

# COVID-19 Transition

## Planning local homelessness provision and move on Version 2

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on how we support people experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage – substance misuse, mental ill health, contact with the criminal justice system and trauma. Many people experiencing homelessness have been provided with temporary accommodation during this time, with 90% of people known to local authorities as sleeping rough prior to the lockdown being housed in settings such as hotels. This has provided an opportunity to engage with individuals and assess their needs in a way that we may not have had previously.

We have seen what can be achieved through political will, local partnership working and flexibility in how services are provided. Homeless Link is [calling on central and local government](#) to continue the effort to prevent and reduce rough sleeping in the long-term. We believe successful transition and recovery must be guided by a shared acceptance and understanding of these three principles:

1. Nobody returns or is new to the street.
2. Everybody receives the support they need to keep their accommodation.
3. No return to business as usual.

This document has been written to support local decision-makers, strategic leaders, commissioners and providers involved in the delivery and implementation of transition from lockdown and emergency accommodation such as hotels. It includes discussion points and recommendations that should be considered for localised collaboration so that the 'everyone in' approach can be maintained post COVID-19.

This document will be updated in line with policy changes or learning from implementation. If you have any suggestions or comments we are keen to hear from you:

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## Local Authority Recommendations

We recommend that local authorities plan strategically for a transition out of lockdown.

### 1. Develop a fully costed transition plan that considers demand and availability of housing and support pathways

With partners, establish a clear understanding of the needs of people requiring accommodation after lockdown and the full range of housing and support available locally. This should include:

- An assessment of the needs of:
  - People in temporary accommodation who were sleeping rough at the beginning of lockdown
  - New presentations since lockdown (including people who have made the decision to relocate from one area to another)
  - People with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)
  - People discharged from hospital or released from prison
  - People still sleeping rough
  - People who have been referred/redirected from other Local Authorities
- Assessments should be holistic and incorporate:
  - The housing, health and social care needs of individuals
  - Their existing support network
  - How they have managed in the current situation
  - Their perspectives on past experiences and wishes for the future

Assessments should be conducted in a psychologically informed way. This process will be extremely anxiety provoking for some people and this should be held in mind.<sup>1</sup>

Map your local housing system to determine the full range of housing pathways available. This should include:

- Reviewing the types of support provided to those with low, medium and high needs; this is a good opportunity to review what 'supported accommodation' looks like and should incorporate feedback, experiences and ideas from people experiencing homelessness.
- Reviewing the availability of properties and how they are accessed.
- Flexing local policies and procedures such as referral pathways, eligibility criteria and allocations policies.
- Consider how local government funding may improve access to the private rented sector including through more robust bond schemes and personalised budgets.
- Engaging social and private landlords to increase supply for schemes such as Housing First (see appendix one for more information) and other 'housing led' approaches.<sup>2</sup>
- Identifying gaps in your local service provision by mapping the identified needs against available services. Consider how to expand existing provision or create new housing/support options as required.
- Liaising with neighbouring boroughs to determine reciprocal pathways and where cross-authority services (such as Housing First) could be co-commissioned and coordinated at a sub-regional or regional level.

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<sup>1</sup> Free and introductory mini-training sessions can be found here: [www.homeless.org.uk/COVID-19-guidance-for-hotel-staff-volunteers](http://www.homeless.org.uk/COVID-19-guidance-for-hotel-staff-volunteers)

<sup>2</sup> Housing led approaches: provision of non-temporary homes and different intensity of floating/tenancy support depending on what the resident needs

## 2. Maintain the momentum of multi-agency collaboration

Homelessness is rarely just a housing need, and the increased cross-sector working between housing, health and social care should continue and be embedded in the long-term:

- Continue, or re-establish, a taskforce to support the planning, implementation and delivery of services throughout the transition phase. This should coordinate with other local homelessness forums or task and targeting groups if they are separate.
- Involve organisations with specialist expertise; such as those working with individuals affected by domestic abuse, survival sex work or exploitation.
- Use, or establish, a homelessness forum or other multi-agency meeting so that all relevant agencies can be involved during transition and to strengthen future collaborative approaches. This should include non-commissioned support such as faith and community groups.
- Work with local drug and alcohol treatment providers to ensure that during and after transition people can still easily access the support and treatment they need.
- Continue to work collaboratively with hotel management and staff so that they are aware of the plans and can be involved in discussions around individuals that may stay in the hotels for longer period of time.

## 3. Ensure nobody leaves emergency accommodation without personalised support in place

Each person housed in emergency accommodation must have personalised support in place and should be delivered by:

- Keeping keyworkers on site to maintain effective engagement during transition<sup>3</sup>.
- Identifying new engagement opportunities with individuals and ensuring that Personal Housing Plans and other plans to address support needs are in place. These should clearly define the role and responsibilities of the both the assessor (LA/local provider) and the owner (person being assessed).
- Ensure that this process (assessment, planning and support) incorporates good practice such as trauma and psychologically informed working, strengths-based approaches and has a harm reduction focus.
- Personalised support plans should include:
  - A personalised assessment of housing and support needs, which takes account of strengths and aspirations and wishes for move-on accommodation.
  - A named key worker (care navigator or support worker) to provide a single point of contact throughout transition.
  - A clear advocacy plan relating to rights & entitlements.
  - Access to drug and alcohol treatment and/or mental health support as needed.
  - Setting up benefits & ID as required.
  - An agreed review date.

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<sup>3</sup> Guidance for supporting people in Covid-19 hotels can be found here: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Supporting%20people%20in%20COVID19%20hotels.pdf>

#### 4. Ensure Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) duties are fully met

Since the introduction of the HRA new responsibilities have been placed on local authorities. It is important that these are strengthened during the COVID-19 transition phase and are a key part of the transition strategy.

We recommend that:

- People who have presented as homeless should be provided with a homelessness assessment, as outlined within the Homeless Reduction Act (HRA), and provided with an appointment if this cannot be done on the day.
- Information is provided in a range of formats and is made accessible to vulnerable people at risk of homelessness. This includes for people experiencing domestic abuse, care leavers, people with poor mental health and those with learning difficulties. Local authorities should incorporate considerations for this group into the mapping exercise outlined above and determine which specialist services should be involved in the transitioning.
- Where referral procedures have halted as a result of COVID-19 partnerships should be re-established to continue partnership and collaborative approaches during and after transition.
- Representatives from each public body should be involved in the local taskforce to maintain their duty to refer requirements. This should include local prison resettlement/probation teams and hospital discharge teams.
- Considerations should be made for the increased number of people accruing rent or council tax arrears as a result of COVID-19. Under the prevention duty people should be supported to manage this by putting reasonable and realistic re-payment plans in place.

#### 5. Provide everyone in emergency accommodation with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) with appropriate advice and support

The COVID-19 health crisis has shown that a significant proportion of people sleeping rough have no recourse to public funds. Some of them may be eligible for the EU Settlement Scheme, which has been extended until June 2021.

We recommend:

- Ensure that NRPF support is a priority for your taskforce when planning for the lockdown transition.
- Establish partnerships with refugee and migrant organisations, such as local refugee and migrant support and law centres, where these are available. Where appropriate, invite these organisations to be part of the taskforce or other homelessness forums.
- Advice on immigration and status issues can only be given by OISC registered advisers. Find advisers via the Home Office website.<sup>4</sup>
- Establish clear signposting protocols for all frontline staff within LA and community providers to ensure that people can be given the opportunity to apply for the EU Settlement Scheme.<sup>5</sup>
- Support EU nationals to secure evidence to demonstrate eligibility for the EU Settlement Scheme.
- Utilise existing employment programmes to support those eligible for employment back into work by making links with local employment providers and specialists in the area. For many this will include support with CV writing, job applications, and use of online submission processes.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://home.oisc.gov.uk/adviser\\_finder/finder.aspx](https://home.oisc.gov.uk/adviser_finder/finder.aspx)

<sup>5</sup> [www.gov.uk/eusettledstatus](http://www.gov.uk/eusettledstatus)

- Newly identified victims of modern slavery should be brought to the attention of a first responder and/or safeguarding teams who will then assess the situation. The National Referral Mechanism is still taking referrals and offering care and support.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Support community-based services to re-establish their provision

Day centres play a key role in providing a safe space for people who are on the streets or insecurely housed and often support social integration to reduce isolation. Local authorities should work with these agencies to ensure they are involved in transition planning and delivery and the role they can provide in the long-term:

- Involve day centre services (including those currently closed) in multi-agency meetings to plan their role during and after the transition.
- Develop a plan for the transition of day centre staff and volunteers out of COVID-19 settings or food delivery and back to building-based services or telephone support/information.
- Ensure these services continue to be available to meet the needs of those that require them, this may include being part of the assessment and planning, providing support and time to individuals who are anxious or lonely and ensuring that people are still able to access resources to meet their basic needs.
- Develop local plans/share information about local plans with these services so that they are able to provide information, advice and support.
- Identify which services will no longer be needed, and when, in order to re-deploy staff and volunteers and avoid any gaps in services e.g. staggering redeployment at the point when people move out of hotels.
- Avoid creating 'cliff edges' in provision e.g. stopping food delivery before everyone has access to food elsewhere. Identify what services are providing food and work with them to adapt during transition so that those who still need healthy meals are able to receive them regardless of where they are.
- Consider the role that these services can play in the long-term to ensure that basic facilities and direct access advice and support can be provided to those who are new or return to rough sleeping.
- Support services to re-establish in-reach provision from health and alcohol and drug treatment providers, as well as Job Centre Plus if this was in place before lockdown.

### Night shelters

MHCLG recommended the closure of all communal night shelters, in line with Public Health England guidance on infection control.

Homeless Link does not advocate for the re-opening of dormitory-style night shelters. This type of provision cannot be delivered safely within health guidance.

However, given the crucial role that night shelters play in providing a humanitarian response to people who are homeless and destitute, Government and homelessness sector partners need to develop an alternative model of provision to ensure that nobody has to sleep rough, in particular people with no recourse to public funds who are blocked from other housing options.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-COVID-19-support-for-victims-of-modern-slavery/coronavirus-COVID-19-support-for-victims-of-modern-slavery](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-COVID-19-support-for-victims-of-modern-slavery/coronavirus-COVID-19-support-for-victims-of-modern-slavery)

## Appendix: Transitioning to Housing First

Housing First is an internationally recognised and evidence-based approach to ending homelessness for people experiencing multiple and complex needs. Housing First services have been commissioned in England since 2010 using an Intensive Case Management approach (where the team provide holistic support and act as navigators into other services). Local areas are finding ways to develop services to meet the needs and wishes of some of their most vulnerable people.

Housing First is underpinned by a key set of principles which guide the ethos of the service in how it should be delivered.<sup>7</sup> To ensure the service is delivered in line with the principles, these operational practices must be in place:

- Services target individuals with multiple and complex needs and for whom other types of housing and support solutions have been ineffective
- There is a commitment to providing long-term support: although in practice funding might be short-term, there are no expectations that people must move on from the support. Support follows the person and is not linked to a specific property.
- Access to housing is not conditional on individuals having to meet certain requirements but a period of pre-tenancy engagement and support is essential before a housing placement is made<sup>8</sup>
- There is security of tenure: people are not given licenses and have the same tenancy as anyone else in that kind of home
- There is a maximum caseload size of seven individuals to one worker, which allows support to be intensive and personalised

This transition period is the perfect opportunity to consider how you may prevent people with high and complex needs, currently residing in hotels, from returning to the streets or unstable housing while also meeting the needs of those who remained or returned to the street during lockdown. This document outlines our recommendations for supporting the transition from hotels to Housing First in three different scenarios.

### Your Housing First service has capacity to take on new clients

If the Housing First team can begin engaging with the person before transition it provides the ideal opportunity to build the relationship and discuss accommodation options. If there has been no opportunity for this work to take place, or there is a delay in finding a suitable home, then we recommend that the temporary accommodation placement is sustained until a relationship with the Housing First worker has been established, and the individual has an appropriate offer of a tenancy.

### Your Housing First service is at capacity

Although many areas now have a Housing First service, they may be fairly small scale and already have reached capacity. If other individuals have been identified as suitable for Housing First, then the local authority should look to expand their existing Housing First provision to reduce the likelihood of these individuals returning to repeat homelessness.

We recommend that:

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<sup>7</sup> [www.hfe.homeless.org.uk/principles-housing-first](http://www.hfe.homeless.org.uk/principles-housing-first)

<sup>8</sup> Such as addressing drug or alcohol use, engaging with mental health services, or related to their previous housing experience. At the moment, individuals would be expected to have recourse to public funds in order to claim benefits for their housing costs.

- Funding is identified to increase staffing based on the recommended caseload size of one worker to no more than seven clients, or where the numbers are very low (e.g. one or two people) the service looks to re-profile the caseload in order to absorb new clients with higher level of need<sup>9</sup>
- Temporary accommodation placements are sustained throughout the transition period to prevent people from returning to the street and to enable engagement to continue
- While staff are being recruited to new roles, steps are taken to provide interim support to individuals in temporary accommodation, including introducing them to the Housing First service.

### Your area does not yet have a Housing First service

Setting up a Housing First service from scratch isn't always easy and can take time. However, the pandemic has proven that local areas can focus their efforts and work in partnership to develop new service models and approaches relatively quickly. Mobilising Housing First as a transition option for your local area is not unachievable but will require planning, flexibility and partnership working.

Once you have identified the need for provision in your area you will be able to determine the scale of your service and work with partners to plan and mobilise. Key things to consider are:

#### Housing

- Engage housing teams and social landlords to gain commitment around provision of units and flexibility in policies and procedures to enable access to this group. This will include flexing policies around eligibility, as many may have been excluded in the past due to arrears or ASB, and how properties are allocated allocations (e.g. direct lets and opportunities for refusal). Properties do not need to be identified in advance and should be sourced based on the needs and requirements of clients (within reason) which may include sourcing from the private rented sector.
- Ensure housing providers understand the intentions of Housing First and work together to plan in advance how you will address and mitigate any issues which arise throughout the tenancy (such as how housing and support staff will work together and how to respond to ASB). Consider using SLAs to formalise working agreements, these may vary for each housing provider.
- Properties sourced should fall within the LHA rate and should be covered by housing benefit payments so that the individual can sustain the tenancy in the long-term (this includes considering the implications of any changes to welfare support as a result of Covid-19). Rental costs should not be included in the support contract.
- Costs associated with housing, which may be included within the support contract, include tenancy deposits (for PRS homes), funds to deal with particular issues (such as damage, lost keys), and furniture/personal budgets.

#### Support

- Most Housing First services are commissioned by the local authority, although consider working with other commissioning streams to pool funding.
- Capacity of the service should be determined based on the number of individuals: one support worker to every 5-7 people and an appropriate amount of management support due to the intensive nature of this type of work.

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<sup>9</sup> This should only be done in instances where people on the existing caseload are more stable or dormant and where the overall team capacity would not be stretched should a minimal number of new clients be taken on. Equally, developing a 'step down' worker post with a slightly higher caseload of individuals requiring less intense support may increase capacity for other post holders.

- Where only one worker is needed, make sure that they are embedded in another service that can provide additional support to the staff member and those on their caseload. However, a single worker service is not recommended due to the nature of the work and issues that may arise through staff absence. This is where cross-border commissioning/delivery may be beneficial.
- To attract and retain the right kind of staff, ensure that salaries are set at senior support worker level for your area and that funding is included for adequate training and support (e.g. reflective practice).
- There are other costs associated with Housing First (such as the provision of personalised budgets and engagement activities). For more in-depth research and guidance for commissioning and costing Housing First: [www.hfe.homeless.org.uk](http://www.hfe.homeless.org.uk).<sup>10</sup>

Access to wider health and social care provision is also crucial in Housing First but can be achieved through engaging strategic partners during the planning and mobilisation process, and supporting the development of operational relationships once the support provider is in place.

### **Timescales for mobilisation**

Be realistic regarding how long it will take to mobilise the service and in terms of the outcomes you expect to see (ensuring this is in line with the principles). This will depend on the scale and delays may be caused by governance arrangements, commissioning processes and effective staff recruitment depending on local requirements. Offering a 'pilot' or 'test-phase' while this is underway can help to keep individuals engaged in the meantime. Either way, we recommend that funding is provided to sustain temporary accommodation placements with some level of support and engagement during mobilisation.

### **For more information**

For more information on commissioning or providing Housing First, please visit the Housing First England website [www.hfe.homeless.org.uk](http://www.hfe.homeless.org.uk).

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<sup>10</sup> <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/commissioners> see guidance for commissioners and ITT examples  
<https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/our-research> see 'cost-effectiveness' and 'current and future funding'



## What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## Let's end homelessness together

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