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# THE **ACT** IN **ACTION**

AN ASSESSMENT OF  
HOMELESSNESS

REVIEWS AND STRATEGIES

Shelter

# THE ACT IN ACTION

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## **Having a piece of legislation on the Statute Book is one thing. Making a difference on the ground is often quite another.**

It is in recognition of this that Shelter has invested considerable resources in our Homelessness Act Implementation Campaign: this has involved 29 dedicated local campaign officers, the [www.homelessnessact.org.uk](http://www.homelessnessact.org.uk) website, extra publications and training courses, as well as an extensive programme of action research. This publication is the outcome of one of those pieces of research.

It reveals that much has been achieved. Local authorities welcome the switch from their homelessness service being about responding to events, towards anticipating problems and preventing them becoming crises. Much has been learnt about the process of carrying out a review, consulting with interested parties, including homeless people themselves and responding to the needs of those who are homeless but not in 'priority need'.

But it also reveals that there is much still to be learnt, issues of policy to be re-visited, information to be gathered, more groups and individuals to be drawn into the response to homelessness. In my view, this also is a positive outcome. The evidence is that, galvanised by the Act's requirement to be properly strategic, local authorities and their partners want to enhance their preventative work and address the needs of groups that remain relatively neglected.

It therefore falls to organisations such as Shelter to continue supporting this work with policy ideas, examples of good practice, and campaigns to support local initiatives.

It is also vital that the 2004 Spending Review should enable the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to continue to support a programme of innovation and investment in the prevention of and response to homelessness – that most fundamental of all aspects of social exclusion. With these resources and the continuing efforts of people and organisations at the front line, the Homelessness Act 2002 will continue to be an Act that truly went into Action.



Adam Sampson, Director, Shelter

## Summary

The Homelessness Act 2002 presented a major opportunity for local authorities to transform how they manage services for homeless people. One of the key changes brought about by the Act was to move the emphasis away from crisis management and towards a more strategic and preventative approach. A key element of this is the requirement for local authorities to carry out reviews and publish strategies to tackle and prevent homelessness in their locality. Authorities were required to publish their first strategy by 31 July 2003.

Shelter committed considerable resources to working with local authorities to ensure the Act would be implemented as effectively as possible. Part of this work involved a programme of research, which included commissioning independent researchers to carry out an assessment of homelessness reviews and strategies once they were published. The findings of that research are published in this report. They complement the findings of a 12 month survey of local authorities carried out by Shelter from August 2002 that identified issues being experienced and dealt with by local authorities during the first year of the new legislation.

The research in this report seeks to identify examples of good practice, in order to help local authorities to continue to develop their strategies in future.<sup>1</sup> It also focuses on examining the difficulties faced by local authorities in the review and strategy process, particularly on examples where these difficulties have been overcome or policy or practice has changed.

Overall, the research has found that compiling reviews and strategies appears to have produced positive outcomes beyond simply delivering an assessment of homelessness levels and patterns. In a broader sense, it has enabled authorities to identify gaps in their knowledge (even where these gaps are yet to be tackled), build stronger relationships with other departments and agencies and develop a multi-agency approach not just to homelessness, but also to wider issues.

In addition, consultation with users has enabled authorities to identify and distinguish between the needs of different groups, and plan for services which meet their particular needs, rather than providing a 'blanket' approach to the problem of homelessness. Importantly, they have identified the need to adopt a proactive approach to tackling homelessness.

This research has examined a number of key inputs necessary for the completion of the first strategies. These include guidance and resources, consultation, data collection and analysis, the prevention of homelessness and plans for implementing and monitoring the strategies.

## Guidance

- There were mixed views about the usefulness of guidance produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup> Some authorities felt it was good, whilst others would have liked it to contain examples of good practice, and for the ODPM to have offered incentives to authorities for the production of a 'good' strategy. Many local authorities were concerned about the lack of ongoing guidance from the ODPM on the implementation of the strategy. Guidance produced by Shelter<sup>3</sup> was found useful by local authorities in producing their reviews and strategies.

## Resource issues

- Inadequate resources, in relation to both time and skills, emerged as a key difficulty for most authorities when producing the review and strategy. In many cases, there was no dedicated lead officer, the person responsible took on the co-ordination of the review and strategy alongside existing duties. In some cases, the lead officer was not sufficiently senior to influence other departments' participation. Lack of other staff to work on the review and strategy and a lack of time to complete the whole process were issues common to the local authorities.

<sup>1</sup> Shelter (2002) *Local authority progress and practice: Initial findings August 2002*, London: Shelter; Shelter (2003) *Local authority progress and practice: Local authorities and the Homelessness Act six months on, research findings, February 2003*, London: Shelter; Shelter (2003) *Local authority progress and practice: Local authorities and the Homelessness Act – the first year, research findings, July 2003*, London: Shelter

<sup>2</sup> DTLR (2002) *Homelessness Strategies: A good practice handbook*, London: DTLR

<sup>3</sup> Shelter (2002) *An overview for local authorities and their partners: Part II Homelessness reviews and strategies*, London: Shelter



## **Consultation**

- Consultation with other departments and the voluntary sector was generally more widespread and more successfully carried out than that with service users. In some cases, authorities already had links with partner agencies, but little experience of, and a lack of skills in, user consultation. Good consultation was dependent on wide involvement from other departments and agencies, and this in turn was a product of having a lead officer who had both the time and the resources to devote to managing the process. Employing specialist consultants proved useful in reaching minority groups who would otherwise have been difficult to consult.
- Problems arose in getting representatives from other departments on board and clarifying each department's role in the review and strategy process. Difficulties were also experienced in consulting users, partly because in most cases, the lead department had little previous experience of consultation, and partly because the survey methodologies chosen for consultation with service users yielded poor response rates.

## **Data collection and analysis**

- Local authorities identified difficulties in gathering and presenting data on the causes of homelessness. Most problems were attributed to the lack of any available data or the fact that different departments collected data in different formats. There was a general weakness in data analysis, with many local authorities presenting data without interpreting it or linking it to other data and information collated for the review. Many officers responsible for producing the review and strategy did not have the necessary research and data analysis skills, and training in this area would be helpful in future.
- Specific gaps were also acknowledged in the collection and analysis of data on homelessness amongst black and minority ethnic (BME) groups.
- Although data collection and interpretation was often limited, most local authorities did recognise both where the gaps lay and the need for comprehensive data collection in future across different departments. The need for staff training in data analysis was also identified as an issue.

## **Prevention of homelessness**

- Local authorities recognised the importance of preventing homelessness rather than simply providing a reactive response to the problem, but they also accepted that this may be difficult to achieve. Prevention requires a detailed understanding of the causes and levels of homelessness, and given that some authorities had very patchy data, work still needs to be done before prevention can be properly targeted at those groups most at risk.
- Although local authorities recognised the importance of implementing strategies to prevent homelessness as well as tackling it reactively, most had not yet developed their plans. This is the first time authorities have had to produce a strategy and it is to be hoped that more proactive approaches will be developed over time and with experience.
- Some authorities had employed innovative approaches to prevention; providing education and training, improving inter-departmental communications among front-line staff, intervening at crisis points to prevent 'at risk' groups becoming homeless and improving general housing advice and support services.

## **Strategy implementation**

- As a consequence of undertaking the review and strategy, local authorities are clearly making efforts to tackle homelessness in a more consistent way. They have recognised that homelessness is an issue that requires joint working between departments and with other agencies. Authorities



have also been able to identify gaps in their knowledge, which is in itself a positive outcome of the review and strategy process. Most local authorities saw homelessness as a problem that required multi-agency solutions, and those that had involved Shelter staff to help with the production of some or all of their reviews had found their input helpful.

### **Targets, monitoring and action plans**

- In the main, target setting for the strategy action plans was vague, and where targets were set, they tended to be 'soft.' Action plans tended to read as 'to do' lists, with a lack of prioritisation or timing. However, it was difficult for local authorities to set targets based on their data, as much of it was not comprehensive and was poorly analysed. In addition, the lack of knowledge about the availability of resources for the action points compounded the difficulties of setting realistic and achievable targets.
- A minority of authorities had produced detailed action plans, which were realistic about what could be achieved. These authorities had prioritised actions and identified available resources, as well as identifying the potential risks.

## **Recommendations**

### **Looking to the future**

There is widespread acknowledgement that the one-year deadline to conduct the homelessness review and publish a strategy was a necessary and challenging target. Equally there is recognition that more information is needed, more service development required, and more joint learning and working is vital for success. Both local authorities and the ODPM must encourage further work and development of the local strategies. On the basis of the research conducted by NFO Social Research for this report, Shelter makes the following recommendations:

### **Undertaking the review, setting the strategy**

- Resources need to be made available for adequate research and consultancy to be undertaken to ensure that strategies continue to reflect need and demand and can be adapted to reflect changed circumstances.
- Staff required to undertake and manage research, consultancy and strategy development and implementation need to be given adequate support and training in recognition of the fact that for many, these requirements are a departure from previous job roles and expectations.

### **Learning from experience**

- In addition to the need for support and training, the ODPM should provide strategic guidance as to what should happen now the first strategies have been published. Clear examples of good practice in relation to undertaking reviews, strategy documents and guidance in relation to the monitoring and 'policing' of strategy implementation would be particularly helpful to local authorities.
- The strategies contain some very significant and positive objectives and intentions and it is crucial that support is given to their implementation. Local authorities need to be given encouragement by the ODPM to continue to develop and monitor the impact of their strategy and to see it as an ongoing, dynamic process that is continually updated to reflect changing needs. It is essential that the ODPM continues to make specific revenue resources available to promote best practice and innovation in service development as local authorities implement their strategies.

## Information needs

- A key issue identified in the review process is the lack of appropriate data in a useful form that can be shared by different providers. The majority of authorities have recognised current data limitations and have begun addressing this issue. There is, however, a clear need to investigate and invest in data gathering to encourage consistency and standardisation that will be useful both for strategy development and monitoring improvements. While some improvements can be made by changes to current procedures, some authorities will need to invest in new systems and software.
- Good practice and innovative methods of data collection and analysis need to be actively promoted through information and training. This is particularly important for those authorities that do not have access to specialist research resources.

## Joint working and prevention in practice

- Positive experiences and improvements were noted in relation to joint working and consultation. However, there is a clear need to build on and develop these improvements in order to engage with different departments and tackle some of the remaining difficulties associated with the perception of homelessness as primarily a housing problem. Joint working between housing, health and social services has been examined in detail in the report *Healthy Relationships?*<sup>4</sup> and further specific recommendations are contained therein.
- Prevention is now seen as an essential approach to tackling homelessness and all authorities appear to have embraced this and made moves to improve their prevention of homelessness. However, in many cases, these improvements are in their early stages and there are still data gaps in relation to repeat homelessness and homelessness among specific groups of people that need to be plugged. Local authorities need to ensure that they fill these data gaps and investigate and invest in innovative prevention measures that are tailored to meet local housing needs.

**In a broader sense, it has enabled authorities to identify gaps in their knowledge, build stronger relationships with other departments and agencies and develop a multi-agency approach not just to homelessness, but also to wider issues.**



<sup>4</sup> Shelter (2003) *Healthy Relationships? Health and Social Services engagement in homelessness strategies and services*, October 2003, London: Shelter



# 1. Introduction

The Homelessness Act 2002 has presented a major opportunity for local authorities to transform how they manage the provision of services for homeless and potentially homeless people. One of the key changes brought about by the Act was to move the emphasis away from a crisis management, reactive approach and towards a more strategic and preventative approach. The Act also required local authorities to:

- provide long term accommodation for unintentionally homeless people in priority need
- implement reforms to the framework for allocating social housing.

Alongside the Act, new regulations extended priority need for housing to new groups of vulnerable homeless people.

The importance of strategic thinking in tackling homelessness was outlined in guidance issued by the government in February 2002, in the form of a handbook to assist local authorities in producing homelessness strategies.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by *More than a roof: a report into tackling homelessness*,<sup>6</sup> which brought together the government's more strategic, prevention-focused agenda for tackling homelessness.

A key element of the new approach is the requirement for local authorities to carry out reviews and publish strategies to tackle and prevent homelessness in their locality. In carrying out a homelessness review, local authorities are required to present a current 'picture' of homelessness provision in their locality and to anticipate future levels of homelessness in their area. Activities and services to prevent homelessness, including the provision of appropriate accommodation and support, need to be identified and adequate resources made available to provide them. Local authorities are then required to use the review to outline a strategy that plans changes to existing service provision to meet the needs of all homeless people, not just those whom they have a duty to re-house. The Act required authorities to publish a strategy by 31 July 2003 and every five years thereafter.

Shelter aimed to work collaboratively with as many local authorities in England as possible, to help them with a complex process of developing their reviews and producing their strategies. The organisation committed considerable resources to achieving this aim that included employing 29 local campaign officers, based in Housing Aid Centres throughout England. Shelter also produced and made available a range of materials, information and training on the Act. This includes a dedicated website, [www.homelessnessact.org.uk](http://www.homelessnessact.org.uk), which is updated regularly and is free to use. An independent evaluation of Shelter's Homelessness Act Implementation (HAI) work, which included a postal questionnaire and telephone interviews, was conducted with local authorities during the summer of 2003. The initial findings of the evaluation are positive.

Shelter also conducted research to evaluate the implementation of the new legislation and other relevant changes in housing and homelessness practice since July 2002. This report looks specifically at the production of homelessness reviews and strategies in 15 local authority areas. It complements Shelter's '*Progress and Practice*' research, which has surveyed a sample of 28 different local authorities to evaluate and monitor their progress in implementing the wider homelessness and allocations provisions in the new Act. Shelter has published the findings of the '*Progress and Practice*' research in three reports.<sup>7</sup>

The research presented in this report aims to assess the extent to which local authorities have complied with the requirement to conduct homelessness reviews and to produce a strategy in accordance with the policy intentions of the legislation. In recognition that this is the first time that local authorities have had to undertake this challenging exercise, Shelter was clear that this research should be constructive. The research therefore focuses on examining the difficulties faced

<sup>5</sup> DTLR (2002) *Homelessness Strategies: A good practice handbook*, London: DTLR

<sup>6</sup> DTLR (2002) *More than a roof: a report into tackling homelessness*, London: DTLR  
<http://www.housing.odpm.gov.uk/information/homelessness/morethanaroof/o.4.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Shelter (2002) *Local authority progress and practice: Initial findings August 2002*, London: Shelter; Shelter (2003) *Local authority progress and practice: Local authorities and the Homelessness Act six months on, research findings, February 2003*, London: Shelter; Shelter (2003) *Local authority progress and practice: Local authorities and the Homelessness Act – the first year, research findings, July 2003*, London: Shelter

by local authorities in the review and strategy process, particularly on examples where these difficulties have been overcome or policy or practice has changed. Additionally, the research seeks to identify examples of good practice, in order to help local authorities conduct reviews and develop strategies in future. Within this context, the research aims to:

- highlight key barriers and areas of difficulty that were encountered in the process
- identify effective models of partnership working and consultation in developing the documents
- demonstrate examples of good practice, and
- provide practical information to assist local authorities in moving forward.

The assessment involved a detailed examination of the content of a sample of 15 local authority homelessness reviews and strategies and the processes by which these were undertaken.

The 15 local authorities were selected by Shelter to cover a broad geographic range within England and to include large and small, rural and urban authorities. The sample also included a number of authorities that had worked on countywide strategies and a number that Shelter's local campaign officers felt had overcome specific local difficulties to produce their strategy.

The 15 authorities selected were different to those that participated in Shelter's *'Progress and Practice'* survey, to avoid overburdening those authorities or duplicating research. A list of the authorities participating in the research for this report is contained in Appendix A.

NFO Social Research was commissioned to conduct the research and undertook the following activities, between May and September 2003:

- Desk-based analysis of the 15 local authorities' homelessness review documents, focusing on both the process and content of the reviews. Only 11 of the 15 local authorities actually produced a separate review document. Of the four that did not, three did undertake substantial reviews and incorporated the results into their strategies. The remaining local authority did some research which fed into the strategy but the research did not constitute a full review.
- Desk-based analysis of the 15 local authorities' homelessness strategy documents, again focusing on both process and content
- In-depth telephone interviews, of around 30 minutes duration, with the lead officer charged with developing the homelessness strategy in each of the 15 local authority areas
- Telephone interviews, of around 15 minutes, with a relevant representative of social services in each of the 15 local authority areas. A total of 9 interviews were actually achieved.
- Telephone interviews, of around 15 minutes, with a key council member in each of the 15 areas. A total of 7 interviews were actually achieved.

As the homeless legislation indicates that it is a statutory requirement for social services departments to be involved in consultation and the development of reviews and strategies, it was considered important that representatives of social services should be included in the research in order to examine how well such involvement had been approached and how it could be improved in the future.

Additionally, council members were included in the research as it was felt necessary to assess the level of importance attached to tackling homelessness locally and to look at how political support, or lack of it, might impact on the development of the homelessness strategy.

A full and detailed description of the research methodology appears as Appendix B.

## Structure of the report

The report is structured to reflect the research aims outlined above.

Section 2	considers resources issues and views on guidance provided to conduct the reviews and strategies.
Section 3	examines some of the key problems faced by local authority staff in undertaking consultation and joint working as well as identifying examples of good practice and successful partnerships.
Section 4	focuses on the data collection and analysis element of undertaking the reviews – in particular, problems with data availability, data gathering and interpretation.
Section 5	examines factors impacting on the effective translation of the review into a comprehensive strategy with clear plans for implementation.
Section 6	focuses on homeless prevention.
Appendix A	lists the participating local authorities.
Appendix B	contains a detailed description of the research methodology.

## 2. Guidance and resources

There were mixed views about the guidance provided by the ODPM<sup>8</sup> and concern about the lack of guidance as to what should happen once strategies were published.

Inadequate resources, in relation to both time and skills, emerged as a key difficulty for most authorities when producing the review and strategy. In many cases, there was no dedicated lead officer; the person responsible took on the co-ordination of the review and strategy alongside existing duties. In some cases, the lead officer was not sufficiently senior to influence other departments' participation. Lack of other staff to work on the review and strategy and a lack of time to complete the whole process were issues common to the local authorities.

### 2.1 Guidance on compiling reviews and strategies

Authorities had mixed opinions about the quality of guidance provided by the ODPM.<sup>9</sup> Some considered it 'a bit daunting at first', although other lead officers reported that it was simple and easy to read and 'not too academic'.

Lead officers adopted a 'pick and mix' approach towards the guidance, using it alongside other published guidance, such as that produced by Shelter.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, several authorities said they had relied more on the guidance from Shelter than that from the ODPM:

**'The ODPM guidance was the guidance that you followed but on a more practical level we probably found different guidance more user-friendly.'** Lead Officer

One of the key criticisms was in relation to the lack of any guidance on implementation of the strategy. Lead officers were unclear as to what would happen next and what would happen if they failed to meet the requirements of the legislation. One local authority felt that there was a need for a 'carrot and stick approach' with incentives for producing a good strategy, as well as penalties for not meeting the legislative requirements:

**'Sometimes you've got to at least have a stick waving around in the background for local politicians to wake up and think, "Oh, I'd better do something."'** Lead Officer

**'Just who's going to inspect it? And what does it matter if you do a good job or not?'**  
Lead Officer

<sup>8</sup> DTLR (2002) *Homelessness Strategies: A good practice handbook*, London: DTLR

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Shelter (2002) *An overview for local authorities and their partners; Part II Homelessness reviews and strategies*, London: Shelter

A minority of local authorities thought that the ODPM guidance would have been of greater use if it had provided examples of good practice. In particular, a couple of authorities thought it would have been useful to have been shown examples of what review documents should look like and what they should contain.

A few authorities seemed to have been unclear about messages being given out by the ODPM and felt that guidance provided had changed considerably over time.

**2.2 Resources**

One of the concerns common to all authorities in implementing their homelessness strategies was the availability of resources. There were three main issues:

- the shortage of staff available
- time pressures
- the need for additional skills to undertake certain additional tasks, such as data analysis.

Several authorities identified the need for additional posts, particularly in relation to prevention and support services, but had so far been unable to secure funding for any extra staff.

**STAFF RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO AUTHORITIES**

**Lead officers**

Most authorities had felt that staff resources were stretched when compiling the review and strategy, particularly where the lead officer was not in a dedicated role, but was managing these processes alongside their usual day-to-day duties. Only a minority of authorities had been able to employ a dedicated full-time person to undertake the review and strategy.

**Temporary posts**

In a small number of authorities, additional temporary posts were created to assist with producing and implementing the documents while others had seconded staff from other sections. Some of these arrangements had, however, led to difficulties with staff turnover during the review process, which in turn led to problems of continuity and sudden demands on other staff.

**Involvement of Shelter staff**

Several authorities had involved Shelter staff in their review and strategy process. Those that had involved Shelter’s local campaign officers were concerned about the impact on their own workloads, once these posts ended. Authorities had found the help from Shelter staff invaluable and one lead officer commented that they would be keen to employ a representative in the future to help implement their strategy.

**Consultants**

Less than half the local authorities interviewed had employed consultants to help with their review and strategy. Officers’ experiences of using consultants were generally quite mixed. Some were very positive and said they would do exactly the same again, whilst others had experienced difficulties in getting consultants to really understand what was required and by when. In particular, there was some concern about whether consultants had the local knowledge to be able to write documents that would be tailored to authorities’ individual needs.

In most cases, consultants were used to undertake smaller pieces of research and only two authorities used them to undertake the whole review or strategy. In these two



cases, the lead officers were satisfied that the quality of the documents produced was of a high standard.

According to lead officers, the main reason for using a consultant to undertake the review or strategy was the lack of time available, either in terms of a lack of internal staff capacity or because the reviews had been left to the last minute:

‘Time was so against us. And that’s the authority’s own fault. The authority has to admit that.’ Lead Officer

Another key reason for using consultants to undertake other pieces of work for the review was because local authorities did not feel that they had the appropriate skills to do it themselves; for example, conducting focus groups with BME groups and ‘at risk’ young people.

An issue closely related to the staffing levels was the period of time available to undertake the reviews. Given that in the majority of cases one lead officer was responsible for the review on top of existing duties, there was a perception that not enough time was available to do the job properly. Some officers said that the review had been ‘a real rush job’ and a couple believed that it could have been considerably improved had more time been available.

In general, there was a feeling that adequate resources had not been available and consequently the review and strategy documents were seen as an additional burden on already over-stretched staff. This meant that some local authorities faced considerable time pressures. One lead officer reported that:

‘It was a nightmare. There was not nearly enough time.’

In addition, many of the new initiatives outlined in the strategy action plans are heavy on staff time; for example, plans to provide support and advice services to user groups and mediation services with housing providers. Resource allocation is therefore a valid concern if the strategy action plans are to be carried out successfully.

Alongside the need for additional staff and staff time, the majority of authorities identified the need for additional training for existing staff, particularly in research skills. Lead officers themselves had mixed levels of research and strategy development experience.

## **FUTURE TRAINING NEEDS**

### **Research and analysis skills**

Most authorities had included in their strategies plans to improve data collection and interpretation on homelessness. However, in a small number of cases, existing staff did not know enough about research and analysis to confidently manage and interpret the data in a meaningful way.

### **User consultation methods**

Most authorities also identified the need for more training in user consultation, including how to select the most appropriate mechanisms for carrying out consultation and developing skills in different methodologies.

### **Cross-departmental training**

A minority of authorities also expressed the need for joint training, particularly with social services, which would allow for more parallel working practices more generally, and in regard to developing the strategy action plans.



### 3. Consultation, partnerships and countywide working

The changes in homelessness legislation mean that local authorities have had to consider new working practices, not least because of the statutory requirement on social services departments to provide housing authorities with the assistance they require during the review and strategy process.<sup>11</sup> ODPM guidance also indicates that the views of all stakeholders need to be included in the review and strategy process. ‘Stakeholders’ are defined as all service users, including potential service users, and relevant voluntary and statutory service providers.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the need to focus on prevention and to ensure that suitable accommodation and support services are available for all categories of people, who are or may become homeless, has necessitated wide-ranging consultation and partnership working.

It is difficult to separate the two themes of consultation and partnership working as they have often merged into one through the review and strategy process – for example, consultation with voluntary agencies as part of the review has developed into partnership working to develop the strategy. Although consultation and partnership working have been important considerations at all stages of the review and strategy process, it is clear that some local authorities were more successful than others in consulting their stakeholders. This section outlines the key difficulties encountered by local authorities, and also where the process went well. Examples of good practice have been highlighted wherever possible. The section also looks at some positive outcomes of partnership and cross-strategy working.

#### 3.1 Steering group management and membership

Overall, the level and quality of consultation with both service users and other agencies was very mixed and varied from authority to authority. One of the fundamental factors influencing the ensuing level of consultation and partnership working was the initial decision about who should take responsibility for managing the review process and how the overall process was overseen.

Most of the 15 local authorities set up a steering group comprising representatives of a range of stakeholders to oversee the process. The degree of consultation with other departments differed widely, but in general, those local authorities that involved a wide range of agencies – including social services, Primary Care Trusts, voluntary sector agencies and local councillors – showed evidence of good practice.

#### EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE WAYS OF ENGAGING THE INTEREST OF OTHER AGENCIES

- One authority set up a steering group to oversee the whole review process, but also sent information on a regular basis to a wider group of stakeholder agencies, inviting feedback on the review and strategy development. This proved to be a practical solution to involving and including the views of outside agencies whilst not placing unrealistic expectations on them in relation to workload and attendance at meetings.

‘I was keen to have this big group of people who I kept in touch with by writing to because...you can’t expect small organisations or even colleagues in housing and social services to spend time trudging around to meetings in order to chew the fat...’ Lead Officer

- One authority had contacted local newspapers and TV in order to raise the profile of homelessness in the media and encourage participation in consultation among its stakeholders and users.

<sup>11</sup> Section 1(2) Homelessness Act 2002

<sup>12</sup> DTLR (2002) *Homelessness Strategies: A good practice handbook*, London: DTLR

- Another factor seen to have a positive impact on operation of the steering group was the seniority of the lead officer. This impacted on their level of influence when trying to engage other agencies in consultation. In one authority, the Director of Housing took a keen interest in the development of the review and strategy and consultation was felt to have been broader and more inclusive.

However, there were some difficulties associated with managing and maintaining steering groups. In one authority, consultation was widespread but the lead officer stressed that it had been a difficult task trying to maintain enthusiasm and interest among partners. It appeared that there was a definite need for a strong central co-ordinator to keep things moving and ensure ongoing multi-agency involvement, and indeed, where this was not the case, consultation was much poorer.

**‘Just holding people’s interest together. It is very easy having a seminar and getting people to come along, but making them continue to think about the issue and do networking and joint working [is more difficult].’** Lead Officer

Problems associated with the composition and continued functioning of the steering group represented one of the first difficulties experienced by the majority of local authorities. There were two key difficulties with steering groups, as outlined below.

## **DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED IN RUNNING STEERING GROUPS**

### **Ensuring attendance**

Poor attendance by partners hampered management of some steering groups. It was unclear whether this was due to the lead officer not providing sufficient information for partners (the view of one or two respondents), or other departments still viewing homelessness as very much a problem for the housing department to solve (the view of a larger proportion of respondents).

### **Getting the size of the group right**

- A minority of respondents felt that large, very inclusive steering groups were unwieldy and difficult to manage, both in relation to managing to get all members to attend meetings and in getting agreement on priorities and action.
- In one area, a small steering group was set up comprising internal staff and a separate external group was set up for consultation on the review. This approach did not work particularly well as it was not seen as being inclusive. For example, the social services representative reported that they had felt largely excluded from the consultation process and even the lead officer admitted that this was not an especially popular approach to consultation:

**‘We wanted to be more involved... We would’ve liked our concerns to be heard more.’** Social Services representative

**‘We certainly got criticised pretty much all the way through, even by our own working group, that the group was very tight and very small.’** Lead Officer

One authority noted that as the review document was essentially the property and responsibility of the local authority it was necessary for it to make decisions where there was disagreement or conflicting views between the steering group and other consultees.

### 3.2 Consultation with and involvement of stakeholders

Levels of involvement in the reviews and strategies from other agencies, departments and service users varied widely across the 15 local authorities. Participation ranged from sporadic input from social services representatives on steering groups and ‘last minute’ consultation with service providers and users, to a very inclusive and comprehensive approach.

In general, local authorities appeared to be more comfortable consulting other departments and agencies than they did service users, as they usually had more experience in this area. Some local authorities already had inter-agency homelessness groups, whilst others were just starting. Even where joint working was established, local authorities viewed the process as an opportunity to identify areas for improvement and consolidation.

#### FACTORS INVOLVED IN GOOD CONSULTATION

- Consultation with service users was dependent upon the culture of consultation within the lead department. Where the authority had a history of consulting service users generally, it was not difficult for lead officers to ensure that people using housing and homelessness services were consulted for the review and strategy. Where consultation with service users was less developed within the authority, lead officers tended to leave it to the last minute or avoid it altogether.
- Having a dedicated officer to undertake and co-ordinate the review and strategy was a major factor in the level and quality of consultation, both within authorities and with outside agencies and users. In a small number of authorities, a dedicated post had been created specifically for the development of the review and strategy, which allowed the post-holder to concentrate his or her efforts, rather than having their time spread around a larger number of tasks. Generally, where there was a dedicated lead officer, consultation was more widespread and action plans more detailed and specific.
- Where lead officers had knowledge of research skills and/or experience of undertaking and commissioning research, their ability to devise methods of consulting service users were, not surprisingly, considerably better.

The involvement of front-line staff as well as strategic staff in consultation proved to be useful; as well as giving those at the ‘coal-face’ the opportunity to air their views, it brought a ‘reality check’ to the consultation process. Those staff dealing with homelessness on a day-to-day basis were able to give insights into where the problems and issues lay, and identify the priority areas to be tackled.

Where consultation with outside agencies was successful, it had led to increased mutual awareness and understanding and better working relationships. The strongest links tended to be made with social services and voluntary agencies. Local councillors and providers of health services were generally less involved.

#### EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN CONSULTATION INCLUDED:

- A steering group involving Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), social services, a range of voluntary sector agencies and councillors.
- Consultation workshops with both voluntary and statutory sector staff to explore specific elements of the review and strategy.
- Surveys and focus groups with service users to obtain their views on the quality of current service provision.

The level and nature of consultation with social services, the voluntary sector and service users is described in the sections below.

### 3.3 Working with social services

As outlined above, there were some problems in involving social services representatives on steering groups. There were also difficulties associated with gaining information for review documents and input into review and strategy consultation documents. There were examples of these difficulties even where the lead department and social services were in the same directorate. In one local authority, the lead officer reported that their relationship with social services was 'odd' and that the involvement of social services with the review had been 'poor':

**'They were in at the beginning of the working group, dropped out for a fair bit in the middle and then re-surfaced at the end and wanted to change everything.'** Lead Officer

However, whilst social services also admitted that their involvement had been inconsistent, they felt that this was due to a lack of information from the lead department about how the review was being developed. And, whilst the lead officer reported that social services would be involved in the future implementation group for the strategy, the social services representative was not aware of how this was to happen.

Consultation and engagement with social services was reported by lead officers to be problematic in just under half of the local authorities. This reflects the findings of Shelter's *'Progress and Practice'*<sup>13</sup> research. In the majority of cases this was due to a common perception that homelessness is largely viewed as the problem of the housing department alone. For example, one lead officer felt that the level of social services' involvement had to be limited because in his view, their primary role was child protection. Another lead officer who clearly saw the review and strategy process as the main responsibility of the lead department echoed this:

**'Basically, we are asking them [social services] to do part of our work and I am not sure that there is much in it for them.'** Lead Officer

This reflects a traditional view from some lead officers and other departments that homelessness is the responsibility of the housing or homelessness department rather than an issue that the council should view as a corporate responsibility.

Although some lead officers had had difficulty engaging social services, the perspective of those social services representatives that had been fairly heavily involved in the review and strategy process was positive. In just over half of the local authorities, the social services representative reported that their experience with the reviews and strategies had been very positive, as it had helped to develop their relationships with the lead department, whilst also building their knowledge of homelessness issues in relation to their own work.

**'My involvement was very helpful. I also had the full support of my own senior colleagues.'** Social services representative

**'...the requirement for joint working on homelessness has been written into our own strategy.'** Social services representative

**'It was very helpful personally. It's helped to develop my knowledge of homelessness in several local authority areas.'** Social services representative

**'Hearing and meeting regularly with colleagues in housing and listening to their perspective is very good.'** Social services representative

Where lead officers and social services enjoyed positive relations, the process and outcome were considerably better. This is important since structures can be re-created but individual personalities

and relationships cannot. Several lead officers explained that it was essential to speak with people on a one-to-one basis in order to secure their commitment:

**‘It didn’t work doing the big meeting stuff... Sitting down with my equivalent...you can explain why it’s their problem. I don’t think it made much sense to people to say it’s everybody’s problem.’** Lead Officer

Whilst it is important to recognise that the involvement of social services in the review and strategy process has been viewed quite differently, between the lead officer and the social services representative, it should also be borne in mind that only nine interviews were achieved with social services. It is possible that those that did not engage with the research may have been less engaged in the whole process, though this is not a definite conclusion.

Additionally, a couple of social services representatives that did take part in the research indicated some problems relating to their involvement, or that of other members of their department, in the review process. For example:

**‘Encouragement to be involved needs to come from the top down and it often doesn’t – particularly in social services.’** Social services representative

**‘The real downside is that it is very time-consuming – [being involved in the review] is a very big commitment to what is already a high workload.’** Social services representative

In a small number of authorities, social services involvement was significant. In these cases, social services representatives had provided information on homelessness to the lead department for the reviews, although there was recognition that they did not collect comprehensive data on all types and causes of homelessness. Their main concerns were tracking families, young people and those with physical disabilities or mental health problems, although attending steering group meetings about the review and strategy did broaden their agenda and widen their involvement.

#### **CASE STUDY – OBTAINING GOOD ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL SERVICES**

One local authority that already had good relations with social services undertook a series of presentations with different county service departments. The need for the presentations was triggered by poor attendance at the initial steering group meeting by county service representatives. In order to avoid duplication of effort, the presentations were carried out in conjunction with several other district authorities who were also developing their review and strategy documents. The presentations also enabled the lead officer to identify the most appropriate person from each service to attend the steering group meetings.

From the perspective of the social services representative, the presentation helped to clarify their responsibilities with regard to homelessness. It also helped to provide a much clearer expectation of what could be done across the district if everyone worked together. For example, social services learned that young people want to be housed in their own local area and therefore it was also important to provide support services within their local area.

More generally, another social services representative said that involvement in the review and strategy process had made them more aware of how their policy impacted on homelessness.

One authority had found it useful to appoint a representative from social services to chair the strategy group. This had widened the agenda as issues arising were seen from a different perspective. This also had the advantage of demonstrating that departments other than housing had a key role to play, and responsibility for, tackling homelessness.



### 3.4 Working with the voluntary sector

Consultation with the voluntary sector was generally very positive and, in many authorities, had led to a much better and closer working relationship and enhanced understanding of each others' work. In areas with a history of consultation and partnership working, the experience of working together for the review strengthened and improved this relationship. In areas where partnership working was less developed, the review had helped to build relationships and, in the majority of cases, it was considered that relationships would continue to improve. To illustrate:

**'They are keen to talk to us. They are keen to come and tell us all the things that are problematic about housing grants... and the usual things. The challenge is getting them to see a wider agenda... but overall, they are just pleased for the council to come out [and see them].'** Lead Officer

#### EFFECTIVE WORKING WITH THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

- 'Workshop' models of consultation with agencies were considered to be very effective and some of the local authorities that used this method reported that they intend to continue it, and may possibly broaden it out to other areas of their work. The model worked by focusing on particular homelessness problems and discussing them in broad cross-departmental/agency groups. Lead officers reported that workshop models were particularly useful because the people involved were very enthusiastic and felt that they were contributing to finding solutions to homelessness problems.
- A useful approach adopted by some authorities was to ask voluntary sector agencies not just about the services they offered currently, but what services they would like to be able to provide in the future. This broadened their thinking and enabled them to see how they could work together with the authority on aspects of homelessness that they had not previously realised were within their capabilities.
- One authority employed an innovative way of broadening the consultation, using a 'snowballing' approach to identify voluntary sector service providers; each agency they contacted was asked to identify others with similar concerns. This approach enabled the inclusive and comprehensive assessment of homelessness service provision in the local authority area.
- In another authority, the lead officer personally visited as many voluntary sector organisations as possible in order to engage them in the consultation process.

### 3.5 Working with local councillors

Only seven councillors participated in the research. However, those that were interviewed did demonstrate a clear commitment to dealing with homelessness in an inclusive and preventative way. The involvement of local councillors in the review and strategy process varied widely, but in some cases, they had been very involved in the process. This included:

- attending steering group meetings and inputting into the budget planning
- regularly informing other council members about progress through cabinet reports
- being involved in formalising and agreeing the final strategy.

## CASE STUDY – EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH COUNCILLORS

In one authority, the lead officer invited councillors to one of the steering group meetings, at which front-line staff from different agencies presented case studies:

‘...so that they could actually get a picture of what it meant to be homeless [locally].’ Lead Officer

The same authority was also planning a homelessness workshop for councillors, extending the invitation to councillors from the various districts and the county. In this example, the local councillor interviewed viewed the review and strategy process positively and felt that much had been learned as a consequence, especially in relation to homeless groups:

‘I feel we now have a much fuller understanding of homeless groups and in particular the cultural issues... such as the stigma of going on the housing list within the Orthodox Jewish community and a greater tolerance of overcrowding in certain cultures’ Councillor

However, where there had been a change in leadership, due to the May 2003 elections, councillors acknowledged their lack of awareness of the strategy, or at least a limited knowledge of its contents.

‘I’m not aware of the strategy really.’ Councillor

‘I’ve read it. I wouldn’t say I’ve totally digested it.’ Councillor

Yet there was still a clear recognition that the strategy document is a useful tool in helping councillors to improve their awareness of the key issues:

‘I’ve got to be honest – [homelessness] didn’t have so much significance to me until I started getting involved in reading through the strategy with the team.’ Councillor

### 3.6 Consultation with service users

Although all local authorities acknowledged the importance of service user consultation and a minority had undertaken high quality and comprehensive consultation, there were specific issues and problems raised across the board. This may be due in part to the fact that local authorities historically have not been required to consult with service users and therefore had limited experience in the field, coupled with a shortage of time and resources. Because of these factors, some of the attempts to consult users were not particularly successful. In two review documents there was no reference to consulting service users at all. In another case the lead officer had specifically chosen not to include some of the more ‘marginal’ groups, such as people with HIV, in the consultation process because of concerns that the process would get too large and unwieldy. Such authorities must be strongly encouraged to redress these omissions at the earliest opportunity.

## DIFFICULTIES IN CONDUCTING USER CONSULTATION

A small number of authorities sent out postal questionnaires some time after respondents had used the council’s homelessness service. This inevitably led to very low response levels. Additionally, it was difficult to determine from the review documents just how many questionnaires were actually completed by service users since base numbers were not generally stated alongside the survey findings.

In most cases, the methods adopted for consulting service users were not clearly outlined in the reviews, therefore it was not always clear what type of consultation had been

undertaken and whether it had been successful or not. Lead officers were also asked about any consultation that had been undertaken with service users which was not mentioned in the reviews, but generally no additional consultation had been carried out. One lead officer did admit that their local authority had only ‘dabbled’ in consultation with service users and thus no substantial information had been gained that could be included in the review.

However, there were a number of examples where authorities had managed to engage users in a useful consultative process.

#### **CASE STUDY – EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE USERS**

In one authority, questionnaires were sent to users at the point at which a decision on their homeless application was issued. Whereas most authorities reported poor responses to postal surveys, this particular survey generated a good response and was felt to be useful as it showed both that users wanted to be consulted and that service planning for homeless people was a long-term consideration rather than a ‘quick-fix’ issue. The lead officer stated:

‘Obviously, homeless people aren’t with you for a few weeks; they are with you for many years in different forms of temporary accommodation and different guises, so people are concerned that actually, yes, they may think the quality of the accommodation is good but they would like to know what is going on and what is happening next...A lot of issues are customer involvement; wanting to be far more involved in the process and far more than just being consulted, but being involved in service planning itself...’

Strategy documents showed that the majority of local authorities had decided to introduce ‘point of service’, or exit surveys in future.

Other innovative approaches to service user consultation are described below.

#### **EXAMPLES OF INNOVATION IN CONSULTING SERVICE USERS**

##### **Specialist consultation with ethnic minority groups and young people at risk**

One authority that did not have the resources in-house employed a consultant to conduct focus groups with local Turkish and Orthodox Jewish communities, and a further specialist to consult with young people, especially those considered to be at risk of becoming homeless. This proved a useful means of identifying their specific concerns.

##### **Using art as a gateway to discussion**

Another authority had employed a local artist to draw pictures of homeless people and build up a dialogue during the process, in order to find out what their particular needs were under non-threatening conditions. According to the lead officer, this had been an especially useful method to encourage older men, who had previously not been very communicative, to talk about their homelessness situation.

As a direct result of user consultation, a number of specific initiatives were put forward as action points in some local authorities’ strategies. These included:

- allowing homeless applications to be made at the offices of voluntary agencies for those users who do not want to contact the council

- providing outreach advice and prevention services for specific minority ethnic groups. Sessions would focus on problems that service users had identified – family breakdown, domestic violence, housing benefit issues, the shortage of larger homes and the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.
- providing opportunities for homeless people and existing residents to meet up, in order to try and dispel prejudice about the ‘kind of people homeless folk are’.

### 3.7 Positive outcomes of partnership working

Compiling the reviews and strategies required a multi-agency approach, and thus enabled people to learn more about how other agencies and inter-council departments work, which increased mutual understanding and co-operation. As a consequence of the review and strategy process there have been improvements in the way local authorities work together, which have been translated into action points.

As well as producing the reviews and strategies, working together provided an opportunity to develop useful inter-departmental and cross-agency relationships, which could be used again on other initiatives. In some cases, where relationships already existed (for example, where the council and social services had undertaken a joint review of services or a Best Value Review), these were strengthened and deepened by the homelessness review and strategy process.

Some social services and health staff said that the process had made them realise how the policy of their own departments can directly impact on homelessness, and how this has helped to improve service provision. For example:

**‘It has raised our awareness – the need to consider homelessness when we are developing our strategies.’** Social services representative

The joint health and homelessness conference, run by the ODPM in 2002, was well received by respondents, although social services presence at it had been low. The thinking behind conferences of this type was seen as a good idea and local authority and social services officers expressed interest in attending similar conferences in the future.

A minority of strategies outlined in their action plans that assessments for young people should be carried out jointly by housing and social services departments. This was because many young people at risk of becoming homeless would be care leavers and already known to social services. By conducting joint assessments, it was hoped to be possible to identify housing solutions that best suited young people’s needs. One authority suggested that preventative work with young people should be carried out in schools, thus reducing the likelihood of young people being at risk of becoming homeless.

One social services representative reported that they now meet with the homelessness department ‘more than ever before’ and that they are currently in the process of developing protocols for how they work together, including joint training and liaising between teams:

**‘The review and strategy have acted as a springboard to developing things as they have made us work more effectively.’** Social services representative

One authority had plans to set up a direct access managed hostel for young people leaving care, as part of a joint project between its housing and social services departments. This authority was also part of a countywide venture to tackle homelessness, and its strategy document showed evidence of close liaison with the county council and social services.

Other joint ventures with social services included setting up a specialist team to provide a range of services to young people. This link was already established before undertaking the review and strategy and the local authority and social services were able to capitalise on the relationship and broaden their agenda, for example, in tackling homelessness problems among young people leaving care.

All authorities had plans to improve joint working through the introduction of protocols and procedures across departments, maintaining more consultative ways of working. In addition, many authorities were planning to continue (or to introduce if not already in existence) point of service consultations with service users, so that regular feedback could be used to inform service planning.

### **3.8 Positive outcomes from cross-strategy working**

In several district authorities, the review and strategy process has facilitated partnership working at a county level, with local authorities conducting joint reviews and in some cases, producing joint strategies with their neighbours. This approach has also enabled the review and strategy documents to link in with Supporting People and PCT strategies, being developed at county and wider levels.

One district authority engaged a Shelter local campaign officer to lead on running a countywide sub-group for the Supporting People programme, which was homelessness-focused. The lead officer had felt uncomfortable about 'chairing' over other districts, and found Shelter's involvement useful, as the local campaign officer was able to provide an objective viewpoint. This had also served to reduce the workload of the lead officers for each district.

**'That [Shelter] role has been really invaluable. There wasn't anybody [else] that could actually pull us all together.'** Lead Officer

The Supporting People sub-group brought together the lead officers from six districts, enabling them to think about homelessness on a countywide basis. Not only did this help to avoid duplication of work at the county level, and thus save valuable resources, it has also facilitated better consultation at the strategic level across a range of policy imperatives. Inter-departmental working and partnership working with neighbouring authorities had helped to build relationships, improving those that already existed and providing the first steps where they did not.

Many of the strategies examined outlined examples of cross-departmental good practice, not just on homelessness but on related policy areas such as housing generally; services for young and older people and those considered 'at risk.' Joint working has led to more comprehensive strategies and clearly shows that homelessness is a cross-cutting issue for which there must be a multi-agency responsibility.

**In a broader sense, it has enabled authorities to identify gaps in their knowledge, build stronger relationships with other departments and agencies and develop a multi-agency approach not just to homelessness, but also to wider issues.**







## 4. Data collection and analysis

A central element of the reviews involved collating and analysing the range of data related to homelessness in order to produce an accurate picture of the nature and levels of homelessness in each local authority area. The new legislation underlined the need for a preventative approach to homelessness; local authorities were therefore required to include information on all groups of homeless and potentially homeless people in the review and strategy. However, the presentation and interpretation of data was probably one of the weakest aspects of the review documents and in many cases, local authorities presented data without interpreting it or linking it to other information collated for the review.

Local authorities identified difficulties in gathering and presenting data both for BME populations and on the causes of homelessness in general. Most problems were attributed to the lack of any available data or the fact that different departments collected data in different formats. In addition, in many cases, officers responsible for producing the review and strategy did not have all the necessary research and data analysis skills. Training in this area would be helpful in future.

Although data collection and interpretation was often limited, most local authorities did recognise both where gaps lay and the need for comprehensive data collection in future across different departments. The need for staff training in data analysis was also identified as an issue. These findings reflect those for the authorities examined in Shelter's *'Progress and Practice'* research.<sup>14</sup>

### 4.1 Difficulties in the collation of data for homelessness reviews

In the main, local authorities tended to include in their reviews all the data that was available on homelessness, rather than selecting information that would inform the development of the strategy document. Analysis and interpretation of this data was also quite weak in the majority of the review documents. Not only did this mean that the review documents were very difficult to follow but that some of the action points outlined in the strategies were unsubstantiated and appeared in some cases to be based more on anecdotal knowledge about the issues than hard data.

There was also a tendency for authorities not to read across the data and to therefore not pick up links across action points. For example, one local authority's review identified domestic violence as one of the biggest causes of homelessness. It also referred to the low take-up of places in a women's refuge, but made no connection between these two important findings and therefore failed to address the issue properly in the strategy's action plan. Similarly, in another review, care leavers were treated as a separate group from young people and therefore some issues that affected both of these groups were not addressed.

The lack of interpretation of data was most obvious in relation to consultation with service users. Where surveys had been undertaken, findings were usually presented without interpretation and sample sizes were not reported. This meant that the validity of the findings was open to question, as it was not clear how many people the reported findings were based on. One authority's review acknowledged that the findings from a survey it had conducted had limited value because they were unrepresentative, but its strategy then advocated the use of the same methodology as a means of showing commitment to consultation with service users.

These difficulties suggest that some lead officers were not confident about interpreting the data available to them and show that training is required to develop research skills and build confidence.

Local authorities also had problems collecting appropriate data for the review from other agencies and departments. According to lead officers, this was primarily due to data being held on different systems and in different ways:



**‘The reviews really highlighted that there is a dearth of hard information. All the various organisations do keep data but they keep it for their purposes and it is not always compatible with what we are seeking to collect data about.’** Lead Officer

**‘There is information there but you have to really seek it out and it is not collected or collated in a way that is particularly helpful to us.’** Lead Officer

**‘There’s all that overlapping data that there is no way of separating and working out whether it was duplicated or not.’** Lead Officer

A lot of data was available to local authorities but it was not always easy to access in a way that suits the needs of the review. A compounding issue was lack of data sharing across different departments and agencies. For social services representatives in particular, data collection processes proved to be especially problematic since they often had to provide data for more than one local authority’s housing department:

**‘I have provided information for the review for several local authorities but not all collect the same data.’** Social services representative

Not only did they have to collect different types of data for different local authorities but it was also required in different formats due to the lack of consistency in terms of computer hardware:

**‘There are different information systems across the areas.’** Social Services representative

**‘Computer systems are not as advanced as we’d like them to be.’**  
Social services representative

There were also particular problems associated with the collection of data for specific groups and about specific issues. In particular, data relating to the black and minority ethnic (BME) homeless population was difficult to obtain and therefore evidence-based research related to BME issues was limited. This was particularly the case in relation to reasons for homelessness among the BME population and, for some groups, their reasons for not using council homelessness services.

Additionally, a minority of lead officers indicated particular data weaknesses in relation to the causes of homelessness more generally. While reasons for current homeless applications were available, historical information – which would be of particular relevance to targeting preventative services – was more difficult to obtain.

## **4.2 Clear plans for future data collection**

Despite the problems of data collection and analysis, the majority of lead officers reported that the review and strategy process had been very valuable, even if it had only really helped to identify where the main data gaps remain:

**‘We’ve learned what we don’t know. We discovered in doing the review vast gaps in our knowledge.... the review is more valuable for what it doesn’t say than what it does.’**  
Lead Officer

Common areas where there were gaps in knowledge relating to homelessness emerged:

- most authorities identified the need for further information relating to the reasons for homelessness, hidden homelessness and levels of rough sleeping
- a small number identified the need for further research about the needs of particular groups, for example BME groups and victims of domestic violence.

The identification of gaps in data was recognised as being a first step towards more comprehensive data collection and analysis in the future.

Where gaps in information were identified, it was not always possible for authorities to address them immediately. However, the important point is that by identifying gaps, authorities should now be able to plan how to move forward. This was recognised and outlined in a small number of local authority strategies.

In all cases, there was a lack of consistency in data collection across different departments. Social services departments for instance, might only hold data on homelessness as part of a wider data set relating to a specific group; for example, young people leaving care or women who have suffered domestic violence. The need to co-ordinate better data collection across different departments was recognised by most authorities.

All of the reviews and strategies recognised the need for improved monitoring of services, and that this should be undertaken on a multi-agency basis so that people did not ‘slip through the net.’ Many authorities planned to implement a multi-agency monitoring system in order to improve the quality and availability of data in the future, and one already had this in place. Most also recognised the need to implement multi-agency monitoring in order to undertake analysis of the causes of repeat homelessness. This was seen as being a preventative measure that would identify those groups at risk, so that actions could be appropriately targeted according to need.

## **5. Implementation – targets, monitoring and action plans**

Part of the requirement of producing a homelessness strategy is to set targets and formulate action plans in relation to tackling homelessness in future, both in a reactive and preventative way. Despite large amounts of data and information being amassed in the reviews, the majority of local authorities experienced difficulties in prioritising this information in their strategy and translating it into specific action points. The following section outlines the difficulties involved in setting targets and action points and monitoring them, and then highlights examples of good practice.

### **5.1 Difficulties in target setting**

In most of the strategies, parts of the action plans were vague and had not been prioritised and in some cases, read as a ‘to do’ list, primarily for the lead department. In addition, there was a lack of reference across action points in terms of how one action might impact on another.

In general, there was also a lack of specific target setting in the strategy documents. The only hard target that most authorities had set was to reduce their usage of bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation. However, in the main, target setting and action points in the strategies were vague. ‘Soft’ targets were more common; for example, publishing a six-monthly report to cabinet members, or providing monthly reports for the strategy group.

One of the difficulties of setting targets was the fact that for the majority of local authorities, there had been little or no quantitative data analysis historically. Specific means of monitoring needed to measure progress towards any targets set was therefore largely missing from the action plans.

Lack of monitoring data and ‘hard’ target setting may also be due partly to the lack of knowledge about research and data analysis, as mentioned previously. A broader and more in-depth knowledge of their authority’s data could provide lead officers with the confidence to establish appropriate monitoring systems and set realistic targets for their area. In addition, lack of knowledge about the availability of resources when action plans were written also compounds the difficulties of setting realistic and achievable targets.

In one case, there were examples of actions listed in the appendix of a strategy document that had not been previously mentioned in the main body of the strategy document. The authority had not

produced a review document and the strategy was based on limited research. The lead officer explained that:

**‘There are things that are not mentioned, there are things that were coming on board as we were writing it.’ Lead Officer**

In this particular case the lead officer said that it was difficult to know when to draw a line under the action points in the strategy document, as new issues kept arising over the course of the review and strategy development process.

#### EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN ACTION PLANNING

The level of detail in each authority’s action plans varied, but there were a minority in which clear actions had been set out and prioritised.

One authority had used a ‘traffic light system’ to identify key priorities for action, which although not a quantitative measure, did give an idea of priorities based on stakeholder knowledge in the face of a lack of ‘hard’ data.

Two authorities that had produced extremely comprehensive review and strategy documents had action plans that reflected this, with action points clearly addressing the issues raised in the review. Each objective was set out with a target date for completion and list of available resources. A lead person was identified to co-ordinate each action. In addition, potential risks to the delivery of each action point had been outlined, along with contingency plans should problems arise, for example, with resource issues.

These particular authorities had also been realistic about what they could achieve, rather than producing a ‘wish list’. For example, one of the authorities identified the need to address the needs of the BME population and recognised that this would require specialist resources that would have cost implications. The authority had identified short-term funding for specialist posts, including translation services and consultants to work with particular faith groups. However, the lead officer recognised that further development funding would need to be sought if work in this area was to be ongoing. It was accepted that issues such as the need for larger homes for extended families in some ethnic minority groups would require a longer-term approach.

Many authorities identified the need for more specialist support services (to fill the gaps where resources were lacking) and the need to place greater emphasis on the prevention of homelessness. Two authorities were in the process of allocating a dedicated worker to implement their homelessness strategy.

Most authorities had set the objective of reviewing their homelessness strategies annually; although a number of them stressed that the aims set out in the action plans would be constantly reviewed and assessed as they developed. To illustrate:

**‘[The steering group] is going to carry on meeting every month and we have a 12- point action plan, and I am in the process of now arranging a timetable so that for those 12 points there will be key lead officers...I am expecting colleagues of mine to actually own the issue and to decide themselves how they are going to deal with it; how they are going to cope; and if they can’t do it they are going to come back and tell us.’ Lead Officer**

There was recognition of the importance of joint working in monitoring and developing action points. One lead officer stated:

**‘I am not going to set up all the systems myself; I couldn’t, it is impossible – it has to be a piece of joint work.’**

## 6. Preventing homelessness

All the review and strategy documents included a section on prevention and recognised its importance, but they also accepted that this would be difficult to put into practice. Whilst lead officers were very aware of the need to adopt a preventative approach to homelessness, for the majority, this was still in its infancy. It is important to fully understand the causes and levels of homelessness in order to be able to undertake preventative measures, and given that most authorities had very patchy data, there is still some way to go before prevention can be properly targeted at those groups ‘at risk’ of homelessness.

Whilst many review and strategy documents identified the importance of education, employment and training in preventing homelessness, as well as the need for appropriately targeted housing information and advice, the majority of local authorities were still in the initial stages of implementing wider ranging preventative measures.

However, local authorities did recognise that prevention is a long-term initiative. Lead officers in two authorities stated that the completion of the reviews and strategies were not an end point in themselves, but represented the start of addressing the problems of homelessness. It was generally accepted that homelessness is an ongoing problem that needs to be tackled through a combination of preventative measures and multi-agency approaches.

### 6.1 Developing services to prevent homelessness

The majority of local authorities had identified that investment in prevention and support services can lead to savings at the acute end of the homelessness problem, for instance by reducing the provision of temporary and B&B accommodation. However, they had experienced difficulties in getting the ‘invest to save’ message across to other agencies, as current means of allocating budgets focused on solving immediate and short-term problems.

Despite the limitations, authorities outlined a number of ways in which they aimed to prevent homelessness in their areas, including recognition that homelessness needs to be tackled from a multi-agency perspective. Authorities recognised that joined-up working was needed to address the problems of unemployment, education and training needs and the causes of homelessness such as domestic violence, family breakdown and young single people at risk.

#### EXAMPLES OF NEW SERVICES AIMED AT THE PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS

##### **Improving housing advice services**

A number of strategies planned to ensure that advice was available both at the ‘point of entry’ to the social housing system and in an ongoing context. This would enable tenants to be aware of available options if problems arose and could help to prevent evictions from occurring.

##### **Developing services at ‘crisis points’ for people ‘at risk’**

Groups ‘at risk’ of homelessness included those leaving hospitals, hostels (including women’s refuges) and prisons. In approximately half of the local authority case studies, domestic violence was a major cause of homelessness, and it was recognised that closer links were needed with social services and services such as Women’s Aid to anticipate and prevent this.

##### **Education and training**

Several authorities recognised that education, employment and training representatives needed to be involved in a multi-pronged approach. A small number of strategies

suggested undertaking learning and training needs assessments with homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless and one raised the idea of 'skilling up' homeless people. The thinking behind these strategies was that a focus on employment and training needs would help to break the links between lack of skills, unemployment and homelessness, while also raising the self-esteem of homeless people.

#### **Provision of support**

One authority's strategy suggested working together with the Supporting People team to develop an assessment process to establish the support needs of a number of key groups of homeless people, including young people leaving care, those fleeing domestic violence, ex-offenders, drug and alcohol users, older people and people with mental health problems.

One authority aimed to improve awareness about the support available to people whilst they were in temporary accommodation.

There was also general recognition among local authorities that different user groups have different needs, and authorities suggested a number of preventative measures in their strategies that would target particular groups.

### **EXAMPLES OF NEW SERVICES FOR SPECIFIC GROUPS**

#### **Services for young people and care leavers**

One authority's strategy suggested a supported lodging scheme for care leavers, and another suggested a scheme for young people which would provide short-term intensive supported accommodation.

#### **Services for rough sleepers**

One authority suggested a 'trainee' flat scheme to help vulnerable people who had been homeless, particularly those who have been sleeping rough, to make the transition to settled housing. This group of people would receive advice and support services as well as accommodation.

#### **Services for older people**

A service to help older people remain in their homes was put forward by one authority, who suggested providing a small repairs service, thus enabling older people, who would otherwise be unable to cope alone, to retain their independence.

Authorities were aware that difficulties remained. Some identified the need for extra staff to focus on prevention (as good prevention initiatives were seen as being necessarily staff-intensive), but were currently unable to fund the provision of these extra posts. All authorities stated that they would like to see less reliance on use of B&B accommodation, in line with ODPM targets, and investing in preventative measures was seen as one way of achieving this.



## **Appendix A: List of participating authorities**

Allerdale Borough Council

City of Norwich Council

City of Westminster Council

Coventry City Council

District of Bolsover Council

Dover District Council

Exeter City Council

Gateshead Council

Harrogate Borough Council

London Borough of Hackney

London Borough of Harrow

North Somerset Council

Oswestry Borough Council

Rochdale Council

West Oxfordshire District Council



## Appendix B: Research methodology

### Selection of local authorities

The authorities were selected using a mixture of random and purposive methods. Authorities were selected to cover a broad geographic range within England and to ensure that a mix of large and small, rural and urban authorities were represented. Additionally, selection was undertaken in such a way as to ensure inclusion of authorities with different characteristics and experiences – for example a number that had worked on countywide strategies and a number that Shelter's local campaign officers felt had overcome local difficulties in producing their strategies.

The 15 local authorities that participated in the Shelter '*Progress and Practice*' survey research were not selected for this piece of research in order to avoid overburdening those authorities or duplicating research.

### Desk-based reviews of homelessness review documents

A checklist for assessing the comprehensiveness of the review documents was developed by the research team and agreed with Shelter. The checklist was used to establish whether review documents for each local authority covered specific points. A pro-forma was developed to record information against the checklist for each local authority area. The analysis of the data was conducted using a matrix approach, which examined the data thematically based on the different elements in the checklist across the different local authorities.

There were some difficulties associated with this element of the study, as some of the review documents were not available to the research team as early as had been anticipated. Only 11 of the 15 local authorities actually produced a separate review document. Of the four that did not, three did undertake substantial reviews and incorporated the results into their strategies. The remaining local authority did some research which fed into the strategy but the research did not constitute a full review.

### In-depth telephone interviews with lead officers

The research team developed a topic guide for in-depth interviews with the officer in each of the authorities that had lead responsibility for conducting the review and developing the strategy. The topic guide was agreed in consultation with Shelter and was used as the core guide in undertaking the interviews. However, the individual in-depth interviews were tailored depending on any particular issues identified at the review assessment stage.

The in-depth interviews focused very much on information, which was not available from the written documentation, for example process issues, especially where there had been particular problems or particularly useful approaches had been adopted. The interviews helped to identify what the local authorities had learnt from the process and how they intended to progress in the future.

### Telephone interviews with social services representatives

Interviews were undertaken with relevant representatives of social services in each of the case study local authority areas where possible. Nine interviews were completed in total. Appropriate contacts were identified with the help of the lead homelessness strategy officer. Although reasonable attempts were made, in some cases it was not possible to establish contact with an appropriate individual within social services. In two cases, the person who had been involved in the review and strategy process had left and in another two cases, appointments were broken on more than one occasion. For the remaining two cases, contact was never established despite telephone calls and messages being left. In some cases, this in itself can be seen as reflecting some

of the difficulties faced by the lead officer in trying to engage with other departments while undertaking the reviews and developing the strategies. It also partly reflects the workloads of some social services representatives and the fact that much of their time is spent out of the office.

### **Telephone interviews with key council members**

To assess the level of importance attached to homelessness and the development of the homelessness strategy by council members, interviews were undertaken with a key council member in each of the case study authorities. The lead homelessness strategy officer in each case identified the appropriate council member. The aim of these interviews was to examine the impact of the reviews and strategies on the councils' priorities and the level of involvement of councillors and their constituents in consultation. As with attempts to interview social service representatives, the researchers had some difficulties in arranging the councillor interviews. Overall, seven councillors were interviewed for the research. Of the remainder, in two cases changes in political leadership meant that the new person in office had no knowledge of the review and strategy process. One councillor refused to take part in the research and in four remaining cases, contact could not be made or appointments were broken despite attempts by the researchers.

As with the other telephone interviews described above, detailed notes of the interviews were made on a tailored pro-forma to facilitate analysis.

### **Desk-based review of homelessness strategy documents**

The research team developed a checklist for assessing the quality of strategy documents, both on their own merit and in relation to the quality of the review document. This was agreed with Shelter. A checklist and pro-forma were also used to record information for each local authority area and the data was analysed using the same approach as for the analysis of the review documents.

### **Research tools**

Topic guides for the telephone interviews and the pro-forma used to analyse the review and strategy documents are available from Shelter's Research Team (020 7505 2000) on request.



