

Kerslake Commission evidence submission

Changing Lives

1. Thinking about the response to rough sleeping during the pandemic, which measures, policies, practices or joint working do you think worked well and why?

The pandemic brought about some excellent practice for people sleeping rough that likely would not have otherwise happened. For example, in one area where Changing Lives works, someone presenting as homeless would have to wait at the Housing Advice Centre for 3-4 hours. This wait can be difficult to manage, meaning many will become agitated or leave before their case is seen. Due to the pandemic, these moved to phone appointments, meaning people could wait at Changing Lives' drop-in and access facilities such as showers while they waited. We have requested that this continue after lockdown and should be considered as best practice in other areas. In another area a Complex Needs Panel was established to provide direct housing offers to people who were ready for independent living but who were struggling to get housing offers pre-pandemic. We also saw the temporary removal of a lot of 'red tape' that excluded a cohort of people we support, including restrictions on rent arrears and previous criminal behaviour, which we would welcome as a permanent solution. The pandemic response also meant that those who would previously not have been considered for housing were able to obtain their own home. Although there were challenges for some, many defied the expectations of other agencies and managed really well in their own properties. This challenges the presumption that someone needs to be 'housing ready' before we give them their own home. Rapid housing models work well in the North-East because there is more affordable housing stock, meaning that services such as Changing Lives can get people into accommodation relatively quickly, but this does not work as well in areas with less affordable housing. This housing stock was increased further during the pandemic because funding was provided by the council for long-needed repairs and/or furnishings.

2. In contrast, which measures, policies, practices or joint working do you think have not worked well and why?

Several people were placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation. For example, foreign nationals were put into hotels with very little support; vulnerable women were placed in accommodation with potentially exploitative men. Hotels were particularly problematic as they often lacked the necessary support, meaning they essentially operated as unregulated

hostels. A common theme reported by staff was inconsistency of funding between areas for wraparound support, as well as accessibility of this support. Addressing homelessness is not just about putting a roof over people's heads, but also about addressing the reasons that they are homeless. Many services providing face-to-face support stopped doing so once lockdown began, resulting in several people falling into crisis. Changing Lives maintained face-to-face visits, often picking up the slack where other agencies felt they had to withdraw support. Access to mobile phones and internet is not possible for many sleeping rough and the disappearance of front-facing services created an extra hurdle to access temporary or permanent accommodation. It also resulted in barriers for outreach workers as the normal access pathway was altered. In order to try and locate and engage with people who would normally have presented at a local service and been referred, staff instead increased early morning and evening outreach in some areas. Staff report that it feels like there is more silo working amongst housing services now than before the pandemic. In some areas there are multiple services all working with the people experiencing homelessness and other interrelated issues, albeit not all face to face. We are concerned that the short term nature of funding and the competition to win contracts means that collaboration has been damaged between organisations who should be working in close partnership. Where agencies have collaborated it has worked well, but most are resistant to collaboration.

3. Please describe the specific challenges, and opportunities, in the next phase of the Everyone In programme and helping people to move on from hotel accommodation.

Moving on will also remain difficult if exclusion policies for temporary and permanent accommodation return to pre-pandemic status. In order to successfully move people on, we need long-term flexibility and re-evaluation of these policies. The pandemic response created opportunities to move people into their own home that might not have been considered before, and many have thrived once given this opportunity. At Changing Lives we believe that giving people their own home, not just a room in a hostel, is an opportunity that should be embraced more widely. Often people with experience of multiple disadvantage are assessed as not being ready for housing and are instead placed in a hostel. Although supported accommodation services are clearly much better than sleeping on the streets, we find that people can be 'stuck' in the system for years in an environment that is not conducive to substance misuse recovery or desistance from crime. An alternative opportunity is to prioritise getting

people into their own homes and, where support is still needed, adopting a dispersed accommodation model combining self-contained homes in communities with intensive strengths-based housing management support. Changing Lives is pioneering this model in North-East England and evaluation of this model is already demonstrating success: timeframes for people moving towards increasingly independent living have reduced by an average of 66% and positive move-ons increased from 51% to 70%.

4. And finally, what do you think needs to be put in place to embed the good work that developed during the pandemic, or improve upon it?

A lot of the funding provided as part of the pandemic response was short-term so any good work developed by organisations such as Changing Lives can only continue if sustainable funding models are introduced. For example, in one local authority area Changing Lives received funding for a dispersed accommodation rapid re-housing project which was working really well, but the funding has already dropped. The issue of short-term funding pre-dated the pandemic where we would often see 12 month projects on rotation with regular changes in staff and processes. The people that Changing Lives work with are often described as hard to engage but the short-term nature of services is a major factor in engagement challenges. We have found that, with the right support, people with multiple disadvantages will engage but the inconsistency produced by short-term funding models makes it harder to build trusting relationships and sustain that engagement, and many disengage during times of transition when services are decommissioned. Others will be reluctant to engage in the first place because they are aware of the short-term nature of the support – our staff report people accessing their services asking “So how long are you going to work with me?” In the North-East, future funding should particularly focus on wraparound support. More social housing and supported housing is needed but overall there is not a shortage of housing in the North East and rough sleeping numbers are fairly low, but there is a shortage of support to help people access housing, settle and maintain their tenancies. Medium to long-term funding (3-5 years) is needed to ensure that the cycle of homelessness ends, given the complex needs that the majority of homeless people face.