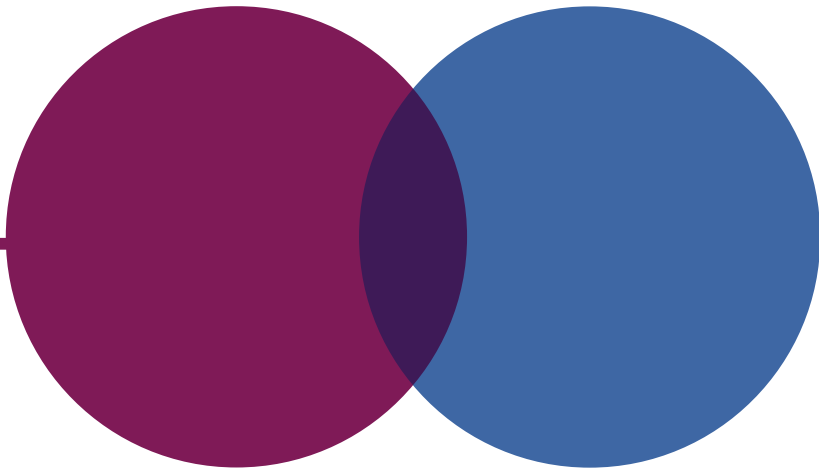




National Audit Office



Investigation into the housing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

REPORT

**by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

**SESSION 2019–2021
14 JANUARY 2021
HC 1075**

Key facts

33,139

people brought into accommodation (including emergency accommodation, such as hotels, and more settled accommodation, such as in the private rental sector) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as at end of November 2020

16

recorded deaths of homeless people linked to COVID-19 as at 26 June 2020 (latest official figures)

£170m

amount local authorities expected to spend in 2020-21 on additional cost pressures related to rough sleeping, as at October 2020

4,266

official annual snapshot of people sleeping rough, as at autumn 2019 (published February 2020)

9,866

people remaining in hotels and other emergency accommodation, as at end of November 2020, having been taken in as rough sleepers or at risk of rough sleeping

23,273

people moved into more settled accommodation, as at end of November 2020 (this and the figure above sum to 33,139)

3,300

number of housing units to provide long-term accommodation for rough sleepers, to be delivered by 31 March 2021 under the £161 million Next Steps Accommodation Programme

What this investigation is about

1 On Thursday 26 March 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government launched its ‘Everyone In’ campaign. Everyone In required local authorities to take urgent action to house rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping in order to protect public health and stop wider transmission of COVID-19. Central government policy responsibility for tackling homelessness sits with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (the Department), while the delivery of services to support homeless people sits with local authorities.

2 This investigation is part of a programme of work we are undertaking to support Parliament’s scrutiny of the government’s response to COVID-19. In this report we set out the steps taken by the Department in rehousing rough sleepers in England during the pandemic, focusing particularly on the steps taken at the outset of the pandemic; the information held by the Department on those at risk of rough sleeping; and subsequent steps that the Department has taken to provide long-term accommodation to those at risk of rough sleeping.

3 Our report primarily covers the period between March and November 2020. Fieldwork, conducted between September and November, included interviews with key staff from the Department. We also consulted a range of local authorities and voluntary sector organisations, as well as academics and other stakeholders with experience of delivering homeless services. Appendix One sets out our methodology in more detail.

4 This report is a ‘facts only’ account of the Department’s actions and is not a value-for-money evaluation. While we set out the spending by local authorities on rough sleeping in this report, we will cover the financial response of local authorities to COVID-19 as a whole in a value-for-money report due for publication later in 2021.

Summary

Key findings

Bringing 'Everyone In'

Putting the Everyone In campaign in place

5 By mid-March 2020, local authorities and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (the Department) were moving swiftly in response to the threat COVID-19 posed to the health of rough sleepers. Rough sleepers typically experience poorer health than the rest of the population and are especially vulnerable to respiratory illnesses. Those at risk of rough sleeping may also occasionally sleep in communal shelters, where they cannot self-isolate if they have symptoms of COVID-19. With these factors in mind, by mid-March a number of local authorities were taking action to rehouse their vulnerable populations. To assist this, the Department announced initial funding of £3.2 million for local authorities to help rough sleepers to self-isolate, and distributed guidance on how to assess individual rough sleepers' needs effectively to contain the spread of the virus (paragraphs 1.3 to 1.6).

6 On 26 March the government launched its Everyone In campaign, asking local authorities to offer accommodation immediately to all rough sleepers and those at risk of being on the streets, due to the health risks posed by the pandemic. The Department was clear that local authorities should include those at risk of rough sleeping and people in accommodation where it was not possible to self-isolate, such as communal shelters. As such, in practice, Everyone In encompassed non-UK nationals who ordinarily are not legally entitled to receive public funding or support (paragraphs 1.7 to 1.9).

How Everyone In was delivered

7 Despite having no contingency plan in place, the Department swiftly reorganised to launch Everyone In. At the outset of this crisis the Department did not have a plan for protecting the rough sleeping population in the event of a pandemic. In early 2020, the Prime Minister appointed Dame Louise Casey (now Baroness Casey) to lead a review into rough sleeping. In mid-March her role changed, and she volunteered to step in to assist the pandemic response for rough sleepers. From mid-March onwards, the Department responded rapidly, reorganising its homelessness directorate to prioritise work on its response to the pandemic. The Department refocused the majority of its homelessness and rough sleeping advisers to work closely with local authorities to help them secure immediate accommodation for rough sleepers (paragraphs 1.10 to 1.11).

8 The Department took a ‘hands on’ approach, working intensively with local authorities, homelessness charities and hotel chains. This meant that the Department, working with local authorities, was able to pinpoint locations where rough sleepers were gathering, and move them into accommodation. At the outset of the pandemic, in March, local authorities estimated that there was a total of 6,000 rough sleepers in England; by mid-April, 5,400 people (90% of this total) had been made an offer of emergency accommodation. The scale and pace of the urgent effort to take rough sleepers, and those at risk of rough sleeping, into safe accommodation tested the resilience of all organisations involved, with key staff working intensively for extended periods (paragraphs 1.11 and 1.12).

9 Local authorities expect to spend around £170 million rehousing rough sleepers in response to the pandemic in 2020-21, paid for by a combination of emergency grants, existing homelessness funding streams, and their own internal resources. Between April and September 2020, local authorities reported that they had spent £100 million on rough sleeping, and as at October 2020 were forecasting spending of around £170 million on rough sleepers overall in 2020-21. The Department did not provide designated funding for Everyone In but has distributed £4.6 billion in funding to local authorities since March to cover all additional spending related to COVID-19. The Department has also allowed local authorities to repurpose £8.2 million from its longstanding Rough Sleeping Initiative to rehousing rough sleepers during the pandemic (paragraphs 1.13 to 1.14).

What Everyone In has achieved

10 By the end of November 2020 more than 33,000 people had been helped to find accommodation under Everyone In. The Department has a goal of ending rough sleeping by 2024. While Everyone In was not designed to contribute to achieving this goal, it has enabled valuable work to be undertaken towards it. At the end of November, a total of 23,273 people (a number of whom had first been taken into emergency accommodation) had been supported to move into settled accommodation (such as social housing or the private rental sector) or a ‘rough sleeping pathway’ (including hostels and supported housing, or moving in with family or friends). Meanwhile, a further 9,866 people remained in hotels and other emergency accommodation, having also previously been taken in off the streets or after presenting to a local authority as being at risk of sleeping rough (paragraphs 1.17 and 1.18).

11 COVID-19 infections and deaths have been relatively low among the homeless and rough sleeping population in England. Up to June (the latest date for which Office for National Statistics data are available), the deaths of 16 homeless people had been identified as involving COVID-19. An academic study also estimates that, by taking preventative measures such as closing night shelters, Everyone In may have avoided more than 20,000 infections and 266 deaths among the homeless population. Early evidence suggests that transmission rates for this group in England have been significantly lower than, for example, cities in the United States that rely heavily on communal night shelters (paragraphs 1.15 and 1.16).

Government approach since May 2020

12 The number of people accommodated under Everyone In over several months far exceeds the number officially recorded as rough sleeping in the annual national snapshot. In November 2019 the government's annual headcount of the number of rough sleepers estimated that there were 4,266 people sleeping rough on a single night. In the early stages of Everyone In, local authorities took in a higher volume of people, presenting as being in need of emergency accommodation, than were reported as sleeping rough in their area in the most recent snapshot. By the end of November 2020 the number of people helped under Everyone In was more than 33,000 (paragraphs 2.1 to 2.4).

13 In May the Department announced that it was moving to the next phase of the government's support for rough sleepers during the pandemic. On 28 May the Department wrote to local authorities, asking them to submit plans for supporting people to move on from emergency accommodation. Following this letter, the approach taken by local authorities to those who newly presented as rough sleeping increasingly diverged, with some continuing to take people into emergency accommodation regardless of eligibility, and others assessing people's eligibility for support (paragraphs 2.6 and 2.7).

14 There was a continued flow of rough sleepers onto the streets over the summer and autumn. Local authorities and charities we spoke to reported that they have seen increased numbers of people sleeping rough since June. Data collected by the Department from local authorities since the early stages of Everyone In appear to confirm the upward trend in numbers, although the data are still to be fully verified. The data are not yet available in the public domain and the Department is currently considering options for the publication of these data (paragraphs 2.8 and 2.9).

15 People with no recourse to public funds housed under Everyone In face challenges in moving to more settled accommodation. At the outset of Everyone In, the Department encouraged local authorities to take all those sleeping rough into emergency accommodation, irrespective of nationality or entitlement to benefits. In its ministerial letter of 28 May the Department reminded local authorities that legal restrictions on offering support to people ineligible for benefits remained in force, and that exceptions should only be made after an individual assessment of there being a risk to life. Some local authorities stopped taking those who were ineligible for benefits into emergency accommodation and sought to move on those already in such accommodation. Moving people who have no recourse to public funds into settled accommodation has proved challenging because they cannot claim benefits and might struggle financially to move into the private rental sector. This was a particular issue in London where, by the end of September, around 2,000 people (or around half of the 4,000 in total) who remained in hotels and other emergency accommodation were ineligible for benefits (paragraphs 2.10 to 2.13).

16 For the winter of 2020, Everyone In will form one of a range of measures targeted on areas with large numbers of rough sleepers. On 5 November, the Department set out the approach to rough sleepers that it will take during the winter of 2020-21. At the centre of this is the Protect Programme, a newly established initiative which provides funding of £15 million in addition to that already spent by local authorities on rehousing rough sleepers, and is geared towards those with high numbers of rough sleepers. Everyone In will continue to run alongside this. In addition, while underlining that night shelters should only be a last resort due to the risks of COVID-19 transmission, the Department announced £12 million of funding to provide self-contained emergency accommodation and help make night shelters safer for use. In January 2021, the Department announced £10 million of additional funding for local authorities to help them accommodate people still sleeping rough, and to help them to register with a GP to get a COVID-19 vaccination (paragraphs 2.14 to 2.18).

17 In response to the pandemic, the Department brought forward planned funding to accelerate securing 3,300 homes for rough sleepers by 31 March 2021. In May, the Department announced that it would make a further £161 million available for local authorities to deliver 3,300 new housing units for rough sleepers by the end of the 2020-21 financial year. Assessing local authorities' bids for long-term accommodation funding proved to be more complex than the Department anticipated, which delayed the funding announcement. The Department announced on 29 October that more than £150 million had been allocated to 276 local authority schemes for new homes for rough sleepers. The Department remains confident that local authorities will be able to deliver 3,300 units by the end of March 2021, as the majority of these are set to be delivered through the lease or purchase of existing buildings, with many projects already initiated in anticipation of government funding (paragraphs 2.19 and 2.20).

18 In early 2020 the Department had identified a need to review its Rough Sleeping Strategy, but this has not yet been carried out. The current published strategy is out of date: it refers to the previous government's target of ending rough sleeping by 2027. The current government was elected in December 2019 with a manifesto commitment to bring forward this target to May 2024. The review into rough sleeping which Baroness Casey was brought in to conduct in February 2020 has yet to take place, due to the focus on COVID-19 (paragraph 2.21).

Concluding remarks

19 Everyone In should be regarded as a considerable achievement. The rehousing of rough sleepers in the early stages of COVID-19 demonstrates what can be done when central government, local authorities and voluntary organisations work together to respond to an extremely urgent priority. Everyone In has helped keep rates of infection and deaths low among rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping – a highly vulnerable population. Moreover, although it is not part of the government’s plan to end rough sleeping by 2024, Everyone In has enabled valuable work to be conducted towards this goal, with more than 33,000 people helped so far. The achievement of Everyone In is made more impressive by the fact that the Department did not have a contingency plan in place for working with rough sleepers at the outset of the pandemic.

20 Nevertheless, Everyone In has also raised key issues that the government needs to address in the immediate future:

- a** Everyone In has for the first time provided data on the potential scale of the population in England which either sleeps rough or is at risk of doing so. The Department needs to build upon this knowledge to understand fully the size and needs of this population and communicate this to local authorities.
- b** Everyone In has resulted in a large number of people remaining in emergency accommodation and not being able to move on from it because they have no recourse to public funds. The government needs to establish what action it will take with this population.
- c** The response to the resurgence of COVID-19 does not appear as comprehensive as the initial Everyone In in the spring. The Department will need to keep under close review whether its more targeted approach will protect vulnerable individuals as decisively as the approach it took in the early stages of the pandemic.
- d** It is clear that there is significant learning available from the experience of Everyone In for the Department and all partners involved. The Department should use this knowledge towards its goal of ending rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament, when it returns to its review of rough sleeping. Also, as the Department revisits its rough sleeping strategy, and to support its new objective for this, it should seek to align the initiatives and funding streams announced during COVID-19 into a cohesive plan.