

This week we discussed the implications the recent announcement of funding for winter provision has for people rough sleeping over the coming months. Many of our Panel have either used night shelters or have volunteered in them.

The following provides a summary of our discussion.

## **The experience of winter night shelters**

Winter night shelters provide immediate, temporary relief from rough sleeping in the cold for those not supported by the local authority. This includes, for example, people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), those with distrust of the local authority or homelessness sector, and in some instances people referred to by the local authority itself.

*“They’re good in the sense it stops people freezing to death.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Half the people are migrants. If you take away the very basic shelters, there is nothing else in place.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Some people will only engage with faith-based groups as they are not seen as part of the Local Authority (despite many receiving direct funding and permission to operate from them).” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

It is extremely positive that many people volunteer their time to support people experiencing rough sleeping, particularly where other services have failed. However, given the support provided is limited to brief periods of time, places conditions around substance use, and does not provide adequate accommodation arrangements, they should not be considered part of a solution to ending rough sleeping.

*“What’s good is the volunteers - you have an army of them, who will get up in the night, and will help you.” You can give a lot of people 1-1 support through this network.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“When I was covered in snow was the bit when I started engaging with the council! When I went in it was a horrendous experience, with some of the most challenging people in the borough, some dead now I’m sure. You had to wake up at 6:30 to get your breakfast. And then it was, ‘Where do you go in the cold?’” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I don’t think it’s suitable to put 100 people on the floor like a dog. It’s inhumane. It’s not acceptable to treat people like this.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I don’t agree with them. It’s inhumane to have people sleeping on the floor, or mixed dorms and people in different place with their conditions. Having to move out early and walk around.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“They shouldn’t be treated like that, they’re a human.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Would that be what we want? You have to go in at 7pm and get kicked out 7am.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“More needs to be done than a camp bed between 7 pm and 7 am. They are not any sort of solution beyond the immediate few days.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Even where Winter Shelters are in place as a last resort for people, the Panel identified that most have risk assessments that stops many entrenched people from accessing them. Instead of an emergency measure, Shelters can become a space for those with low support needs who could maintain a tenancy if given one. This runs the risk of entrenching people into Winter Shelters and thereby stopping some engaging with services that can get them into long term housing.

*“They force people to keep up a lifestyle that they may not want to have by offering no actual alternative except rough sleeping.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“From personal experience at [ ] there is very little movement of guests from the start to the end...” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“A few have a fair few of the same guests every year that travel to the area specifically to use the service, some [ ] do have a policy of no annual returns but this is often overlooked if the guest is one who is liked and deemed to be quiet and helpful.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“It’s the same people, year after year.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Most guests are unable to get taken into hostel/ move on accommodation due to outreach not engaging with non-verified guests forcing them to rough sleep at the close.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

## **The need for adequate shelter and support**

Many people need accommodation to relieve their homelessness. As a Panel, we are passionate that more should be done, particularly around the support for people with No Recourse to Public Funds and ensuring offers of accommodation for people recognises peoples voices and aspirations, so that night shelters are not seen as an option, albeit one of last resort.

*“I was devastated by the [night shelter] guidance – Such a backward step.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I think about half the people in the COVID hotels (at least in London) are migrants with limited or No Recourse. These are not people entitled to help under the law or entitled to benefits. Do we think the shelters fill a gap there? If not what happens to those people?” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Regretfully, however, some areas frequently gate-keep access to accommodation during the non-Winter months, and then utilise Winter Shelters during the cold months as an emergency measure. With COVID-19 increasing the risks associated with Winter Night Shelters, we believe it’s crucial that work is done so that local areas do not see Winter Shelters as a viable provision before they have exhausted all other opportunities.

*“Shouldn’t it be like that 12 months a year? We should move away from special conditions. Is it because they don’t want that publicity of someone dying on our streets? The rest of the year you’ve been doing all you can to avoid accommodating people!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Given the reduced capacity of Winter Night Shelters that will result in any adherence to the guidance, it is necessary that work to seek stock is prioritised anyway and goes beyond that made in previous years.

*“From a social distancing point of view, they would have to dramatically reduce the amount, meaning 70% would still be left to freeze to death.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Whatever way you look at it, there isn’t enough room.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

## **Possible accommodation options**

Over the last seven months there has been a concerted effort from many to accommodate people through the Everybody In scheme, which has resulted in far fewer deaths than would have been otherwise. The next few months will need to see local areas thinking outside the box on how they are going to accommodate people, and not fall back on the provision of Winter Night Shelters.

People should be given access to move on accommodation through the Homelessness Reduction Act and Local Authority pathways, which meets people's aspirations, with Winter Night Shelters not being seen as a viable option for Housing Option teams. Innovative thinking that has been called for through the Next Steps Fund should be applied.

*“Need to look at what do people want – and how can we go from there? Not what the local authority thinks it can provide.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Looking outside the box for stock – incentives for landlords, buildings that aren't used, suspending certain taxes. How do we get the properties? How do we get the stock? What incentives are we going to have?” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“[X] prison is mis-used, or a hospital. There's lots of office space around [PLACE].” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Use these empty buildings!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Many places use accommodation guardians for empty building, own short, short, short term tenancies.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“There's something about when businesses are going under, that the local authority gets to use the building.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I was thinking about University Dormitory accommodation type stuff. With little individual rooms and shared bathrooms as a minimum standard? (Although universities are ripe with COVID?)” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Why not fire safety check the squats? Just make it safe for them.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Service providers could engage with local housing associations (in particular) older person provision to highlight and rent empty properties that can be temporarily used to house rough sleepers, they can have open access lounge (sits outside of planning regs this way). Many area that need provision cannot get it due to NIMBYism so planning regs need to be circumvented, this can be done by the LHA on a temp basis so a [Winter Shelter] can be set up.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

## **A last resort**

*“How are they going to work when you can't mix with people?” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

As the guidance acknowledges, shelters “should only be used as a last resort.” We encourage local authorities to recognise this, and to recognise crucially that these shelters are not providing the opportunities for self-isolating during the day which will need a different solution.

*If any winter provision is given through night shelters, which we hope will not be the case, then considerations will need to be made as to the support needs of individuals, particularly those with addictions. Further, the opening of Winter Shelters should not be linked to specific temperatures, and should instead be open for a set period of time to support their effective operation.*

## Expert Link – National Panel

*“We’re expecting people to refrain from using drugs and alcohol. I think we need to think outside of that box, people are allowed to use, and the place has a nurse, and someone there for a crisis. COVID has given us a golden handshake if you will, and we need to think about what we can do.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“I want the Government’s [SWEP] guidance to be more empathic than 3 nights in a row. We need to come to an agreement that severe weather comes from this month to this month, and they need to be in for that periods. There’s an action plan and people have options to move on.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Is -1 that different to your chances of dying than 2 degrees?” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

**The actions of national and local government, the homelessness sector and faith and voluntary organisations over the next few months will be critical for the lives of those of us experiencing rough sleeping. We urge national and local government to explore all opportunities to gain adequate accommodation and support for all people rough sleeping so that they do not have to risk their lives accessing winter provision.**

### **About Expert Link**

Expert Link is a peer led organisation championing the voice of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, including homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, offending and domestic violence and abuse. We advocate for a world where people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages are treated as equal partners in decisions made about their lives.