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# A new national drive to tackle homelessness and multiple disadvantage

## Recommendations to the “Joined-up approach for people with complex needs” task and finish group” for the MHCLG homelessness and rough sleeping strategy 2025

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### 1. Introduction

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- 1.1 In January 2025 the government started work to develop a new homelessness and rough sleeping strategy for England and we were pleased to be asked to join one of the advisory groups feeding into this process. Meanwhile, officials in MHCLG and other government departments are preparing their submissions to the forthcoming spending review and developing their programmes to drive forward the government’s various missions, including transforming public services.
- 1.2 This short paper was written specifically to feed into the *Joined Up Approach for People With Complex Needs Task and Finish Group* but it seeks to contribute to all these discussions. Our recommendations draw on our experience since the early 1990s in developing policy and practice in the homelessness and multiple disadvantage arenas as well as our more recent consultancy work with local authorities, charities and health services.
- 1.3 We asked for comments on a draft of this paper via LinkedIn and other networks and have incorporated these below.
- 1.4 This paper lies within the scope of the specific task and finish group and we do not try to address a much wider agenda on preventing and tackling homelessness that will be dealt with by the other groups. However, given the complexity of homelessness, there will be some overlap with this work – for example in our section on upstream prevention, which is of relevance to the prevention group.

### 2. Three decades of learning - a powerful case for change

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- 2.1 We argue that the government should avoid using the term “complex needs” but instead stick to “multiple disadvantage” which has an established definition linked to a large and growing evidence base. However, there are limitations to this which we address below.
- 2.2 The term “multiple disadvantage” refers to a pattern of experience that is found in every area across the UK. The prospectus for the MHCLG’s Changing Futures programme used this definition:

*“There are an estimated 363,000 adults experiencing multiple disadvantage in England - including a combination of homelessness, substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic abuse, and contact with the criminal justice system. Many of these people have been caught in this situation for years, experiencing entrenched disadvantage, trauma and ill-health. They come into repeated contact with our police, criminal justice, and emergency response services without receiving the support they need to help them break the cycle – generating significant costs to the public purse without seeing improved life outcomes.”<sup>i</sup>*

- 2.3 Over the past three decades, efforts by organisations like the Revolving Doors Agency<sup>ii</sup> and MEAM<sup>iii</sup>, together with learning from a series of national programmes (for example by the Social Exclusion Unit and the Adults Facing Chronic Exclusion<sup>iv</sup>, Fulfilling Lives and Changing Futures programmes) have produced a large set of evidence that adds up to a powerful political, fiscal, moral and practical case for change, and provides many of the tools and building blocks needed to accelerate progress.
- 2.4 The roots of much of this work lies in efforts of the Social Exclusion Unit and other programmes of the 1997 to 2010 Labour government. The new government now has the opportunity **to build on these foundations and to move from the current limited programmes towards a truly national approach on multiple disadvantage**. Working with local authorities and other partners across the country, ministers should set their sights on the goal of ensuring that in every area anyone experiencing multiple disadvantage gets the integrated support they need to take a journey to recovery.
- 2.5 An important consideration is that any definition we choose for multiple disadvantage means there is a risk of excluding people who need additional support. We need a clear definition to be able to build a coherent case for change, but there is a valid argument that the current definition of multiple disadvantage should be extended to bring in people who face additional barriers to services due to other factors such as migration status, learning disability, neurodiversity or acquired brain injury, especially given that people facing these challenges are over represented among the homeless population. Furthermore, the cumulative effects of systemic discrimination and disadvantage based on protected characteristics such as race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity and sexuality demand that any approach is informed by recognition of the intersectionality of people’s identities.
- 2.6 Based on this evidence and our own experience over three decades, we believe the recommendations below can help achieve this goal, drive the government’s mission to make public services more efficient while contributing to a range of their policy objectives, from reducing homelessness, making our streets safer, and reducing pressure on the NHS.

### 3. Driving change at five levels

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- 3.1 This evidence base shows that to transform the life chances of people experiencing multiple disadvantage, change is needed at five different levels:
- National policy level - so there is clear leadership and a sustained drive for change with adequate resources
  - Local strategic level (e.g. Integrated Care Systems, Health and Wellbeing Boards, regional mayors, police and crime commissioners) – so there is strategic collaboration across public services
  - At service commissioner level – so services and pathways are designed and coordinated to address multiple disadvantage
  - Service and pathway delivery – so services are wrapped around the individual and work seamlessly to reinforce rather than to frustrate their recovery.
  - Individual level – so every person facing multiple disadvantage benefits from an integrated approach that supports their unique journey of recovery.
- 3.2 At this individual level the evidence shows that people can escape the chaos of multiple disadvantage when they are offered timely and sustained trauma-informed, relational and strengths-based support, suitable housing, treatment for mental and physical health problems or addictions, and help with benefits, finding employment or training and settling into communities. Cuts to budgets have held down salaries among support staff doing this emotionally skilled and demanding work and has increased caseloads. We need to value, support and adequately reward the staff and managers that deliver this vital work.
- 3.3 Our paper sets out six national policy recommendations that would accelerate change at all these levels in the next three to five years. This would tackle a significant aspect of the challenges of homelessness and rough sleeping, and make significant contribution to a wide range of other government agendas, including making the streets safer, reducing demand on the NHS and improving the efficiency of public services.
- 3.4 Our six recommendations, explained in more detail below, are:
- Appoint a minister to lead the change
  - Extend and expand the Changing Futures programme
  - Legislate to join up public services
  - Create a multiple disadvantage Innovation Hub
  - Focus on upstream prevention
  - Invest in social housing, supported housing and Housing First.

#### 4. Recommendation 1 – Appoint a minister to lead the change

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- 4.1 One root cause of the challenge of tackling multiple disadvantage is the way that public services operate in silos. Specialisation of services into government departments is inevitable, but the unintended consequence of this is the emergence of barriers for people who find themselves facing multiple and complex adversities and requiring several public services at once. What make sense and works efficiently for the majority - who need one public service to resolve one problem at a time - does not work well for people facing multiple disadvantage. The government must acknowledge this inbuilt paradox, grasp it as a fundamental challenge of public service reform, and take concerted sustained action to address it.
- 4.2 To provide the leadership needed to drive this change, the prime minister should appoint a cabinet minister with overall responsibility for delivering on the agenda set out in this paper. The most appropriate role might be the cabinet office minister (the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster) who has a remit to work across all government departments and lead public service reform. A junior minister in this department could be tasked with driving the detail of the agenda. There is a precedent for this: under the Blair government there was a minister of social exclusion located in the Cabinet Office.
- 4.3 Alongside this appointment, the prime minister should make addressing multiple disadvantage a priority and explain how this will contribute to achieving goals across many of the government's wider reform agenda.

#### 5. Recommendation 2 – Extend and expand the Changing Futures programme

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- 5.1 The approach in this paper aims to drive change from the centre and at the local level. Since 2021 the Changing Futures programme has been operating in 15 areas with a budget of £77m, part funded by HM Treasury Shared Outcomes fund and part by the National Lottery. This programme was the legacy of the Fulfilling Lives programme.
- 5.2 In the forthcoming spending review, HM Treasury should provide funding to expand Changing Futures to cover at least 50 areas - with a budget of at least £250m over the next three-year period. This expansion should be designed to generate further evidence for the business case using the Treasury's Five Case Model approach<sup>9</sup> leading to a longer-term plan to expand it to national coverage from 2030.
- 5.3 The national Changing Futures programme infrastructure should also be expanded to continue to support evaluation and learning and the national Changing Futures team and MEAM should work with current Changing Futures areas to continue to hardwire change into local strategic governance, strategies and structures. Learning from the existing Changing Futures areas will then be available to inform and accelerate efforts in the new areas.

## 6. Recommendation 3 – Legislate to join up public services

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- 6.1 Local efforts to coordinate across different systems at the local area level often find themselves working against the grain of incentives in public service silos. While programmes and funding like Changing Futures can make a big difference driving change from the bottom up, they will not be sufficient to achieve lasting sustainable progress on this agenda.
- 6.2 To secure this change, the government should consult on and then bring forward a Multiple Disadvantage Act which would:
- Put national ministerial responsibility for multiple disadvantage on a statutory basis – and require the minister to report to parliament on their work to drive progress.
  - Require local strategic bodies to set out plans for tackling multiple disadvantage, coordinate efforts and join up strategies by amending existing legislation. For example, section 116A of the *Local Government and Public Involvement In Health Act* (as amended by the Health and Care Act 2022) could be amended to require local Health and Wellbeing Boards to address multiple disadvantage in their joint strategic needs assessments (JSNAs) and joint local health and wellbeing strategies (JLHWSs).
  - Add tackling multiple disadvantage to other legislation referencing health inequalities.
  - Add multiple disadvantage to other statutory requirements, for example Combatting Drugs partnerships, developing local homelessness strategies etc.
  - Require relevant ministers to consider multiple disadvantage when they draw up relevant national strategies including the NHS long term plan and strategies addressing mental health, drugs and alcohol, crime, policing, housing and homelessness.
  - Require commissioners of public services to collaborate across silos to co-commission effective integrated pathways of housing, treatment and support.
- 6.3 The government should publish a white paper to enable consultation ahead of drafting a bill and make time for the legislation in the 2026/27 parliamentary schedule.
- 6.4 This approach does not contradict the view that local leaders are best placed to bring about systemic change in their areas and need to be freed up from central government requirements. The legislation would not set out how local areas tackle multiple disadvantage, but it would expect that the issue is recognised and tackled by local leaders. This is needed because the costs of failing to take action on multiple disadvantage are offloaded to public services budgets that are not controlled locally – such as prisons – and therefore clear expectations are needed to drive universal collaboration and improvement.

## 7. Recommendation 4 – Create a multiple disadvantage Innovation Hub

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- 7.1 While greater strategic cooperation and coordination are essential at local level, to accelerate change the government should create a Multiple Disadvantage Innovation Hub with a budget to deploy to accelerate the co-design and development of service and pathway models. This should include supporting local commissioners to embed these in local systems and ensuring that they are tested through robust evaluation, scale up and roll out. The Hub would promote and support innovation, design and the scaling up of effective service and pathway models and collaborative system change frameworks that are effective in meeting the needs of people experiencing multiple disadvantage.
- 7.2 We use the term “pathways” here because people experiencing multiple disadvantage usually need a package of support that can flex and change over time, depending on what stage of their recovery journey they are at. For example, early in someone’s journey support may need to be focused on pre-treatment engagement<sup>vi</sup> and harm minimisation, whereas later, once stability is achieved, the individual may want help to engage with longer term psychotherapy or move into employment training and education or to engage with new opportunities for friendship in a new community.
- 7.3 The Hub would identify and work to scale up models that address specific challenges. For example, a common experience of people facing multiple disadvantage is that existing mental health services do not meet their needs, especially when they have experienced childhood trauma and are using drugs or alcohol as a result. Women and men in this group need support and treatment for their substance use and mental health problems at the same time, and yet they are often told by health services they can’t be treated until they are abstinent, and by rehab services that they can’t be admitted given their mental health needs. Dual diagnosis teams often fail to help, because they are designed to deal with people who have “acute” or “serious” mental health problems. There have been small scale pilots of models that have been promising in providing the sort of support people need, but without investment in evaluation and scale up, these efforts are destined to quickly fizzle out, usually with any learning lost as evaluation reports gather dust on shelves. The same pattern is then recognised elsewhere but efforts to tackle it go back to square one, and previous valuable lessons are missed.
- 7.4 Through Fulfilling Lives and Changing Futures we have seen the importance of local “system change” work to improve local responses to multiple disadvantage. The Hub would be able to critically appraise and evaluate learning from existing approaches (e.g the MEAM systems tool<sup>vii</sup>, Human Learning Systems<sup>viii</sup> etc) and support efforts to hone these tools and approaches. It could also help develop the system change workforce, understanding and supporting development of the skills and competencies that are needed to tackle system challenges in local areas.
- 7.5 Co-production should be at the heart of the work of the Hub, ensuring that people with lived experience work alongside commissioners and providers to develop and test models. A portfolio of models should be started based

on learning from the Fulfilling Lives and Changing Futures programmes, but fresh innovation should also be encouraged - there is still plenty of scope for testing new approaches, even while we scale up models that have already been shown to work.

## 8. Recommendation 5 – Focus on upstream prevention

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- 8.1 While there are undoubtedly some men and women whose experience of multiple disadvantage first develops due to misfortunes in adulthood, evidence shows that the majority have already experienced extremely challenging experiences in their childhood. The most common patterns involve abuse, neglect, poverty, discrimination, violence and upheaval. The global ACEs research<sup>ix</sup> underlines the links between adverse childhood experiences and poorer outcomes in later life.
- 8.2 The government should take a prevention approach to multiple disadvantage by joining up the lessons from previous and current multiple disadvantage programmes to their efforts to support the most excluded families, children and young people. Our vision as a society should be that no child in Britain grows up to face multiple disadvantage.
- 8.3 The new minister should work with colleagues in the Department for Education and across every government department to identify opportunities to support families and children at risk. This work should build on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and other efforts to pursue the government's Opportunity Mission to break the link between young people's background and their future success. Lessons from *The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*<sup>x</sup> and the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care*<sup>xi</sup> and other reviews should inform this work.
- 8.4 There are some promising models to build on – for example, Pathfinder Birmingham<sup>xii</sup> and Westminster City Council's trauma informed schools programme<sup>xiii</sup>.

## 9. Recommendation 6 – Invest in social housing, supported housing and Housing First

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- 9.1 Without a stable, safe, affordable and sustainable place to call home, other efforts to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage can be wasted. Our final recommendation focuses on the need to invest in social housing, supported housing and to scale up Housing First. This is fundamental to efforts to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping but requires spelling out why it needs particular attention now.
- 9.2 Over the past 15 years, two abject failures in public policy have left tens of thousands of vulnerable people unable to afford decent housing and unable to find the support they need to maintain their tenancies. The Supporting People programme, established under the Labour government after 2001 has been decimated: since 2010 more than £1 billion has been cut from local budgets for supported housing<sup>xiv</sup>. Furthermore, investment in social housing that is truly affordable to people on benefits or low income has likewise dropped to historically low levels<sup>xv</sup>. Restrictions in benefits and local housing allowance rates have pushed vulnerable people into low-quality private



rented accommodation. Billions of pounds of taxpayer money is going into the pockets of landlords<sup>xvi</sup> providing poor housing including in the unregulated exempt accommodation sector.

- 9.3 The deputy prime minister has recognised this challenge and the government has committed to transform supply of social housing across England. We now need a new vision for the role of social and supported housing and how this can prevent people from having to enter expensive care or health services and can contribute to a wide range of other government objectives including reducing homelessness and repeated use of overstretched public services, including A&E, police and prisons.
- 9.4 The government should review the learning from the previous Labour government's Supporting People programme and HM Treasury should update previous cost benefit analyses that showed how investment in supported housing could generate significant saving across public services.
- 9.5 A renewed commitment to supported housing should be backed by new capital and revenue funding streams, proper regulation and quality controls. The Supporting People quality regime in the 2000s drove up standards but restoring adequate funding to support a workforce to deliver good quality services will be essential. The government should quickly deliver on the requirements of the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023.
- 9.6 Finally, the government should invest in the rapid scale up of Housing First, building on the previous government's pilot. The evaluation of this concluded: "The vast majority of HF clients were in long-term accommodation a year after entering HF and reported significantly better outcomes across a range of measures, with sub-group analysis suggesting that, in the main, HF support had wide benefits across the different types of clients coming into the programme."<sup>xvii</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

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- 10.1 In developing its new homelessness and rough sleeping strategy, the government now has the opportunity to accelerate efforts to address multiple disadvantage building on three decades of learning and development. The policy recommendations we have briefly outlined here could form the core of this change, making a significant contribution to the government's wider missions while beginning to get back on track on making rough sleeping a thing of the past.
- 10.2 There is of course a much wider agenda around homelessness that we haven't touched on here, which will be addressed by the other task and finish groups feeding into the new strategy. However, we hope that some of the ideas in this paper will inform the work of these groups and help to build a bold and comprehensive cross-departmental homelessness strategy. The reality of rising numbers of men and women sleeping on our streets and tens of thousands of families stuck in temporary accommodation demands nothing less.

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## 11. References and resources

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- <sup>i</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd35420d3bf7f30641aa2fc/Changing\\_Futures\\_Programme\\_-\\_Prospectus\\_for\\_local\\_EOIs.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd35420d3bf7f30641aa2fc/Changing_Futures_Programme_-_Prospectus_for_local_EOIs.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Revolving Doors has published lots of evidence including: <https://revolving-doors.org.uk/publications/the-cost-of-inaction-is-too-high-revolving-doors-presents-new-labour-government-with-plan-to-break-the-cycle-of-crisis-and-crime/>
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://meam.org.uk/>
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a795968ed915d0422067ad1/1925475.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-case-guidance-for-projects-and-programmes>
- <sup>vi</sup> E.g. <https://pielink.net/pies-and-pretreatment/#:~:text=The%20concept%20of%20pretreatment%20was,social%20worker%20in%20the%20US.>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://meam.org.uk/resources/systems-intervention-tool/>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://www.humanlearning.systems/>
- <sup>ix</sup> E.g. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10503911/>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/index.html>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122449/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://birminghampathfinder.org.uk/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/children-and-families/education/think-trauma-awards>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://wpieconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WPI-Economics-local-authority-homelessness-spending-2020-update-FINAL-images.pdf>
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/affordable-housing-in-england/#:~:text=Around%2063%2C600%20units%20of%20new,by%20other%20social%20housing%20providers.>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/16bn-in-housing-benefit-paid-to-private-landlords-for-non-decent-homes-research-reveals-81194>
- <sup>xvii</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a1503ce96df5000df845ba/Housing\\_First\\_Pilots\\_report\\_on\\_clients\\_12-month\\_outcomes.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a1503ce96df5000df845ba/Housing_First_Pilots_report_on_clients_12-month_outcomes.pdf)