
West Midlands Combined Authority
**Covid -19: Homelessness
and positioning us for a
better future**



**West Midlands
Combined Authority**

Summary

The West Midlands Combined Authority Homelessness Task Force is encouraged by the impact of the collective efforts to bring everyone in. These gains must be sustained and good faith kept with those who have trusted enough to come in, including those with no recourse to public funds. It must also be recognised that unless we ‘design out homelessness’, there will be no lasting success. We are now in a liminal zone where the fluidity that creates makes it possible to position ourselves for a much better future.

The WMCA Homelessness Taskforce has identified these measures as the most important to sustain our gains and calls on Government to:-

- Commit ring-fenced additional funds for ongoing accommodation and support to all those for whom local authorities have taken on additional responsibility.
- Allow local councils ongoing flexibility on how current RSI funding is used, and extend the term of RSI until the end of this parliament.
- Give 12 months ‘grace’ to those with No Recourse to Public Funds and funding to help this group either into work or to achieve resolution of their status.
- Extend the scale and length of Housing First support to promote confidence in landlords that support for those with complex needs will be ongoing.
- Fund and encourage the local development of a range of supportive housing options for those who need more than single or dispersed accommodation.
- Establish and communicate a clear and compassionate ‘Everybody in for Good’ message for the public and community groups.
- Ensure that the Government’s review of housing related support, supported housing and unregulated accommodation takes evidence from our experience of the frailties of the non-commissioned exempt sector exposed during this crisis. Additionally commit to expedite the on-going review to a solution as soon as possible.
- Extend the current period of no evictions in the rented sector by a further 3 months.

In order to achieve lasting success the Homelessness Taskforce has identified the following asks of Government:-

- Increase grant rates to kick start truly affordable housing development using definition of ‘affordability’ adopted by WMCA.
- Increase investment to promote the widest possible range of housing led options through capital and revenue monies to facilitate building, acquisition and change of use.
- Support the introduction of the LHA + approach developed by the WMCA in order to open a greater range of private rented stock to those most vulnerable and bring forward the date where young people are exempt from the SAR if they have been in resettlement accommodation.
- Develop and fund a temporary Rent Support scheme for those who have accrued arrears during the Covid-19 lock down, aimed at households who have either lost jobs or been furloughed on low incomes.
- Offer non-repayable grants to those on low incomes and benefits in order to reduce the impact of the time delay between claims and first payments of Universal Credit.
- Promote more effective support for vulnerable people and households by ensuring cross government commitment to integrated social, health, drug and alcohol and economic support through transition and beyond. Including a focus on what is needed in the universal and targeted prevention space for all vulnerable groups.
- Introduce a ‘Duty to Collaborate’ to relevant legislation to promote early help for those at risk of homelessness and increase collaboration between public bodies.

Introduction

Over the period of the Covid -19 pandemic nationally we have been able to make a significant impact on numbers of rough sleepers with over 90% now in accommodation and we believe there is an opportunity to use this as a platform to create a sustained reduction in the numbers of rough sleepers going forward.

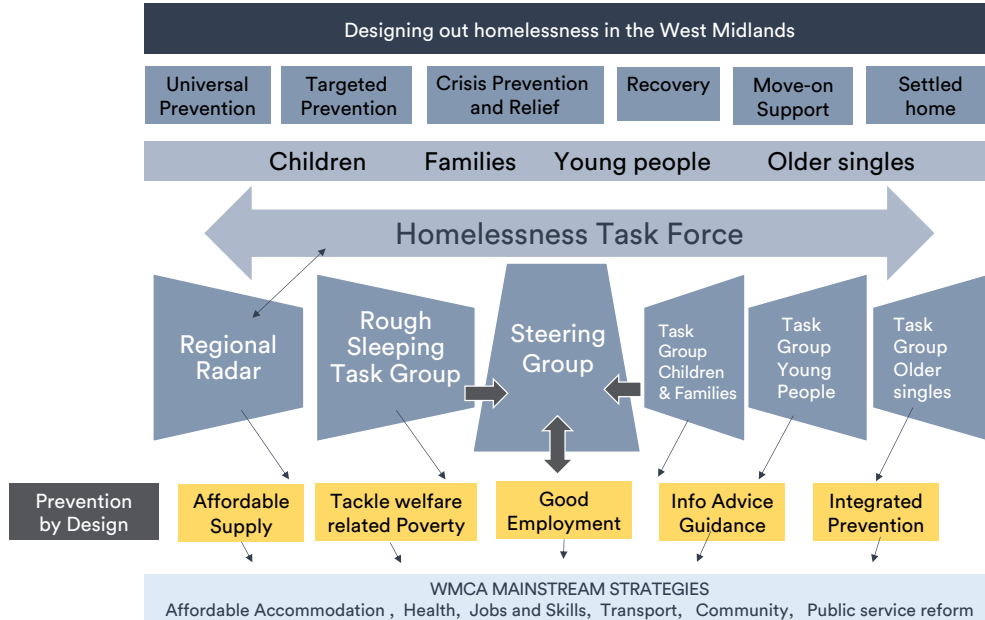
Critical to sustaining that change will be the measures and actions put in place as the lock down is eased and the work we can do with both those in accommodation and those who may be at risk of homelessness in the near future.

The approach we set out here is based on broad consultation across the West Midlands Combined Authority region and is rooted in our fundamental approach to homelessness prevention.

The model we have adopted to underpin our aim of ‘Designing out Homelessness’ identifies a broad range of prevention measures across all of the stages of a person’s or household’s journey towards homelessness.

Our ‘Designing out Homelessness’ framework helps to distinguish actions required for recovery, move on and settled home but equally important is the focus required on the universal and targeted space. What new measures do we need to introduce to ensure a universal approach to prevention of homelessness and targeted attention to those most at risk?

Our experience suggests that this framework enhances the potential to identify what works and where the gaps are and to develop systemic and sustained change: prevention by design.



We welcome the significant investment made by Government before Covid -19 (e.g. Housing First and RSI) and the additional investment we have had to support the current situation.

Our hope is that by considering the actions below we can turn those investments into sustainable outcomes for a wide range of vulnerable households not just for rough sleepers.

Whilst we understand the current focus on those rough sleepers who are now being accommodated our assessment is that this is only the tip of the iceberg and that failure to address the issues in a systemic and prevention focused way will only store up considerable demand and complexity for a later date.

Results delivered by the Covid - 19 response so far

As of the 1st of May across the WMCA region we have successfully accommodated over **800 potential and actual rough sleepers¹** as part of the Covid 19 response.

Of those who have come in off the streets 10 have returned and a further 40 have refused offers of help.

Of those accommodated close to 150 have no recourse to public funds.

We have seen evidence of greater engagement with the support we have been able to offer, and in some cases an unprecedented willingness on the part of rough sleepers to engage with services. It is critical that this engagement and trust is honoured and built on through the next stages of the process.

The contextual evidence suggests that the dramatic change in the street economy, reduced income from begging, less street feeding and fear of illness, have been critical factors in ensuring people come in.



¹ this figure includes those who were on the edges of rough sleeping e.g sofa surfing but not actually on the streets and those living in nightshelter accommodation

Broader system pressures and issues as we move into Recovery

One of the impacts of the current situation has been a reduction in broader homelessness presentations and our concern is that this is only a temporary bottling up of demand and that as the situation eases the number of presentations will increase dramatically.

The reasons for future homelessness will include rent arrears and wider debt accrued during the lock down phase as people’s incomes have been reduced. There is significant risk of increased family and relationship break down as restrictions are eased and family members feel able to leave or are asked to leave (e.g parents no longer willing to accommodate).

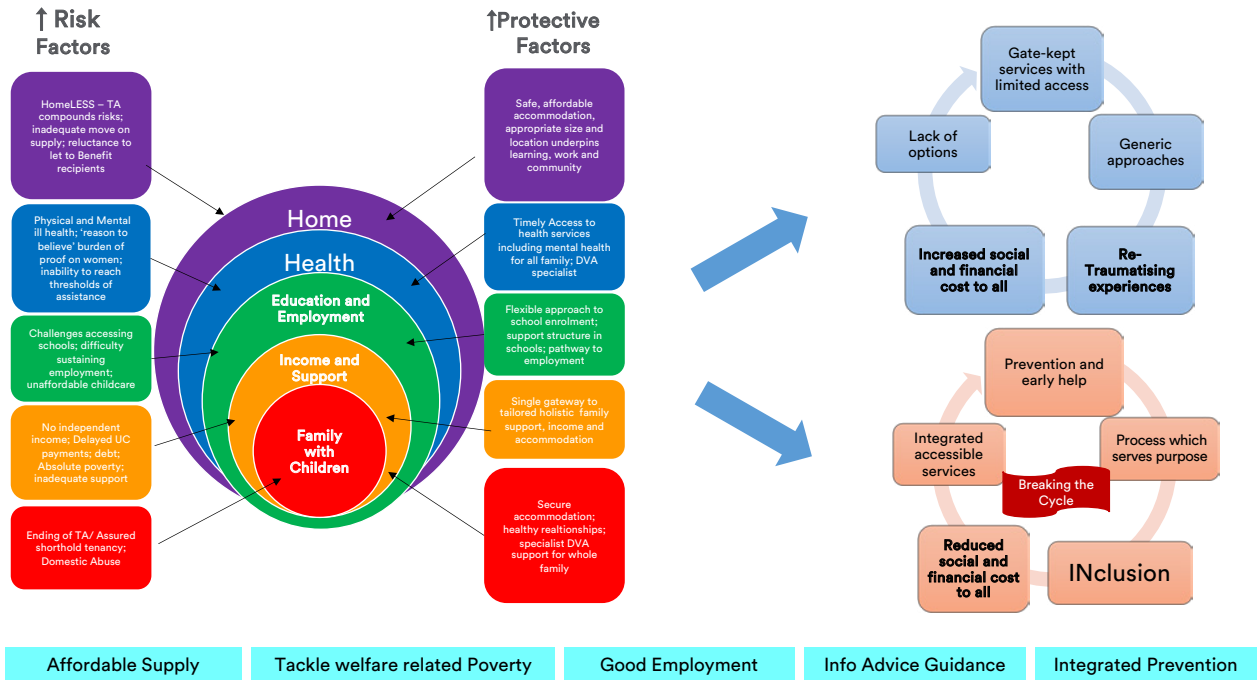
Additionally some Authorities are already stating that families being housed during the current situation tend to be as a result of domestic abuse and are predicting this will increase significantly post lockdown.

Clearly the broader economic impact of Covid -19 is yet to be fully understood however it is unlikely that there will be a return to pre Covid – 19 levels of

economic activity for a considerable period of time. This will only add pressure for households on low incomes in both the social rented and private rented sectors.

This is set against the backdrop of existing need, we have high numbers of individual and families in Temporary Accommodation across the WMCA region, most recent figures are in excess of 1000 individuals² and 4000 families. All of them need access to move on accommodation and the support to make that sustainable.

Our analysis suggests that we need to stem the flow of all forms of homelessness across communities as part of our response in the coming phases of the Covid -19 recovery.



² mix of individuals owed a duty pre Covid -19 and those that came in as a result of the Covid -19 offer

Impact and Outcomes that could be delivered after lockdown

By taking a systemic and prevention-based approach to the next phases of intervention we can help to deliver some critical outcomes in the WMCA region.

In collaboration with the Government we can sustain the dramatic reduction in street homelessness, reduce flow onto the streets and help a broad range of vulnerable households to maintain their current housing and avoid homelessness with all the attendant issues and costs that brings.

More specifically we are in a position to achieve the Government’s rough sleeping ambition before the 2024 deadline as well as making serious inroads into issues related to modern slavery, exploitation and domestic abuse.

Potential Impact

The current situation presents us with the opportunity to create positive and sustained change and a better future for people who may be at risk of homelessness.

Rather than return to business as usual we can work together so we are:

- Preventing homelessness
- Disrupting exploitation
- Tackling poverty
- Promoting health and wellbeing
- Promoting cross governmental working – Influencing Public Service Reform

Immediate Objectives

- Rough sleepers who have been accommodated do not return to the streets
- Those at risk of rough sleeping are helped quickly and prevented from becoming street homeless
- Households at risk of homelessness are helped through prevention to retain and sustain their housing
- Households in temporary accommodation are supported to move on to settled accommodation and helped to avoid future homelessness

WMCA Homelessness Taskforce Our commitments to making a difference



Potential solutions, actions and impact

People sleeping Rough

Activating the **Recovery, Move on and Settled home** parts of the pathway, creating space and time for us to work with those **who have been accommodated during the Covid -19 response** and to help **stop the flow of new rough sleepers** as we move into the next phases of **Protect and Care**.

Areas where we need policy changes and/or Central Government financial support:

MHCLG establish a dedicated and ring-fenced funding stream, beyond the resources already committed to Covid -19 response, to provide ongoing accommodation and support.

Allowing local councils ongoing flexibility on how current RSI funding is used to reflect the current situation.

Commitment to extend current RSI funding for sufficient time to allow contracts to be effective and for a proper return on investment to be accrued.

Giving a period of 12 months 'grace' to those who have been accommodated as part of the Covid-19 response and have No Recourse to Public Funds. Plus funding to help this group either in to work or to achieve resolution of their status.

Extending the scale and length of Housing First support and investment to promote greater confidence for landlords that support for those with complex needs will be ongoing.

Funding and encouraging the local development of a range of supportive housing options for those who need more than single or dispersed accommodation to help them sustain successful transition from the streets, e.g. Live and Work schemes piloted in the West Midlands.

Collaboratively (national and local) developing and disseminating a clear and compassionate 'Everybody in for Good' message for the public and community groups so that the changes made to the street economy are maintained. Ensuring that members of the public feel confident that there is an offer of help to people on the streets and that for those citizens that want to offer help the most effective way of doing that is through schemes like our local 'Change into Action' approach rather than by individual 'giving' to people on the streets.

Ensure that the Government's review of housing related support, supported housing and unregulated accommodation takes evidence from our experience of the frailties of the non-commissioned exempt sector exposed during the current public health crisis.

Areas where support for local action will add value:

Encouraging support providers funded as part of this process to adopt evidence based approaches to provision, for example the use of PIE and trauma informed support being set as standard.

Broader homelessness Prevention

Supporting local activity to broaden **prevention of homelessness** (including those at risk of rough sleeping) through relaxation of current constraints and increase in resources so that the flow of those on to the streets and into TA is reduced at the same time as those already homeless are helped into settled accommodation. The areas noted below fit into the following areas of our pathway: **Targeted prevention, Crisis prevention and relief, Recovery, Move-on support and Settled homes.**

Areas where we need policy changes and/or Central Government financial support:

Increase grant rates to kick start truly affordable housing development using definition of 'affordability' adopted by WMCA.

Using both resources committed in the Spring Budget and increased investment to promote the widest possible range of housing led options through provision of capital and revenue monies to facilitate acquisition and change of use e.g. empty stock for sale/conversions to rent; increase in capital grant levels to reduce rents to affordable levels; buying back former RTB; purchasing empty homes; conversions of former sheltered housing; investment required to bring stock up to lettable standards.

Support the introduction of the LHA + approach developed by the WMCA in order to open a greater range of private rented stock to those most vulnerable.

Developing and funding a temporary Rent Support scheme for those who have accrued arrears during

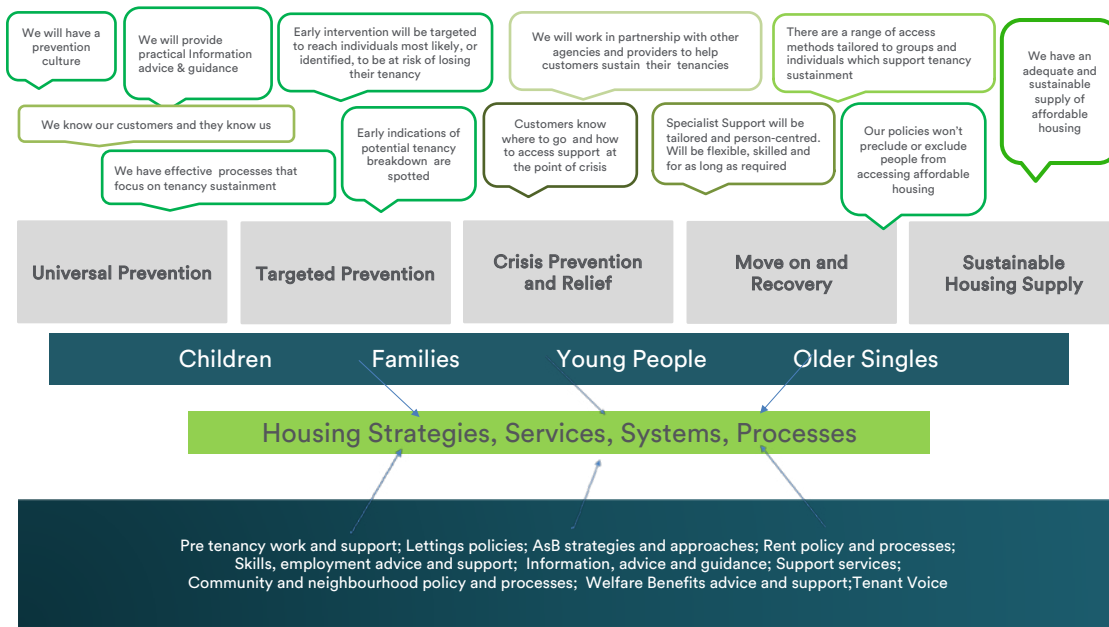
the Covid-19 lock down, aimed at households who have either lost jobs or been furloughed on low incomes. As a minimum extend the current cessation of evictions for a further 3 months.

More broadly offering a range of non-repayable grants for those on low incomes and benefits in order to reduce the impacts of the time lapse between claims and first payments for Universal Credit.

Promote more effective support for vulnerable people and households by ensuring cross government commitment to integrated social, health, drug and alcohol and economic support through transition and beyond. Including a focus on what is needed in the universal and targeted prevention space for all vulnerable groups.

Introducing a 'Duty to collaborate' to relevant legislation so that we promote early help for those at risk of homelessness and increase collaboration between Local Authorities and others where people are either being housed out of their area or seek help out of their home area.

Our Commitment to collaborate to prevent and relieve homelessness



Conclusion

There is an unprecedented opportunity to end rough sleeping and avoid a return to streets, shelters and cash in hand exploitation. This will require policy, resourcing and operational actions at national, regional and local levels across sectors. The solutions put in place will need to address practical, policy and systemic issues and be deliverable.

We believe that the approach set out above will not only contribute to a sea-change in homelessness but will play a critical part in both ongoing public health interventions as we move forward and help inform the wider city centre renewal and regeneration agenda.

We see this paper as the start point for more detailed work on the medium to long term impacts and opportunities created during this liminal period. It is our intention to start now on a more detailed piece of work which will include analysis of the economic as well as the moral case for designing in prevention to design out homelessness.

Inclusive Growth

“A more deliberate and socially purposeful model of economic growth”

The West Midlands Combined Authority Homelessness Taskforce

Who we are and what we do:

Homelessness is the ultimate exclusion and a tragedy for individuals and for wider society. Following the election of Andy Street as Mayor in 2017, the Homelessness Taskforce was established, with the aim to ‘design out homelessness’. The Taskforce was adopted within the mainstream structures of WMCA in June 2019

The Taskforce membership includes our seven Local Authorities (Birmingham City Council, Coventry City Council, Dudley MBC, Sandwell MBC, Solihull MBC, Walsall MBC, City of Wolverhampton), key public sector agencies, representation from Voluntary and Not for Profit sector and senior representation from the Business Community. It has an independent Chair, Jean Templeton, CEO of St Basils, and is supported by representatives of each WMCA Directorate.

A senior Members Advisory Group (MAG) comprising Homelessness portfolio holders

for the seven local authorities, chaired by Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods in Birmingham, provides oversight, support and scrutiny of the work of the Taskforce, reporting to the Public Service Reform Board of the WMCA.

The WMCA has no statutory duties, powers or resources around homelessness, but in designing out homelessness, is committed to identifying and addressing gaps and flaws in policies, procedures, laws, structures, systems and relationships that either cause or fail to prevent homelessness. It recognises that homelessness takes many forms – rough sleeping, sofa surfing, night-shelters, B&B, temporary accommodation, hostels, squatting, and is a complex mix of personal and wider structural factors, such as health, employment, relationships and housing.

For more information please contact: Neelam Sunder, Programme Manager, Homelessness
Neelam.Sunder@wmca.org.uk



West Midlands
Combined Authority