

Response to Inquiry: Impact of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) on homelessness and the private rented sector

Museum of Homelessness | Streets Kitchen | The Outside Project | The Magpie Project

30th April 2020

In this submission we outline the findings of several award winning community groups and charities that have directly supported homeless people throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Our work has found:

1. Significant gaps in the provision of accommodation
2. Significant failures with Street Link – the primary channel for referrals
3. Failures of support services when people receive accommodation – including around food provision and PPE use
4. Counter-productive public messaging resulting in the abuse of homeless people
5. Evidence of a significant increase in homelessness caused by COVID-19

We conclude by identifying recommendations to address both the near term challenges faced by homeless people and the structural issues made more severe by Covid-19.

Our organisations

We are a group of small, independent, award winning community organisations and charities working directly with people affected by homelessness. Collectively, we operate across London. We have worked together for several years and have supported each other since the outbreak of COVID-19. We have therefore come together to submit this evidence.

Our group includes Streets Kitchen, The Magpie Project, The Outside Project and Museum of Homelessness. Collectively we work with people sleeping rough but also intensively with marginalised communities within homelessness, specifically LGBTIQ+ homeless people (The Outside Project) and mothers with No Recourse to Public Funds and children under 5 (The Magpie Project). Therefore our groups are in a good position to submit evidence related to the experiences of people housed precariously in the private rented sector, those sleeping rough and the vast hidden homeless population across London.

This submission has been coordinated by the Museum of Homelessness - a research institution. Since its founding in 2015, we have systematically gathered evidence of the impact of contemporary policy and socio-economic factors on homelessness. This includes the Dying Homeless Project, a detailed analysis of the deaths of 1638 homeless people since October 2017. This research gives significant

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insight into the factors that cause homelessness and the unacceptable level of untimely deaths – e.g. addiction and barriers to healthcare.

We also hold an archive of more than 7,000 items dating back to the 1930s which charts how responses to homelessness have changed in the UK along with the development of the contemporary homelessness sector. Our Collections Panel includes Nicholas Crowson, Professor of Social History at Birmingham University who specialises in homelessness and its relation to charities and the state since the 1950s. We draw upon this research and expertise to inform the recommendations we make at the end of the document for tackling homelessness and inequality post COVID-19.

Effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' initiative.

While the Everyone In initiative has provided accommodation for many people that are rough sleeping as a public health measure, our work has identified several areas of concern.

1. The exclusion of vulnerable groups

On 16th March we wrote to advisers to the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Directorate to inform them of the growing risks faced by homeless people and ask for smaller independent groups to be included in the creation of the response plan to ensure all homeless people were covered. This did not happen.

The Everyone In initiative requires people to be verified as rough sleeping to be referred into hotels. People who do not engage with this system or are not 'visibly' street homeless are not supported with emergency accommodation.

This means vulnerable groups have not been included in hotel plans rolled out by the GLA or large providers. Many communities have been completely overlooked. Each of our organisations has been unable to refer people into the main emergency provision, despite clear need. At risk, excluded groups include:

- **Hidden homelessness** : We have seen no provision for the growing number of hidden homeless or those people in abusive homes despite the escalating risks they face. There are no options for people sofa-surfing (who cannot self isolate easily) or those who slept in saunas, on public transport, at after parties or in cheap backpackers many of which are shut. Many of the services on which these people rely have also been suspended.

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- **Mothers with children under 5:** The Magpie Project has seen an uneven application of the policy to make sure that those who are vulnerable are no longer housed in “shared accommodation” in which they share a bathroom and a kitchen. Some local authorities have moved families to whom they owe a main housing duty from “shared” accommodation - in which they were unable to socially distance or self-isolate - into self-contained accommodation (where they don't have to share a bathroom and kitchen with other families).

But those who are housed under Section 17 of the Children Act and those in NASS accommodation are not covered by this provision and remain at risk. Those still in “shared” accommodation report being unable to isolate even when other household families are ill, and in some cases have been confirmed to have COVID-19. This accommodation is often infested, dirty, mouldy, overcrowded and frightening for many lone women with young children – when locked down they have little means to escape house-mates who are not observing lock down, or worse, who are abusive or difficult.

- **LGBTIQ+** people affected by homelessness face particular risks as they have fewer support networks, often having moved away to bigger cities like London or forced from the stability of family structures by rejection. Those facing abuse are left with more dangerous options of escape. A response focused on people who are ‘verified’ as rough sleeping in commissioned services or by commissioned outreach teams rarely feel like safe options.

The GLA have funded The Outside Project to remain open 24hrs a day for an extended 2 months and are supporting their campaign to open an emergency hotel. However, the Outside project has to apply for additional grant funding to make this happen as there is no funding allocated for those who are hidden homeless or fleeing abuse. Several weeks after the roll out of ‘Everyone In’ the LGBTIQ+ community still has no additional emergency accommodation.

Many of these problems were caused by the consistent failure of commissioned homelessness organisations to communicate or collaborate with those which are not. Already problem before Covid-19, this has created acute problems during the pandemic. Ultimately this does not serve people experiencing homelessness or support the initiative to get ‘Everybody In’, because specific groups are missed and left out.

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Finally, we are aware that the prioritisation system employed at the beginning of the pandemic was as follows:

- No Second Night Out and Safe Place to Stay hubs
- Shared space winter shelters
- Rough Sleepers
- Hostels

This prioritisation system has directly affected one of the groups featured in this submission, the Outside Project. The St Mungos Safe Place to Stay hub in Clerkenwell Fire Station was decanted to safety on Friday 20th March. In contrast, The Outside Project, **who share the same building**, were not offered hotel accommodation for their service. Guests were confused as to why St Mungos residents were being prioritised. Several weeks later The Outside Project is still campaigning for hotel accommodation for the LGBTIQ+ community.

2. The failures of Streetlink and other services

The official route for referrals from street level has been Streetlink. We have strong reasons to believe that Streetlink is not functioning effectively and is not fit for purpose for the following reasons:

- There has been no apparent increase in staffing capacity despite the March 2018 Beast from the East providing evidence of the need to prepare the service for a crisis.
- Over the Easter Bank Holiday weekend our groups were unable to refer through Streetlink and it appeared that even during the pandemic, bank holidays were being observed as normal by Streetlink and Outreach teams.

Museum of Homelessness was working intensively at street level with a vulnerable individual and received an email on Thursday saying this case would be 'picked up on Tuesday.' Four days is a long time to wait for accommodation, if a person is at crisis point (as this individual was) but during a pandemic it is absolutely unacceptable.

- There have been other reports of difficulties with the service including a piece by Liberty Investigates.

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What are people experiencing once they are within the 'Everybody In' scheme?

Clearly any long term effectiveness of the COVID-19 response in tackling homelessness will need to retain people in accommodation as a first step. We are concerned that the institutionalising and dehumanising practices which already existed in the homelessness sector are simply being replicated in some cases of emergency accommodation. We note recent reports of nearly ¼ of all people in hotels in Manchester leaving their accommodation in just a few short weeks.

In our work during the crisis we have:

- Become aware of one emergency accommodation where people newly accommodated are expected to have a meeting with a support worker in order to collect meals. Not only is this unsafe, due to a lack of social distancing but food should never be conditional and is a basic human right. Within this context, it is not surprising that people may choose to return to the streets.
- We have also heard about examples of other hotels being operated without social distancing or provision of PPE.
- We were contacted on more than one occasion by either a local authority or homelessness charities to supply names for people to volunteer to work 12 hour shifts. One job description was effectively an unpaid Complex Needs Support Worker role and furthermore, stated that the volunteers would only be given supervision for the first two weeks.
- There are groups being commissioned to provide support and services who have a track record of prejudice against marginalised groups. For example, Greenlight have been doing clinical support for the homeless in this crisis. Greenlight is the medical van run by the Hillsong Evangelical Church in Westminster – an organisation known for its homophobia.
- We are also concerned about those housed in temporary accommodation by one borough in another. We have witnessed little sharing of information that could allow help to be extended to families by their host borough. Similarly those housed by NASS are often overlooked in borough provision of food, relief or health initiatives. Community initiatives are filling the gaps and ensuring people have what they need to survive in their out of borough placements

The Corona crisis is an opportunity to develop more productive and relational ways of working with vulnerable people and to stamp out bad practice that exists.

However, this requires honest, open conversations and a willingness to change.

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4. Public Messaging

In the context of all of this, the public messaging around the success of the Every One scheme has been extremely unhelpful. Again, during the Easter weekend, we witnessed a case of stigmatisation and verbal abuse by members of the public towards a vulnerable rough sleeper who had not been offered accommodation, but the public belief was that he had rejected a hotel room. Other people sleeping rough have reported experiencing similar behaviour from members of the public during the pandemic.

5. New cases of street homelessness

We corroborate with findings published in the Guardian this week that there are a significant number of newly homeless people due to Corona Virus. Streets Kitchen operates in Lambeth, Camden, Hackney and Tower Hamlets and they are seeing an increase in numbers with many new faces.

One case study of new street homelessness is a 65 year old woman who Homeless Taskforce volunteers identified on Friday 17th April. Up until the Corona crisis she had been working in a private domestic role which included accommodation. Her employers terminated her employment and her accommodation. She found herself on the streets, extremely frightened and distressed. When we found her she had been walking the streets for days, unable to even find a spot to rest. She was accommodated by Islington Council the same day, but we are seeing many people for whom this is not the case .

We are also seeing people newly street homeless through squat evictions, which continue due to the amended emergency legislation.

The Magpie Project reports an increase in mothers and children who were previously sofa-surfing becoming homeless and the lockdown bites and people need their own space – these people – because they were not engaged with services are difficult to find.

Our recommendations include:

For immediate relief of problems with the current response and to stem further homelessness:

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1. The narrow focus on rough sleepers is creating significant harm. Programmes need to be able to offer support to broader communities – particularly if lockdown is extended or a second wave of infection causes restrictions to be put back in place .
2. There needs to be an urgent intervention into StreetLink to ensure it can operate effectively.
3. To prevent rising homelessness, suspend rent in line with mortgage suspensions, and financial support must be made available for any rent arrears occurring due to Corona virus crisis.
4. Extend eviction freeze until a vaccine has been developed. If we see an easing of lockdown, and evictions resume we'll see an influx of people onto the streets and into unsafe accommodation.
5. Remove exemption clauses from emergency legislation around squatting.
6. Repurpose and expand emergency response processes around homelessness. Grassroots groups must have a seat at the table and have real influence. The “closed shop” approach always misses people -in particular LGBTIQ people, migrants and long term rough sleepers, young people and families.
7. Scrap No Recourse to Public Funds rules: The NPRF rule removes any safety net – either social or housing- from individuals, the majority of whom are single women and BAME British children. In this time of crisis NRPF exacerbates: Poor housing, inability to access food and essentials, lack of support if a sole-carer becomes ill , and a disinclination to access medical help given uncertain immigration status. This not only puts families with NRPF at risk but also undoes the efficacy of PHE advice that would ensure a successful lock down for the whole community. When families with NRPF become homeless they are still being gate-kept from Section 17 support (including housing) on the basis of their immigration status. We have also experienced mothers attempting to flee domestic violence (which has risen during the crisis) being told to stay where they are until the home office processes their destitution domestic violence (DDV) concession visa. This leaves them in a dangerous situation where they experience continued physical abuse.
8. Day centres and hostels must not reopen with a ‘business as usual’ approach and must be supported to safely operate in line with public health safety measures. The sector must be supported with proper provision of testing, PPE and proper planning around a phased end to lockdown.

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Long term measures

There is much evidence that the current homelessness crisis has been caused by a combination of austerity, welfare reform, changes to immigration legislation and a lack of social housing stock. This is evidenced by the Government's own figures on statutory homelessness acceptances and rough sleeping figures. Our own research on the issue draws upon work by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Local Government Association, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Shelter, Crisis, The Trussell Trust, Disabled People Against Cuts and Public Interest Law Centre.

In line with some of the problems we have encountered and detailed above in the last seven weeks, we do believe that this is time to fully reform the homelessness sector and its provision. However, that is outside the recommendations we can make within the scope of this inquiry.

In terms of policy and legislation, we recommend the following actions to support a true reduction in homelessness with a particular focus on access to secure and safe housing for all. Without attention to the structural factors underlying homelessness, any move on plan from the emergency COVID19 provision will fail in the vast majority of cases.

1. Scrap the Government pledge on the First homes scheme and commit to building new social housing instead. A fund should be created to include bursaries for people to move and a long term policy which means that Local Housing Allowance matches the true cost of rents. The explosion of mutual aid groups has shown there is significant public appetite to help the most vulnerable and the Government should take note of this. The crisis has brought the deep inequalities in the UK to broader public attention.
2. Allow councils to keep receipts from Right to Buy sales to support this new initiative and bolster with the new taxes that will invariably be needed for the economy after the lockdown ends.
3. For a shorter term solution, give councils powers and funding to make use of empty buildings post-crisis, whether through CPOs or other mechanisms. There may be a more favourable climate for CPOs given the seismic economic changes we are likely to encounter.
4. Commit to reviewing Localism Act clauses around allowing local authorities to discharge their duty to house people in the private rented sector. This has created a whole swathe of people unable to access safe and secure long term housing (Big data research carried out in 2019 by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism showed that 94% of the private rental sector is unaffordable to people on housing benefit, despite this being the main option for councils to house people)
5. Create a housing plan for marginalised groups that fall into the hidden homelessness cohort

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6. Repeal legislation allowing developers to convert office blocks and other unsuitable buildings into inadequate accommodation.
7. Repeal the Immigration Act 2014 and other punitive measures for migrant groups.
8. Repeal 2014's housing benefit reform for EEA nationals, which has by 2019 caused significant destitution and street homelessness, according to reports by Law Centres.