

Kerslake Commission evidence submission

University of Portsmouth

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?

Our ESRC/UKRI and Health Foundation-funded research focuses on migrants who have experienced homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis. We are 9 months into an 18-month project. Our initial findings indicate that homeless migrants benefitted hugely from the Everyone In initiative. This was, most significantly, because of the suspension of immigration-based eligibility criteria. The initiative meant that migrants, many of whom had no recourse to public funds and were among the 'hidden homeless', were able to access a private room with washing facilities, and regular meals. Hitherto ineligible for statutory support services, these migrants were now able to access support from homelessness response services. They were able to get advice and assistance to help resolve their immigration status and were also able to access substance use recovery programmes and mental health support. In one of our interviews, a support worker observed that: 'Everybody was housed without question and I think that was a really key point that it didn't matter where you were from, you were put into accommodation and you were fed which we've never experienced anything like, have we really, you know – everybody taken off the streets and given a home.' (Z004)

Another benefit of Everyone In was that joined-up, on-the-ground relationships were developed between organizations in the homelessness sector that are often pitted against each other in competition for funding, as well as with local authorities.

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

One of the problems we have identified with the Everyone In initiative is that it has been inconsistently applied across various councils. In some instances, as we have moved in and out of lockdowns, eligibility criteria have been reintroduced, and therefore those without recourse to public funds have not had access to the accommodation and the associated support that has been available elsewhere. Moreover, some councils have only taken in 'verified' rough sleepers, thus potentially excluding vulnerable individuals. There has also been a tension between the Everyone In initiative and the fact that the statutory framework at the level of legislative power and policy has remained unchanged throughout the pandemic. This means that many

councils have had to make decisions on the basis of available funding and their interpretation of the legislation. This has led to further unevenness in the provision of support for homeless migrants. Our initial findings from interviews with migrants experiencing homelessness have revealed that while they have been extremely grateful for the accommodation provided, some have expressed concerns about the incursions on their sense of autonomy. For example, one local authority stipulated that there could be no working hobs in the accommodation and so the clients were left without the appropriate means of cooking food from their countries of origin. Others have expressed concern that they were offered accommodation in a distant town or region where they have no friends or family. One final thing to note: the current accommodation has in many instances been based on a 'one size fits all' approach. This means some individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health-related issues have felt that their needs have not been taken into consideration when rooms have been allocated, and when they have been placed alongside disruptive individuals.

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.

The great opportunity here is to continue the suspension of immigration-related eligibility criteria. This will be essential if we want to take this chance to end homelessness. Many of those that we have interviewed were among the 'hidden homeless' prior to the crisis and would not even have been included in statistics on homelessness. The challenge is to help them resolve their immigration status and move on to appropriate accommodation. As the support staff in our project have pointed out, it can be traumatic to offer temporary accommodation and then to withdraw it. One support worker summed up this concern for the future: 'It's the lack of certainty – when the accommodation is going to finish what is going to happen with me? Where am I going to go, is [this organisation] going to keep on helping me? On what basis, like, how are they going to help me? And I think we were not really able to answer those questions many times – and that was frustrating for staff as well actually.' (X005) 'And I think even for people that do have settled status they don't know what's happening when the funding ends for this, you know, and we're desperately trying to get everybody into somewhere. So already their basic needs are in question.' (Z004) Our initial interviews with migrants experiencing homelessness have revealed similar concerns. They are worried about their future and their main preoccupations are resolving their immigration status and finding somewhere to live.

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?

If we are to be serious about ending homelessness, the best way forward is the continued suspension of immigration-related eligibility criteria for those seeking access to accommodation and statutory support services. We also think that staff would benefit from more immigration training in order to better negotiate the complexity of the immigration system, particularly in the context of Brexit. Some organisations are very well prepared on this front when compared to others, but we have also found that many migrants experiencing homelessness have been largely unaware of the immigration situation they are in (e.g., lacking knowledge about how Brexit has impacted their right to remain in the UK, and what they need to do to obtain settled status; or a lack of knowledge about in/eligibility for benefit support). Communication is often a problem, and we advocate the increased use of interpreters on site. This will help individuals when things seem to be progressing too slowly with their case (a slowness which would make more sense with a greater awareness of the complexity of their situation). We recommend, therefore, more immigration training for staff; for service users, we recommend the use of interpreters and translated 'brochures' with information regarding Brexit/The EU Settlement Scheme/Benefit or Housing in/eligibility/No Recourse to Public Funds. We advocate a continuation of the cross-collaboration (rather than competition) and joined-up approaches between organisations that have been formulated during the crisis. We also recommend that the high standard of accommodation – consisting of private rooms and facilities for washing – continues to be offered. On a separate note, we are finding that the migrants experiencing homelessness that we are interviewing are finding it helpful and cathartic to tell us their life stories and relate how they became homeless, and how they have experienced the crisis.