

# Let's End Homelessness Together

Policy briefing:

A homelessness system  
that works for all



Homeless Link

# A homelessness system that works for all

There is no single solution to end homelessness for everyone. The identities and needs of people experiencing homelessness are incredibly diverse, and the best support is often that which can flexibly, holistically adapt on an individual basis.

Specialist, person-centred services across the country can – and do – deliver amazing support every day. Despite this, the current system pushes providers towards one-size-fits-all approaches, and access to specialist support is often based more on where you live rather than what you need. The drive towards general needs services can make support inaccessible for many, unable to address the root causes that will help them leave homelessness for good.

A new homelessness strategy is an opportunity to change this. We have a wealth of evidence on best practice when delivering support in homelessness settings, but these require bolder governance and better commissioning resource to embed consistently.

The diversity of need within the homelessness sector requires an ecosystem of services working together. Statutory providers and the VCSE deliver support in day centres, outreach, emergency and supported accommodation, and each setting can play a crucial role in supporting individuals on their journey. Providers need the resources to deliver effective support, with the freedom to develop a menu of options to meet different needs. Specialist provisions for women and young people, or housing options which can flex depending on health needs or addiction recovery, can be crucial in safeguarding residents, reducing pressure on wider public sector provision and unlocking support that works to help prevent and end people's homelessness.

## Recognising diversity of need and solutions

People facing homelessness come from diverse backgrounds and have different needs. Any new homelessness strategy should reflect this and ensure individuals experiencing homelessness are given the right support to meet their aspirations and improve wellbeing. This applies to everyone, but particular groups face specific challenges including women, young people, people of colour,<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ people,<sup>2</sup> and other marginalised groups and communities. Homeless Link has recently worked on developing solutions for women's, youth and non-UK national homelessness and we have expanded on these below.

### Women

Gender has a huge impact on experiences of homelessness. Women move through homelessness in distinct patterns, with many reporting long spells of 'hidden'

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<sup>1</sup> Bramley et al. (2022) *Homelessness Amongst Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in the UK*

<sup>2</sup> Sanders et al. (2022) *Sexuality, gender identity and homelessness Incidence, experience and evidence of homelessness among LGBTQ+ people*

homelessness, higher levels of unmet need and some of the worst health outcomes of any population.

Women's journeys through homelessness are often marked by distinctly gendered traumas, which can include domestic abuse, exploitation, or child removal. Women can also remain hidden from services, avoiding visibly sleeping rough or accessing mixed-gender services due to their heightened risk these environments present.<sup>3</sup> The scale of women's homelessness is therefore often underestimated, and commissioners may prefer 'one-size-fits-all' approaches despite evidence of their unsuitability for women. Women may also face heightened levels of exclusion from services, as stigmatising attitudes label higher support needs and exposure to gender-based risk as 'difficult' or 'complex'.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the current gaps in provision, there is a growing body of evidence of what works to end women's homelessness. **The Government should embed gender-informed learning at the heart of the new homelessness strategy, leading on overcoming the structural factors behind the gap in outcomes for women experiencing homelessness and ensuring everyone has access to support that works for them.**

### Youth homelessness

Young people aged 16-25 have distinct drivers into homelessness and experiences of the system. The support to meet their needs is often unique within the wider homelessness system. Despite this, young people are too often left in hidden forms of homelessness for prolonged periods or forced through inappropriate adult pathways.

Young people's journeys into homelessness are associated with the transition between childhood and adulthood.<sup>5</sup> This is often related to the lack of a secure safety net, which may involve family breakdown, criminal exploitation, or transitioning out of government institutions such as the care system, youth offender services, or young person's mental health services, among other drivers.<sup>6</sup> Youth homelessness often involves long periods of movement between a range of precarious accommodation options characterised as 'hidden' homelessness, as well as rough sleeping and service engagement.<sup>7</sup> Many young people report avoiding adult homelessness services, which

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<sup>3</sup> The Connection at St Martins (2022). *Women's spaces within homelessness settings: Setting up your service.*

<sup>4</sup> Sharpen, J. (2018) *Jumping through hoops: How are coordinated responses to multiple disadvantage meeting the needs of women?* London: AVA, MEAM, Agenda and St Mungo's.

<sup>5</sup> Coyne, B and Page-Hammick, L (2024). *Difficult transitions: How certain experiences put young people at particular risk of homelessness.* Homeless Link and Commonweal Housing.

<sup>6</sup> Centrepoint (2024). *Youth homelessness: the causes.* Web. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> July 2024. Available at: <https://centrepoint.org.uk/youth-homelessness/>

<sup>7</sup> Clarke, A (2016). *The prevalence of rough sleeping and sofa surfing amongst young people in the UK.* Social Inclusion.

are often felt to be dangerous or traumatising.<sup>8</sup> Young people also face disproportionate hardship when trying to move on from homelessness, as welfare practices such as the Shared Accommodation Rate and lower rates of Universal Credit mean that much of the PRS is unavailable to them.<sup>9</sup>

Evidence shows that effective support for young people can reduce the impacts of multiple disadvantage early, preventing homelessness and responding to unmet needs during the critical juncture between childhood and adulthood.<sup>10</sup> Nearly half of adults experiencing homelessness first became homeless under the age of 20,<sup>11</sup> and the legacy of this trauma can lead to long-term support needs across health and social care. **Any new homelessness strategy should therefore prioritise the distinct needs of young people including a significant suite of prevention activity and addressing welfare disparity.** Doing so will help address the root causes of multiple disadvantage and avoid an enormous amount of future long-term homelessness.

### Non-UK nationals

Government policies and practices have placed non-UK nationals at much higher risk of homelessness than those with UK citizenship, and these effects are felt most significantly among people with limited or no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and/or unsettled immigration status.

Exclusionary policies restrict access to essential support such as housing benefit and some immigration advice. Without access to these safety nets, many migrants fall through the cracks of both housing and migration support, facing administrative barriers, stigma and instability at every stage. Exclusion from homelessness support has led to a rise in the number of non-UK nationals sleeping rough across England, many of whom are unable to access mainstream support.<sup>12</sup> Such policies trap people in homelessness and create challenges engaging in immigration support and in understanding rights, responsibilities and options during this journey.<sup>13</sup> Collaboration across departments has been proven to improve outcomes across both housing and immigration. Changes to practice during the COVID-19 pandemic saw homelessness support extended to everyone regardless of immigration status, and these measures enabled people to advance their immigration cases and successfully transition out of homelessness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> St Basils. (2021). *Young People In: A report on young people who were assisted by the Everyone In programme across the West Midlands during the first national lockdown.*

<sup>9</sup> Webber, R, Hill, K and Hirsch, D (2023). *Living or surviving? Benefits, barriers, and opportunities for young people transitioning out of homelessness.* Loughborough University.

<sup>10</sup> Homeless Link (2021). *Young and Homeless.*

<sup>11</sup> Mackie, P. & Thomas, I. (2014) *Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain.* London: Crisis.

<sup>12</sup> Piemontese, S. and Sigona, N. (2024). *The legal and policy infrastructure of irregularity: United Kingdom.*

<sup>13</sup> Leon, L. and Broadhead, J. (2024). *Understanding Migrant Destitution in the UK Research Findings.*

<sup>14</sup> Gardner, Z. (2021). *Migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic.* JCWI.

No one should become, or remain, homeless because of their immigration status. **Preventing homelessness must be a considered part of the immigration system, alongside greater collaboration with housing, welfare, and voluntary and statutory services, and improved recourse to justice through our legal systems.** Through this we can deliver the changes needed to ensure that the immigration system no longer drives homelessness, and instead contributes to a shared goal of preventing and ending homelessness for all.

### Building blocks of an inclusive system

Building a system that is enabled to respond to different needs, both in terms of the people accessing support and local variations, means understanding and valuing the diversity of services that make up the whole ecosystem. It also needs to embed the factors that allow for building effective and responsive services including partnership working, strong collaboration between local government and the VCSE, co-production, commissioning processes that allow for quality services to be delivered, and workforce support that ensures training, capacity building and resilience. Ensuring these approaches are built into the system are as much enablers to a successful strategy to effectively supporting those experiencing homelessness as the interventions they help to deliver. Homeless Link provides expertise and support to the sector across all these areas alongside developing specific insight into those interventions and practices needed to be delivered to create an inclusive system for all.

### Supported housing

Supported housing is a cornerstone of the homelessness system. Many of the thousands of people living in supported housing are not owed a statutory homelessness duty, but may live with significant unmet support needs despite this. Supported housing is often one of the few support options available for people living with severe and multiple disadvantage, and its role within the health and social care landscape should be reflected in its funding and resourcing.

But despite its place at the heart of efforts to end homelessness, service provisions have dropped 38% since 2010 with an associated decline in specialist services.<sup>15</sup> Homeless Link members report feeling increasingly pushed toward delivering 'one-size-fits-all' services, accommodating everyone under one roof regardless of their support needs.<sup>16</sup> Alongside real-terms funding cuts, this approach has seen resources stretched, overall levels of support need worsen, low staff retention and higher rates of burnout.<sup>17</sup> The Housing Benefit-led funding model has forced supported housing providers to focus their resources into 'intensive housing management' rather than

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<sup>15</sup> Homeless Link (2023). *Support for single homeless people in England: Annual Review 2022*.

<sup>16</sup> Based on focus groups with Homeless Link members, September 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Frontline Network (2023). *Frontline worker survey 2022: Experiences of frontline homelessness work*.

toward support. This has stretched standards and led some providers to describe their own services as 'inadequate'.<sup>18</sup>

Supported housing works best when it is able to flex around individual needs. This can mean specialist support for distinct groups such as women, young people and NUKNs, or provisions that focus on enabling recovery from addiction or mental health conditions. Local authorities and their partners should be empowered to deliver a wealth of services that can meet diverse needs and adapt to changing demands. **The incoming supported accommodation standards provide an opportunity for the Government to enhance the quality of supported housing, and this should be delivered alongside a new funding strategy which enables services to deliver flexibility, diversity, and a consistently high standard of care.**

### **Housing First**

Housing First is a highly effective and impactful approach to delivering long-term accommodation to people with histories of multiple disadvantage and homelessness. Significantly more effective at supporting this cohort than traditional homelessness services, Housing First should play a central role in the delivery of a system that works for all.

The trauma of long-term homelessness, poverty and social exclusion means there is a small but significant cohort of people whose needs consistently go unmet in traditional services. These individuals typically have significantly worse physical and mental health outcomes and lives marked by cycles of rough sleeping, temporary accommodation, prison stays and hospital admissions. Many face enduring health needs caused by trauma and homelessness and require long-term, continuous care. For this cohort, the support of Housing First can be transformative.

The evidence is compelling. In 2017 Government invested £28 million to establish three scaled Housing First pilots, which showed just how effective Housing First is at ending homelessness. Across the pilots, tenancy sustainment sat at 78%, far surpassing sustainment rates in other support models.<sup>19</sup> Further research has shown Housing First to have transformative effects on the lives of residents, with significantly reduced use of emergency healthcare, 40% reductions in rates of offending, and huge improvements in mental health, wellbeing and quality of life.<sup>20</sup> However, progress on Housing First is at risk: funding for the pilots has been integrated into generic homelessness budgets, while many smaller-scale providers have struggled to maintain essential grant funding in the face of increased competition.

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<sup>18</sup> Based on focus groups with Homeless Link members, September 2023.

<sup>19</sup> DLUHC (2022). *Evaluation of the Housing First Pilots: Third Process Report*. September 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Aziz, S and Boobis, S (2024). *More than a roof: Exploring the holistic outcomes of Housing First*. Homeless Link.



**Housing First works, and it should be integrated as a core part of the new government's homelessness strategy. [Government should commit to deliver a full-scale rollout of Housing First so that the programme is available to everyone who needs it.](#)**

### **Trauma Informed Care**

Trauma and homelessness are closely connected. Losing your home is traumatic in itself, and homelessness can expose people to unsafe situations which may result in trauma.<sup>21</sup> Many people experiencing the most severe forms of multiple disadvantage report extensive childhood trauma.<sup>22</sup> Trauma can impact how people engage with support and how effectively that support works. Growing awareness of the link between trauma and homelessness has led many services to move towards a trauma-informed care (TIC) model in recent years.

TIC is an approach which takes trauma into account in the design and delivery of support services.<sup>23</sup> TIC has proven to improve the experiences of services by reducing the risk of harm to people accessing and staff delivering services, which subsequently improves relationships and contributes to positive changes in peoples lives.<sup>24</sup> Despite these benefits, many services report significant structural challenges which can prevent them from embedding TIC. Funding models and commissioning across the sector often favour price over quality,<sup>25</sup> and restricted budgets to deliver support can mean that resources are too limited to meaningfully embed TIC while delivering on other requirements. Short-term, competitive commissioning also mean services are often insecurely funded and may change hands every few years,<sup>26</sup> limiting the ability to plan long-term and properly design a service around trauma-informed principles.

Improving the efficacy of homelessness support is critical to increasing the standard of care available and providing better outcomes for all those experiencing homelessness. Introducing trauma-informed care across the system must be a key part of this and **Government should commit to embedding trauma-informed principles and approaches including through a national training programme to upskill the sector.**

### **Data collection**

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<sup>21</sup> Irving, A and Harding, J (2022). *The prevalence of trauma among people who have experienced homelessness in England*. Oasis Community Housing.

<sup>22</sup> Koh, K and Montgomery, A (2021). *Adverse childhood experiences and homelessness: advances and aspirations*. The Lancet Public Health.

<sup>23,24</sup> Hopper, E, Bassuk, E and Olivet, J (2010). *Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-informed care in homelessness settings*. The Open Health Services and Policy Journal.

<sup>24</sup> DLUHC (2023). *Trauma-informed approaches to supporting people experiencing multiple disadvantage: a rapid evidence assessment*.

<sup>25</sup> Blood, I et al. (2020). *'A traumatised system': Research into the commissioning of homelessness services in the last 10 years*. University of York and Riverside.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, L (2022). *Trauma-informed approaches in homelessness practice: an exploration and practitioner understandings and implementation*. Sheffield Hallam University.

Detailed data collection plays a core role in the design and delivery of the homelessness system. Local authority homelessness data, rough sleeping 'snapshot' data and local-level homelessness verification influences the landscape of services and what support an individual can access.

Methods to quantify homelessness are imprecise by nature, and there will always be a proportion of homelessness that goes uncounted. However, there is increasing evidence that current definitions and methods of data capture bias towards more visible forms of homelessness.<sup>27</sup> Approaches such as the rough sleeping snapshot, the data framework or CHAIN have faced criticism for their reliance on headcounts, meaning people must be seen visibly 'bedded down' to appear in count data.<sup>28</sup> Local authorities may follow similar processes to 'verify' rough sleeping, which can be used to gatekeep access to homelessness support. But 'bedding down' in a public space is risky,<sup>29</sup> meaning many from groups who already face higher risk of violence – women, non-UK nationals, young people and LGBTQ+ people, for example – may favour 'hidden' forms of homelessness, leaving them locked out of rough sleeping support and hidden from official figures. Some agencies have sought to develop alternative methodologies to meet this gap and better represent diverse experiences of homelessness.<sup>30</sup>

There is great need and potential for a more representative approach when defining and collecting data related to homelessness. **A new homelessness strategy offers a valuable opportunity to evaluate best practice and design a methodology that can deliver a national dataset in a manner that is both consistent and inclusive of diverse experiences of homelessness.**

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<sup>27</sup> Howells, T, Davison, A and Stoyanova, S (2023). *"Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review*. ONS.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, S *et al.* (2024). *Women's rough sleeping census 2023 report*. Solace, Single Homeless Project and Change Grow Live.

<sup>29</sup> Sutton-Hamilton, C and Sanders, B (2023). *'I always kept one eye open': The experiences and impacts of people sleeping rough*. Crisis.

<sup>30</sup> Wright, S *et al.* (2024). *Women's rough sleeping census 2023 report*. Solace, Single Homeless Project and Change Grow Live; Nicoletti, A (2023). *Failure to act: the scale of youth homelessness in the UK*. Centrepoin; Fitzpatrick, S *et al.* (2023). *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2023*. Crisis.