



HOW TO

Develop homelessness prevention solutions

NOVEMBER 2016

Introduction

[Official figures](#) show that homelessness has been gradually increasing since 2010 and measures to address this are being considered via the [Homelessness Reduction Bill](#) – currently making its way through the legislative process – which if enacted will require English local authorities to provide a homelessness service to anyone who needs it, irrespective of their priority status under the current framework.

Homelessness prevention is the focus of the proposed changes in the Bill so this guide is intended to provide an overview of emerging examples of how some councils and other organisations are demonstrating good practice in the development of solutions to preventing homelessness.

This briefing is aimed at officers responsible for developing and/or delivering services in discharge of local authorities' homelessness duties under Part VII Housing Act 1996 (as amended). It outlines the wider policy context of rising homelessness levels and the measures being considered to address this.

For the purpose of the briefing the term 'homelessness' will be the statutory definition outlined in [part VII Housing Act 1996](#) and homelessness prevention activity includes early intervention and the provision of services to help divert people away from homelessness.

The National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) and the Gold Standard Programme

This briefing has been developed in partnership with the [NPSS](#), which is a DCLG funded service set up specifically to develop and administer a framework for providing continuous improvement in front line housing options services through the development and delivery of the Gold Standard Programme.

Based on the government's "[Making every contact count](#)" report (2012) by the Ministerial Working Group on Homelessness, the Gold Standard Programme introduced ten local challenges aimed at supporting local authorities to improve their frontline housing options services and increase opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness.

The programme includes a sector led peer review scheme designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. With the support of NPSS practitioners, local authorities share good practice across the sector and assist each other to improve their own services. The good practice examples in this briefing have been provided by local authorities currently working with the NPSS.

What would the Homelessness Reduction Bill change?

There are a number of changes being considered - the most significant amendments relate to the introduction of new requirements on local authorities to:

- Assess all eligible households' cases and agree a plan if they are considered to be threatened with homelessness within 56 days.
- Take 'reasonable steps' to help prevent the

homelessness of all eligible households threatened with homelessness.

- If homelessness cannot be prevented, take 'reasonable steps' to help all homeless and eligible applicants to secure suitable accommodation for at least six months unless the applicant is referred to another local authority.

For more details on the proposed changes, we published a briefing on [what you need to know about the Homelessness Reduction Bill](#) for CIH members.

Why is homelessness prevention important?

Local authorities in England are legally obliged to provide varying levels of support to certain groups of homeless people. This can range from providing advice and assistance to the provision of temporary accommodation and long term settled accommodation in cases where an applicant has a 'priority need' under the 1996 Act. It is widely accepted though, that models of homelessness service delivery that prioritise prevention are more cost effective and can help more people avoid homelessness in the first place.

The 2002 Homelessness Act required councils to have a strategy to reduce homelessness and to put in place better services for homeless people. As a result, the housing and homelessness sectors worked with government to great effect to reduce rough sleeping and to prevent homelessness more generally.

Targets were set to eliminate the use of inappropriate bed and breakfast accommodation and to reduce the number of families forced to live in temporary accommodation. What followed was a very significant reduction in levels of homelessness, from a high of almost 300,000 acceptances in 2003/04 to just over 89,000 in 2009/10. The number of families in temporary accommodation fell significantly from 92,000 to 58,000 over the same period.

Since 2009/10, however, we have seen a reversal of these trends – the number of homeless acceptances has increased by almost 30 per cent, rough sleeping has more than doubled and the number of households living in temporary accommodation has grown to over 71,000.

As a result of this gradually rising trend, the government has been placed under increasing pressure to set out a plan for tackling the issue and the introduction of new laws could form the basis of a wider strategy for doing this.

What is homelessness prevention?

Effective homelessness prevention involves the development of strategies to allow early identification of people at risk of homelessness that provide interventions to help them secure or sustain safe, secure and affordable housing.

Within a prevention focused model of service delivery individuals can be supported to access the most appropriate form of intervention, increasing the likelihood of them avoiding homelessness.

Activity to help individuals and families avoid homelessness can take many forms and has traditionally included the following types of interventions:

- Where affordability of existing housing is an issue, people can be helped to access financial advice to manage their debts, reduce expenditure and/or maximise income.
- If a young person is being asked to leave by their parents, they can access help via mediation or conciliation to try and resolve the issues at home so they can either remain at home in the long term or at least to allow sufficient time to arrange alternative accommodation.
- When a private tenancy is being ended:
 - Help with applying for a discretionary housing payment to cover any shortfall

between rent and housing benefit entitlement

- Accessing homelessness prevention funding to clear any arrears if it is determined that the tenancy is affordable and the arrears built up as a result of a temporary affordability issue
- Mediation/ conciliation if there has been a breakdown in the landlord/tenant relationship
- Enabling access to legal advice to ensure landlords are following correct procedures to recover possession of a property
- Providing assistance to secure alternative accommodation in the private rented sector via a bond or rent guarantee scheme.
- If someone is at risk of violence or domestic abuse, helping them to access specialist advice and/or support to remain in their home e.g. via a Sanctuary scheme, or by helping them access alternative accommodation in a refuge or other safe housing.
- Supporting vulnerably housed people to sustain their tenancies
- Referring people with both housing and support needs to supported accommodation schemes
- Collaborating and joint working with other agencies via a coordinated and person centred approach to providing support

What are councils and other organisations doing to develop homelessness prevention solutions?

Introducing a triage assessment service

The introduction of an effective triage service can help to ensure opportunities to prevent homelessness are identified at the earliest opportunity. In effective triage systems, the initial contact point is where the work to advise and assist households is triggered and is an important stage for gathering information about each individual or family that requires help with their housing situation

Triage assessments can form an effective first stage to an enhanced housing options service where everyone who approaches their council for help with their housing circumstances receives advice/assistance according to their assessed needs.

The triage function exists to try and help individuals resolve their housing problems in a short space of time, without the need for casework intervention. Where cases cannot be resolved in this way, they will typically be referred to a specialist case officer who can carry out prevention activities at the same time as conducting inquiries into whether any statutory duties are owed.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Winchester City Council

Winchester City Council has an effective triage service running from their main reception. The service is based on a housing options duty officer being based in reception during working hours.

The duty officer is the first port of call for all housing options enquiries and any customer whose enquiry cannot be resolved within fifteen minutes will have an appointment booked with the duty officer; who then retains responsibility and ownership for the duration of the case.

A template form is made up of two parts a) the triage assessment and b) the early intervention and prevention application form.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Bristol City Council

Bristol City Council introduced a full housing options triage function in early 2016.

The customer service point team carries out the initial face-to-face enquiry and if the enquiry cannot be resolved within fifteen minutes an appointment is booked with the duty housing options officer, who retains ownership and responsibility for the duration of the case.

A template triage form and template housing options enquiry form is used in all cases.

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Implementing effective pathways for vulnerable people at increased risk of homelessness

Some groups may face an increased risk of becoming homelessness so it is important to put services in place to enable vulnerable people to make sustainable progress towards achieving independent living.

Developing pathways in partnership with other agencies and organisations encourages early identification and action to help vulnerable people avoid homelessness. Groups considered to be at increased risk include:

- Those who have previously been homeless
- People known to have a social worker, community psychiatric nurse etc.
- Young people, especially 16/17 years olds and care leavers
- Offenders and ex-offenders
- Refugees/migrants
- People leaving institutions e.g. hospital, prison, or the armed forces
- People with drug or alcohol problems
- People with a disability (learning/physical)
- Older people
- Victims of domestic abuse
- Victims of harassment and anti-social behaviour

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Young people multi-agency hub - Royal Borough of Greenwich

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has a number of pathways, with protocols and procedures, including hospital discharge, tenancy services, refuge and young people move-on

To support young people aged 16-24 years, they have a multi-agency hub, The Point, which brings together a range of services, including personal development, drugs and alcohol, sexual health, housing options and support, education, employment and training.

They use evidence-based joint commissioning and have a range of accommodation options in the young people's pathway including: supported lodgings (via registered charity CAYSH), Emergency Lodgings Accommodation Network (ELAN) and DePaul housing schemes providing high, medium and low living support.

Also Family Mosaic provide floating support services for young people at risk and accommodation-based support for teenage mothers and babies, as well as working in partnership with YMCA for new accommodation provision for young parents aged 18-21 or aged up to 24 with special needs.

All young people in the supported housing pathway attend Hyde Money House, a five day AQA accredited course in money management and tenancy sustainment or a one day Independent Living Money House course.

The housing options and support team provides training and briefings for teams who refer, they deliver regular inductions for new social workers and the Steering Group is led by partners.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Young persons hub - Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

Dudley MBC operates a hub with a young persons' mediator based on-site. The mediator sees all young people, some of whom are then assigned a support worker.

Support needs are assessed immediately which informs placement in accommodation where needed. The mediator has a high success rate of helping young people to return home, but where crisis accommodation is needed, emergency beds, supported accommodation, supported lodgings and Nightstop (emergency short term lodgings in the home of a 'host' in the community) are all available.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping - London Borough of Tower Hamlets

A range of direct access emergency accommodation options are available to place rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping.

All of their adult hostels (around 600 beds) offer short notice admissions, enabled by excellent partnership arrangements with other sectors such as health and treatment agencies who contribute to joint risk assessments.

A 20-bed adult hostel assessment centre at Booth House provides 24-hour access every day. Rough sleepers whose support needs are unclear are prioritised for these beds and can stay for 28 days whilst an ongoing assessment will identify their most appropriate move-on options. A similar assessment centre for young people is due to open shortly.

The borough's hostels also have 'safe seats' for men, often rudimentary camp bed facilities, providing 24-hour access for a 72-hour period whilst further work is carried out. They also act as a "pop-up hub" whilst the NSNO (No Second Night Out) hub is closed. The equivalent is provided to women in single rooms.

Tower Hamlets has committed to accommodate everyone referred by the pan-London NSNO project regardless of whether or not they have a priority need. They are initially offered emergency accommodation, usually bed and breakfast, whilst more medium term housing options are considered and sourced.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Pathway & protocol for prison leavers - Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council

Wigan's pathway and protocol for prison leavers follows a "through the gate" approach, easing the transition for offenders from custody to the community.

A housing adviser employed by Wigan and Leigh Homes attends HMP Liverpool and Styal to carry out monthly surgeries to identify clients without suitable housing available on release, and to carry out homeless assessments.

A floating support provider for offenders receives referrals for those who are due for release up to six months before their release date and works with prisoners to develop move-on plans.

They provide enhanced engagement and intervention, including a multi-agency pre-release visit, gate pick up and a mentor assigned prior to release.

They have a range of supported accommodation available for this client group, and also access the private rented sector through Wigan Housing Solutions' bond scheme as well as floating support and employment support. There are three floating support bases within the borough where clients can access day services including mental health, young offender services, CAB and food banks.

The service also has access to a designated bed space in the NSNO project. Partners can refer offenders for whom alternative accommodation cannot be secured, for a short term stay, whilst they work on finding a longer term solution.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Offender housing protocol - York City Council

The York and North Yorkshire offender housing protocol ensures a co-ordinated approach is taken to the accommodation of offenders, people released from custody and those supervised by the National Offender Management Service and Community Rehabilitation Companies. Accommodation is secured with the help of local authority and voluntary sector housing providers.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Domestic abuse referral pathway - Manchester City Council

Manchester operates a domestic abuse referral pathway that includes an assessment and referral form supported by a referral flowchart.

Services work together to try and stop domestic abuse and to provide information to anyone who is concerned about abuse so they can access help for themselves or for friends and family.

The services include Helplines, Women's Aid, the police, victim support, housing services, education, health services, independent domestic abuse advisers, Relate and the probation service.

The Greater Manchester multi-agency domestic abuse website is [here](#) and Manchester City Council's multi-agency domestic abuse toolkit is available [here](#).

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Hospital discharge project - Cornwall Housing Limited

Cornwall's homeless patient hospital discharge project aims to address housing and health problems to prevent patients from being discharged onto the streets or into unsuitable accommodation.

On admission, ward staff seek to identify patients who have nowhere suitable to live on discharge and refer them to the Homeless Patient Adviser (based at the Royal Cornwall hospital), who visits and carries out an initial assessment.

The project also receives referrals for patients attending accident and emergency who say they are homeless, and when there are concerns for the welfare of patients who self-discharge. A full assessment of patient's housing, community care and support needs takes place and specialist advice, support and advocacy is provided by the patient adviser.

If the patient has accommodation they could return to with assistance from the Enabling Fund, the patient adviser applies on their behalf. They liaise with Cornwall Council regarding any possible statutory duties owed but will help to secure accommodation for patients where possible, referring them to supported housing and private rented sector access schemes. Hospital discharge accommodation units are available for up to six weeks if required.

Inclusion Cornwall provides access to Cornwall Works Hub for progressing back to work through training, volunteering and work.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Mental health pathway - Essex County Council and Colchester Borough Homes

The Essex mental health pathway provides a clear route to services for people with mental health support needs. All referrals to supported housing services are made through mental health joint referral panels. There are a range of services available to meet different needs.

The intensive enablement service promotes recovery and move on towards independent living. It supports people with complex mental health needs as well as other needs including substance misuse. It targets people moving from, or at risk of moving into, residential or in-patient care.

Supported to independence services provide lower levels of support, either a step down for people moving on from intensive enablement services or for others who do not require an intensive level of support. Floating support is also available.

The mental health housing brokerage identifies and brokers housing solutions for people with mental health needs who would otherwise be:

- awaiting hospital discharge pending suitable accommodation
- in residential care and suitable for independent living and unable to move on
- unable to move on from supported to independence
- living in housing which does not meet their needs.

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Working effectively with the private rented sector (PRS)

Social housing and places in supported living schemes are scarce resources so improving options to access accommodation in the private rented sector can enhance capacity to prevent homelessness.

The PRS will not be the most suitable option for everyone but it can provide an effective housing solution for many, where appropriate and affordable. PRS access schemes, such as selective licensing alongside deposit guarantee or local lettings schemes can ensure a successful and sustainable private sector offer that is beneficial to both landlords and tenants.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Salford City Council

Salford City Council uses an accreditation scheme and also selective licensing to ensure that the PRS stock in the city is of high quality. The housing options service has a dedicated rental bond coordinator in place, who seeks to manage relationships between the local authority and the private rented sector and deliver a high quality service to both tenants and landlords.

The officer coordinates work to ensure that they make the best use of local services and resources, and this includes consultation with both landlords and tenants with regard to the development of local services.

As part of the bond application the coordinator is able to facilitate direct payments to landlords, and engage floating support for all tenants who may require it.

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Strategies for effective and early intervention

Councils can maximise opportunities to prevent future homelessness by developing and implementing effective strategies to target resources at providing timely and effective advice to everyone who feels they have a problem with their housing situation.

The NPSS Gold Standard highlights some other effective ways that local authorities can enhance their approaches to homelessness prevention:

- **Introducing an early intervention campaign** – structuring services to focus resources at front end customer contact points allows advice and information to be provided in a targeted, effective and efficient way.
- **Implementing a written advice and assistance letter for all customers** – tailored and targeted advice is enhanced further by providing each individual who has approached their council for housing assistance with a written record of the council's understanding of their circumstances, the advice provided and the further actions and support offered by the council and any other relevant agencies.
- **Incorporating the Gold Standard challenges into council homelessness strategies** – each local authority that commits to achieving the Gold Standard must take part in a diagnostic peer review to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement in local approaches to homelessness prevention. Once the peer review has been completed local authorities will have a continuous improvement plan to refer to as they proceed through the ten local challenges. Some local authorities have incorporated these identified areas for improvement into their homelessness strategies to help focus resources and planning.
- **Developing joint protocols with other organisations and statutory agencies** – strengthening and creating local partnerships can enhance opportunities to tackle homelessness. Formal arrangements set out in protocols promote cooperation and collaboration to meet the diverse need of homeless people and of those at increased risk of homelessness.
- **Developing an education programme for young people** – early intervention to prevent youth homelessness is an important part of any local authority homelessness strategy and working with school-age young people provides a key opportunity to raise awareness of the challenges and myths about homelessness. This involves providing an understanding of what can cause homelessness, giving information to young people and school staff about where to go if there is a risk of homelessness and explaining what options may be available.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Shared housing needs team - South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council

Since 2011 South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council have operated a shared housing needs team. Through improvements to phone and online services, close partnerships with statutory and voluntary agencies, and improved engagement with customers, the councils deliver a fast, effective and efficient service that meets people's needs.

Although there has been an increase in people requiring housing needs services, the number of households actually becoming homeless has not grown.

The councils have met increased demand by ensuring that the most vulnerable residents have access to a dedicated phone line. Intervention is better targeted at the earliest possible opportunity, with face to face meetings or home visits provided when necessary.

If someone at risk of homelessness approaches the councils, unless there is a statutory obligation, the same housing needs officer will retain responsibility for individual cases for up to twelve months. This means the customer will receive a consistent service and the same officer will continue to work with them should further intervention be needed in the future.

The councils have also introduced a new online self-help service, providing people easy 24-hour access to housing information and advice.

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Written advice and assistance for all customers - Hart District Council

Hart District Council provides a written advice and assistance letter for all customers. Their confirmation of advice clearly demonstrates the presenting issues and advice that has been provided along with clear actions both for the customer and their housing advisor.

Hart District Council's proactive approach to providing all customers with written advice is supported by a comprehensive procedure manual covering all aspects of service delivery from making effective case work inquiries to maximising prevention opportunities. This is enhanced by a set of template forms and checklists to ensure a consistent service is provided to all customers.

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INCORPORATING THE GOLD STANDARD CHALLENGES INTO COUNCIL HOMELESSNESS STRATEGIES

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council

Trafford council used the outcomes and continuous improvement plan from their diagnostic peer review as key resources when developing their current homelessness prevention strategy. Their strategy now makes strong reference to the gold standard programme and the council's action plan has been formed around the ten local challenges. This has allowed the strategy to focus on delivery of prevention services for all client groups, including both statutory and non-statutory homeless households.

The activities in the action plan are focused on assisting people to remain in their existing accommodation, and the action plan is SMART, with strong detail on resources and exit strategies.

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Ryedale District Council

Ryedale District Council's homelessness strategy has been developed using the framework from the diagnostic peer review, and the criteria in local challenge eight – "To have a homelessness strategy which sets out a proactive approach to preventing homelessness and is reviewed annually to be responsive to emerging needs". The local homelessness strategy was developed in line with the council's housing strategy, and both feed into the regional North Yorkshire Housing Strategy.

The North Yorkshire strategy has helped to shape the aim for each of the district councils in the county to work towards achieving the gold standard. Ryedale's

homelessness strategy reflects this specific aim to work towards achieving the gold standard, and wider actions that work towards meeting each of the ten local challenges are identified in the action plan.

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Winchester City Council

Winchester City Council's homelessness strategy features the gold standard programme in the foreword, background, top priorities and goals. The document contains a section which details the planned achievements and progress working toward each of the ten local challenges, and this is also reflected in the action plan.

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Joint working protocols - Norwich City Council

Norwich City Council has a number of measures and protocols in place to ensure the service works effectively with statutory partners. In particular, there is a focus on working with neighbouring districts (Greater Norwich Housing Partnership), police, Norfolk children and adult services, and the clinical commissioning groups (CCGs).

Arrangements include a youth homelessness protocol for young people leaving care; "Off the Street" – a multi-agency hostel eviction protocol; and an intentionally homeless protocol with children's services - in cases of a potential decision of intentional homelessness, the housing options team give as much notice as possible to children's services to enable early intervention.

Other partnership working takes place through:

- Joint plans and initiatives with City Reach (a project of Norfolk Community Health & Care NHS Trust). The project provides services for anyone who finds it hard to access mainstream health services, including homeless people, people at risk of homelessness, people staying in hostels or refuges, people in temporary accommodation, gypsies and travellers, refugees and asylum seekers, sex workers, people with 'no recourse to public funds' and people leaving prison
- A Norwich City Council specialist rough sleeper coordinator who acts as a key point of liaison with partner organisations, including City Reach and the police. GPs will ring the coordinator to provide an early alert to clients at risk of homelessness. The post holder is also a key contributor to MARS (multi-agency rough sleepers group)
- Close involvement with strategic planning and delivery of safeguarding of children and adults
- Early help - working with Norfolk children's services,

Norfolk Constabulary and Norwich CCG to deliver an early help hub that provides partners with a space to collaborate, consult with one another, problem solve and share information to make sure families and residents in need of help, receive the most appropriate and effective support as soon as possible. The objective is to provide help where it is required early to reduce delay and duplication and reduce the need for higher cost interventions.

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Education programme for young people - Borough of Poole

The Borough of Poole has a service set up for local young people called UpinPoole (www.upinpoole.co.uk). It aims to encourage young people to Step Up (for jobs and courses), Turn up (to things to do), Speak Up (for advice and support), and Stand Up (and have their say).

It covers a wide range of topics such as relationships, education, housing, training and apprenticeships, family problems, health, and alcohol and drugs. Young people can gain information about services relevant to them by either viewing the website pages, or contacting the team by email, web messaging, by telephone, or in person.

There is a link from the UpinPoole website to the page for 16-25 year olds on the Borough of Poole website. Further to this, the council has also commissioned Zest Theatre Group to perform at the majority of the secondary schools in the district with a message showing the stark reality of homelessness as a young person.

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Other useful information

- A range of templates, tools and briefing papers can be found on the [NPSS website](#)
- [CIH member briefing](#) on the Homelessness Reduction Bill
- CLG Select Committee [homelessness inquiry report](#)
- CLG Select Committee's report on the [pre-legislative inquiry into the Homelessness Reduction Bill](#)
- Pleace et al, 2016, [Better than Cure? Testing the case for Enhancing Prevention of Single Homelessness in England](#)



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