

The impact of COVID-19 on homelessness, rough sleeping, and the private rented sector

National Housing Federation Submission in Response to HCLG Committee Inquiry

Summary

This submission addresses the following questions from the government on behalf of the National Housing Federation's housing associations members:

- How effective has the support provided by MHCLG and other government departments been in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on those in the private rented sector, rough sleepers, and the homeless?
- What problems remain a current and immediate concern for these groups?
- What might be the immediate post-lockdown impacts for these groups, and what action is needed to help with these?

This submission focuses on homelessness and rough sleeping. Housing associations have a key role to play in preventing and ending homelessness and have been heavily involved in the effort to alleviate homelessness during the coronavirus crisis. They are also in a strong position to assist with the next steps following the crisis.

Where we have made progress, we cannot row back now, most immediately around rough sleeping. Housing associations are already working hard with partners across the sector and with government to ensure permanent homes for everyone currently housed in hotels and other forms of temporary accommodation. This is just one important step towards ending homelessness more widely.

In the short term, housing providers and policy makers must secure permanent homes and support for those who are temporarily housed. In the longer term, we need to see investment to build the social housing the country needs, alongside providing properly funded support services for prevention and tenancy sustainment. Housing associations are ready to work with the government to make this a reality.

Introduction

The National Housing Federation (NHF) is the voice of housing associations in England, representing almost 800 housing association members that provide homes for around six million people. As the trade body for the housing association sector, we influence, campaign and engage on behalf of our members. We create an environment where housing associations can deliver their social mission.

Housing associations are committed to working with the most vulnerable people in our communities. During the coronavirus crisis, housing associations have worked with partners to help keep people secure at home and help people get the support they need. Housing associations have a key role to play in preventing and ending homelessness and have been heavily involved in the effort to alleviate homelessness during the coronavirus outbreak. They are also in a strong position to assist with the next steps following the crisis.

It is important to note that rough sleeping essentially ended overnight, with the government's emergency measures for temporary accommodation. This shows what is possible with determination and funding. We need this support to continue after the crisis, with a renewed effort to securing permanent homes, ring-fenced resettlement funding and ongoing support for those who are temporarily housed.

How effective has the support provided by MHCLG and other government departments been in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on those in the private rented sector, rough sleepers, and the homeless?

We welcome the £3.2m fund for accommodation for rough sleepers needing to self-isolate, alongside the government's instructions to accommodate all rough sleepers throughout the country. The requirement to house all rough sleepers shows commitment from government to protect them from coronavirus.

However, the government's own announcement acknowledges that not all rough sleepers have been accommodated (90%).. Housing associations have been working with local authorities to offer support and accommodation to rough sleepers, including setting aside voids for local authorities to use. However, we know there is still some capacity in the housing association sector to be more involved in the work local authorities are doing to house rough sleepers. For example, we know some smaller housing associations have homes that are currently empty that may help local authorities with any emergency accommodation they need to provide. It is also worth noting that there are other barriers that prevent homes that have become empty being made immediately available as accommodation for those who need it, as set out below.

What problems remain a current and immediate concern for these groups?

Availability of support: funding

While it is positive that many rough sleepers are now housed in self-isolation accommodation, this situation is not without risk.

- Rough sleepers with complex needs will find it harder to self-distance/isolate than others.
- Those coping with alcohol and drug misuse are at potential risk from unmanaged withdrawal.
- Some hotels have refused to continue the offer of accommodation to rough sleepers because of "problem behaviour".

This shows that support must be available to manage risks and make the accommodation sustainable.

Support services are providing support over and above what they would normally do and consequently are spending more than usual on essentials such as:

- Providing food for those self isolating
- Delivering medication
- Making mobile telephones available so clients can keep in touch
- Travelling to more locations than usual, using greater amounts of cleaning products, trying to buy PPE, etc.

At present, it is unclear how much support funding will reach those organisations providing floating support.

Support services also report significant levels of staff absence due to illness and self-isolation (15-25%), which brings additional costs when agency staff are needed to replace them or existing staff are redeployed, incurring administrative costs. Some organisations are modelling for absences of up to 70%, which would make some smaller organisations no longer financially viable. **Without extra financial support, some services may need to close, meaning a return to rough sleeping for many and increased costs in healthcare, policing, social care, housing and welfare.**

We believe the £1.6bn of funding for local authorities from DHSC and MHCLG¹ and the extra £1.6bn for local authorities recently announced by the Secretary of State,² must include adequate funding for homelessness support services.

Recent funding is not ring-fenced, and given the range of challenges facing local authorities during this crisis, not all are making more funding available for support. This means services providing support over and above what they normally provide, may be doing so without extra funding.

Voids availability

There have been and in specific cases still are barriers to letting homes during the crisis, which are both practical and procedural:

- Some local authorities previously paused nominations, despite availability of housing association properties.
- Previous government guidance suggested house moving was not essential.
- There are lower levels of tenant turnover:
 - Vulnerable people are delaying their moves.
 - Self-isolation is delaying moves.
 - Prospective tenants are unwilling to move in or out, even if they have accepted a property, and are not handing back keys and so landlords cannot gain access to properties and arrange inspections.
- Many housing associations feel they cannot carry out lettings in sheltered accommodation or other settings where there are associated risks for elderly or high-risk groups. Many older residents or prospective residents are isolating and unable to go out.
- It is difficult to clear voids of deceased tenants' belongings or for family members to attend to remove items.
- It is difficult to carry out void inspections and interviews, viewings or signups with prospective tenants.
- It is difficult to prepare voids for reletting for a number of reasons:
 - Restricted access to contractors to carry out repairs and electrical inspections needed to bring the property up to standard.
 - Tips have been closed so maintenance staff have not been able to dispose of broken items. There is a restricted availability of parts/furniture/carpets from suppliers.
 - Lack of available staff to carry out deep cleans of properties.
 - Securing removal vans is challenging, as many companies are not operating.
 - A lack of storage facilities.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-9-billion-funding-to-strengthen-care-for-the-vulnerable>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-pledges-extra-16-billion-for-councils>

- General restrictions on movement until now.
- There is a lot of extra work for in-house staff because many housing associations' contactors are not currently operating.

Specific government guidance³ confirming that essential moves should continue over this period (where possible within social distancing guidelines) should help overcome some of these barriers. NHF members that are still managing to let are doing so in just this way: on an emergency basis. **However, this guidance does not address practical issues raised above such as the availability of parts and contractors, which continue to be barriers to preparing voids, even for emergency moves.**

It is useful that the new guidance covers the issue of direct lets. Further guidance on expected cooperation between local authorities and housing associations would be useful to avoid inconsistencies. Indeed, among the 47 members we consulted, more are providing emergency long-term accommodation for other vulnerable groups than are specifically providing self-isolation accommodation for rough sleepers.

Long-term financial viability of services

In addition to the increased costs of support provision and staff shortages, specialist homelessness services (hostels) and supported and sheltered housing providers are experiencing significant financial challenges because of the inability to fill void properties, so there is a risk that these services cannot continue to operate long term without additional support.

Sheltered housing providers in particular are unlikely to be able to offer properties in line with the “essential moves” guidance, given the risk to existing older and vulnerable residents. Some supported housing services are concerned they will not receive their commissioned funding if their percentage occupancy criteria are not met.

Without extra support to use these voids to house other groups or without extra financial support to cover the losses incurred from empty voids (in some cases up to 6 months' rental income), some services may need to close, reducing the overall supply of specialist accommodation and support to keep people off the streets. It would also lead to increased costs in healthcare, policing, social care, housing and welfare.

In order to make the best use of services, reduce the risk of infection and free up accommodation for rough sleepers and other vulnerable groups, some housing associations have had to move significant numbers of residents around. This could mean moving people into other schemes, or within existing services. For example, some providers are moving the most vulnerable residents from shared accommodation into self-contained accommodation, followed by deep cleans if the person is symptomatic. This represents further cost for providers.

Families in temporary accommodation

³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-social-landlords-on-essential-moves>

Families living in temporary accommodation are often in overcrowded conditions where it is difficult to self-isolate and maintain social distancing. The pause in lettings means they must stay in this accommodation even longer than previously planned (months or even years in some cases). The new guidance on social housing lettings will help ensure suitable accommodation can be found for families in this position. .

Increase in homelessness cases

An increase in homelessness has already been identified and these newly homeless people will also need accommodation because of the crisis. Issues such as youth homelessness, increased incidences of domestic abuse, hospital discharges, and prison releases are likely to become more problematic.

A lack of clear funding for support in hotel accommodation means former rough sleepers may be moved on from one hotel to another if provision breaks down. This represents significant upheaval for these individuals and increased risks for staff and other residents.

What might be the immediate post-lockdown impacts for these groups, and what action is needed to help with these?

Supporting the sustainable resettlement of rough sleepers

Housing associations, working with government and other partners, can play an important role in ending rough sleeping. **We are keen to see government support for a move-on strategy to bring people, including rough sleepers accommodated in hotels and other self-isolation accommodation into long-term solutions. This would need to be backed by significant investment in support. A return to the street would be missed opportunity to end rough sleeping, which the government has pledged to do by 2024.**

We can work with our housing association members, central and local government on what is needed to deliver this in the short term:

- A clear commitment and plan from government to ensure that every former rough sleeper will be supported into sustainable and affordable housing.
- Local or combined authority coordination of appropriate provision, working with partners including housing associations to identify suitable accommodation.
- Guaranteed support funding to ensure people receive appropriate support in their new home and can sustain their tenancy.
- Capital funding to secure additional accommodation where necessary.
- Up-to-date guidance on how to manage new lettings given lockdown restrictions.

Appropriate housing

Investigations must be made into the needs of newly accommodated rough sleepers so there can be a clear view of what will be most appropriate for them, such as supported housing, Housing First or high intensity supported housing. These should be in appropriate locations and dispersed properties where appropriate.

Support funding

We have seen that support funding needs to be available to guarantee sustainable accommodation in hotels. **Support funding will also need to be available to help people move into and retain permanent accommodation.** This help includes floating support, wrap-around support for multiple needs, welfare and benefits advice, drug and alcohol support, mental health support and sourcing furniture. We need to see a package of support so that there is no return to the streets.

Funding will also need to be available to deliver more supported housing units or convert more units into supported housing than previously earmarked.

Backlog

As voids have not been available as usual during the crisis, there will be a backlog of people in temporary accommodation waiting to be rehoused. This could cause problems unless move-on accommodation is ready after the crisis, which will be difficult as void provision and construction has slowed down. **It may be necessary to look at different ways of allocating properties to deal quickly with the backlog,** such as direct lets, which the new guidance on social housing allocations suggests.

Prevention and future planning

There may be an inflow into homelessness once the eviction ban is lifted, unless safeguards are put in place and renters' income is secured after the freeze. Other increases in homelessness may be seen after the crisis, as a result of issues such as relationship breakdown.

Future planning must therefore include not only those people who are currently accommodated but also those at risk of homelessness. **Homelessness prevention measures such as increased supply of affordable housing, benefits that cover the cost of renting, tenancy sustainment, legal advice and family mediation will be more important than ever.**

Successful multiagency working, systems change and increased funding have come about because of the crisis – this is something we should work hard to retain once it is over. The drive to provide safe accommodation for everyone should continue beyond the crisis.

Conclusion

Despite the positive developments towards ending rough sleeping and reducing homelessness, now is not the time to be complacent. There must be a plan to rehouse those who are in self-isolation accommodation into suitable, permanent housing with appropriate support. This must sit alongside guidance on how this can be done successfully and planning to overcome practical barriers. Long-term thinking must also be applied to prevent further homelessness post-crisis. This is about building the social housing we need, alongside properly funded support services. Housing associations can be part of the recovery work and ensuring a sustainable end to homelessness, provided that adequate funding is available and ongoing guidance fosters partnership working.