

# WHAT HAPPENED AT THE **HOMELESSNESS HACKATHON** AT HOUSING 2019

At this year's Housing 2019 in Manchester, visitors may have spotted something novel going on in the registration area; a cluster of large round tables, each covered in variously coloured Post-It notes, pens and paper, around which were sitting groups of intently focused participants talking, listening and drawing.

This was the inaugural Homelessness Hackathon, organised by public services innovation consultancy FutureGov.

A hackathon does not, as the name might suggest, have to involve coding – rather, it describes an approach for generating solutions to given problems. Groups of people come together to work creatively on a problem in a structured and time-limited way. Key to this concept is developing a minimum viable product – that is, the smallest, simplest iteration of the proposed solution. It's an idea that began in the start-up sector, as Vimla Appadoo, service designer at FutureGov, explains: "A minimum viable product or service is the easiest, cheapest way to test your solution. If you can really hone the problem you are trying to solve, and build the minimum version you need to solve it, you are proving [your solution] as you go along rather than investing loads of time and energy into something bigger that you don't know is going to work."

Homelessness is an umbrella term that covers so much territory, from rough sleeping to sofa surfing and temporary accommodation, each with its own set of challenges. Solving these requires collaboration and innovative thinking, and what better resource could there be than the collective skills, knowledge and drive contained within the largest gathering of housing experts in Europe?

More than 120 people took part in the hackathon at Housing 2019, working with colleagues from across the sector to identify ways to prevent people from becoming homeless, and to develop innovative solutions to them. Over three two-hour sessions, each table identified a problem, brainstormed possible solutions, developed the most promising of those and presented it at the end of their allotted time.

"How often do you get to work with people who are a different age, from a different background or setting, and come up with ideas?" says Ms Appadoo. "These are settings where I think true innovation is sparked, because you have that clash, and you have to listen in a way where you can't take anything for granted, because each starting point is different."

As the teams developed their ideas, they sketched out visual representations on sheets of paper. These were then stuck to the conference centre windows, gradually obscuring the lashing Manchester rain, and the breadth of solutions – both in their form and in the range of issues they addressed – on display seemed to speak for the value of the hackathon model. Some were low-tech and based on tweaking existing ways of working; these included an early intervention toolkit to help GPs identify patients at risk of becoming homeless, while another suggested training frontline housing staff such as repairs and gas operatives to look for visual clues that might identify people at risk of homelessness. Others were more technically oriented: an app for people living in temporary accommodation was put forward in response to the lack of any existing centralised repository of information for people in this group, for example, while another team came up with the idea of using biometric ID – a fingerprint, for example – to get round the problem of lost physical IDs and the barriers to accessing essential services that can go up as a result. There was even the pleasingly meta idea of running homelessness hackathons for children, to raise awareness of homelessness among younger people while tapping into their boundless creativity.

The ideas were voted on by conference delegates the next day, and the winning solution was announced by the Bishop of Manchester on the final day of the conference. This addressed the catch-22 faced by rough sleepers who need an address to obtain an ID and bank account – but need a bank account to get an ID. The solution? To install lockers in housing association and local authority offices that can be used by rough sleepers as an official address. Any missing ID documents, such as birth certificates or national insurance numbers, could then be sent to the physical locker (as well as scanned into a virtual locker) and then used to open a bank account.

Details on this, as well as the other 16 ideas dreamed up on the day, can be found at [www.cihhousing.com/homelessness-hackathon](http://www.cihhousing.com/homelessness-hackathon)

## What did the attendees think?

“

We had years of experience between us around the table, we were all from different backgrounds, all lived life differently and respond to things differently... I really enjoyed working with different people. It has been fascinating. ”

**Peter Harrison**  
Senior best practice officer  
**Crisis**

“

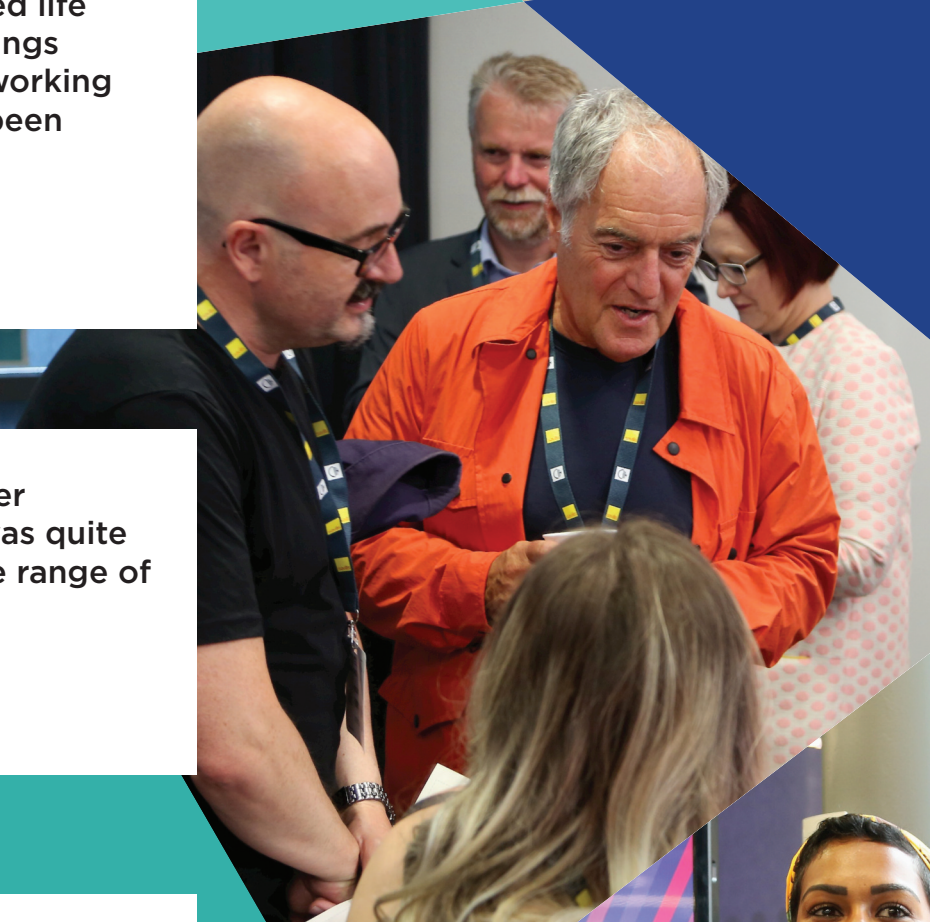
It was very positive – the sheer number of ideas generated was quite surprising, and from a diverse range of people too. ”

**Andrew Hall**  
Business intelligence developer  
**Places for People**

“

I walked in this morning, found a space and just sat down... my team were lovely, you get a real mix of people. Some were from housing associations, one was a software consultant. It made for a really interesting and lively discussion. ”

**Jennie Ellis**  
Community investment manager  
**Wates Residential**



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# Our involvement with the hackathon and where we hope to take it



Upon receiving an invitation to present at the Housing 2019 hackathon I was both delighted and intrigued by the concept. I began chatting with organisers of the event, discovering attendees would be a varied group of professionals across multiple sectors, united by a shared vision to 'find a solution' and a commitment to do something, anything, that would make a difference.

Immediately inspired and excited, I realised what possibilities taking part may hold for our programme and the individuals at the heart of it. GM Homes Partnership exists to support, empower and enable individuals previously sleeping rough to return to independent living. We provide access to permanent homes, health and wellbeing services, and eventually employment, training and education via intensive and person-centred engagement. Alongside operational delivery, our aim is to identify systemic barriers or challenges and find innovative solutions to overcome them.

One of the most prevalent barriers faced and one that many of us take for granted is the lack of available identity. Imagine if you had nothing to verify who you were, which means you're unable to have access to a home, an income, a bank account and health treatments. Many of our participants experience this daily. Having lost everything through years of sleeping on the streets, their possessions can be limited to one bag of personal or survival items. If you had to keep warm, safe and dry would a priority be retaining a piece of paper? Once we gain someone's trust and begin working with them, the time incurred sourcing forms of ID that are subsequently deemed unacceptable without a photo image places dangerous delays on engagement and access to services.

We needed to find a solution and I made that plea to the talented individuals in attendance at the Housing 2019 hackathon. Immediately there was a flurry of activity, ideas and innovation with attendees bouncing their ideas across one another, each drawing on expertise from digital, commercial and marketing worlds. My desire was for a digital solution to be developed which put homeless people first, ensuring they were not left behind as the digital world advances around them. I was not disappointed. The fabulous minds created a concept for biometric ID through the use of virtual lockers and systems enabling immediate authentication of individuals, verifying their identities and providing the means to print photo cards at designated locations. With this immediate and protected access to virtual existences, one that many of us carry around in our pockets on smartphones, any individual would be able to prove who they were, whenever they needed to and open doors previously closed to them in modern society.

We are now committed to developing this idea over the next 12 months and will report back at Housing 2020. I personally can't wait to see how we develop this concept through participant co-design and collaboration. It's amazing what can be achieved working together and a huge thanks to those that supported and sponsored the first hackathon at Housing 2019.

**Sarah Cooke**  
Project manager  
GM Homes Partnership

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