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Video transcript

Hello, my name’s Suzanne Fitzpatrick, I’m director of the Institute for Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh. I’ve been asked to do this short video about the implications of COVID and economic lockdown on homeless people and on homelessness policy from a UK perspective.

I plan to talk mainly about England because myself and colleagues are currently in the field just now doing key informant interviews with high-level stakeholders across England about the implications of COVID under lockdown for the people that they work with. We’re interviewing people from central government, from local government and from charities and so I want to draw out some of the key themes that are emerging from those interviews and from some of the other work that we’re doing as part of the Homelessness Monitor England report that we do for Crisis every year.

There’s really three areas that I want to draw out.

First of all what seems to have gone well in terms of the emergency response with respect to homelessness. Secondly what are the key challenges that are faced right now and as we move towards the exit strategy? And third, what might we hope for by way of longer-term shifts in housing and homelessness policy as a result of the COVID experience?

So, what has gone well? Well, I think first of all the clarity and directness of that communication that came out from central government from HMCLG at the end of March via Louise Casey telling local authorities, instructing local authorities, that really anyone who was sleeping rough and anyone who was in congregate-style shelter accommodation was to be moved to a safe place, to self-contained accommodation by that weekend. That was an instruction that was that was welcome, very much in its clarity and its directness. Local government was looking for that lead from central government and appreciated very much getting it, and it seems that there really has been a remarkable effort across the country by local authorities to get everyone in, or at least to make sure everyone has a decent offer of self-contained accommodation. Some local authorities have found it easier than others. Some have got greater access to hotel accommodation and other forms of self contained accommodation. Others struggled more for that. Those that have got better developed multi-sectoral partnerships and relationships, particularly with health colleagues, found it easier than others. Some have got more capacity than others, particularly some of the smaller authorities seem to have really struggled. So, you know, the overarching message there is central government put out a message and local government in general actually reacted incredibly swiftly and effectively to that so that’s a real positive.

I think another positive that has to be foregrounded is that it does seem that the rate of infection amongst people in hostels and other homeless populations has been kept really quite low. So we can’t be certain exactly what the percentage is but people are talking around three percent which is very different from the situation in the United States for example. So it does seem that that triaging system has been really pretty effective including in some of the areas of real concentration like London. More generally people have said that another positive is the
closeness of the relationship that has been there has been built or enhanced with public health colleagues and with local NHS colleagues at least in some areas so that's been a really big positive that has come out of the crisis so far. Clearly what's been hugely welcomed are the changes in benefits, and from the homelessness perspective particularly, the increase in the local housing allowance rate to cover the bottom 30th percentile of eligible rents has been hugely important. So there's, you know, a range of things there that people are reporting, where changes brought about by central government policy and local government response to those policies, that have really made the difference in the midst of the crisis. Another area which people were very keen to emphasise as being positive, was the no evictions, the halt in evictions policy, that again came out very quickly and seems to have been particularly impactful with respect to family homelessness which we're hearing has been kept to a pretty low level. It really seems to have been suppressed during the crisis which, of course, has been hugely helpful. So clearly there have been a lot of challenges in implementing help for homeless people in this emergency situation. Those challenges have varied between different places but what we were hearing, really across the board, and from key stakeholders in different parts of the country is concern now about what they view as being mixed messages coming out of central government, coming out of HCMLG. It's no longer clear that there's going to be full cost recovery for local authorities who are accommodating a lot of people who they wouldn't normally have a duty to accommodate. That's a particular concern around the no recourse to public funds group and the EA migrants who don't have access to the Housing Benefit system and it's just really not clear how their accommodation costs are going to be met going forward, and I would say that local authorities and others really seem very anxious, almost panicked about what's going to happen to that group. More generally there's clearly widespread concern about what's going to happen in the step-down phase. The idea of turfing hundreds or thousands of people, vulnerable people out on to the streets is clearly a scenario that nobody wants to contemplate but it really hasn't clear at the moment how that step-down accommodation is going to be paid for, far less the care and support revenue costs for vulnerable people with more complex needs who form quite a substantial part of that population. One of the things I've been quite surprised about in doing this work over the last couple of weeks is is the extent to which shared forms of accommodation are still being used even during the crisis so while shared dormitory-type accommodation shelters have been closed there still appear to be a lot of hostels and shared accommodation that's being used where people are sharing kitchens and bathrooms and so on. So that clearly is raising issues around social distancing and protecting people's health. Looking forward and more towards the exit strategy phase of things, there's a lot of anxiety around a potential spike in family homelessness, with, particularly once the ban on evictions comes to end if that's not extended further. And looking at the prospect of there being a major economic recession, depression, with all the implications that that will have for increased levels of their debt, rent arrears, unemployment and so on.

One specific issue that's coming through is the extent to which resources, local authority homelessness services resources have been pulled away from the more preventative type interventions that they've been engaged in under the Homelessness Reduction Act towards, obviously, the crisis response during COVID and that may well have implications as well for this potential spike in family homelessness. Finally, what kind of longer-term shifts in housing and homelessness policy might we want to see as a result of the experience of the COVID crisis. Well, here's a whole range of these but three that I would pick out for just now are these.

First of all I would really hope that this experience of this crisis and the public health style intervention that we've seen would help propel us away from the use of congregate forms of
provision, particularly larger scale, lightly supported forms of accommodation for homeless was
people which we've long known are very unpopular with homeless people, are places where they
don't feel safe and now with the COVID crisis we can see the variance of the acute health
implications of placing large numbers of vulnerable people in these congregate settings. I really hope
that this is the prompt that we need to shift decisively in the direction of a housing-first model of
accommodation as default for homeless people with complex needs they can live in ordinary
housing in ordinary communities and self-contained settings with the support that they need. So
that would be my first hope for the future.

My second, which is closely related, is that we can start to re-conceptualize the support needs that
particularly vulnerable rough sleepers and other vulnerable homeless people have which really are
health and social care needs. These are not predominantly housing or homelessness issues. They are
effectively social care issues and I hope that that closer relationship between health and
homelessness we've seen during the crisis can be maintained and that people who are vulnerable,
who on the streets or in shelters and hostels and so on, can be properly assessed for their health and
social care needs going forward.

The third thing I would hope to see is a recognition of the importance of central government really
taking grip of issues like, a social issue like homelessness and taking full responsibility for tackling it,
not just in the context of public health emergency like COVID work but in the long term. In England
over the last ten years we've seen a shift towards a localist policy which, to my mind at least, saw
central governmental really abdicate its responsibility for some of the most vulnerable and some of
the poorest citizens in the country. I would hope that the importance and the effectiveness of
central government really taking the lead during the COVID crisis is something that we could see
embedded longer term so that we don't go back to the failed localist approach that's seen in
homelessness rise so significantly across England in recent years. I look forward to seeing everybody
for further discussion on Thursday. Bye.