

Report: Impact of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) on homelessness

Museum of Homelessness

7th April 2021

Executive Summary

In this report we outline findings based upon our direct work with people who are homeless and our own research since March 2020. We draw upon primary research such as our Dying Homeless Project and research carried out by other organisations such as King's College London, the Local Government Association and National Audit Office.

Key findings in relation to homelessness and the pandemic can be summarised as follows:

Positive outcomes from the pandemic response

- A internationally significant effort across the UK, from central and local government, charities and community groups to accommodate people who were homeless during the pandemic
- Only 3% of homeless deaths were COVID related
- Formal change in practices for some local authorities
- A shift from dormitory provision to individual rooms

Systemic challenges during the year

- A collapse in the supply chain and in services in the early stages of the pandemic, with community groups filling gaps in provision.
- Failings in the provision of accommodation, specifically related to more marginalised people within the homeless population.
- Failures with Street Link – the primary channel for referrals through the year
- Failures of support services when people received accommodation – including around food provision and PPE use

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Widening inequalities, stigma and isolation

- Counter-productive public messaging about the success of activity from authorities and charities resulting in the abuse of homeless people
- Aggressive enforcement from local authorities and police
- Increased risk to homeless migrant people
- Evidence of an increase in homelessness caused by COVID-19
- Structural problems with homelessness and housing
- Evidence of an increase in deaths of homeless people from factors other than COVID19
- Evidence of spikes in suicides around the lockdowns

About us

Museum of Homelessness is a community led social justice museum. Museum of Homelessness postponed all the charity's creative and heritage work in early March 2020. We redirected all resources to emergency support and campaigning. We formed a Homeless Taskforce with partners and worked closely throughout the pandemic with The Outside Project, Streets Kitchen, the Simon Community and others such as the Magpie Project. We are all small award-winning community organisations and charities who have delivered services pan London during the year.

Museum of Homelessness also runs the Dying Homeless Project, a research project and memorial which seeks to remember with love everyone who dies homeless in the UK. Through the findings of the Dying Homeless Project we also campaign to prevent further unnecessary deaths.

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Positive outcomes from the pandemic response

The government reports that to date, 37,000 people have been supported through the Everyone In programme. At the beginning of the pandemic, around 5,000 people were expected to need support. Although the 37,000 figure is often presented as a positive achievement, we are deeply concerned that the scale of the homelessness crisis was not previously recognised.

There was a period in March 2020 and early April where usual homelessness duties were lifted along with a promise of funds flowing. This meant the usual barriers (immigration status, nationality, priority need, local connection) were not an issue. Our observation of this change comes from London Borough of Islington where we were involved on ground, running a 7 day a week emergency hub. The change was significant. The speed at which people were connected with and offered safety was unprecedented. The process was simple. The culture was humanitarian, open and flexible. This is what is required but unfortunately has since shifted back as legal duties resume and funding dries up. We note that this was not what happened in every borough or local authority area however, in Westminster people we work with reported being left outside for the whole of the year. As we detail in the next section, Everyone In did not work for all communities in all places. It was not a panacea.

Sector workers and people who are homeless cited the benefits of the programme. “We’ve been getting people coming in off the streets who haven’t been accommodated for years. Some of our staff have been in tears; there have been so many good news stories,” Petra Salva, St Mungos director of rough sleeping told the Guardian¹. Case worker John Gibbons who tested and worked with people in hotels pointed to the meals, TV, access to services and the fact that the hotels were respite: “I

¹ [‘I might have died if they hadn't rescued me': life inside the new hotels for the homeless | Homelessness | The Guardian](#)

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think there are a lot of people who just needed a break, and this might be the break they needed. ² In Islington, where Museum of Homelessness worked on the emergency measures through lockdown one, we noted that people who were long term substance using and living outside were committing to a methadone treatment plan as part of taking up the offer of an emergency room.

There was a widespread shift from dormitory style accommodation to accommodation with individual rooms. This was regarded as a step forward by public health professionals and some policy makers. ³ Crisis at Christmas, which has traditionally been large scale sleep space, shifted to hotel rooms. ⁴

In addition, there is evidence that we are seeing longer term changes in how local authorities deal with homelessness. The Local Government Association reports: “Some councils are changing or intending to change their practices. A number of councils we spoke to, such as Cornwall and Hillingdon, have maintained a policy of continuing to accommodate anyone deemed to be at risk of rough sleeping, even if not in priority need. However, there are concerns that this is opening up councils to a level of demand, and a consequent increase in temporary accommodation costs, which most are unable to meet in the longer term.”⁵

It is clear that as a public health measure, the Everyone In initiative was effective. Our own research for the Dying Homeless Project documented on 3% of deaths of people who were homeless attributed to COVID-19.

However, our work has identified several areas of concern.

² [The Pavement, May 2020]

³ [Homeless shelters to be replaced with 'welcome centres' - BBC News](#)

⁴ [London's homeless to be offered two-week Christmas hotel stay | Daily Mail Online](#)

⁵ ([Lessons learnt from councils' response to rough sleeping during the COVID-19 pandemic | Local Government Association](#))

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Systemic challenges during the year

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 plan to accommodate people in London involved the formal commissioned sector and had the following prioritisation process.

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

The 'Everyone In' initiative required people to be within this system or verified as rough sleeping, in order to be referred into hotels. People who do not engage with this system or were not 'visibly' street homeless were not supported with emergency accommodation. People that we worked with in Westminster throughout winter 2020 reported the chaos and isolation of lockdown one, being outside on the streets with no support, patchy communication and food provided by faith and community groups.

This tallies with our understanding that some vulnerable groups were not included in initial hotel plans rolled out by the GLA or large providers. Some communities were completely overlooked. At risk, excluded groups include:

- **Hidden homelessness** : In the early pandemic we saw limited provision for the growing number of hidden homeless or those people in abusive homes despite the escalating risks they face. There were no options for people sofa-surfing (who cannot self

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isolate easily) or those who slept in in saunas, on public transport, at after parties or in cheap backpackers many of which are shut. The squatting community reported many evictions to us throughout the year. Many of the services on which people who are hidden homeless rely on have also been suspended.

- **Mothers with children under 5:** Our partners, the Magpie Project reported 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).
- **Homeless migrants under the duty of the Home Office:** 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

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GLA funded The Outside Project to remain open 24hrs a day for an extended 2 months and supported their campaign to open an emergency hotel. However, the Outside project has to apply for additional grant funding to make this happen. Several weeks after the roll out of 'Everyone In' the LGBTIQ+ community still had no additional emergency accommodation. The Outside Project set up, with GLA funding, STAR Refuge in June 2020. A specialist LGBTIQ+ refuge to respond to people forced from their homes during the pandemic due to domestic violence and abuse. They also campaigned successfully for hotel spaces with the 'Make Space for Homeless Queers' campaign. We note that the LGBTIQ community has been actively self-supporting, with support from the GLA but none from councils.

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' cold weather spell providing evidence of the need to prepare the service for a crisis.
- Case Study: Over the Easter Bank Holiday weekend 2020 we 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.

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- Case study: During Christmas week during street outreach in Westminster, Museum of Homelessness intervened on a situation with a woman at risk of sexual assault on the street, it was her first night outside. Having separated her from the perpetrator, we took her to Charing Cross Police station for safety whilst making a referral. Streetlink responded to let us know they could not help and their outreach team would not be able to enter the Police station to meet the person. We secured a space for the woman at the Crisis women's hotel, luckily.
- There have been other reports of difficulties with the service including a piece by Liberty Investigates.

Failure of support services once people were accommodated.

Provision was inconsistent and varied, so there were many different kinds of experiences. A report by Kings College London which followed 35 people showed positive benefits for most people. However, in April 2020 we wrote to the government as follows:

“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.”⁶

During lockdown one, we became aware of:

- An Everyone In programme emergency accommodation where people newly accommodated were 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.

⁶ [MHCLG-response-corona-and-homelessness-inquiry-30.04.pdf \(museumofhomelessness.org\)](#)

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- 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 were 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 people who are homeless in this crisis. Greenlight is the medical van run by the Hillsong Evangelical Church in Westminster – an organisation known for its homophobia.
- We were 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 filled the gaps and ensuring people have what they need to survive in their out of borough placements

Widening inequalities, stigma and isolation

In the context of all of this, public messaging from government, thinktanks, charities⁷ and media around ‘ending’ homelessness was extremely unhelpful⁸. During the Easter weekend 2020 when tensions

⁷ [Coronavirus: a historic opportunity to end homelessness for good in the UK : CaCHE \(housingevidence.ac.uk\)](https://housingevidence.ac.uk)

⁸ [In the first lockdown, England proved it could end homelessness. Why not now? | Homelessness | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/12/homelessness-why-not-now)

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were high, we witnessed cases 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.

Winter 2020 became very difficult for people living outside. There were no day centres or libraries open to warm up in the day. There was nowhere to do laundry or dry items from snow and rain. There were very limited places to get clean. In February, ShowerBox (a pop-up shower service) reported that one person came to use the service and they had not showered since March 2020.

During the winter lockdown, people we were working with in Westminster reported that their belongings had been taken and their sleep-sites had been hosed down. They also reported that private security employed by the Northbank Business Improvement District had been filming people and waking them up. We are working with one individual, Martin, and Liberty to challenge the legality of these enforcement tactics undertaken by a partnership of Northbank BID, the police and Westminster Council. We committed to doing this as we felt very strongly it was despicable action especially given the extra challenges the street homeless community were facing in the lockdown.

Increasing risks for homeless migrant people

People who are homeless and who are not British nationals have been increasingly at risk. There has been widespread coverage of dangerous accommodation including former Barracks. We also saw some tragic incidents in Glasgow in relation to deaths of people who were in the duty of care of the Home Office. Everyday racism is also increasing in intensity, with Far Right groups carrying out 'migrant hunting' in Everyone In accommodation. In December 2020 the Home Office announced a change in rules that would allow people to be deported for

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rough sleeping. A widespread backlash, including a legal challenge from Public Interest Law Centre has meant the plans have been paused for now. The National Audit Office report showed that 2,000 people in the Everyone In scheme could not move on due to their immigration status. In February 2021 the Home Office announced plans for Operation Oak, which intends to move 6,000 migrants out of London into dispersed accommodation. At the time of writing it has been revealed that Change Grow Live and Single Homeless Project have been signed up to the Home Office controversial RSSS programme which is widely understood to bring risk of deportation to homeless migrants.⁹

The hostile environment for homeless migrants is deepening and post Brexit this is pushing people away from services and into more risk of human slavery and exploitation. Museum of Homelessness has funding from the Isla Foundation to run Project Fortify in 2021, which will provide support to homeless people affected by racism as well as investigating and campaigning against structural and everyday racism in homelessness.¹⁰

The wider picture for levels of homelessness

"There was a continued flow of rough sleepers onto the streets over the summer and autumn of 2020."

National Audit Office

One case study of new street homelessness in lockdown one 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.

⁹ [Charities use Home Office scheme that could lead to deportation of rough sleepers \(libertyinvestigates.org.uk\)](https://libertyinvestigates.org.uk/charities-use-home-office-scheme-that-could-lead-to-deportation-of-rough-sleepers/)

¹⁰ [Museum of Homelessness announces Project Fortify for 2021, funded by the Isla Foundation – Museum of Homelessness](https://www.museumofhomelessness.org/news/museum-of-homelessness-announces-project-fortify-for-2021-funded-by-the-isla-foundation)

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She was accommodated by Islington Council the same day, but we were seeing many people for whom this is not the case .

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

The Magpie Project in Newham also reported 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.

An LGA report into the impact of Everyone In highlighted that increases and decreases in rough sleeping varied region to region – “Our discussions with councils suggest a varying picture, with rough sleeping numbers much reduced in some areas, but in other places having returned to previous levels, or even exceeding them.”¹¹

One significant problem has been move on accommodation, with many people stuck in the emergency hotels for the year. This has led to emotional distress and we believe very sadly it is linked to homeless deaths findings.

The LGA report into lessons learnt highlights this as a significant issue that Everyone In hasn't addressed. The lack of genuine move on options for people. In Summer 2020, MHCLG's own select committee recommended that the department pledge to building 90,000 socially rented homes per year. In the same week, MHCLG announced quite a different direction with the announcement of changes in planning rule regulations related to PD.

It is clear therefore, that the problem with move on needs addressing. Housing First is costly for many councils and by no means widely available, supported housing supply is also low whilst in many parts of the UK the wait for a socially rented home can be up to 2 years. Many city and

¹¹ [Lessons learnt from councils' response to rough sleeping during the COVID-19 pandemic | Local Government Association](#)

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local councils are trying to work with their providers of socially rented homes in new ways.

Many councils were looking closely at PRS and there is debate about how well this can work. Outside of London, a decent standard of accommodation can be obtained and if the right support is in place for people it can work well. On the other hand in places like London “rent levels and the overall benefit cap make it difficult to source affordable studio and one-bed accommodation, despite the increase in Local Housing Allowance. Respondents to the LGA report also wondered about PRS being “too much, too soon.”

The failure of Government around move on is epitomised by it’s failure to deliver on some of it’s promises regarding Everyone In¹².

Homeless deaths in a pandemic year

The Dying Homeless Project recorded 976 deaths across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 2020 - a 37% increase in the numbers reported in our 2019 study. The data was gathered through over 300 Freedom of Information Requests, local news sources, and a national network of organisations that contributed to the project. The figures include the deaths of people who were living on the streets, sofa surfing, and in emergency or temporary accommodation for people who are homeless,

A significant finding from our Dying Homeless project data reveals that people are facing real challenges when they come off the streets and most of our data shows that people were accessing some form of temporary accommodation when they died. This should be a reminder to us all to properly consider the suitability of our accommodation and

¹² [Government Quietly Shelves Plan To House 3,300 Rough Sleepers By This Month | HuffPost UK](https://www.huffpost.com/uk/news/government-quietly-shelves-plan-to-house-3300-rough-sleepers-by-this-month)
([huffingtonpost.co.uk](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk))

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support provided in the future and to have a balanced view about the success of the 'Everyone In' programme.

Our data is published ahead of the official ONS figures on the deaths of people who are homeless and can be compared. In 2019, the ONS verified 563 real and actual deaths and used this figure to estimate that 726 people had died nationwide. In 2020, we have verified 693 real and actual deaths in England and Wales, an increase on both our own figures and the ONS figures. Direct comparison between the 2 datasets between 2019 (ONS) and 2020 (MoH) shows a rise of 23%.

There is a correlation between rising numbers of deaths and key moments in the historical timeline related to the pandemic. There are sharp rises around the start and end of the first lockdown (April 2020) and the start of the second lockdown (Oct/Nov 2020), as well as a smaller rise at the end of the first lockdown (July)

In line with the UCL Inclusion Health findings published in the Lancet in 2020¹³, our information shows that the primary goal of Everyone In – to keep people safe from COVID-19, was broadly successful with only 10 deaths (3%) in our data

Causal data highlights physical health conditions (35%) and drug and alcohol use as the primary causes of death (35%). Rates of suicide also remain shockingly high at 14%.

In contrast to the ONS, we are able to generate specific data around dates and causes of death in particular areas and therefore identify trends. We were very concerned to read about 5 suicides in Greater Manchester area between October and November 2020. We also

¹³ Lewer, D, Braithwaite, I, Bullock, M, Eyre, Max T, White, P, Aldridge, Robert et al; COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England: a modelling study. December 2020, The Lancet, VOLUME 8, ISSUE 12, P1181-1191

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identified that 31% of all deaths in Camden (5 of 16) were due to suicides.

We were concerned to learn about two deaths of homeless people in police custody. These took place in Reading on the 8th January 2020 and in Exeter on 20th May 2020.

Conclusion and recommendations

Whilst some remarkable things happened in 2020 and there is much to be proud of, we also urge a cautious and balanced view. Systemic problems with how society cares for its people were amplified within the Everyone In programme. The structural causes of homelessness most recently rooted in; 10 years of austerity, an unaffordable private rental sector, a hostile environment for migrants and a lack of social housing stock have not been resolved. Whilst there was evidence of a 'blitz spirit' in lockdown one and some amazing community movements across the UK, it is ultimately our view that inequalities have widened during the period and that people are facing additional challenges.

It would be remiss of us to point out problems and not offer recommendations for change. We have identified immediate changes that could be made to relieve people's current situation along with longer term changes that we think would help the crisis we find ourselves in.

Our recommendations include:

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

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 and the verification rule in London should be abolished.

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3. 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.
4. Scrap No Recourse to Public Funds rules: The NRPF 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.
5. Day centres and services must reopen as soon as possible. At the moment people’s services are still significantly limited.
6. Improve access to substance misuse and mental health services.
7. Implement a genuine trauma informed approach to working with homelessness and addiction across the sector.

Long term measures

There is much evidence that the pre COVID19 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

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acceptances and rough sleeping figures. Our own prior 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 over the year, 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 report.

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.
2. Implement a long term policy which means that Local Housing Allowance matches the *true* cost of rents.
3. Allow councils to keep full receipts from Right to Buy sales to support this new initiative.
4. 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.
5. 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 in cities)
6. Create a housing plan for marginalised groups that fall into the hidden homelessness cohort

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7. Pilot harm reduction spaces
8. Implement mandatory fatality reviews on homeless deaths with panels including community members
9. Develop a regulatory mechanism (eg Care Quality Commission) for temporary accommodation, especially that provided by private sector but also including charities.
10. Repeal legislation allowing developers to convert office blocks and other unsuitable buildings into inadequate accommodation.
11. Repeal the Immigration Act 2014 and other punitive measures for migrant groups.
12. 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.

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