented in [Working together: the homelessness sector's path beyond COVID](#), where research findings are presented in greater detail.

The sector was able to capitalise on the incredible opportunity presented by the government's Everyone In provision and related interventions. In doing so, they have demonstrated an ability to quickly adapt, finding creative solutions that are responsive to existing and emergent needs and challenges. Being able to house and support tens of thousands of people over more than fifteen months also presented an opportunity for re-prioritisation and rethinking, leading to a greater focus on the future of homelessness provision.

This report highlights many of the key themes in best practice provision across English homelessness services during the COVID-19 pandemic, including fifteen case studies representing faith-based organisations, emergency housing services, supported housing providers, day and resource centres, training providers, local authorities and more. These include:

- 1. A shift from short- to long-term homelessness provision.** After night shelters and day centres closed at the onset of the pandemic, many saw the benefits of longer-term approaches aimed at ending and preventing homelessness.
- 2. The incredible challenge of no recourse to public funds provision in tackling homelessness.** Everyone In enabled organisations to support those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), but many remain concerned about the end of emergency measures, which will mean a return to rough sleeping for this group.
- 3. While housing is a key part of the solution, holistic approaches are needed.** Organisations worked creatively to find ways to meet clients' social, emotional and psychological needs, creating a range of initiatives and working in partnership to provide needed support.



**4. New opportunities for partnership working led to improved streamlining and collaboration.**

Everyone In presented a unique opportunity for increased partnership working, with those working across local authorities coming together and establishing new, streamlined ways of working.

**5. Financial strain and innovation.** Those working in a sector accustomed to an extremely challenging and precarious funding environment, characterised by short-term grants that are often difficult to access, have been forced to find creative ways to make funding work for them. Nonetheless, significant concerns remain about the sustainability of short-term funding.

**6. A focus on re-prioritising and refocusing for the future.** Coming out of the pandemic, many across the sector describe extreme fatigue and overworking, having worked incredibly hard to meet clients' needs while many other services shut. However, if granted appropriate long-term commitment and resources, this work has presented a wealth of opportunities to rethink and rebuild better.

As restrictions are lifted, organisations and local authorities are ready to capitalise on new ways of working that utilise new, joined-up partnerships aimed at providing holistic, long-term solutions to achieve the government's goal of ending rough sleeping by 2024. However, as demand continues to increase, concerns continue to mount about funding that generally comes in short spurts and is difficult to access. This is an incredibly exciting opportunity for homelessness provision across England to capitalise on the enormous amount of work and innovation that occurred over the pandemic.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction and methodology

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For the homelessness sector, COVID-19 presented a new, but familiar crisis. Accustomed to working in situations of incredible adversity, uncertainty and mounting pressure, the voluntary sector and local authorities were able to capitalise on unprecedented levels of support by central government to not only get through the pandemic but come out stronger.

With the chance to focus on housing and supporting all those at risk of rough sleeping through Everyone In provision, the voluntary, faith-based and community sector (VCS) was able to work with local authorities to find new ways of working, with an increase in partnership working and the ability to streamline approaches across other types of provision. The result has been a chance to re-prioritise and refocus for the future.

As we come out of the pandemic, there are a wealth of learning opportunities for the sector – opportunities to combine the best from pre-pandemic provision with what worked well during the pandemic. To capture the current priorities and best practice provision from across the sector, MHCLG commissioned Homeless Link to write two research reports. The first of these, Working together: the homelessness sector's path beyond COVID, discusses the findings of a survey (n=158) and interviews (n=8) with key individuals from across the sector, as well as information gathered through Homeless Link's informal and formal networks.

This report expands on the themes identified in Working together: the homelessness sector's path beyond COVID and exemplifies the best practice and learning opportunities from the pandemic through the exploration of fifteen case studies representing faith-based organisations, emergency housing services, supported housing providers, day and resource centres, training providers, local authorities and more.

These include the shift from short- to long-term homelessness provision, particularly as night shelters and communal accommodation closed and many saw the benefits of longer-term approaches aimed at ending and preventing homelessness, including the need to not only provide long-term housing but to meet clients' social, emotional and psychological needs. The opportunity to support those with NRPF also presented a positive for many, though concerns about the inability to support these individuals post-pandemic remain.

Organisations responded to the increase in need with incredible creativity and adaptability, often quickly creating new services or adapting old ones to meet emergent and shifting needs. Ways of working also shifted, with more collaboration and joined-up working across the sector and with local authorities and other types of service providers. However, these rapid adaptations came at enormous cost, with organisations struggling to maintain consistent support in an environment dominated by short-term funding.



Moving forward, it is vital that the sector can reflect on the many challenges and learning opportunities that emerged from the pandemic. The themes and case studies discussed in this report aim to serve as a starting point not only for these conversations, but in designing homelessness provision for the future.

## **a. Methodology**

Data collection for this report was conducted from May to June of 2021 and included an online survey and semi-structured interviews with those working in the sector, including voluntary sector and faith-based organisations, housing providers and local authorities. The survey was completed between late May and early June by 207 individuals, with 158 valid responses. It addressed areas related to experiences, opportunities and challenges during the pandemic and organisational and governmental priorities moving forward.

Interviews were conducted with representatives who work on a national level, as well as those that work in each of the primary regions of England. Using a semi-structured style, interviews touched upon similar themes to the survey but remained respondent to emergent themes and organisations' experiences over the course of the pandemic. A total of eight interviews were conducted with CEOs and other senior leaders from the homelessness voluntary sector, as well as housing providers and local authorities.

Additional information has been gathered through Homeless Link's work with over 850 member organisations, which included the National Advisory Council (NAC) meeting in June of 2021 with 60 members and informal sharing through Homeless Link's practice and partnership work. Through these research avenues, fifteen case studies were identified and are featured within this report, with all organisations having the opportunity to review wording and quotes before the finalisation of the report. All references to specific clients have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and removal of any potentially identifying information.

This report should be read in conjunction with our second report, [Working together: the homelessness sector's path beyond COVID](#), where the findings of the survey and interviews are discussed in greater detail. This report, instead, focuses on highlighting case studies demonstrating the diversity of best practice exhibited by the sector over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and key learnings from their experiences and trends across the sector as we move forward.

As a variety of research has already been conducted into the homelessness sector's experiences over the course of the pandemic, methods aimed to prevent duplication, while drawing and expanding on current findings. Previous research has also been used to inform the findings and emergent themes described within this report.



## Chapter 2

# A shift in focus from emergency to sustained provision

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The national response to COVID-19 demonstrated on a large scale the unnecessary nature of homelessness and rough sleeping. This also presented an opportunity for organisations and local authorities to reflect on their own work and the implications of ending nearly all rough sleeping across the country in a matter of weeks. By May 2020, just over a month after the start of Everyone In, **14,610** people had been provided emergency COVID-19 accommodation, which then increased to **37,430** by January 2021.<sup>1,2</sup>

Research suggests that this rapid response to the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak prevented **21,092** people experiencing or at risk of homelessness from being infected, **266** from dying and **1,164** from been admitted to hospital.<sup>3</sup> Within a matter of days, almost no one was rough sleeping in England. Due to the incredibly rapid nature of Everyone In provisions – with local authorities being told to house everyone in their local areas “by the end of the week” on a Thursday, a huge range of strategies were used.

However, one of the key challenges organisations continued to face was the lack of affordable housing, a challenge that, in many ways, COVID-19 presented opportunities to address. With the nation in lockdown, the near total shut down of the tourism and hospitality sectors presented a unique opportunity for local authorities to rent hotel and bed and breakfast (B&B) suites to house those who were rough sleeping or threatened with homelessness.

The rapid response and emergent needs and challenges over the next fifteen months have presented key opportunities for trialling new approaches and finding better ways of working moving forward. This also presented an opportunity to improve the standard of accommodation, which, in contrast to communal night shelters, was generally private, cleaner and safer.

For those running communal night shelters, emergency accommodation or hostels, this meant shutting their doors for an indefinite period of time. Matt Lambert, CEO of **Enterprise Homes Group**, a faith-based organisation in Wolverhampton, described closing the night shelter they had run for many years as one of the main positives coming out of COVID-19. Those facing homelessness still needed accommodation and instead of simply closing their doors, those within the sector capitalised on the opportunity to trial different approaches.

1. Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: May 2020
2. Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency accommodation survey data: January 2021
3. Lewer, D. et al. (2020) COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. 8 (12), 1181–1191.





“We’ve seen ... that when we come together and do things the right way, we can offer something that has outcomes that are so much better than what a communal shelter has ever been able to do in the past. We feel as though as a sector and as a city, we have a moral responsibility not to go back to do something that just isn’t good. ... We’re not going back to the way things were, we’re going to do better moving forwards.”

Matt Lambert (CEO, Enterprise Homes Group)

After the first four weeks of supporting Wolverhampton’s hub-based Everyone In provision through a central hotel, Enterprise was convinced by the changes they were seeing and committed to never opening another night shelter. Matt described the experience as an opportunity to reflect on the work they had been doing and, ultimately, to see that things could be done better:

“You can’t look back on something and evaluate it in light of knowledge that you’ve received subsequently. So, we were doing the best we could in a sense. ... We’ve learned a lot and ... [had a] four-week period of just realising that we can do better, and I think in some senses that’s a real testimony just of the quality of the work that we’ve done in Wolverhampton. As far as I’m concerned, I think it was up there with some of the best-run hotels in the country. And so that in and of itself exacerbated the gap with what we’d been able to offer within the night shelter context and what we’d been able to offer in the hotel context.”

The transformative element of Everyone In was felt by many working across the sector, with many previously refusing to come into communal night shelters and hostels thriving in what was often safer, cleaner, private provision. The opportunity to trial and fund this approach on a national scale enabled those working in areas like Wolverhampton to focus on working together to shift from short- to long-term solutions.

The task of ensuring everyone was safely indoors was, however, no small feat, with organisations commonly describing working at maximum capacity to identify enough space for a population of unknown size, while also trying to ensure they were adhering to the sudden changes in health and safety regulations. For many areas across the country, the availability of private accommodation – in the forms of hotels and B&Bs – saved them from needing to completely redo existing spaces. However, these types of accommodation came at incredibly high cost.

While many local authorities were left scrambling to procure sufficient housing for an unknown and often continuing stream of people presenting for support, **Newcastle Council** was able to capitalise on its existing specialist panel approach to avoid the use of hotels or B&Bs. Along with their ALMO– Your Homes Newcastle, they set up an Emergency Housing Panel that was able to quickly handle all referrals through one central working group.



Their ability to avoid the use of hotel or B&B accommodation came at significant cost savings, including not having to procure additional security or cover the costs of rental properties and damages to them. It also meant that those with more complex needs were already known to the council and in appropriate, supported accommodation.

They also continued to work with their three pre-pandemic multi-disciplinary panels focused on (a) extra care housing, (b) supported housing offers for those with learning disabilities and (c) supported housing for people with mental health needs. Claire McMullen, Housing Policy and Commissioning Manager for Newcastle City Council described some of the positives in their approach:

“As the Panel sits daily it has not only meant referrals are dealt with quickly, but the approach and trust between the members has been established quickly. It has been reviewed to include a wider range of social care officers so that support provision and safeguarding is considered alongside accommodation offers.”

Through the Panel, they worked to ensure all referrals received the most appropriate accommodation offer, with a particular focus on meeting the emergency housing needs of priority groups, providing temporary accommodation in social housing properties, responding to resilience issues, freeing up temporary accommodation and, where needed, ensuring care and support needs were met for those discharged from hospital. In mid-January, they were able to transition the Emergency Housing Panel to a Complex Case (Housing) Panel.

Other government measures, including the pause on evictions and the furlough scheme, also presented key opportunities for the sector to witness first-hand the impact of government interventions to tackle the root causes of homelessness. Moving forward, Newcastle strive to have no evictions into homelessness by both reducing the number of evictions and by ensuring that all potential evictions are reviewed by a multi-agency panel, so that alternative housing can be arranged where necessary. Continuing their long-term focus, they are currently in the process of mapping out the pathways for Newcastle’s whole housing system approach. Through collaborative partnerships, this model uses a flexible and proactive approach to facilitate residents in getting the support they need to have suitable and sustainable homes.



## Chapter 3

# Supporting non-UK nationals and those with NRPF

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In the initial call by central government to house everyone at the end of March 2020, the wording clearly indicated that legal status should not be a factor in whether an individual receives housing. However, later statements in May and June clarified that support should only be provided where “there is a risk to life”.<sup>4</sup> This led to a postcode lottery, where some local authorities continued to house those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) status under section 138 of the Local Government Act 1972 and Section 2B of the NHS Act 2006, while others interpreted government messaging as requiring an end to the support of such individuals.<sup>5</sup>

In December of 2020, the *Ncube v Brighton and Hove Council* case determined that these two powers were sufficient in justifying the accommodation of those with NRPF status. However, even after this ruling, some organisations have stated that their local authorities have continued to deny support to individuals with no recourse to public funds.

As pandemic-based emergency provision ends across the country, the sector has and will continue to be faced with having to turn out those they have been supporting for up to and, in many cases, over a year. Organisations and local authorities will have no basis or ability to support individuals with NRPF. The opportunity to work closely with these individuals, build relationships with them and learn their stories has invigorated many across the sector to try and ensure that the end of COVID-19 housing does not mean a return to rough sleeping and destitution. According to a recent review by the HCLG Committee, the prohibition on supporting those with NRPF status is, thus, ‘irreconcilable’ with the goal of ending rough sleeping.<sup>6</sup>

One of the greatest successes of the pandemic was the ability for service providers to house those with NRPF under the Everyone In provision. Through this, many organisations worked incredibly hard to help those with NRPF receive needed support and, in particular, helped many EU citizens to repatriate or apply for settled status in the UK.

4. House of Commons (2021) Protecting the homeless and the private rented sector: MHCLG’s response to Covid-19. Available from: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5342/documents/53217/default/> (Accessed 15 May 2021).

5. Shelter (2021) High Court rules councils can lawfully accommodate street homeless people with ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ – will the government now provide proper guidance?. Available from: <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2021/03/high-court-rules-councils-can-lawfully-accommodate-street-homeless-people-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds-will-the-government-now-provide-proper-guidance/> (Accessed 28 June 2021).

6. House of Commons (2021) Protecting the homeless and the private rented sector: MHCLG’s response to Covid-19. Available from: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5342/documents/53217/default/> (Accessed 15 May 2021).



**Simon on the Streets**, a Leeds-based charity supporting those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, describes one of the biggest challenges of working with those with NRPF as the difficulty in earning their trust. Amongst this diverse group of people, many may be fearful of authorities and potential deportation and/or have experience of human trafficking, modern-day slavery or other forms of exploitation.

For Simon on the Streets, their work with those with no recourse started with building relationships and walking the streets to find these individuals, who they often found in encampments at the bottom of the motorway or in woods on the outskirts of the city. When they started this work pre-pandemic, they were legally prohibited from offering them any support or housing. All they could do was take the time to visit them every day and get to know them.

That all changed during the pandemic, as CEO Natalie Moran explained: “The great thing about Everyone In was that it was everyone.” Building on their initial, pre-pandemic efforts, they were able to slowly start engaging with more and more people. From the first two or three groups of people they had been able to build relationships with, they were introduced to a few more and slowly gained the trust of people across the city.

Over the next twelve months, they supported 75 individuals, initially through Everyone In’s emergency B&B provision, but also with finding long-term solutions to the underlying reasons for their rough sleeping. 37 of these clients have now received Settled status and have been moved from emergency to temporary to long-term, independent accommodation. By June 2021, all their clients had been moved from temporary to long-term accommodation, with ongoing support from Simon on the Streets.

While the programme was initially funded through grants, they have since been able to procure funding through Public Health England. However, they hope to obtain sufficient funds to continue their work over the year and beyond, particularly given the challenges and expenses of applying for Settled status for those who may not have the necessary legal documents, such as passports or proof of residency.

When discussing the programme, Natalie was thankful for being able to support these clients over the past year but remained concerned about the future: “We’ve had a really good opportunity to offer something in the last year. ... Someone needs to get hold of this and acknowledge that it’s an issue and it hasn’t gone away.”

Across the country, those supporting people with NRPF status have struggled with having to legally abandon these people when Everyone In ends. This concern led **Connection Support** to quickly work to set up two new initiatives to support those with NRPF. The first, in Buckinghamshire, was established in October of 2020 to support those with no recourse.

Using pandemic funds from MHCLG they were able to establish the short-term programme,



initially planned to last for twelve weeks. They originally identified just under fifteen people and hoped that they might be able to engage with three or four of the identified individuals. By working to slowly build relationships, they were able to exceed these goals and successfully established relationships with twenty people, 17 of whom were from the EEA and three of whom were nationals of other countries. They also found that continuing to engage with local people allowed them to expand their reach, as new clients identified others in need of support who were still unknown to service providers.

Of the twenty individuals already supported by the programme, four have gained Settled status, nine have obtained Pre-settled status, three are preparing applications or awaiting their results, one has been granted indefinite leave to remain under the Windrush provision and one is being helped to repatriate to their country of birth.

Based on individual needs, clients can also be provided with education, training and employment support, which 14 clients have accessed. This includes six who have signed up for ESOL introductory courses, four who have completed ESES courses, four who have been funded to attend a Polish language CSCS course and four who have secured jobs (one of whom is still employed). After the success of the initial twelve-weeks, the charity decided to self-fund the programme and are looking into potential funding opportunities moving forward.

While the main target group of the Buckinghamshire programme was EU citizens, in Oxfordshire other voluntary sector organisations were already working to help people from the EU to access housing and complete their Settlement scheme applications. However, they identified a key gap in provision for 21 individuals with NRPf status who were remaining in temporary Everyone In accommodation for prolonged periods. These clients, most of whom were from outside the EU, were at a stand-still, with providers unable to offer them move on support or housing.

An initiative was established by Connection Support in Oxfordshire to help these individuals receive support with asylum claims and, where possible, settlement scheme applications. Working in partnership, the programme follows the seven principles of Housing First, ensuring that each client receives stable accommodation and support tailored to their individual needs for as long as is needed. Thus, the procurement of long-term accommodation and services is an essential component of this programme, though a challenge given the legal status of this client group and the short-term nature of available funding.

The project has successfully engaged with six people so far and is hoping to eventually build up to a twenty-bed project that is large enough to support all those with NRPf in the area, including being able to assist with obtaining legal status and to access move on accommodation and services. The programme is planned to run for five years and the hope is that by running the project on a more long-term basis they will not only be able to provide stability for those already supported by the programme but continue to grow and provide a model for others to be able to better support those with NRPf status.



While both the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire programmes originally began with some short-term government funding, they are now in the process of procuring additional charitable funding to continue the work.

While the initiatives in Leeds, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire came out of an emergent need and opportunity, other organisations across the country have used the new regulations to expand on work they had already begun, particularly in supporting those with NRPF apply for the EU settlement scheme. One of these initiatives is **Greater Manchester's EU Homelessness Prevention Service**, which has been run by **the Booth Centre** for the last ten years and expanded into a new partnership during the pandemic.

Jez came to the Booth Centre September 2020 for help with applying for the EU settlement scheme and finding employment. They helped him get a new passport and connected him with the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, who helped him apply for and receive Settled status. While he was waiting for his passport, he volunteered at the Centre, helping him to establish a routine and have a sense of purpose. In the Employment and Skills sessions, Jez received support to write his CV, apply for jobs, contact prospective employers and open a bank account. Once he had everything ready to start work, including a new photo ID and smart phone, he was quickly able to find work through an agency. He is now working in a bottle factory and is in long-term accommodation.

George is a Latvian gentleman who was referred to the Booth Centre along with a friend by the Manchester City Council outreach team. George had limited English language and, due to the pandemic, had struggled to find employment. As a result, he had been rough sleeping for a short time and wanted to return to Latvia to be with his pregnant girlfriend, while his friend decided that he would remain and continue looking for employment with help from the Booth Centre's Job Club. The Centre helped George book and complete his COVID-19 test and obtain the necessary paperwork and tickets to travel. However, upon arriving at the airport, he was told that the rules had changed, and the COVID-19 test he had taken was not correct and that he could not board the flight. The Booth Centre maintained contact with him throughout the day and, with the support of staff at the Luton airport and train station, he returned to Manchester. Booth Centre staff met him at the train station with some food and got him in a taxi to his emergency accommodation provided by the A Bed Every Night team. A few days later the Booth Centre was able to again arrange for his travel home, including a new COVID-19 test and travel documents. The morning after his arrival, George called The Centre from his home in Latvia and shared his joy in being reunited with his girlfriend.





The programme was designed through co-production with eleven volunteers who are non-UK nationals and is supported locally by Manchester City Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Over the course of the pandemic, the programme has seen many EU nationals – many of whom are employed in the hospitality sector, losing jobs and sleeping rough. EU citizens experiencing homelessness are directed to the Booth Centre and if they have no benefit eligibility are provided with single room emergency accommodation provided by Supporting People In Need, where they receive assistance with their settlement scheme applications by The Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit. The Booth Centre also assists clients with finding employment and permanent accommodation.

Over the period from April 2020 to May 2021, the programme supported 279 migrants, with 129 securing supported accommodation, 44 in employment, 54 gaining Settled or Pre-settled status and 48 settlement applications waiting for a decision or currently being completed. EU citizens now make up a much smaller proportion of those who are sleeping rough in Greater Manchester.

Figure 1. Client standing in front of the Booth Centre in Manchester, holding an EU flag

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## Chapter 4

### Beyond Basic Needs

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As the weeks went by, local authorities found themselves continuing to house hundreds (or thousands) of people during an international health crisis, national lockdown and government-mandated social distancing. While many thrived living in private, clean and safe accommodation, others did not. For the sector, it was clear that housing everyone was only part of the solution, particularly with many services remaining closed or having limited, remote provision.

With many experiencing extreme mental ill health while in isolation, services acted quickly and grasped at the opportunity to provide unprecedented levels of support, often in conjunction with or through central Everyone In housing. This was also an opportunity to improve joined-up working and collaboration across services to provide a more holistic, person-centred approach that ensured clients' needs were met. Organisations found creative ways to work together to meet clients' basic, social and psychological needs over what remained an undefined period and many were able to think strategically about their local provision pre- and post-pandemic.

In addition to addressing clients' existing needs, they were also facing new support needs that had emerged or been exacerbated during the pandemic. To do so, local authorities and the voluntary sector worked together across other government services, particularly for those with more complex needs, including clients with mental ill health, physical disabilities, no recourse to public funds and/or a history of substance or alcohol dependency. This included: being able to support those they had previously struggled to engage with or who they had not been able to legally support previously; meeting clients' needs for stimulation, a sense of purpose and socialisation; providing technology (particularly as more services became phone-only or moved on-line); closing or transforming night shelters; restructuring spaces to meet new health and safety guidelines; organising food delivery services; transitioning to digital or remote trainings or services; and more.

This work required rapid turnaround times, adaptation and creativity. For day and night centres having to close, this meant needing to quickly find new ways to deliver services and continue supporting clients, while still adhering to government guidelines. Birmingham-based organisation **SIFA Fireside** acted quickly when they were left with no choice but to close their drop-in day service at the start of the pandemic, knowing that their clients – adults with multiple and complex support needs, still required the same or, as the impact of lockdown and COVID-19 continued, increased support.





Pawel was originally referred to SIFA Fireside from Guide Dogs for the Blind. Pawel is 60 years old and has multiple physical health needs, including being registered blind and having diabetes, epilepsy and COPD. He has also experienced brain injury and suffered a stroke. Pawel didn't have the medication he needed and was experiencing severe harassment from a neighbour at his property.

SIFA Fireside was able to help him access his necessary medication and a phone charger and provided him with a taxi to stay at a local hotel for the night. SIFA also maintained contact with Guide Dogs and established a new connection with a local organisation, Focus and Headway, to ensure Pawel maintained support as a blind person.

A referral to Adult Social Services helped Pawel access more suitable, long term accommodation in a care home with an allocated support worker. At present, Pawel has an upcoming referral planned with Headway and states that he is extremely grateful to have a safe space during a very turbulent period.

With the initial focus being exclusively on housing everyone, SIFA became increasingly concerned about clients who were not receiving much-needed support, particularly as the large numbers of people being housed meant that assessments continued to be delayed. They found that individuals in Everyone In who were accustomed to their and other types of services struggled.

SIFA Fireside acted quickly and put measures in place to ensure that their central hub in Birmingham could continue to operate. The team transitioned to phone-based services and worked to reopen as quickly as possible. By June, they were able to reopen their drop-in services, while continuing to work in partnership with three Birmingham City Council Options Officers who co-located to the centre, improving service streamlining for those with multiple or complex needs.



Figure 2. Staff member serving meals at the SIFA Fireside central hub in Birmingham after reopening

During the pandemic, SIFA Fireside was also commissioned to deliver homeless transition services on behalf of the local authority. Working with SIFA-based Housing Officers, homeless transition workers visit clients within 24 hours of having received accommodation to ensure that they have all the support they need. This also reduces the risk of accommodation failing and a return to SIFA Fireside for further housing assistance.

These more integrated approaches have meant that when people arrive at their centre, they are assessed right away and can immediately access a variety of wraparound support services. They have also found that the substantial reductions in the number of people able to be in their centre at any given time has helped clients feel safer. It was not simply about delivering the services they had always delivered, but, for SIFA Fireside, it was also about ensuring they were filling in the gaps where other services were no longer available or accessible and improving coordination and communication across services.

Like SIFA Fireside, many providers found ways to adapt and continue to provide face-to-face services and activities, either during the first lockdown or as the pandemic continued. This included opportunities to transform initial, emergency measures into strategic, long-term initiatives. One key area of provision was in helping clients find meaning and stimulation, particularly with thousands of people in Everyone In provision with no or extremely limited social contact and activities.



The sector responded with an enormous variety of new and adapted services to help clients overcome boredom and find purpose, demonstrating incredible creativity, innovation and adaptability, even when facing enormous challenges. While some were able to adapt their existing spaces and services, some responded to emergent needs by creating entirely new services to meet basic needs or needs for socialisation and meaning.



Figure 3. A client preparing a meal at home using a slow cooker and ingredients provided by Handcrafted Projects

North East-based organisation **Handcrafted Projects** capitalised on every opportunity they could to develop new projects for their clients to find what CEO Dan Northover describes as the ability to have a “meaningful use of time”:

“We started off doing door-to-door meal delivery and then we realised that long term, we need to ask, how much is this really empowering people? Could we help people to cook affordable meals for themselves? ... Often, when we go to people’s houses, they don’t have an oven, they don’t have a working microwave, they don’t have anything. So, we developed this course, which is a slow cooker course. We give people everything they need: a slow cooker, all of the ingredients and [instruction] video. That’s been hugely popular, especially with single parent families and it’s an initiative that we will definitely continue. It’s been great, because it equips some people to provide for themselves for the first time. ... We’ve had to come up with new ways of doing things. There’s a lot that we’ll carry on doing.”





As a supported accommodation provider, Handcrafted saw first-hand the immense impacts of isolation during the COVID-19 lockdowns, with clients struggling without access to formal and informal sources of support.:

“I’ve seen the enormous public cost of, for example, having someone in severe emotional distress who tries to jump off a bridge several times a week. ... Repeatedly the motorway in Durham gets closed, because the mental health services for one young lady got withdrawn. ... It shows that if we don’t invest more in social care, mental health care, the supported housing provision than there’s a huge public cost to the police, the NHS, the prison service in the long run.”



Figure 4. Clients working in the Handcrafted Projects workshop, making a bedside table (left) and screen printing (right)

Dan explains he has come to see great value in a housing-led approach and that their work is generally based on five key components to building lasting stability: (1) good quality, clean, safe housing; (2) meaningful use of time; (3) a positive social network; (4) building self-confidence and (5) healthy coping strategies. Pre-pandemic, they provided a range of training opportunities for clients in and out of their supported accommodation, ranging from small crafts to furniture building and house renovation work.



This also includes a range of social enterprises for clients, including screen printing and opportunities to make soap, jam and pickles. While employment is not a realistic short-term outcome for many of their clients with more complex needs, for those able to access work, these activities can also provide vital job-training skills.

In discussing the impact of COVID-19 and their work on clients, Dan shared the story of a woman they have worked with during the pandemic:

“One person we work with is a 20-year-old care leaver who came into our housing after leaving the care system. At the start of the pandemic, she lost her job and the activities that helped her to fill time and cope. Her mental health quickly deteriorated, and there were a number of quite serious suicide attempts. She tried accessing crisis and mental health services, but was only offered phone support.

“So, we did our daily meal delivery with her, and used that as a way to spend a lot of time on the doorstep with her, providing that face-to-face, human support. As soon as the restrictions allowed any form of gathered activity, we got her in to start doing something again and now have started to see some improvement. ... She learned to do screen printing during lockdown and we gave her a sewing machine. We were trying to help give her a positive outlook. We recognise that, being sat at home, and left ruminating on difficult circumstances can lead to a very destructive cycle.

“Over the last few weeks of doing this new role, she has really rediscovered that purpose and direction. So, she’s gone from being on the police’s list of familiar face and regularly out in a risky situation to cutting out some of these self-destructive behaviours and drug use. Actually, for weeks at a time now we’ve not had any really serious incidents, which is a huge step of progress.

“That’s a common story that we have seen across many of our 35 houses in people who are very vulnerable, very isolated, at risk of relapse or self-destructive and even suicidal behaviour. Now, we’ve got through a very long, difficult lockdown by taking every initiative to do what we could. We’ve learned to find creative ways of connecting with people and empowering them and, now, we’re starting to see people across our houses thrive and move on with life. Our workshops have had 187 new referrals this year, 46 people have managed to move back into employment or volunteering and 49 people are sustaining their recovery from drug or alcohol addiction.”

Looking to the future, Dan discussed the importance of capitalising on these learning experiences: “Our focus is really about trying to turn everything that we’ve learned during lockdown and what we’ve seen as being really valuable and trying to maximise that and push that forward.”





Many across the sector described new and adapted strategies to ensure clients had opportunities to develop creative skills and have meaningful activities during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Historically, the arts have been used by those in the sector to promote well-being, a sense of agency, resilience, knowledge and skills with those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.<sup>8</sup> During the pandemic, this included online workshops, collaborative embroidery, the distribution of thousands of art packs and more. Much of this work has focused on reaching single people who were digitally and socially isolated by creating postal projects and fostering opportunities for face-to-face engagement on the street and in hotels, hostels and single tenancies.

When the pandemic hit, the London-based organisation **Arts & Homelessness International (AHI)** acted quickly to establish a number of projects, often in partnership. They established a regular arts programme in the Days Hotel in Coventry in partnership with the City Council, Crisis and Coventry City of Culture 2021. AHI also expanded a Cardboard Citizen's mobile library project with residents of the Wandsworth hotel who were shielding.

By working collaboratively with St Mungo's staff and residents, the Cardboard Citizens programme developed a series of weekly creative challenges. Residents received a bag of art and craft supplies each week and were encouraged to respond creatively before sharing their ideas in an online feedback session. Other co-produced projects included smartphone photography, mural painting with Haringey residents in emergency accommodation and concerts over the Christmas period in COVID hotels. They also partnered with Underground Lights, a local arts and homelessness charity, to run an international art collaboration that connected clients from centres and NGOs in North and South America, Africa, India, Australia and East Asia.



Figure 5. A resident painting the mural at Red House in Haringey



Matt, a Wandsworth hotel resident, took part in the Cardboard Citizens project before becoming a volunteer with one of the project's partners, The Reader. He has now found regular, paid freelance work with AHI and others, including performing at Homeless Link events and international conferences.

“It’s the best thing I’ve done in 18 months. It’s stopped me running back to my room to drink. We should have had this project in rehab.” – Natasha, a participant of the Haringey project

AHI described these and their other initiatives during the pandemic as incredible opportunities for co-learning, including on how to deliver arts projects remotely and how to use arts and creativity to support not only clients’ morale, but that of staff as well. They attribute much of the success of the programme to their focus on co-production, with 50% of their board and staff having experience of homelessness and clients involved in all stages of design and delivery. Gill Taylor, Strategic Lead for Single Homelessness and Vulnerable Adults for the London Borough of Haringey described the programme as transformative, not only for clients, but in her own thinking:

“We found really quickly that it was an amazing opportunity for people in the hotel to express themselves and to build connections with other people. We were also really happy ... to see that people had a huge amount of talent that they wanted to share with others. As a commissioner, it made me reflect on the role of arts and creativity in our rough sleeping strategy and in decisions we are making in the Borough.”

Figure 6. Arts & Homeless International’s mural at Red House in Haringey





For many, the challenges presented by COVID-19 have been an opportunity to reflect on not only strategic developments during the pandemic, but how they can capitalise on these learnings moving forward. For AHI, this has included recent work with local authorities in Coventry and Haringey to establish methods for policy co-creation with those with experience of homelessness, including through embedding the arts into local homelessness strategies.

For **HARP**, a charity based in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, this was an opportunity to reflect on how they were supporting not only the wellbeing of their clients, but also that of their staff and volunteers. While they provided staff with the tools to support clients through a trauma-informed approach, the nature of working within the sector – exacerbated by professional and personal hardships throughout the pandemic, could have substantial emotional and psychological impacts.<sup>9</sup> In particular, vicarious trauma could have a significant impact on staff burn out and retention.

While their staff received training in the use of a trauma-informed approach with clients, HARP felt that it was important for staff to have the same opportunities available to them. They developed a new initiative soon after lockdown began that used a trauma-informed approach to support staff's own well-being. They brought in a qualified professional to offer quarterly reflective-practice sessions. One-on-one sessions were also available for staff with high levels of stress or who had experienced work-related trauma. As the pandemic continued, these support services were extended to staff who had been furloughed or were working from home.

HARP found the project to provide much-needed support for staff in reducing stress and managing trauma. They have, however, found that returning to work in-person and continuing worries around the pandemic have led to an increase in anxiety for some staff members, leading HARP to extend the initial three-month pilot project by a further six months to ensure necessary support is available.

The challenges faced by organisations like HARP are multi-faceted, requiring meeting the needs of clients, staff and local communities during an international health emergency and rapidly changing government guidance. While this presented a range of challenges, it also presented opportunities to think creatively and strategically, particularly as the national focus on rough sleeping in the context of preventing illness and death lent itself to strategic working across other sectors. As seen through the innovative initiatives discussed in this chapter, the sector had to not only think creatively, they also had to work collaboratively to ensure they were meeting the complex needs of each client.

7. Homeless Link (2020) Getting creative with support during lockdown. Available from: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2020/nov/11/getting-creative-with-support-during-lockdown> (Accessed 12 June 2021).
8. Shaw, P. (2019) A Literature Review of Arts and Homelessness. Available from: <http://with-one-voice.com/sites/default/files/2019-12%20%7C%20A%20literature%20review%20of%20Arts%20and%20Homelessness.pdf> (Accessed 22 June 2021).
9. Gaskin, C. (2020) Putting staff well-being at the centre of the pandemic response. Available from: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2020/oct/27/putting-staff-well-being-at-centre-of-pandemic-response> (Accessed 5 June 2021).





## Chapter 5

# Streamlined approaches through partnership working

One of the greatest benefits of the pandemic for the homelessness sector was the widespread increase in joined-up, partnership working experienced across many local areas. As local authorities were faced with the large task of achieving Everyone In, voluntary sector organisations commonly described feeling that their expertise had come to be more highly valued as they were relied upon for guidance and support.

New working groups that included local authorities and the voluntary and health sectors were established, rapidly transforming processes that had previously taken place in isolation, often with few or no opportunities for collaboration. To meet the exponential increase in demand and service provision, in conjunction with the health requirements surrounding COVID-19, many described much closer working practices across their local councils and with the health sector. The framing of homelessness provision and support also shifted from an emphasis on addressing rough sleeping to prevention, working to address health-related needs through supporting those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

For some, where they already had close relationships with their local authority, the change in approach was primarily focused on streamlining processes to improve efficiencies and joint working approaches. In **Wolverhampton**, close working relationships across the council meant that the multi-agency Homeless Operational Group was able to quickly collaborate to support those now being housed through Everyone In at their central hotel.

Over the pandemic, they were able to house over one hundred people who were threatened with or experienced homelessness. Matt Lambert, CEO of **Enterprise Homes Group**, described one of the greatest achievements of this programme as the ability to formalise processes for streamlining referrals:

“When new people come on to the city’s radar, they can be directed to the organisation that has the best fit and the greatest chance of getting them to achieve their stated outcomes. Because we’re not working against each other, we’re not worried about who’s doing what. We are doing it all together for the benefit of the individual.”

This experience has been so overwhelmingly positive that the city has commissioned a new multi-agency hub, which will include a Single Persons Assessment Centre and 24 settled and emergency housing accommodation units.<sup>10</sup>

10. City of Wolverhampton Council (2021) New multi agency support plans for vulnerable people [online]. Available from: <https://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/news/new-multi-agency-support-plans-vulnerable-people> (Accessed 12 June 2021).



For others, where relationships with local authorities were strained or simply more removed, the necessity of the situation could present an opportunity to rebuild trust and new partnership practices across local government and the voluntary sector.

**The Booth Centre**, a Manchester-based charity, described how the pandemic has helped to forge a new start across their local authority. At the start of Everyone In, they established a new regular meeting across the sector, which CEO Amanda Croome described as an opportunity to ensure co-production with those with experiences of homelessness and to create avenues for joined-up approaches across the local authority and voluntary sectors:

“The end of the night shelters was fantastic. ... [We] set up really good alternative single room accommodation, which involved all the partners. So, for example, we were producing all the meals for quite a few of the emergency hostels, using our kitchens, ... and then other organisations were delivering them.

“[The] strategic advisory group that we set up during COVID will continue to meet as everyone, including the Council, found it useful. The council’s now doing a whole service redesign, partly to help address homelessness better but also to cope with the cuts that they’re facing, and they’ve kept the advisory group of voluntary sector organisations in place, which is really positive.

“So, coming out of COVID we’ve got much better communication with the Council than we did beforehand. We always had fairly good connections, but we’ve now got quite a formal structure where we can feed into the changes that are happening in the council’s homelessness services. ... The way that we’re working together as a partnership has changed and is much, much stronger, which is really good and that partnership includes the city council and the voluntary and faith-based sectors.

“The way we’re going to deliver our winter provision in future will be very different. We’ve now got all the evidence that shows that what Manchester used to do, pre-COVID, was nowhere near as effective as what we were able to do this year, so we’ve now put together a partnership approach to delivering a unified winter service, which is a complete transformation from what it used to be.

“So, we used to have three different faith-based organisations all running different night shelters. ... The City Council would provide extra night shelters for three days when the temperature dropped below zero and we’d get people in and then chuck people out again, ... sometimes six or seven times during the winter, every time the temperature dropped below zero, without ... any long-term support to keep people inside.

“And this year, because of COVID, we got people into single room accommodation and



kept them in and put in loads of support for people and then moved them on either into long-term supported accommodation or into their own tenancies and that was really effective at reducing levels of rough sleeping. ... It was more expensive, but long term it will have been much more effective, and we put together a model to keep this approach going forward. ... It's all a unified, coordinated approach with the Council and voluntary and statutory sectors working together and with co-production with people who are homeless really clearly at the heart of that, which it wasn't before.

“COVID got all the partners working together to provide single room accommodation with move on support provided throughout the winter, which has been really positive. It made everyone think differently and do things differently, which was great.”

In one London borough, the local council and VCS had already agreed that change was needed months before the pandemic started. In December of 2019, just a few months before the first national lockdown, **Newham** approved their first new rough sleeping strategy in a decade. Struggling with one of the highest rough sleeping rates in the country, they knew they needed a more tailored approach to meet the needs of a very diverse population. They wanted to introduce multiple planned pathways to meet peoples' individual needs but did not have the data they needed to determine what these pathways should look like.

COVID-19 presented the perfect opportunity to get to know the population they were serving and assess and trial different approaches to providing strategic, streamlined provision. Simon Reid, the local authority's Assistant Director of Commissioning explained: “We transformed our system from emergency accommodation, a room for a night, to a roof for a pandemic, to something more geared toward our needs.”

Based on emergent needs, they were able to establish multiple pathways, including developing women-only accommodation and a pathway for those with high needs. Using COVID-19 funds, they were also able to establish a substance misuse pathway, which is now being funded by Public Health England. Simon explained:

“We were always trying to develop our pathway ... to be way more than just accommodation and move on, but something that genuinely tried to support people with care and compassion. ... And what that's enabled us to do is to move on a lot of people. So, over the last year we've supported about 620-630 people, of which the vast majority have moved on. 200 plus have been supported to regularise their immigration status. ... 90 plus have now got Settled or Pre-settled status, with another 54 waiting, and that means about 30 have nothing. ... [There's] nothing more we can do [to help] them, but, actually, we've been able to support a huge number of people to actually get to a position that they haven't been in before. We've tried to evolve our system, so it's not just an emergency response, but it's a foundation for what we want to do in the future.”



Through this, they have also been able to continue to improve and strengthen other partnerships with the health sector and other providers. In collaboration with the East London Health Foundation, they were able to launch RHAMP, a new mental health and rough sleeping service. They also worked with the BEAM Foundation to provide employment support for those who are ready and able to work.<sup>11</sup>

While the programme has come a long way in a very short period, Simon was also quick to point out that they still have a lot of learning and growing to do. In particular, he described a need to continue to improve their women-only accommodation, with clients living in this accommodation having some of the most complex needs of those they serve. For Newham council, it has been about designing an approach that will meet these women's needs and recognising that building trust and addressing historical trauma will take some time. They have begun to introduce more psychological support, but a crucial issue remains around procuring the necessary long-term funding.

As with so many of these programmes, there has been an enormous recognition during COVID-19 that, while working in collaboration and establishing more streamlined approaches can have an enormous impact, it is crucial that initiatives and ways of working are able to take a long-term approach that is responsive to emergent needs.

Simon spoke to the enormous cost savings of this way of working, how, by putting in a bit more money upfront, the local authority has cut down on the huge expenditure associated with supporting someone who is rough sleeping: “We think that kind of compassion economics works in our favour, to make financial savings in the future.” While he expressed optimism about the future of homelessness provision in Newham, he remained frustrated with the difficulties in accessing the long-term funds needed to support those with more complex needs:

“The challenge moving forward, as the COVID money tapers off is, how do we sustain the quality of work and not go back to just putting a roof over someone's head? We know losing the roof that they once had was the last thing to go. That's not the reason they're rough sleeping. ... But they need all of this other work and if that money isn't there, how do we pay for it? And I think that's a genuine challenge.

“The second genuine challenge is the RSAP and move on funds that we have. They're seemingly designed for people with low needs. ... What we need is money for people who are more complicated, who have higher levels of need and will require longer time periods of support. ... They need something more than what we have historically been able to offer them, which is effectively what we're doing now. But none of the funding streams seem to want to do that. .... The funding doesn't seem to be aligned to local needs.”

11. The BEAM Foundation is a London-based organisation that provides job training and essential support for people with experience of homelessness. More information available at: <https://beam.org/>



## Chapter 6

# Creating resilient financial models

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While the sector exhibited an incredible amount of creativity and resilience over the course of the pandemic, their experiences also demonstrated the many challenges of working in an area characterised by constantly struggling to obtain short-term, precarious funding. Many organisations felt particularly concerned about the next two to five years, as the increased funding opportunities available over the course of the pandemic end and funding becomes even more limited, while the impacts of COVID-19 continue to create a stream of new clients facing homelessness.

Some organisations, particularly housing providers, have been able to develop financially resilient models that have helped them through the pandemic and will hopefully continue to protect them as they move forward. While such models are not possible for many, particularly those who are not housing providers, they reflect just some of the strategies employed within the sector to survive in such a challenging, uncertain funding environment.

**Action Homeless** is the largest provider of accommodation and support in Leicester for those facing homelessness, managing over 200 housing units. They have worked managing supported accommodation on behalf of housing associations for close to fifty years. Historically, they have maintained a relationship similar to most housing suppliers, with Registered Providers maintaining the buildings and Action Homeless letting the properties and receiving funding from the local authority to provide support.

However, in the past decade it became clear to them that this model was no longer sustainable. They realised that, in order to provide the standard of accommodation people need, they would have to be less reliant on Registered Providers and start developing their own portfolio of purchased and directly leased properties.

In 2012, Action Homeless was awarded what was then Department of Communities and Local Government funding to bring long-term empty private properties back into use as affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness. This funding, along with the organisation's own reserves and social finance, has supported the charity's broader strategic objective of creating more long-term housing. In the past eight years, they have renovated forty properties, of which ten are owned directly. In total, they have created 160 new bed spaces for people experiencing homelessness in Leicester.



Not only does this increase in accommodation meet the continuing need for affordable housing in Leicester and nationally, the associated revenue generates a surplus that is reinvested into securing more affordable, clean, safe accommodation units. It also provides a guaranteed income stream that has increased the organisation's sustainability, which was especially important in coping with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Handcrafted Projects** also described their ability to use their supported housing provision to provide greater financial stability. According to CEO Dan Northover:

“Sometimes you get these partnerships where it just works well for everyone. So, there’s a constant stream of people that we see who need housing, who need somewhere to live. We’ve got a local authority who is looking for better housing options and particularly for people who have very complicated, very high needs, who need a lot more support. ... There’s also, particularly in the North East, a number of properties available which are affordable to certain investors. ... They’re looking to make a return on those and actually the model we’ve got is: we’ve got people who need housing, a local authority who want to fund it and then investors who can put the capital up. And, actually, it works. It works for everyone in that way.”





## Chapter 7

# An opportunity to rethink and re-prioritise

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The longer-term aspect of Everyone In enabled local authorities and those working across the sector to think more strategically about the types of services they provided and the support clients needed. While some of this shift reflected general needs – e.g., changing from night shelter to long-term provision, the opportunity to meet and work with a greater number of clients for a longer period also helped to reveal needs experienced by particular groups.

For Leeds-based charity Simon on the Streets, this allowed them to further work they were already doing trying to support vulnerable women. **Simon on the Streets** is a member of Women's Lives Leeds, a forum of eleven organisations specialising in a variety of areas related to supporting women in the city. They attribute this forum and the strong partnership working around women's services in Leeds as one of the primary reasons for the local authority's rapid establishment of a women-only hotel at the beginning of the pandemic. They also described the greater visibility of women experiencing homelessness in the city, largely due to the managed sex working zone and the subsequent close working relationship with the Police and Crime Commissioner and local council.

The early establishment of a women-only hotel in Leeds was atypical and was viewed positively by Simon on the Streets, with CEO Natalie Moran stating that those in the accommodation were able to rebuild their independence. She described the initiative as “invaluable, work[ing] extremely well for the women, providing them with a safe space to stay. It's full all the time”. Through this central provision and the large Leeds working group, Simon on the Streets has been able to work throughout the pandemic to increase their support and engagement with women experiencing and at risk of homelessness. To do so, they have worked to ensure that they are able to provide supportive, tailored advice and services.

This has included capitalising on the opportunities to work closely with women in Everyone In accommodation to improve their co-production processes, while establishing systems for using this information to directly inform and continue to transform the services they provide. They have also worked to increase the number of staff knowledgeable about gender-informed provision, including hiring a full-time women's worker and training staff in trauma-informed approaches, addiction, dual diagnosis, domestic violence and abuse and mental health.

In collaboration with other partners and the Leeds Housing Authority, Simon on the Streets has been able to provide a wide range of support and services to clients over the course of the pandemic. This has included finding appropriate housing for those with experience of domestic violence and abuse and/or a history of sex work, connecting individuals with safeguarding and substance misuse services, providing essential items (e.g., sanitary products, clothing and food), supporting women in obtaining necessary medications and more.





One of the groups they have found to be hardest hit by the pandemic has been women with no recourse to public funds, finding that many have lost cash jobs and, without any options for support, have been left destitute. Simon on the Streets has been helping these women apply for Settled status, many of whom have been successful in their applications. However, Natalie remains concerned about these women:

“Their rights to access benefits and housing support are extremely limited. Many women with NRPF have been left destitute, disempowered and pushed further underground as they become part of the hidden homeless.”

While support for women and NRPF was a key area of concern and increased provision during the pandemic, another group that emerged through pandemic provision was young people, with data on rough sleeping demonstrating increases across this group in many areas, particularly with the increase in ‘hidden’ homeless populations presenting to services (e.g., ‘sofa surfers’ and others in precarious housing situations).<sup>12</sup> In London, from April 2020 to March 2021, one in ten of those seen rough sleeping by the Greater London Authority were 18 to 25 years olds (1,093 young people), a greater proportion than has been previously seen.<sup>13</sup>

**New Horizon Youth Centre** worked in partnership with Depaul UK to quickly establish a new hub for young people who were currently or imminently sleeping rough in the city. Opened on 24 March 2021, **Hotel 1824** was developed through a collective effort that also included the Greater London Authority and London Councils, who have funded the project in conjunction with several foundations. In less than eight weeks, they had already filled their forty-bed capacity and have remained full ever since, with referrals coming from across London’s inner- and outer boroughs.

One of the greatest successes of the project has been its ability to accommodate same-night referrals, including maintaining close working relationships with local health and wellbeing service partners. The team responds to referrals 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Accommodation includes twenty beds for referrals from the voluntary sector and council housing option services and another twenty beds for referrals from statutory-funded street outreach teams.

Through their wraparound, youth-specific support, the project focuses on addressing the underlying causes of homelessness and working to prevent longer-term or repeat homelessness. As they have been at capacity throughout the time they have been open, concerns remain about their ability to accommodate all referrals in the future and the absence of a youth-specific pathway.

One of their main challenges has been struggling to access appropriate move on accommodation. Nonetheless, during the first eleven weeks of the pilot, they had accommodated 54 young people, 23 of whom had moved on after an average of 36 days. Within this group, 39% of clients were female and 57% identified as Black or Black British.





“Rough sleeping, it’s not something anyone wants, but I didn’t have a choice. At first, I was very frightened. It was really cold, really dark and uncomfortable. I just didn’t really know what services were out there. Being in the hotel gave me a chance to think. It allowed me to rest and plan my future.” (Lawrence, 20)

12. Boobis, S. & Albanese, F. (2020) The Impact of Covid-19 on People Facing Homelessness and Service Provision Across Great Britain; Fitzpatrick, S., Mackie, P., et al. (2021) The COVID-19 crisis response to homelessness in Great Britain
13. Greater London Authority (2021) CHAIN annual report, Greater London, April 2020 to March 2021



## Chapter 8

# Conclusions

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COVID-19 has been an international tragedy of incredible proportion. At the same time, the early and extensive action taken by central government in supporting those who were rough sleeping not only saved hundreds of lives, it gave the sector an opportunity to support and house tens of thousands of people in a way that may not have otherwise been possible.

Over fifteen months, the sector experienced unprecedented transformation, housing nearly everyone who was at risk of rough sleeping in a matter of days, before then rapidly transitioning from emergency to temporary to long-term provision. What is vital from this period is that the lessons and opportunities gained are not lost and that organisations can enact key learnings to provide homelessness provision that is not only suitable for today, but that is able to achieve the government's goals of ending rough sleeping by 2024.

Now that the sector has seen what is possible in national homelessness provision, we have been able to identify many of the solutions needed to end rough sleeping and homelessness in England. Joined-up ways of working through new and expanded partnerships enabled the sector to address the underlying causes of homelessness and provide tailored approaches to meet individual needs and circumstance through streamlined provision. Meanwhile, the streamlining of processes and emphasis on timely, holistic support we have seen over the past fifteen months better addressed the complexity and diversity of clients' needs. Moving forward, it will be important to prioritise the maintenance and growth of these formal and informal partnerships across local authority provision.

Around the country, organisations also found ways to act with creativity and flexibility to establish, expand and adapt services to meet clients' ongoing and emergent needs, helping people regain their independence and find purpose and meaning in their lives. The incredibly rapid transformation exhibited under extreme pressure and high need reflects immeasurable resilience and flexibility. COVID-19 brought a wide variety of challenges for the sector, but it has also shown that the homelessness sector is capable of incredible innovation, adaptability and, ultimately, a willingness to question old approaches and try new ones.

Given the enormous successes demonstrated while facing enormous adversity, it is vital that the sector is given the opportunity to utilise and expand on these skills and learning opportunities moving forward. Through the pandemic, we have seen a glimpse of what future-oriented homelessness provision might look like. Those working across the sector have demonstrated that joined-up working in partnership across sectors can provide a more holistic approach that not only addresses immediate needs but prevents new and a return to homelessness.



We have also seen that for those who have refused night shelters or deteriorated in communal accommodation, we now know that there are better, higher quality options that can return a feeling of dignity and safety. Providing accommodation and services tailored to individuals' circumstances can be transformative, particularly for those with more complex needs.

By working in collaboration, those across health, substance misuse, mental health and other statutory services have seen that we cannot address these issues in isolation. Through a need – supporting those in Everyone In accommodation, came the opportunity to work together and create streamlined, individualised approaches that have the greatest chance of helping people never return to homelessness or rough sleeping.

However, amidst this incredible spirit of hope and doing better for the future, many of the old challenges remain. While many across the sector have expanded to meet increasing needs and worked diligently to improve and tailor services to changing demographics and pandemic-related impacts, without the ability to obtain a sufficient supply of affordable housing and without access to long-term funding opportunities, organisations will likely struggle to continue meeting clients' needs, particularly as we have yet to see the full impact of COVID-19.

However, across the homelessness sector there is hope: hope that we have seen that we can do better and the knowledge that, whatever barriers exist, we will continue to do better in the future for our clients.





### **About Us**

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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