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Tackling rough sleeping

After 25 years working at the coalface of complex needs services, Simon Bowkett joined the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) in early 2020, in the hope that working in policy could help influence a “change in the weather, rather than just dealing with the conditions”

Tell us about your job

I’m a senior adviser in the Covid-19 Rough Sleeping Response Policy Team. I was on another team, but when the world turned upside down with Covid, I was whisked off here. We dealt with the ‘Everyone In’ plan – a huge national effort working with local authorities and the hospitality and voluntary sectors to get as many rough sleepers off the street as possible.

More than 37,000 people were supported with emergency accommodation – including people who were crashing with friends or were in shelters and couldn’t be kept safe. Around 26,000 of those are already in more secure long- term accommodation, which is fantastic. It would be a travesty if we couldn’t use this opportunity to get as many people as possible to move on into settled homes. I’m now working on the Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme, which has that goal.

I don't want to sound too gushing, but this is a vocation for me.

What were you doing before?

I was mostly in leadership of complex needs services – including working with homeless people, drug and alcohol users, offenders, people with mental health issues. Of course, all these issues overlap. I reached a stage where I was weary of patching people up and sending them back to the same situations that brought them through our doors, so I started thinking about working in policy.

Has Covid finally put rough sleeping up the agenda?

This government has made a manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping within this parliament. With such a political focus, it's an extraordinary time to be working here. Covid did have an impact, both in the minds of politicians and the public. It became clear that bringing people in was an imperative, to keep them and public health safe; it became unacceptable for people to be out on the streets amid a pandemic. My question would be, if it's unacceptable within the health system, why would we accept it within an economic system? I think that sense of not going back to how things were is absolutely there.

What are the issues for PCS in MHCLG?

Most of our recent concerns have been around the return to work. I've been involved in leading our team through a new agreed hybrid working charter. PCS has very much been part of saying this mustn't be a top-down process. A lot of measures have been put in to maintain social distancing, increase cleaning and improve ventilation. It's a good example of the union and the department working together.

Are you involved in other activities?

I'm a member of PCS and civil service LGBT networks, and I'm also a Stonewall Bi Role Model. I go into workplaces, schools and universities and talk about bisexual awareness and wider LGBT issues.

Rough sleeping: the facts in figures

37%

reduction in rough sleepers to 2,688 in 2020, according to the annual snapshot (but 52% higher than 2010)

6,000

Units of accommodation is the target for the UK government's £433m Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme 2021-24.

17.5m

people are impacted by the housing emergency, says Shelter (England), and are living in overcrowded, dangerous, unstable or unaffordable housing.

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