

Westminster Hall Debate: Support for homelessness during the winter months

Shelter is the UK's largest housing and homelessness charity. Throughout the pandemic, we have continued to provide information, support and advice to thousands of people experiencing bad housing or facing homelessness.

The government has introduced welcome interventions to protect people sleeping rough and those at the sharpest end of the housing emergency against the impact of COVID-19. However, despite the measures in place, people have fallen through the gaps in support. People at risk of sleeping rough have been turned away without emergency accommodation. Hundreds of thousands of private renters have fallen into rent arrears. Homeless families have had no option but to self-isolate in unsuitable, overcrowded temporary accommodation.

To protect those at the sharp end of the housing emergency this winter and beyond, the government must:

- **Provide unequivocal guidance and the necessary funding to local housing authorities to ensure everyone at risk of sleeping rough is accommodated during the winter months.**
- **Strengthen our welfare safety net, by removing the benefit cap, reversing the freeze to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), and ensuring the rates align with at least the 30th percentile of market rents going forward.**
- **Extend the current bailiff ban to tiers 2 and 3 after January 11th, and bring forward legislation to give private renters security by ending Section 21 “no fault” evictions, which remains one of the leading causes of homelessness.**
- **Invest in a new generation of social housing, to provide families with stable, permanent and affordable homes.**

Safe accommodation must not be a lottery

- In March, Shelter welcomed the government's Everyone In approach, in which MHCLG directed councils to accommodate everyone at risk of sleeping rough during the national lockdown. This ambitious action from MHCLG and local housing authorities doubtlessly prevented many infections and saved lives.
- Since this announcement, however, Shelter has been contacted by people at risk of sleeping rough, who were refused emergency accommodation by council housing options services. People at risk of the street have faced a lottery, with some people offered support and some refused even within the same council area. There were instances where individuals were required to 'bed down' on the street in order to be 'verified' by Streetlink as a rough sleeper before accommodation was offered.
- In November, the government launched the Protect Programme in response to the new national lockdown. In its announcement, MHCLG said councils would need “to make sure every rough sleeper [is] offered somewhere safe to go, as new national restrictions start”. In the Spending Review, the Chancellor also announced increased funding (£254 million) for rough sleeping in 2021-22.
- This commitment is welcome. However, unless it is followed by unequivocal guidance to councils on the legal duties and powers they should be using to accommodate people at risk of the street, we remain concerned that vulnerable people will continue to be turned away with nowhere safe to go during the winter months.

Deaths of homeless people

- This week the Office of National Statistics published statistics which reveal that an estimated 778 people died in England and Wales while street homeless or living in emergency accommodation (such as homeless hostels) in 2019. This is an increase of 7% on the previous year and is the highest number of deaths since the ONS began monitoring in 2013.
- Every number represents a real person who lost their life without a safe home - either while sleeping on the streets, or in emergency accommodation.
- The pandemic makes street homelessness and shared emergency accommodation, such as homeless hostels, even more dangerous. **To protect people at risk of the streets from COVID-19 and from the cold this winter, the government must support councils to accommodate everyone at risk of sleeping rough - by issuing the necessary funding and robust guidance, clarifying the basis on which everyone should be accommodated.**

New immigration rules will penalise rough sleepers

- New Immigration Rules published in October and to be applied once guidance has been published will make rough sleeping grounds for refusing or cancelling someone's right to remain in the UK.
- The rules will effectively punish people for being street homeless, penalising some of the most vulnerable people we work with. The reason people can be on the streets in the first place is because they are not eligible for homelessness assistance or housing benefit because of their immigration status. When applied, it will also undoubtedly mean fewer people come forward for help or support, to avoid putting themselves at risk of deportation.
- Those legally in the UK with no access to state support, and for whom employment is not possible during the pandemic, risk staying in abusive relationships, being pushed into exploitative work and potentially modern slavery to avoid sleeping rough and the risk of deportation.
- Every man and woman sleeping rough is the symptom of a homegrown housing emergency, driven by unnecessary rules that prevent people accessing a home, and by the failure of successive governments to build social homes. **These rules must be reversed.**

Security for private renters

- The government has committed to suspending bailiff activity over Christmas, so no bailiff evictions will take place until January 11th. However, once these protections end on January 11th, we can anticipate that much of the country will be in tiers 2 and 3, with a ban on gathering indoors. **The government must extend these protections to cover all those living in these areas after January 11th.**
- The current extended notice periods have helped give private renters some security in their homes, but to prevent evictions and homelessness down the line, the private rented sector is desperately in need of wholesale reform. The loss of a private tenancy remains a leading cause of homelessness and Shelter welcomed the government's commitment to finally put an end to Section 21 'no fault' evictions. Looking beyond this winter, **the government must give private renters security in their homes, by introducing urgent legislation to finally scrap Section 21 'no fault' evictions.**