



**MILTON  
KEYNES** | HOMELESSNESS  
PARTNERSHIP

# The Impact of COVID-19 on Homelessness in Milton Keynes

Executive Summary

September 2021

## About Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership

Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership (MKHP) is a network of 35 public, private and voluntary sector organisations who connect to prevent and end homelessness in Milton Keynes. We do this by facilitating innovative ideas on how to end homelessness, focussing on prevention rather than cure. We encourage engagement, share good practice, advocate for change and champion a joined-up approach to achieve better outcomes for people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

To provide the best service to our partners and end users Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership (MKHP) need to understand the true reflection of homelessness within the Milton Keynes area, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We commissioned a combination of primary and secondary research to provide an overview of a very complex area and act as the first step in understanding how Milton Keynes is currently supporting people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, and ways in which that could be improved

## Key findings

Homelessness is an issue throughout the UK, but levels in Milton Keynes are disproportionate for the size of the city. It ranks 37<sup>th</sup> out of the 343 local authorities in England with most areas ranking higher linked to big cities such as London, Manchester, and Birmingham.<sup>1</sup> Its reputation, history, landscape, and location all play a role in driving high levels of homelessness.

Focused investment in recent years had seen progress in improving homelessness in the city, but frustrations with the bureaucracy and lack of collaborative working within the homelessness sector still exist. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic also brought additional complications.

The initial interventions from the government at the start of the COVID pandemic, designed to support people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, was unprecedented. It raised awareness of homelessness to unparalleled levels and offered unmatched access to housing and support.

*“In terms of homelessness, some of the outcomes have been incredibly positive, which is probably one of the few areas that can say that from COVID really.”*

*“This possibly the first time as a sector and as a community, we have witnessed a true picture of the complexity rather of rough sleeping and homelessness within the UK.”*

However, the speed at which policy was developed and released and the subsequent interventions that were implemented have had a mixed impact. There have led to both positive and negative outcomes for the people they were developed to support as well as the services supporting them, both nationally and within Milton Keynes.

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter (2019) This is England: A picture of homelessness in 2019. Available at: [https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources/policy\\_and\\_research/policy\\_library/this\\_is\\_england\\_a\\_picture\\_of\\_homelessness\\_in\\_2019](https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/this_is_england_a_picture_of_homelessness_in_2019)

There is now a distinct unease about the future. There is little communication or clarity on the long-term plans for homelessness support. It is unclear when and how the current policy and guidance will stop and what, if anything, will replace it. This makes it incredibly difficult for national and local services to plan their provision.

*“I believe that when the funding finishes, we will have a wave. A surge of those that have been put into the temporary accommodation system, including the including the hotels with the ‘Everyone In’ policy that they introduced to get everyone off the street.”*

*“In the current time it's effective in that people are in and there's a lot of support. It will only be effective if there is a sustained amount of support thereafter.”*

## The impact on public perceptions

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated policy and guidance played a significant role in public perception of homelessness.

### 1. Raising awareness of homelessness

The COVID-19 interventions raised the profile of homelessness, increasing the recognition and understanding of the issues to record levels across the nation.

- People are now more aware of the range of reasons for and causes of homelessness.
- People understand that homelessness applies to more people than those who are rough sleeping.
- The Government now have a better understanding of the vastness of the problem.

#### In Milton Keynes:

Partners in Milton Keynes agreed that the pandemic has been instrumental in raising awareness of homelessness within the city.

### 2. Accuracy of data

Whilst the pandemic helped people to realise the scale of homelessness, it also identified issues with data collection. Figures collected to demonstrate the success of *Everyone In*, showed that the numbers of people who were housed were nine times higher than the last official government estimate of people sleeping rough in autumn 2019.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2021) COVID 19: Housing people sleeping rough. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/934/93402.htm>

For those on the ground supporting homelessness this was not a surprise. For years they have argued that the national rough sleeper count uses a deeply flawed methodology that leads to misleading and under representative data.

Many also felt that even the higher numbers reported through *Everyone In* were still not an accurate representation, only benefiting 90% of rough sleepers and those in unsuitable sheltered accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

### In Milton Keynes:

Partners agreed with the accuracy of data, and that this was not something new, but something they had been aware of and voicing for some time.

For Milton Keynes, the rough sleeper count showed 35 rough sleepers in 2019, whereas Milton Keynes Council data shows that they housed 208 people between March 2020 and May 2021 through *Everyone In*.

When asked why they thought the numbers were so misaligned, partners believed it was driven by a difference in the defined populations, with more people included in *Everyone In*. Also, the appeal of hotel accommodation attracted a greater number than may be captured when counting people sleeping rough on the streets.

Partners also agreed that these higher numbers still do not include everyone.

*“Everyone In did not get everyone in. People haven't taken them up on it, and why haven't they?”*

## The impact on people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness

The policy and guidance linked to the pandemic was designed to help and support people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. The overall outcomes were mixed.

### 1. Minimising COVID infection rates and deaths

The COVID-19 interventions were successful in meeting the Governments primary goal of preventing people who are homeless from dying from COVID-19. At the end of June 2020, only 16 people whose deaths were registered as involving COVID-19 in England were identified as having been homeless, equally less than 3% of all COVID-19 recorded deaths.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> British Medical Association (2020) Written evidence submitted to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee: Impact of Covid 19 on homelessness and the private rented sector. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/17648/pdf/>

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2021) COVID 19: Housing people sleeping rough. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/934/93402.htm>

In addition, it was estimated that between February and May 2020, the measures prevented:

- 21 092 infections,
- 266 deaths,
- 1164 hospital admissions
- 338 ICU admissions.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst these are positive results, emerging data from the second wave of the pandemic suggest a sharp rise in cases of COVID-19 among the rough sleeping population.

#### **In Milton Keynes:**

We were unable to find specific data for Milton Keynes around deaths and infections linked to COVID-19 in among people who are homeless.

However, the partners involved in the research did not mention any known outbreaks.

*"I am not aware that there's been any particular kind of outbreaks of COVID among homeless communities anywhere. I don't think they have been in MK. I guess that's a positive."*

## **2. Reducing Rough Sleeping: *Everyone In***

National data indicates that the *Everyone In* policy was effective in achieving its main goal of getting rough sleepers off the street with a total of 37,430 housed by January 2021.

#### **In Milton Keynes:**

The success in housing rough sleepers was also replicated in Milton Keynes with numbers almost halving in the annual count from 35 in 2019 to 18 in 2020 and local partners own counts showing a reduction in visible tents on the city streets from 125 to 1.

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<sup>5</sup> Lewer, D et al (2020) COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness in England. The Lancet. 8 (12) 1181-1191. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30396-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30396-9/fulltext)

### 3. Suitability of accommodation

Despite high numbers being accommodated, there were many people who were not helped under the *Everyone In* policy.

- It did not adequately cover all relevant recipients
- The speed at which it was applied led to errors in process and judgement

#### In Milton Keynes:

Partners agreed many people were excluded from support offered through the *Everyone In* policy. They identified several reasons why accommodation was not fully suitable for all people who needed it.

- New residents having issues with rules and regulations of the accommodation
- The availability and location of accommodation
- Hotel management dealing with a population they were not used to
- The temporary nature of accommodation

### 4. 'Move On' planning

Official data shows by January 2021, 26,000 people nationally had been moved on to longer term accommodation<sup>6</sup> with some experiencing a faster time to permanent accommodation than would have been seen previously.<sup>7</sup>

However, due to lower levels of housing turnover as people stay put due to restrictions on movement and ability to conduct relevant housing checks<sup>8</sup> there has been a bottle neck for most councils in being able to move people on. 'Move on' plans for those given emergency accommodation have been seriously lacking.

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<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2021) COVID 19: Housing people sleeping rough. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/934/93402.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Groundswell (2020) Monitoring the impact of COVID 19 on people experiencing homelessness. Available at: [https://groundswell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring\\_Impact\\_COVID\\_Groundswell-FINAL-REPORT.pdf](https://groundswell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Monitoring_Impact_COVID_Groundswell-FINAL-REPORT.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> National Housing Federation (2020) Written evidence submitted to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee: Impact of Covid 19 on homelessness and the private rented sector. Available at: <https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/resource-files/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-homelessness-in-the-private-rented-escor---nhf-submission.pdf>

### In Milton Keynes:

The number of households living in temporary accommodation provides a good illustration of how many people are waiting to move into a long-term home. The numbers in Milton Keynes are much higher than the national average. As of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020, 10.0 out of every 1000 households in Milton Keynes were living in temporary accommodation, compared to 4.0 in every 1000 households in England.

Milton Keynes already has issues with suitable housing stock, which will only be exacerbated as people who require supported housing increase.

## **5. Eviction bans and welfare changes.**

Policies designed to minimise the impact on people perceived as most at risk of homelessness have been a success, with national data showing a notable reduction in the number of households threatened with homelessness, with numbers dropping from 1.61 households per 1,000 in Jul-Sept 2019 threatened with homelessness to 1.23 households per 1,000 in Oct-Dec 2020.

However, these measures are only temporary, and many people expect an influx in those presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness once the policy support is removed.

### In Milton Keynes:

The reduction in those threatened with homelessness is even higher for Milton Keynes, dropping from 2.86 households per 1,000 in Jul-Sept 2019 threatened with homelessness to 1.32 households per 1,000 in Oct-Dec 2020. The figures also show a narrowing of the gap between Milton Keynes and the national figures.

However, there is therefore an underlying sense of dread from partners of the level of people who may face homelessness in the coming months

Residents in the city were already struggling to buy homes or pay rent prior to the pandemic. Between March and May 2020, the number of people in Milton Keynes claiming Job Seekers Allowance increased 100%,<sup>9</sup> and is expected to rise further as furlough ends, further impacting ability to pay the higher levels of rent.

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<sup>9</sup> MK Community Foundation (2020) Vital Signs. Available at: <https://www.mkcommunityfoundation.co.uk/about/vital-signs-2020>



## 6. Access to support

For many people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, the pandemic has meant access to key services being restricted or removed completely. This means access to key support services, sanitation and social interaction has been limited, having a knock-on impact on mental and physical health. The lockdown has also impacted people's ability to generate money and gain access to food.

### In Milton Keynes:

The ramifications on daily life have been seen in Milton Keynes too in terms of:

- Access to facilities, with some services no longer financially viable
- Changes to service provision, such as the Winter Night Shelter no longer able to provide rooms
- Reduction in begging, impacting people's ability to generate income
- Access to food sources, due to a reduction in the number of services available in the city

## 7. Access to and provision of healthcare and wrap around support.

The pandemic has illuminated and, in some cases, perpetuated the existing health inequalities faced by people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, with access to appropriate support often more problematic. National data shows a 37% increase in deaths among people who are homeless.

However, for some people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, the access that the pandemic provided to safe sheltered accommodation with regular interaction with key support staff has led to improved outcomes.

### In Milton Keynes:

In Milton Keynes some services have been negatively impacted, such as the suspension of twice monthly outreach medical clinics offered at Unity Park and the Salvation Army.

There was also some concern among partners that the reliance on digital provision of healthcare would be detrimental for many people experiencing homelessness or risk of homelessness, limiting their ability to access relevant services.

However there have been positive outcomes. For some people, having a safe place to stay has led to overall health benefits. As well as access to additional support services provided at some accommodation.

The existence of the MKHP Health and Well Being Strategic Group has been helpful in ensuring timely and relevant response to health care challenges.

## **8. Types of people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness**

There has been a continued flow of people experiencing homelessness since the start of the pandemic with 53 per cent of services reporting an increase in homelessness in their area.

As the pandemic has continued, there has been an increase in people experiencing homelessness for the first time for different reasons:

- Financial hardship / loss of stability due to furlough or unemployment.
- Relationship breakdown between partners / wider family
- Domestic abuse
- Health impacts and care responsibilities

This has required a shift change in how services providers deal with cases, with people requiring different types of help and support. These numbers are expected to grow further as the preventative policy is removed.

### In Milton Keynes:

The partners in Milton Keynes also saw the shift in people experiencing homelessness for the first time.

The data for Milton Keynes also suggests that homelessness seen during the pandemic was more prevalent in certain subgroups, such as people who experienced domestic abuse and disabled people.

## The impact on service providers

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated policy and guidance also impacted service providers in various ways.

### 1. Poor communication

The overall communication of the policies and guidance has been somewhat frustrating for those involved in implementing it.

People acknowledge that situation is unprecedented, and continually changing, but generally feel the speed at which the UK government has responded to issues and released guidance was sluggish, vague, and opaque.

#### In Milton Keynes:

Partners agreed with the issue of communication.

As the pandemic progressed, more guidance was released, but often with limited clarity and delivered in an untimely manner. The extent of the ask and the timeframe in which to achieve it was also often extremely tight.

Partners found working through the policies and implementing the guidance very time consuming as homelessness service provision often fell into many categories, making the policies frustrating to navigate and apply. There was also an inconsistent application of the guidance and regulations as people interpreted guidance in different ways.

### 2. Increase in demand

The lockdown initially led to a reduction in demand for some services, however once lockdown lifted, demand increased exponentially. 73 per cent of homelessness services saw an increase<sup>10</sup>. With demand only expected to increase further as numbers continue to rise.

#### In Milton Keynes:

This was replicated by the services in Milton Keynes. Data from Milton Keynes Foodbank showed they provided 11,400 food parcels in 2019, equivalent to 950 per month. Between March and July 2020, they gave out over 12,400 food parcels, an average of 2480 every month<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Crisis (2020) The impact of COVID 19 on people facing homelessness and service provision across Great Britain. Available at: [https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/244285/the\\_impact\\_of\\_covid19\\_on\\_people\\_facing\\_homelessness\\_and\\_service\\_provision\\_across\\_gb\\_2020.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/244285/the_impact_of_covid19_on_people_facing_homelessness_and_service_provision_across_gb_2020.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> MK Community Foundation (2020) Vital Signs. Available at: <https://www.mkcommunityfoundation.co.uk/about/vital-signs-2020>

### 3. Engagement with people who are homeless people or are at risk of homelessness

The pandemic had both a positive and negative outcome on engagement with people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness.

For some, whilst engagement became more challenging due to the move away from face-to-face interaction and toward digital provision most services have been able to maintain connection with users.

Some services felt that the pandemic had enabled them to gain better access to some people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, with more regular and intense interaction leading to better engagement and outcomes. However, these increased interactions and improved relationships are fragile, and service providers are anxious progress made will be lost as people are moved out of emergency accommodation.

#### In Milton Keynes:

Service providers in Milton Keynes agreed that whilst changes in provision were challenging to apply, it did often offer them a chance to change the way in which they were interacting with service users leading to improved outcomes.

Having access to service providers in one place has given providers an easier way to reach users and a better chance to build trust and rapport and really learn what the service users need. It has also given users access to support in a much more efficient way and led to greater interaction and enabled them to mix with other people who are homeless sharing knowledge and learning.

Partners are concerned about what will happen to the service users once the increased provision is no longer available. They have made progress with so many people, new and old, and are keen not for that progress to be lost.

### 4. Impact on working practices

For some services, the pandemic has been devastating, leading to them being unviable and unable to continue, reducing the overall provision for people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness.

For others, there was a need to adapt provision very quickly leading to a change in working practices that had often been in place for years. With many providers developing completely new systems of working which were challenging but often positive.

Many people feel there is a lot to learn from the changes that were made that could lead to more efficient and effective provision moving forward.

### In Milton Keynes:

Many were surprised as the ease at which services had been adapted and how successful the changes had been. Partners saw lots of changes to working practices, requiring creativity, adaptability, and flexibility.

Partners felt the interaction and collaboration that was already in place in Milton Keynes had a positive impact on the response to COVID. As relationships were already established, it made planning and implementation a little easier.

For many, due to the focused investment over the last few years, there were several support plans already in place that were yet to be implemented, COVID-19 just sped up the process.

## **5. Impact on workforce (staff and volunteers)**

The pandemic has had a notable impact on the workforce within services, who have worked tirelessly throughout. There have been high levels of stress, and an underlying sense of moral obligation to continue.

Most are concerned about the future, with expectations that workload will continue to be high and difficult to manage as policy is removed and homelessness increases.

### In Milton Keynes:

All the providers within Milton Keynes agreed with the national sentiment saying how proud and impressed they were of the staff and volunteers who had shown relentless resilience and flexibility.

However, there is a sense of worry and dread linked to expectations of the future and continued increases workload, levels of responsibility and burn out.

## **Expectations of the future**

The expectations for the future are pessimistic, with many expecting an influx of people at risk of and becoming homeless.

A lack of clarity on future funding and investment, and how that will be allocated and implemented is preventing effective planning. However, many feel that lessons learned during the pandemic can be built upon to lead to more efficient working practices and better overall outcomes, assuming everyone works together toward a collective goal.

### In Milton Keynes:

These concerns were even greater in Milton Keynes given the disproportionate level of homelessness already experienced in the city. Any further increase will put further pressure on support services.

However, partners were keen to identify that many positive things were achieved, and improvements made, particularly in working practices and collaboration. People are keen to see these continuing and adapted further to ensure better provision and outcomes moving forward.

They consistently seek clearer guidance from the local authority to enable them to plan more effectively and in a timely manner for what the future may hold

## Conclusion

The current state of homelessness within England as a whole and Milton Keynes is in flux, reacting to the ongoing COVID policy, guidelines, and interventions. A lack of communication and planning means that future of the sector is uncertain.

The overall feeling is a sense of dread and panic, with expectations of a significant increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness or the risk of homelessness. This is expected to lead to an increased demand on services at a time when funding may also be cut, leading to a worrying long-term outcome.

Forward planning is needed to ensure that risk to service users is minimised. The COVID interventions have provided some positive outcomes that could significantly improve the homelessness support sector, and partners within Milton Keynes are eager to see these advantages not lost as things move forward.

## Recommendations

1. Improve cross sector communication
2. Maintain and enhance public awareness, through a co-ordinated approach
3. Listen and learn from people with lived experience
4. Create a learning culture, implementing evaluation and monitoring as the norm
5. Improve data, by establishing a sector wide framework and joint action plan
6. Build on collaborative working, by establishing a 'Charter for Change'
7. Influence local systems and policy change
8. Focus funding on prevention
9. Focus on the wider housing market
10. Achieve clarity on future planning

The full recommendations appear within the main report.

**Milton Keynes Homelessness Partnership**

The Ridgeway Centre, Featherstone Road, Wolverton Mill South, Milton Keynes, MK12 5TH

Registered Charity 1181232

[www.mkhp.co.uk](http://www.mkhp.co.uk)