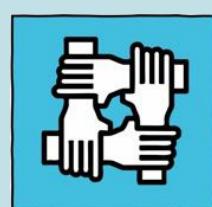




# Ending Homelessness Together



## Our Voice, Our Rights

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## Foreword

We are a group of people who have joined together to support the development of this charter. We are sharing our collective voice by drawing on our individual and unique experiences of homelessness. Each one of us has had a very different journey, none of us expected, planned or wanted to become homeless, it was something that was forced on us by circumstance and systemic failures. We recognise that we have a long way to go before we can end homelessness, but we believe the experience of being homeless could be improved if we truly acknowledge homelessness as a human rights issue, ensure people experiencing homelessness understand their rights and are supported to urge for their rights to be upheld without feeling guilty or ashamed.

Homelessness should not be swept under the carpet or be ignored in the vain hope that it will somehow disappear overnight. We don't allow ourselves to fall prey to such wishful thinking or even think that it is just too difficult a problem to solve. In the development of this charter, we recognise that homelessness is an individual, political, structural and societal issue that requires effective collaboration and increased resource so that the complex issues around homelessness can be solved for good. Through the covid-19 pandemic, we demonstrated how we can tackle homelessness when we work in this way, but it is also key to note that this way of working needs continuous investment, or we risk creating problems for future generations. We must therefore take this opportunity to reduce homelessness now.

We are asking the new Labour Government to hear our voice and the voices of all those who have personal experience of homelessness. We must be part of the solution to tackling homelessness and not simply seen as a problem to be solved. We want you to recognise that we are people who have rights, and together, our rights must be upheld.

# Background

Building on the recommendations of [An Obstacle Course](#) (a collaborative research project between [Amnesty International UK](#) and [Groundswell](#)), Groundswell volunteers have come together to co-create a charter for change.

Through a series of peer workshops identifying their main priorities, Homelessness Sector Roundtables, hearing from 11 organisations about their key asks for the next government, and development sessions, we heard from 71 participants across the UK; 49 of which disclosed that they have experience of homelessness.

This charter sets out some of the priority areas for the government to focus on, in order to address the inequalities faced by people experiencing homelessness in the UK. Participants talked about homelessness and its impact on human rights, using the framework of the [UN International Covenant](#) on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to guide their discussion. Amnesty International UK also offers commentary from a rights perspective for the real-life experiences and priority areas outlined in each section.

*"Homelessness is a profound assault on dignity, social inclusion and the right to life. It is a *prima facie* violation of the right to housing and violates a number of other human rights in addition to the right to life, including non-discrimination, health, water and sanitation, security of the person and freedom from cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment."*

- [UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing \(A/HRC/43/43, para.30\)](#)

## Our Voice – key priorities for change



We must:

- **Acknowledge that homelessness is not only a housing issue but also a health issue**, and must be tackled to address health inequalities.
- **Provide more and better financial support** for people experiencing homelessness, through making renting affordable and addressing benefit levels.
- **Improve and increase housing provision**, including temporary accommodation and review wider homelessness regulations.
- **Ensure that all future policy decisions are fully informed by and created with people with lived experience.**

# Acknowledge that homelessness is also a health issue



**Homelessness is a public health issue and should be considered alongside physical and mental health needs in relation to eligibility for benefits.** Barriers that prevent people from gaining and maintaining benefits whilst homeless (such as online access or difficulty complying with claimant commitments) should be removed. Action should be taken to ensure people have increased awareness and support to apply for all they are entitled to.

*"If you're homeless, you're going to be ill. There's no two ways about it and it can be major illness down to the smallest little thing".*

*"People should be told what they're entitled to, because unless you know about it, they don't really tell you about things. It took me having to speak to a friend, who spoke to somebody else to find out about getting PIP and stuff like that. Whereas the Job Centre should have just told me".*

The UN [Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights](#), in its general comment on Article 9 The Right to Social Security, states that *"Benefits should be provided in a timely manner and beneficiaries should have physical access to the social security services in order to access benefits and information, and make contributions where relevant"*. It outlines that attention should be paid to particular groups of people such as disabled people, migrants and those living in remote areas. The UK government should consider the conditions within which people are living which acts as physical barrier to accessing benefits including homelessness.

The UK [governments guidance](#) on access to Universal Credit whilst homeless states it is at a staff level decision to apply easements to accommodate barriers to social security where people are homeless. However, there is a requirement for claimants to demonstrate they are *"actively looking for stable accommodation"*. This relies on the subjective opinion of work coaches which could limit access to benefits for people experiencing homelessness and to justice where easements are unfairly denied.

**Implement the NICE Guidelines for people experiencing homelessness**, involve people with lived experience in informing their implementation, and invest in the role of peer advocacy to remove the barriers to accessing services for people experiencing homelessness and wider inclusion health groups.

*"I've said it many times, it shouldn't be a guideline, it should be a must. "This is what you should do" is no good because they look at it and think, yeah, well we could, but we haven't got the funding. If you say this is what you must do, then they must do it. It should be mandated in law. This is the rules. This is what you have to do".*

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its general comment on Article 12 sets out state obligations on the [right to highest attainable standard of health](#): *"health facilities, goods and services must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable or marginalized sections of the population, in law and in fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds"*. The Committee interprets the right to health, as defined in article 12.1, as an inclusive right extending not only to timely and appropriate health care but also to the underlying determinants of health, such as access to safe and potable water and adequate sanitation, an adequate supply of safe food, nutrition and housing, healthy occupational and environmental conditions, and access to health-related education and information, including on sexual and reproductive health. A further important aspect is the participation of the population in all health-related decision-making at the community, national and international levels (CESR GC 14, para 11).

The UK government has an obligation to deliver 'targeted' programmes to address inequity in access and outcomes for people experiencing homelessness: *"even in times of severe resource constraints, the vulnerable members of society must be protected by the adoption of relatively low-cost targeted programmes."*

The [NICE guidelines on integrated Health and Social Care for people experiencing homelessness](#) echoes the UN calls for such targeted initiatives to address discrimination within the health and care system and disparity in health outcomes for people who are homeless. NICE directs Integrated Care Boards (ICB's) to commission services that meet needs through a Local Homelessness Health and Social Care needs assessment. It also recommends statutory safeguarding adults boards have an appointed homelessness lead to ensure accountability. Implementation of this guidance and targeted initiatives across the country is understood to be patchy and this fails to address the very real [barriers to healthcare](#) which shorten life expectancy.

**Develop targeted Mental Health and Recovery services**, which are focused on the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness and prevent excluding people who have co-occurring conditions.

*"I spoke about the crisis team with someone who ran a local mental health drop-in Centre, and he said less than 5% of his users are willing to use the crisis team because of the lack of trust and the their perception of how bad the quality of the service is. Why have a crisis team if people are afraid to use it or just don't trust it?"*

*"I think co-occurring conditions also needs to include learning difficulties because a lot of times it's been overlooked when people are going through homelessness, they don't really pay attention to the fact that that person may have learning difficulties as well, and they should be thinking more broadly about all kinds of co-occurring conditions".*

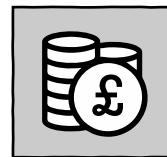
The UN General Assembly defined [principles for the protection of people with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care](#) stating:

*"Every patient shall have the right to receive such health and social care as is appropriate to his or her health needs, and is entitled to care and treatment in accordance with the same standards as other ill persons".*

The principle of non-discrimination also applies in that no one should be excluded from a service because they have mental illness: *"There shall be no discrimination on the grounds of mental illness".*

The NICE echoes this principle in their [guidance](#) and states that commissioners of health and social care services must *"Ensure that people experiencing homelessness with multiple health or social care needs are not excluded from services because of restrictive eligibility criteria. For example, people with mental health problems are not denied access to mental health services because they have drug and alcohol treatment needs"*. It also recommends the development of a Homelessness multi-disciplinary team and outreach services to assess, coordinate and deliver the care needed linked to unmet mental health needs.

# Provide more and better financial support



**Make renting affordable and ensure people are aware of the option for Local Housing Allowance (LHA) to be paid directly to the landlord** to prevent people becoming homeless due to administrative errors or difficulty managing money. Further steps must be made to ensure people understand and are aware of the options available to them when applying for LHA and any changes to payments are clearly communicated.

*"I decided to have my rent paid directly to my landlord, and they did it for a couple of years but then they paid in my account. There were a couple of times I spent it, I spent it all. And I think they should just remove that temptation".*

Increase LHA levels as current levels do not align with market rent, nor pay enough of the housing costs and this is contributing to rising homelessness and is a barrier to moving out of homelessness.

In order to make sure that renting is affordable, the government will also need to abolish benefit caps and bedroom tax. This will prevent people being costed out of the rental market and being pushed into homelessness.

The UN [Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights in its comment on Article 11: The Right To Housing](#), states that governments have the obligation to ensure that measures are put in place, including through housing subsidies and regulation of rents to ensure that there is sufficient and affordable housing for people from different income groups.

Within the UK the Housing Benefit/ Housing costs elements of universal credit for private renters aims to address the 'affordability' challenge. However, housing subsidies are currently not included within UK legislative statutory duty for government to annual review the amount paid under the [Social Security Administration Act 1992](#). It is only done when the "*Secretary of State considers it appropriate to do so*" (S.150 (7)).

The amount paid is 'capped' by the Local Housing Allowance. The government's failure to require in statute an annual review of these calculations has led to governments freezing, reducing and capping housing support to the extent that people are unable to bear the cost of escalating rents with a resultant impact on their [ability to access an adequate standard of living](#). Despite recent announcements that LHA will be unfrozen for the first time in 4 years, this is felt by organisations like Shelter to have [temporary impact only as families will still feel the impact of the benefit cap and LHA will be again frozen after this temporary measure](#).

**Address benefit levels and waiting times for accessing them, benefits currently don't enable people to meet their basic needs.** The amount needed to meet basic needs will vary based on an individual person's circumstances. The increase in costs within the UK means that the situation is worse than ever and those already experiencing economic hardship are particularly impacted. The government should set benefits at a level which enables people to meet their basic needs (which must include access to digital) and this should be regularly reviewed against the real cost of living.

*"Benefits should be able to meet people's basic needs and having to pay bedroom tax puts an extra burden on those people relying on the benefits system through no fault of their own".*

*"An essentials guarantee would maybe help to mitigate a lot of issues. Just to ensure that people have that minimum basic amount that they need to survive, you know, and if the percentage of rent that they've got to pay ends up costing more, that's not something that should have to fall to them, if it takes them below that minimum standard".*

*"We just shouldn't be leaving people in positions where they can't afford the essentials, and recognising that that the essentials is not the same for everybody and that needs a person-led approach".*

The government must also address the 'catch-22' for people living in supported accommodation, who are unable to earn income through employment as they would risk being unable to afford the supported housing costs. This should include establishing permitted earnings for people in supported and temporary accommodation or other initiatives to make going into work affordable and accessible.

*"I knew clients that had to turn down getting jobs as they couldn't afford the hostel rent. That's totally madness".*

'Adequacy' is among the key components of the right to social security and the committee on economic social and cultural rights [states](#), "Benefits, whether in cash or in kind, must be adequate in amount and duration in order that everyone may realize his or her rights to family protection and assistance, an adequate standard of living and adequate access to health care". States parties must also pay full respect to the principle of human dignity contained in the [Article 2 of the Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights](#), and the principle of non-discrimination, so as to avoid any adverse effect on the levels of benefits and the form in which they are provided.

Failure of the UK government to address the lack of adequacy in its social security system has been criticised by the [UN Committee on Rights of People with a Disability in March 2024](#) who state that people are being denied an adequate standard of living and social protection and call on the government to review "the current Universal Credit system, to ascertain the additional costs of living with disabilities and adjusting benefit amounts accordingly to reflect these costs".

## Improve and increase housing provision



**There must be better standards for commissioning, quality and regulation of supported and temporary accommodation for all (including people seeking asylum), informed by people with lived experience.**

The government should engage in a genuine consultation and codesign process with people with experience of homelessness, and other stakeholders on the creation of standards and a regulatory body to oversee the quality and management of temporary housing provided in B&Bs, hostels, supported housing, and other forms of unregulated temporary accommodation.

This should include ensuring access to essentials within the property (including cooking facilities and quality internet connection to support people to be digitally included). It should include considerations of support available to enable people who are moving on from temporary accommodation to successfully sustain housing, through social and support work (such as the Housing First approach), which is based on a person-centred holistic support plan.

*"If people are in temporary accommodation they should be entitled to an Internet connection. I know it seems minor compared to some of the other issues faced by people but it's a huge thing, isn't it? Being able to access the Internet".*

[\*\*General Comment 4 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights\*\*](#) on Right to Housing, states that governments must ensure that any accommodation provided includes essentials needed to maintain health, safety and security through ensuring essential facilities are in place.

AIUK has called for [\*\*stronger enforceable standards for temporary accommodation\*\*](#) to ensure that temporary housing provided during periods of homelessness are in line with international human rights standards of adequacy which include habitability, affordability, access to public goods and services.

**Build more social housing** and prioritise people who are experiencing homelessness. We support [the call](#) made by many in the homeless and housing sector to address homelessness, by taking urgent action and preparing a roadmap with concrete targets to fulfil unmet housing needs, including by building and enabling local authorities to provide adequate and genuinely affordable housing for every person who needs it (e.g. social housing).

*"Having affordable quality housing will help those relying on the benefits system".*

*"There were major incentives in the early 90s and the late 80s that could be replicated, which might catalyse potential more housing. So this is nothing new. You've done it before. Do it again. It worked brilliantly in the 90s and hopefully we can replicate it".*

The UK government has failed to put measured in place to ensure sufficient, affordable and adequate housing was noted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights noted in its [concluding observations from the 2016 periodic report on the UK](#):  
*"The Committee also notes with concern that the lack of social housing has forced households to move into the private rental sector, which is not adequate in terms of affordability, habitability, accessibility and security of tenure".*

AIUK noted the ongoing failure to address the availability of affordable housing and has called on the government to invest in development of affordable social homes.

**Introduce regulation of private landlords to increase accountability** to ensure that maintenance is carried out, access to tenancy is not discriminatory and rent remains affordable. The government must work to develop robust regulations on the requirement to be met by residential premises and consider extending the [Decent Homes Standard](#) to the private rented sector. This should be done in consultation with people who have been renting from private landlords. In development of these regulations, directions must be given to set out reporting, monitoring and enforcement actions for those landlords who do not comply.

There is a failure of regulatory measure in the UK to protect people from living in unhabitable homes that impact on health. The [Committee on Economic, social and cultural rights](#) states that governments must ensure that housing is habitable in that it provides: *"adequate space and protecting them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards, and disease vectors. The physical safety of occupants must be guaranteed as well"* and to apply the guidance of the [World Health Organisation on Housing and Health](#).

Following the fall of the [Renters Reform Bill](#), a future government must address the lack of robust regulation of standards of private rented accommodation, address discrimination in allocation of lettings and security of tenure (including abolishing on No Fault Evictions).

**Reform wider Housing and Homelessness Legislation overall to recognise Housing as a Human Right.** Legislation and its implementation should ensure that everyone who is homeless and unable to provide for themselves, is provided with housing while prioritising those most at risk of abuse, exploitation and other human rights violations. The government should explicitly recognise and incorporate the right to adequate housing as a human right in domestic law, policy and practice. They must ensure that all victims of violations of the right to adequate housing have access to effective remedy, including access to justice including through the court.

There are a number of key areas where Housing and Homelessness legislation needs to change. This includes the decriminalisation of rough sleeping. In order to prevent rough sleeping, there must also be no discharge from hospital, prison or care to the street.

*"Decriminalising rough sleeping and begging should have been part of the abolition of the Vagrancy Act ... then they just brought in new rules that were basically the same thing".*

The government should also end conditionality, priority need, intentionality and local connection in England to help people move out of homelessness for good.

*"I can't understand local connections because I was put right back to where I used and abused drugs after getting clean. Luckily I was strong enough to not slip back to my old ways".*

The UK government policy infrastructure is exacerbating exclusion from right to adequate housing and failure to protect against discrimination. There needs to be instructions and guidance to all local authorities, including through the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities, to ensure that local authorities act in line with the UK's international human rights obligations, including those on the right to adequate housing as articulated in the [UN Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Adequate Housing](#). Local authorities should be supported to ensure that everyone within their district has access to minimum essential levels of housing and other rights.

## Ensure that all future policy decisions are fully informed by and created with people with lived experience

As this charter highlights, it is vital to ensure that future policies are informed by people with lived experience.

It is only with lived experience at the heart of decision-making that we can understand the issues and challenges people are facing, ensuring people's experience and rights are informing issues, and identifying solutions together.

We have highlighted ways this can be done, and Groundswell would welcome further discussions and explorations on how meaningful participation can lead to genuine coproduction of policies, services and strategies together.

*"People with direct experience have answers to the solutions you seek, by simply involving them through your work from the beginning you will save time, money and effort...all you need to do is ask! - failure to do this cements failings of the systems you seek to change".*

The Right to Participation in public affairs is part of the fabric of good governance, accountability and improving outcomes. The [UN guidance](#) states that: "The equal right to participate in public affairs should be recognized, protected and implemented in national constitutions and legal frameworks".

The barriers to the engagement of people experiencing homelessness in a process of genuine consultation in policy solutions and evaluations, are often not adequately considered. In doing so the government does not comply with the Gunning Principles or [Cabinet Office Consultation Guidance](#) to develop 'targeted' consultations and this leads to exclusion. It is imperative that in development and implementation of a human rights led national housing and homelessness strategy and the UK governments ensure that there is sufficient funding and administrative support to realise the right to participation of all affected in the realisation of adequate housing for all.

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