

The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Health
Richmond House
Whitehall
London
SW1A 2NS

17th October 2017

Dear Secretary of State,

Making homelessness visible in the NHS

We write to ask for your support to improve health service responses to people who are homeless.

Homelessness is both a health and a healthcare problem. People who are homeless face terrifyingly high mortality rates, often rely upon A&E for healthcare, and have complex needs that can add significantly to the burden on NHS services. To address this Pathway has helped the NHS to create specialist teams in ten hospitals, helping over 3500 homeless hospital patients every year and improving health and housing outcomes.

However, lack of routine data prevents the NHS and partner organisations from developing wider integrated responses to address health and homelessness. Currently there is no nationally agreed standard across the NHS documenting housing status on patient record systems. This makes it impossible to generate standard national data on homelessness from the healthcare system and anticipate patient need.

For NHS Digital to proceed towards consulting on and rolling out a new patient data standard for the NHS they need a direction from you. We write to ask if you would now issue such a direction.

You will be aware that work is underway across Government to prepare for implementation of the provisions of the new Homelessness Reduction Act. This welcome legislation is creating significant momentum for change across all the services that work with people who are homeless. We therefore write now, as preparatory work on the Act is beginning, to ask you to direct colleagues in NHS Digital to create a new standard for recording the housing status of patients within the NHS.

If there is not an agreed national approach, it will seriously impede the NHS's ability to respond to the new duties likely to flow from the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Creating a standard way of describing and recording housing status will help services identify patients who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, and raise clinical awareness of people's health-compromising housing problems. It will allow the NHS, for the first time, to generate standard, comparable data on the level of health needs relating to homelessness.

Poor health and homelessness are intimately connected. Making homelessness more visible within the NHS will help us all respond better to the needs of some of our most vulnerable fellow citizens and help us evidence potential integrated solutions, for example Housing First, and better target commissioned services for homeless people.

As the UK's only dedicated homeless health charity, Pathway has been working with partners across the NHS and beyond for the last two years to improve data sharing standards, initially for specialist Pathway homeless hospital teams. We have developed comprehensive data sharing agreements for seven NHS organisations working in London, and shared the resulting coding recommendations with homeless health services across the country. This has allowed our front-line clinical colleagues to identify many inconsistencies, or complete omissions, in the way people's housing status is recorded. Through this work we have developed a strong relationship with colleagues in NHS Digital and other key players in the system (NHS England, Public Health England). All parties agree that we are now ready to propose a straightforward national standard to fill this gap. We also have been working with Department for Communities and Local Government officials to make sure that this contributes to their work to improve data on homelessness.

A short technical note is enclosed to give you more background. We hope you will take this opportunity to initiate this important step to improve our collective response to some of our most marginalised and vulnerable fellow citizens.

Yours sincerely



Alex Bax
Chief Executive,
Pathway



Dr Nigel Hewett
Secretary, Faculty for Homeless &
Inclusion Health



Dr Adrian McLachlan,
Chair, London Homeless Health
Programme Board



Professor Andrew Hayward,
Director of the Institute of Epidemiology & Health Care,
University College London



Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Crisis

Please reply to Alex Bax at Pathway (alex.bax@pathway.org.uk)

Cc:

Sajid Javed MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Marcus Jones MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Local Government)
Jackie Doyle-Price MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Community Health & Care

Enc: Technical note