

Working with the *homeless*



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What do you do when the UK Government tells you to stay at home but you haven't got one? **Nathalie Griffin** supports key workers at St Mungo's charity for the homeless and explains what happened in Bristol last year

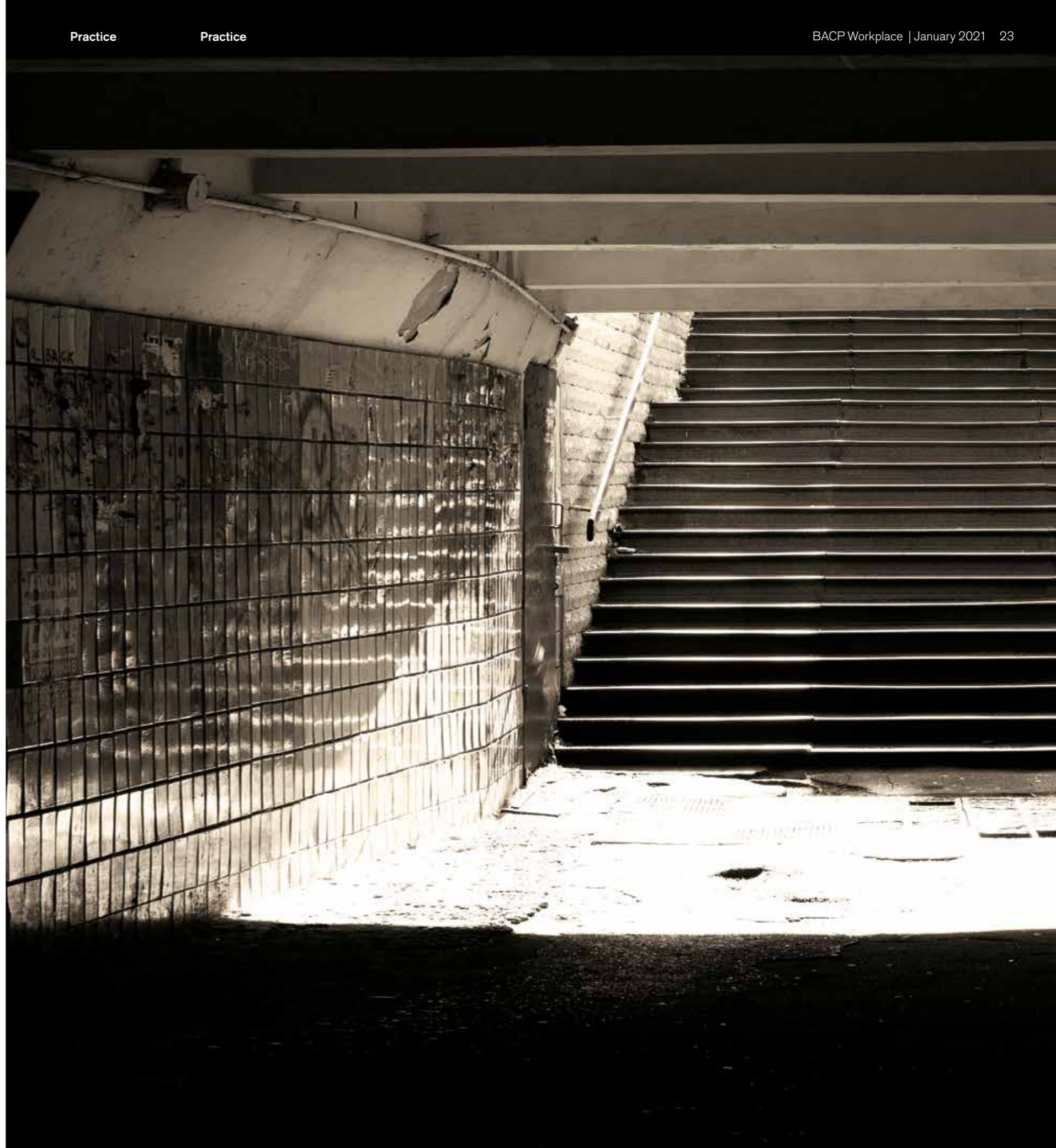
There is no shortage of stories about how COVID-19 has forced us to think or behave differently, but reflecting on 2020, the story of what happened to the homeless and the workers who support them, is one that I think needs telling. Why? Because for a few brief months, those people who have nothing, had what they needed most – shelter, warmth and food. This is the story of what happened in Bristol.

When people ask me, 'Where do you work?', they're often surprised or confused to hear me say that I work with the staff of St Mungo's, a charity that aims to prevent homelessness and to support the recovery of homeless people. It's not immediately clear why the staff need my support, as surely, it's the clients of a homelessness charity who would need my skills? However, having worked with staff at St Mungo's for over five years, it's clear to me that the task of supporting the homeless and

people who are sleeping rough is largely invisible, undervalued and relentlessly difficult work. It's rarely mentioned except for around Christmas time or when the weather is so bad that the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) is initiated or when the numbers of homeless people on the street increase so much, that it's impossible to ignore.¹ It's my role to bring my therapeutic and supervisory skills to teams of staff at St Mungo's in Bristol, providing reflective practice (RP) for those who provide a range of services to people who are, or who are at risk of, rough sleeping so that the work can be seen, heard and valued.

About St Mungo's

The St Mungo's key workers support homeless people 365 days of the year, providing a wide range of services to support people who are sleeping rough and who have been living on the streets of Bristol for



months or, sometimes, years. It can be support with simple things like providing a place to have a shower or somewhere to do their laundry; or supporting people who move from the streets into hostels or shelters, assessing their physical and mental health needs and helping them access appropriate support, often from other agencies. Sometimes it means supporting people to maintain their tenancies when they move into their newly allocated housing; or running a day centre where people can drop in, offering a sense of belonging and developing skills which may eventually help people find a job.

A space to reflect

I first began providing RP to a team at St Mungo's based in a 30-bed, dormitory-style shelter, in the autumn of 2019. It was a relatively young team of six to eight people, with varying degrees of experience of working with homeless people, but all with a great passion to support the residents of the shelter as well as their colleagues. The idea of RP was new to the team, and after some initial uncertainty about how honestly workers felt they could speak in a group, they came to embrace the opportunity to take time each month to share their joys, fears and frustrations about the client work, and to support each other. The team had a strong sense of day-to-day collegial working in a very challenging environment and this was a firm foundation for the way they worked together in RP.

The team's managers also attended the sessions and were aware of the need to not rush in offering operational solutions, instead, allowing workers to think out loud about what might make a difference to the lives of their clients and to the work environment, which helped to develop a sense of openness and safety. Our sessions took place in the homeless shelter itself, in an old Bristol City Council suburban office building that had been partially converted to include two

Shelter estimates that **280,000** people are homeless in England. This equates to one in every 200 people finding themselves without a home⁹

Source: Shelter



dormitory-style rooms, shared toilets, showering facilities and a kitchen.

It is quite something to ask a multidisciplinary team to reflect honestly on their work in front of their peers and, often, their managers, with the risk that it might be interpreted as 'not being good enough' at one's job, or to admit frustration and even fear about their clients' situations. A part of my work is normalising these feelings and providing some psycho-education and reflecting on how these emotions influence the client work.

Precarious work

Early in 2020, the St Mungo's team were preparing for the planned spring and summer closure of the hostel as usual, with the hope that funding would be available to reopen in the autumn. It's a precarious position for workers to be in – not knowing if the service will continue later in the year for those who are homeless or what it means for their own livelihoods. In RP, the following questions were raised: Will the clients be housed elsewhere? Will clients spend the warmer months on the streets? Will the clients' mental health and substance use concerns become more severe without the relative safety and support of the homelessness shelter? And, what will happen to the team? Will we all be back, working together in the autumn or will some of us have to take permanent employment elsewhere? Will we even be able to find jobs during the spring and summer?

There may not have been answers to some of the questions, but the RP sessions at least provided a safe place where the concerns felt for those who rely on the services could be named, as well as the parallel anxiety which workers felt about the insecure nature of the work itself, with their livelihoods dependent on statutory funding.

Going into lockdown

The UK COVID-19 lockdown began on 23 March 2020, and due to my age and an underlying condition, I decided that I couldn't take the risk

of going into the hostels, shelters and the day centre to continue my work with staff providing RP. I paused all my RP groupwork with St Mungo's, and confess that, having worked with the organisation for the last five years and formed relationships with the workers, I was heartbroken.

Despite the announcement that the UK Government would provide extra financial help to local councils,² I wasn't confident that the plight of the homeless would be taken sufficiently seriously. Both underlying health conditions and the compromised immune systems of people who are or who have been homeless, mean that they are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. If they contract the virus, they don't have anywhere safe to self-isolate or to try to recover from the illness, unless they became so ill that they are hospitalised. I recall feeling angry and scared for this client group and for the committed teams of people who work to support them.

Like so many professions, therapists quickly adapted to working virtually, protecting vulnerable family members, rearranging our homes into workspaces and following the Government guidance to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives. This wasn't an option for those whose 'home' might be a tent pitched in a park night after night, or a city-centre shop doorway, or at best a group of friends/family members who provided an occasional sofa to sleep on. These options weren't necessarily safe on a 'normal' night, so how safe would they be in the midst of the pandemic? For key workers, how safe would it be to continue supporting homeless people in such conditions, with all the known risks of contracting the virus?

Solving the homeless crisis

Somewhat to my surprise, by the beginning of April, a considerable majority of the people who were sleeping rough and other people at risk of becoming homeless in England had been temporarily housed through the Everyone In programme,³ with

The number of households owed assistance from councils to prevent or relieve homelessness in 2019–20⁹



England
288,470

Wales
9,993

Source: Shelter

Wales and Scotland taking similar action.^{4,5}

This included moving people already housed in dormitory-style facilities into hotels, hostels and B&Bs so that, if necessary, they could self-isolate.

Considering the enormity of the task, it is amazing to think that all the homelessness organisations, local councils and relevant national government ministries managed to execute a plan to move as many homeless people as possible off the streets in less than a month. Since then, I've heard it said many times: 'England has just managed to solve its homelessness problem overnight'.

The team at St Mungo's, who had been preparing to close the shelter for the spring/summer, suddenly had the task of moving all the residents into a city-centre tourist hostel where each resident would have their own room instead of a dormitory bed, and where there would be more bathroom facilities. Maintaining social distancing between people in the building was one of the biggest challenges, which meant that no-one could use the shared kitchen facilities.

Finding new energy

By the time we were able to 'meet' again in late April for RP online, using the now ubiquitous video conferencing software, I was amazed at the new energy in the team. It soon became clear that, ironically, COVID-19 meant that both the workers and the homeless people were receiving far more support than usual.

Key workers were receiving help from outside agencies to support some clients with alcohol and drug detoxes; mental health professionals were involved in assessing the needs of some of the clients who had previously struggled to get support; food was being delivered by another organisation, so the clients were eating three meals per day, perhaps for the first time in years; and similarly, many of the clients were actually getting a full night's uninterrupted sleep.

Put simply, once some of the basic needs were met, there was a chance that clients might be able to engage with rehabilitation and recovery programmes. One of the team members pointed out that it was easier to have confidential and honest discussions with the residents about difficult topics because there was now the increased privacy afforded by everyone having their own room.

In RP, the team reflected feeling that they were actually able to do 'proper support work' because the clients were experiencing the stable living conditions that enable more profound behaviour change. We explored the possibility that the clients felt cared for in a way that they might not have

experienced since becoming homeless, including the support of external agencies who actually came into the hostel. So often, support work is about being in the right place at the right time, but having professionals, such as drug and alcohol workers, available in the clients' home seemed to be having a considerable impact. The staff team commented on how much better it felt doing support work in a building that was of a better quality than the standard homelessness shelter – because it made them feel better about themselves as workers and gave them more confidence in the work they were doing. One team member commented that working with professionals from other agencies provided new learning opportunities which staff benefitted from, and as a result they began to consider themselves as more specialist support workers, which impacted on their self-esteem.

Restless and exhausted

Much like the rest of the population during lockdown, once the shock of the change in day-to-day living had been overcome, the restlessness and anxiety about how long this 'new normal' might last started expressing itself among the client group, with some residents asking for more reassurance from the staff team. The team reported the residents worrying about being 'chucked back out on the street' with no support once lockdown ended. After all, there was an existing lack of permanent housing options for the clients, so how could this be resolved during a pandemic? Considering the countrywide ambient anxiety brought on by the uncertainty about the length of lockdown and how we all, as a country, would come out of it, it is not surprising that this group of vulnerable people would feel it acutely.

The team also started showing some signs of exhaustion, as almost no one had taken any annual leave because it did not feel worth taking, just to stay at home. Some of the team also expressed resentment at having to continue working when so many of their friends had been placed on furlough. Recently, it has become increasingly clear to me that they are missing their previously normal lives and we take the opportunity in RP to mourn the tangible absence of opportunities to meet with friends and family members, the festivals not attended (festivals being a big part of the Bristol summertime landscape), and the holidays abroad not taken. The team are now more likely to use their annual leave, even if it means they will spend it closer to home and in the company of fewer people. Just as before lockdown, when we don't always come up with answers to team members' concerns in RP, we are continuing to create a space where

we can acknowledge the serious challenge of trying to stay motivated when the future is very uncertain and it often feels like their lives are based entirely around their jobs.

What next?

The idea that England managed to solve the homelessness problem overnight is belied by the most recent official statistics for April to June 2020, stating that over 38,000 households in England were assessed as homeless, which is an increase of almost 14% from the previous year; this increase reflects the number of single men becoming homeless.⁶ However, there is some hope: English households assessed as at risk of homelessness has reduced by 32% from the previous year, which is interpreted as the result of the UK Government's action in halting evictions.⁷

Despite all the uncertainty that remains as we enter 2021, it's reassuring to know that the UK Government has initiated a couple of new schemes to build upon the success of Everyone In. There is the Next Steps Accommodation Programme, helping people stay in accommodation and/or access other support.⁸ The Government then launched the Protect Programme during the November lockdown in England, amid calls from various homelessness organisations to re-invigorate the Everyone In programme and get all people who are sleeping rough off the streets and into safe accommodation again.⁹

Having witnessed the work of the St Mungo's team during the austerity years and the current pandemic, it's my hope that COVID-19 might be a catalyst for change, because now we have even more evidence of what makes a difference when it comes to supporting people out of homelessness and rough sleeping. The key workers that I have the privilege of working with have illustrated just how much can be achieved when they and their clients are given the right resources and support. ●

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