

lettings processes, so that people who urgently need housing can continue to access it.

- guidance for police on the role of enforcement powers in supporting people sleeping rough to take up offers of support.

3.5.6 Guidance should also provide urgently-needed clarity to councils on how they are expected to support the large numbers of people who are currently being accommodated on an emergency basis once the lockdown period ends in the forthcoming weeks. This is needed so that councils can effectively plan their local provision.

### **3.6 People with no recourse to public funds**

3.6.1 Councils have seen high numbers of the population with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) facing homelessness and destitution, particularly given restrictions on access to benefits following loss of employment job losses. There has been a significant shift in the expectations on councils to support people with NRPF since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Councils are statutorily obliged to provide support to families and adults with care and support needs, with no eligibility for support under the statutory homelessness framework. Despite this, councils have made a significant effort to ensure that individuals in acute housing need have been safely accommodated and supported to follow government guidance on shielding, self-isolation and social distancing.

3.6.2 This vital work is made difficult by the NRPF conditions as councils must respond within the parameters of the law and avoid use of prohibited public funds. Support from local welfare funds is also legally unavailable to people with NRPF. Government guidance on public funds or information has not been updated to set out what government assistance schemes can or cannot be accessed by a person who has no recourse to public funds, leading to variance in provision.

3.6.3 Whilst the Home Office has introduced some protections for certain groups of people with NRPF, these have been subject to large demand and thus delay. These also require people to actively make what can be quite complex applications, meet onerous evidential requirements and it will be unclear whether policies are satisfied until Home Office decisions are made.

3.6.4 There has been limited and conflicting information available to councils on whether the £3.2 million emergency fund to support rough sleepers can be used to support people with NRPF. It is also unclear to what extent the Government's Covid-19 emergency funding will adequately meet additional costs. Data on NRPF service provision for 2018/19 - outside the current crisis - shows that unfunded provision cost 59 councils £47.5 million a year.<sup>iv</sup>

3.6.5 All these create significant funding and reputational challenges for councils. On 8 April, the Local Government Associations across the UK wrote to the home secretary to ask that this is addressed in the following ways:

- The no recourse to public funds condition is universally lifted during the pandemic to facilitate compliance with government public health guidance.
- If the NRPF condition is not relaxed, there needs to be joint work with local government to:

- Provide accessible and clear government information in one place for both councils and their communities which include details of all schemes related to coronavirus and what people can or cannot claim when they have no recourse to public funds
- Adequate funding for local authorities for supporting people with no recourse to public funds when statutory duties are engaged or when this is required on public health grounds
- Remove the local welfare fund from the list of prohibited public funds
- Introduce changes to process including provisions for people whose leave to remain is due to expire, to ensure this can continue to be valid, and amend fee waiver and change of conditions policies to reduce the evidential burden on people.

### **3.7 Domestic abuse**

- 3.7.1 The coronavirus pandemic presents serious risks for victims of domestic abuse. The stay-at-home measures required are likely to have a significant impact on on domestic abuse victims due to increased exposure to those perpetrating the crime.
- 3.7.2 The isolation of families could exacerbate domestic abuse, as perpetrators will be more likely to be at home with the victim, and the traditional routes to help and support such as schools, GPs and workplaces may be closed. There will also be new domestic abuse cases during this period, but isolation will mean there are less opportunities to identify the early warning signs of abuse as they emerge.
- 3.7.3 We know that other countries that are also dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic have reported an increase in domestic abuse cases. Sadly, this has been borne out in the UK too, with the UK National Domestic Abuse Helpline reporting a 25 per cent uplift in people calling the helpline since lockdown measures began.
- 3.7.4 Domestic abuse victims are likely to face restricted access to support or escape as a result of the lockdown measures. It may even curtail measures that perpetrators may take to keep their own abusive behaviour under control. Some domestic abuse victims may feel it is not safe to reach out for support, as the stay at home policy means there are fewer opportunities to speak to someone when victims are alongside the perpetrator in the home.
- 3.7.5 There will be risks associated with calling helplines when the perpetrator is able to hear the domestic abuse victim's conversation. These concerns around safety are demonstrated by the fact that alongside the uplift in calls to the helpline, domestic abuse services have seen a significant uplift in the use of their online services and web forum support services. For example, Women's Aid's Live Chat service has seen a 41 per cent increase since 16 March 2020 when the self-isolation measures came into place<sup>4</sup>. There have also been reported increases in calls to helplines late in the evening.
- 3.7.6 There will be an impact on refuges and emergency accommodation, due to those having to self-isolate if they are presenting symptoms. Government guidance has been provided to help refuges continue to remain open for domestic abuse victims, but there remain questions about how to manage self-isolation safely in communal accommodation. The sector has highlighted the need for additional financial support, guidance on accepting new referrals and managing move-on, and safety measures such as access to testing and PPE.