

Robert Jenrick's speech to the Centre for Social Justice

Thank you for that kind introduction.

It's a pleasure to join you and the Centre for Social Justice at the launch of your 'Close to Home' report which makes a really powerful contribution to the debate around how we can end rough sleeping.

In particular, I want to thank Andy Cook and Joe Shalam who are tireless campaigners; the work that the CSJ publishes is both inspirational and integral to our plans for the future.

What guides you is what guides this government: a belief that opportunities should be more equal and background no barrier to success. And a commitment to helping those who have been held back by accident, circumstance or misstep, to achieve the fulfilment and happiness of rewarding work, security at home and nourishing relationships.

The pandemic has reminded us as Robert Kennedy said, that those who live with us are our brothers and sisters, that they share with us the same short moment of life, that they seek, as we do, nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness.

Which is why our goal to reduce rough sleeping is more important than ever.

An extraordinary thing has happened over the course of the past year: the pandemic has accelerated and magnified many forces like never before, upending people's lives, businesses and communities. But it is rare that something entirely positive has happened, and that is the manner in which we as a country have supported rough sleepers throughout the pandemic.

Our priority is to ensure that the 37,000 vulnerable people and rough sleepers 'Everyone In' has helped never return to a life on the streets. We have made good progress so far with at least 26,000 of those supported by the programme now in long term accommodation, and new figures published today paint a picture of a country that is changing.

I am pleased to tell you that the number of people sleeping rough has fallen for the third year in a row. Across England, the numbers have fallen by 37% to 2,688. And since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister, the number of people rough sleeping has reduced by over 40%.

We have also published, alongside the snapshot this year, additional management information indicating that the number of people on the streets reported by local authorities fell to 1,743 in December and 1,461 in January.

For the first time in many years London has seen a significant fall as well,

mirroring the rest of the country with a 37% decrease. And again, that achievement has been built upon in the months that have passed since.

I want to say thank you to the hard work of Rachael Robathan and Georgia Gould – the leaders of Westminster and Camden councils and their respective teams in the West End. The London figures published today, which show the largest decrease since these statistics began, highlight the impact of their work and the dedication of the staff.

We've seen a number of areas that have reached 0 rough sleepers at the snapshot – including Ashford and Basingstoke – among many others. And major cities have seen quite exceptional improvement, like Birmingham where numbers have fallen to just 17 people.

Having, I hope, praised the many great achievements, in all types of places and by councils of all political colours, it is worth noting that there are wide variations, which shows that whilst some local authorities have achieved truly exceptional things this year, there are others somewhat less so. There are differences of approach and of commitment. Those yet to conquer this issue must learn from those that have or are on the way.

It is almost a year since I phoned Dame Louise Casey and discussed how the pandemic would impact rough sleepers. Not then a reality in this country, a distant threat, but one whose drumbeat was drawing inexorably closer and louder. Louise was in Australia, struggling to get a flight home. We agreed immediately that the right approach was to emphasise protecting the most vulnerable people among us. And upon her return she came to Marsham Street and in her characteristic way, gave herself fully to the task ahead. I'm immensely grateful to Louise for her energy, commitment and friendship.

That conversation, and the meetings that took place in the following weeks led to the birth of the Everyone In programme, and later the next phase, our Protect Programme. A programme that has saved many lives.

TS Eliot said that sometimes things become possible if we want them badly enough. That describes Everyone In. But you also need exceptional people. The work of staff in shelters, of council support workers, of outreach workers, of volunteers at soup kitchens and to so many others – whose work is unglamorous and often unnoticed, but is vital and noble.

I should also like to place on record my gratitude for the commitment and dedication of the civil servants at the Ministry of Housing with whom I work. Under the superb leadership of Penny Hobman and Catherine Bennion, who demonstrate every day a real passion and idealism for this cause.

We know that the community, charity and faith sectors are instrumental to this effort. Importantly, nobody comes off the streets because of the work of one agency. A critical element of the success of Everyone In was due to the

quality of our partnerships: so I must extend thanks and gratitude to those charities that have paved the way on this issue, especially to the inspirational Jon Sparkes from Crisis and Petra Salva from St Mungo's.

And I need to thank my two immediate predecessors in this role, Sajid Javid and James Brokenshire. It would be wrong to see Everyone In as some kind of remarkable start-up. Its success was built on the foundations they had laid. Both cared passionately about this issue, and indeed do still.

Sajid started the Housing First pilot – work that as we will hear today, the CSJ has proved so vital in spearheading. The Homelessness Reduction Act happened under his leadership. James oversaw the reinvigoration of the Rough Sleepers Initiative, whose impact is well evidenced and had driven the two prior years of reductions, in 2018 and 2019.

As our vaccination programme gathers speed and we begin to turn the tide on COVID-19, it is right that we cement the incredible gains we have made over the last twelve months, acknowledging the seriousness and the weight of the challenges we have yet to face.

The late Lord Ashdown, in a notable speech on homelessness, once compared tackling rough sleeping at times of economic disruption to “leaves in a gale” – the faster you collect the leaves, the faster they gust away again, and all the time more fall around you in the headwind. And there will be headwinds to come as we exit lockdown and move beyond the pandemic.

The truth is, we cannot begin to tackle this issue until we begin to tackle its causes: which are multi-faceted and complex. Unemployment, family breakdown, domestic abuse, insecure housing, criminal justice policy, failures in our immigration system, and above all else – substance misuse and mental health. So we're utilising the expertise of all government departments from the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to the Departments of Health and of Work and Pensions, investing over £750 million next year to continue to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping and invest in preventative programmes which tackle the underlying issues early.

It is vital that we bring together health and housing to tackle rough sleeping. The marriage of health and housing will be the heart of our strategy.

That is why we have brought forward an investment of £150 million in long-term housing through our Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme, delivering 3,000 new homes.

And a further £272 million will be invested over the course of this Parliament providing 6,000 vital new homes for rough sleepers – the largest ever investment of this kind. These will be a national asset – symbols of hope and opportunity for those looking to turn their lives around.

Thanks to the hard work and perseverance of Robert Buckland and Lucy Frazer

at the Ministry of Justice, we are tackling reoffending, ensuring more prison leavers are offered accommodation at release and building a criminal justice system based on second chances and redemption. That takes inspiration from, amongst others, the direction set by Michael Gove when he was Justice Secretary – and I his bag-carrying PPS. It has always stayed with me that more than 50% of rough sleepers have spent time in prison. This must be at the front of our minds as we frame our strategy.

At the Home Office, Priti Patel shares my commitment to supporting victims of domestic abuse and together we have seen the Domestic Abuse Act implemented and fully funded with £120 million of financial support for local councils next year. And together we will use the new freedoms we have as a sovereign country, to create a better and fairer immigration system, so that fewer foreign nationals end up on our streets and those that do can be compassionately and considerately returned to their home countries.

On health and housing, almost two thirds of homeless people cite addiction to drugs and alcohol as both a cause and consequence of rough sleeping. We know the toll that substance misuse takes on individuals and on families – and drug addiction is a global human crisis, at the very heart of this issue, more important than ever as we come out of the pandemic; which emerging evidence suggests has amplified substance misuse through unemployment, isolation and anxiety.

The homeless will not be forgotten when it comes to the vaccination. Last night we asked all local authorities to redouble their efforts to safely accommodate as many rough sleepers as they can and to register them with a GP, as a good in itself, but also as a precursor to vaccination. At this crucial stage in our vaccination programme, there really is no time to waste. So we have also allocated a further £10 million of funding to help protect people rough sleeping this winter and ensure their wider health needs are met.

We need to follow in the footsteps of my now somewhat distant predecessor Sir George Young who worked hand-in-hand with homelessness charities in pioneering the first Rough Sleeping Initiative.

That same sense of urgency and resolve is needed again today.

I want to be unequivocal in stating that we will use every mechanism at our disposal to achieve our goal.

And yes, Housing First is an integral part of that mission. I'm grateful to Brooks Newmark for his role in establishing Housing First. As a former Treasury Minister under Philip Hammond I can say it was no mean feat of Brooks and Sajid to persuade him to back it.

Our £28 million Housing First pilots in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and West Midlands are already supporting around 800 of our most vulnerable people off the streets and into secure homes. 600 are now in permanent

accommodation. Over 2,000 other Housing First places have been created, many funded through the Rough Sleeping Initiative and our new accommodation programme draws inspiration from it.

I have seen it in action myself. Last Christmas Eve I met a woman in Walsall and Housing First was helping to turn her life around after several years of sleeping rough in local parks and of drug addiction. It was working and she was re-entering society and re-establishing herself as a productive member of it. As I left her flat to drive home to my family, I turned around and watched her welcome her children to her home for the first time in many years. For their first Christmas together in many years. I couldn't help, but cry.

Rough sleeping a terrible waste of lives. To see dignity and purpose and the love of family and friends restored is a wonderful thing to behold.

So I will champion Housing First. One solution – it goes without saying – will not fit all. This must be multi-targeted and multi-focus. But the principle that everything begins with a home will be our guiding star.

Our strategy will be refined, with the guidance and support of all those willing to offer it to us, but our objective is clear, that no one should have to sleep rough in this country. That is a litmus test of a civilised society. And we will raise the safety net from the street, but addressing the causes as well as the consequences. Not so much no second night out, but no first night out.

As we come out of the pandemic, and as the Prime Minister has said, we must aspire to build back better. This means not merely mending, or simply restoring a status quo. Nor even more improvement.

It is not like teaching a horse to jump better, but like turning a horse into a winged creature that will soar over fences which could never have been jumped, said CS Lewis. It is in that spirit we will work, together, to resign rough sleeping to the history books once and for all.