

Shelter

Common monitoring  
A good practice guide



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# Foreword

Much has been achieved since the Homelessness Act 2002 and Shelter's Homelessness Act Implementation Campaign. Local authorities have welcomed the switch from their homelessness service being about responding to events, towards one that is anticipating problems and preventing them becoming crises. Much has been learnt about the process of carrying out a review and developing strategies that fully reflect local needs.

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

When drafting their first strategy, many local authorities have realised there is still much information on homelessness that needs to

be gathered, particularly regarding single people. Common monitoring schemes facilitate the collation of local data and can therefore help bridge this gap. Gathering information in this way, on single people who are experiencing homelessness or housing problems, can provide an accurate picture of the situation and assist authorities and their partners to find solutions.

Shelter has been coordinating a common monitoring system in Merseyside since 1995, known as the Multi-Agency Monitoring scheme. This document has been put together in response to requests from many areas for a simple, practical guide to setting up similar systems. We hope that this is a useful tool, and that it assists local authorities and other agencies to further develop their services for single people in housing need.



Adam Sampson  
Director, Shelter

# Introduction

## Background

Shelter established the Young Persons Housing Resource Centre in 1990 to tackle youth homelessness on Merseyside. Its remit was research, development, training, education, and information – all in relation to young people and housing.

Accurate information, on the levels and nature of housing problems encountered by this group, was needed for the centre to carry out its function. The media, statutory bodies, and others, also regularly asked for figures that showed the extent of need. The problem was that local authorities did not record separate data on young people, and other agencies working with homeless people all gathered and collated their information differently. The centre knew that what was needed was a way of accumulating and standardising all this information in order to get a more complete picture.

Shelter developed a common monitoring scheme called Multi-Agency Monitoring in 1995, as a pilot with six organisations. Shelter and Centrepoin developed the initial system jointly, with Shelter facilitating the scheme. Shelter's Young Persons Team still coordinate the scheme for agencies based in Merseyside, and it now involves over 30 organisations collecting data on approximately 3,000 individuals each year.

Benefits of a common monitoring scheme include:

- a greater awareness of housing and homelessness problems in all the areas supplied with multi-agency monitoring information
- any organisation, seeking to develop their own or new services for homeless people, using the data to assess the level and nature of need, and therefore targeting new projects more effectively

- agencies becoming involved because they see the benefits to themselves and their wider aim of improving the situation for young people locally.

## Why do you need to undertake common monitoring?

Recent central government policy expects local authorities to adopt a strategic approach to the development of services for homeless people. The Children Act 1989, Homelessness Act 2002, and Supporting People, have also required housing and/or social services departments to consider local need and produce strategies for addressing that need.

The government has also placed more emphasis on multi-agency and partnership working. Establishing a common monitoring scheme will not only assist local authorities in their development of strategies for homelessness and supporting housing, but also lead the way for local agencies to work more closely together.

## Homelessness Act reviews and strategies

The Homelessness Act 2002 provides an opportunity for the approach to homelessness to change from a crisis-driven service to a strategic response, based on early intervention to prevent homelessness. As a result local authorities have a duty to review homelessness and develop a strategy for tackling it in their area.

In undertaking a review of the levels and likely future levels of homelessness, many areas will have difficulties because information is not gathered in the right form, is spread across many different agencies, is not gathered at all, or cannot be compared. Improving the quality and consistency of data collected is likely

to be a theme throughout reviews, and establishing an effective monitoring and evaluation process will probably need to become an objective of the strategy. Common monitoring schemes are particularly useful for measuring single homelessness, as this group has always been the hardest to quantify.

**Homelessness reviews should research:**

1. current and future levels of homelessness
2. activities undertaken to: prevent homelessness; secure that accommodation is available for homeless people; provide support to homeless people
3. resources available to the local housing authority, social services, other public agencies, voluntary organisations, and others, for such activities.

**Homelessness strategies should be formulated by the local housing authority after consultation, and should aim to:**

1. prevent homelessness
2. secure that sufficient accommodation is and will be available for people who are, or may, become homeless
3. secure the satisfactory provision of support services (defined as advice, information, and assistance) for homeless people.

**Supporting People**

The Supporting People programme introduced a new framework to promote and improve the quality of housing-related support services in England – a new detailed system of planning, monitoring, and funding for housing-related support services.

The Supporting People strategy requires a common needs-assessment approach to identify needs not currently being appropriately met, and to plan for future provision by obtaining detailed knowledge on what services are already being provided in the local area.

The strategy will be developed alongside other key local authority strategies such as the housing strategy, health improvement plan, community safety strategy, and the community plan.

Any mapping of need and supply requires quantitative information and must therefore involve all stakeholders: local government; services-users' health, probation and support agencies.

**Street homelessness**

Historically, street counts have been the main method used for assessing levels of rough sleeping. Whilst these can be useful snapshots, they do not, however, always provide a clear picture of the extent of street homelessness.

A common monitoring system will add value to street counts and can help local authorities assess levels of need among rough sleepers.

# Aims of common monitoring

## **To research the extent and nature of homelessness**

- to assess the number of single homeless people
- to gain a profile of single homeless people
- to gain an accurate picture of the type of housing problems faced by single homeless people
- to identify patterns of referrals and approaches to agencies for assistance
- to examine the experiences of homeless people
- to identify factors contributing to homelessness.

## **To assist development and strategic planning**

- to assess the match between supply and demand
- to identify gaps in provision and services

- to assist local authorities and other organisations in developing appropriate resources
- to promote a coordinated response to homelessness at a local level
- to encourage multi-agency working to meet the need of homeless people.

## **Campaigning and dissemination of information**

- to monitor the effects of local policy and national legislation on access to housing
- to raise the profile of homelessness and service provision
- to keep providers and policy makers informed as to the level and nature of need
- to inform national and local campaigns, to improve the rights and services available to homeless people.

# Setting up a common monitoring scheme

## Generating interest

A local housing or homelessness forum is a good place to start when setting up a common monitoring scheme, as many of the key agencies will be members. They are also likely to support such an initiative and help attract other organisations to the scheme.

If there is no such group, organising a meeting or seminar is a good way to generate interest. It is unlikely that either of these methods will successfully attract all relevant agencies to the scheme, so one-to-one follow up meetings will be essential for recruiting others. This direct contact is essential, not only for recruitment but, also, for inducting new members into the scheme and ensuring that all participants are recording and coding information accurately.

## Timescales

If there is an established forum, and common monitoring was detailed in the homelessness strategy, then establishing a scheme could happen fairly quickly. It may be beneficial to run a short pilot scheme that could provide a snapshot of the issues facing an area and afford the opportunity to iron out problems. The outcome and statistics from this could be used to encourage other agencies to join.

## Lead agency

A multi-agency monitoring scheme, by its very nature, requires one organisation to undertake the role of lead agency and for others to be participating agencies. It is essential for one organisation to commit staff time to its coordination.

## The role of the lead agency is:

- to act as facilitator by gathering and collating information
- to set terms of reference for the scheme to which all agencies agree
- to establish systems of monitoring and evaluation, and to establish definitions and coding for the database
- to give feedback, reporting on statistics at agreed times
- to arrange regular meetings for all the agencies involved, and to maintain regular contact with them
- to encourage new agencies to join and to induct them into the scheme
- to chase up late returns
- to keep agencies motivated, and encourage a sense of ownership of the project.

## Participating agencies

Any agency that has contact with the target group could be a participating agency. These can include:

- statutory agencies: for example, local housing authorities, social service departments, the probation service, youth offending teams, connexions services
- support services: for example, all agencies providing advice, assistance, or advocacy services for homeless people; outreach teams, rent deposit schemes, family mediation services, Citizens Advice Bureaux, day centres, youth centres
- hostels and supported housing providers: for example, direct access



or emergency hostels, medium-term resettlement projects, shared housing schemes, floating support schemes, foyers, lodging schemes.

**The role of participating agencies is:**

- to follow guidelines and decisions agreed at meetings held for participants
- to adhere to the terms of reference
- to return information at agreed times
- to ensure that all information is as accurate and detailed as possible.

**The type of information**

The key areas of information, detailed below, are those the agencies in Merseyside considered the most useful to collate on their service-users. This list is not exhaustive but needs to be agreed by the participants at the start of the monitoring period. The monitoring period could be either calendar years or financial years.

**Initials and date of birth**

This provides an eight-digit sequence. It avoids double-counting and also makes it possible to track individuals, who approach more than one agency or return to the same organisation later in the year with a different problem.

**Area of origin**

This can identify the local authority the person is from, and also the locality within it. It can monitor:

- local authority policies
- movement within the local authority's boundaries
- problems prevalent in specific areas
- spread of resources.

**Racial and/or ethnic origin**

It is important that clients determine their origins, rather than this being guessed at by a third party. It can monitor:

- any differences or patterns in experiences
- discrimination issues
- accessibility of housing and support services
- demand for specialist provision.

**Household type**

This category can be used to give information on gender as well as different household types (for example, single man and/or lone parent). In our experience, it is simpler to define women who are pregnant as having children, although this may distort information about specific problems faced by pregnant women and access to services. It can monitor:

- differences or patterns in experiences
- discrimination issues
- priority status with housing providers
- accessibility of housing and support services
- demand for specialist provision.

**Sexuality**

It is important that the client discloses this information, and assumptions should not be made. It can monitor:

- any differences or patterns in experiences
- discrimination issues
- accessibility of housing and support services
- demand for specialist provision.

### **Referred by**

This provides information about where or how an individual heard about a service. It can monitor:

- referral patterns
- access to temporary housing
- when and how young people seek advice
- effectiveness of joint working agreements.

### **Slept last night/tenure**

To avoid confusion, this category should record the individual's present situation; for instance, where they slept the night before approaching the agency. It can monitor:

- rough sleeping
- homelessness after having own tenancy
- hidden homelessness
- movement between projects
- local and government policy.

### **Source of income**

This should include the type of wage (full/part-time) or benefit an individual is on, any grant they may receive, or if they are in receipt of no income. It can monitor:

- impact of government policies
- accessibility of private sector
- demand for support services.

### **Housing problem**

When recording data in this category, it is important to ensure that this is their actual housing problem, not what may have caused it. For example, eviction, not rent arrears; or, rent arrears, not housing benefit problems – these other issues are causes, and can be recorded in the 'causes' category below. This information should be the main reason a client has approached an agency. It can monitor many things, including:

- need for advice/preventative measures
- people at risk of sleeping rough
- private renting issues
- landlord problems
- need for support
- neighbour disputes.

### **Support issues**

This can help identify any other problems that an individual has and the type and levels of support they may need. It should detail the needs that the individual would like to be addressed. It can monitor:

- effects of local policy
- need for additional supported housing and other services.

### **Causes**

This is a difficult category, as there is the danger that people may make subjective judgements. It can, however, be used to identify factors which have contributed to the person's housing problem. This can include issues such as family breakdown, redundancy, housing benefit problems, drug use, mental health issues, need for furniture, etc. Again, clarity is very important here. It can monitor:

- impact of government policies
- support needs
- need for practical/financial support.

### **Statutory involvement**

This can be subdivided into three categories – social services, mental health services, and probation involvement. It is useful to detail the nature of the involvement that the agency has with the individual. It can monitor:

- any correlation with homelessness
- need for extra support
- fulfilment of duties by statutory bodies
- need for/effectiveness of joint procedures.

### **Disability**

This category includes physical and learning disabilities, and must be determined by the service-user. It can monitor:

- any differences or patterns in experiences
- discrimination issues
- priority status with housing providers
- practical and support needs
- accessibility of housing and support services
- demand for specialist provision.

### **Outcome / Support provided**

These are both difficult categories, due to the likelihood of individuals being referred between projects as well as it being hard to give a definitive outcome. The aim is to record the initial actions taken or the service provided. It can monitor:

- how many people are turned away
- the level of inter-agency working
- the number of people who move from agency to agency
- numbers housed or temporarily accommodated.

# Running a common monitoring scheme

## Gathering the information

The lead agency manages the database, and participants can send in returns in a variety of formats, depending on their access to IT:

- individual monitoring return-sheets (Appendix one)
- database table (Appendix two)
- spreadsheet.

Data-entry is much quicker if participants have databases or spreadsheets that are compatible with that of the lead agency. If a participating organisation does not have access to any IT, the information can be collected and entered manually – although this will involve substantially more staff time on the part of the lead agency.

The information should be sent on an agreed regular basis – perhaps quarterly. This helps to spread the work of data-entry more evenly throughout the year and allows for six-monthly statistical reports if necessary.

## Data protection and confidentiality

The monitoring scheme we have outlined involves participating organisations passing data on their service-users on to a lead agency. This data is then entered into a database and the raw data is destroyed. In this situation, the lead agency is the processor rather than the controller and, as such, it is

the responsibility of the participating organisations to ensure that their systems are secure. Participating agencies should have a contractual statement from the lead agency in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

A data protection agreement should include the following points:

- the purpose of processing the data
- that the data is protected against unauthorised or unlawful processing, or accidental loss
- that the data will not be passed to any other person without the express consent of the participating agency.

Service users must give their consent before their own data is made available to any other body, but it is important to remember that the information cannot be traced back to an individual once it has been entered onto the computer, so breaching confidentiality should not be an issue. The only information available would be that disclosed by the individual, and the named officer at the participating agency is the only person to see the raw data. There may be some occasions when there are concerns about confidentiality, i.e. when including case studies in reports on rural areas, since individuals may be easier to trace or more recognisable because of their situation. However, this can normally be dealt with by changing the place name, for example.

### **Maintaining interest and increasing membership**

After the scheme has been running for a year, a report can be produced and used as a marketing tool to encourage further agencies to join.

Agencies' involvement is maintained by one staff member within each agency being nominated as the scheme's contact. Thus the lead agency has a contact point for chasing up late returns. If there is a change in personnel, it is vital that the lead agency meet with the new person in charge as soon as possible.

The agencies' responsibilities for sending in returns regularly mean that contact is maintained with the lead agency. However, direct personal contact is key, especially if an organisation is having difficulties with collecting or recording information.

As long as the lead agency continues to fulfil its responsibilities, by providing regular feedback, information, and yearly briefings or reports, the participating agencies tend to continue to fulfil theirs.

Sustainability depends on having the resources and commitment to provide the staff with the time necessary for data-entry and coordination.

Annual meetings keep current agencies involved, and can provide an opportunity for networking with other agencies and recruiting them to the scheme.

### **Timescales**

On Merseyside, the database records information from over 30 organisations on approximately three to four thousand individuals per year. Information is received both as hard copy and electronically. Based on a scheme of this size, one-and-a-half days a week would allow for the inputting of information. Additional time would be needed for analysis and report writing, although another member of staff could undertake this. If all agencies involved were able to provide their data electronically, less time would be required for inputting.

# Troubleshooting

## Incomplete information

Some common problems that arise are:

- the initials and date of birth for an individual are missing. This means that the record cannot be entered, as this is the mechanism by which double-counting is avoided
- some organisations only record data on the people they actually help (some hostels may only provide information on those they accommodate)
- there is difficulty in providing information on outcomes. It is hard to tell whether giving advice or making a referral, for example, resolves someone's housing problem
- no information on the area the individual is from makes it impossible to get an accurate picture of the areas of greatest housing need
- many agencies do not monitor race over the telephone, and many more do not monitor sexuality at all.

In these situations it is important for the lead agency to either meet with the agency concerned to iron out any problems and suggest ways around them, or to organise a meeting with all participants to agree on issues such as how to define outcomes.

Many agencies that have joined the scheme have altered their recording procedures to ensure that all the information is collected for each referral they receive. This can be as simple as having a referral book by the telephone that has a section for each enquiry, listing all the information needed, and which can be filled in at the time of the call.

Race and sexuality can be monitored more easily if a form has been produced which can be given to the service-user or applicant to fill in themselves. Monitoring telephone referrals can still be an issue for some agencies. In these situations it makes sense to agree that each organisation should implement their own policies when dealing with such enquiries, otherwise many hours in meetings will be wasted debating when and how such monitoring will take place. Despite the fact that many do not monitor sexuality, it is still worth including it as a category, as it will provide some information, and will also encourage organisations to improve their recording systems.

### Accuracy

There can be problems with the interpretation of information by different agencies (for example, 'NFA' and 'homeless' have very different meanings to different people).

The production of guidance notes on each category is a way of maintaining accuracy and helps to ensure that the interpretation of information by different agencies is as standardised as possible. It is important to clarify the precise meaning of each term, otherwise it can be very difficult to analyse the data.

Some aspects of the information gathered can be problematic if the individual recording it is making judgements about the service-user. This is a particular danger when looking at causes or support issues.

It is important that agencies joining, as well as long-standing members, are reminded not to make judgements on issues such as mental health problems or drug use. For instance, if an individual is a drug user, this does not necessarily mean their drug use led to their housing problems.

### Staffing issues

Problems arise with participating agencies when:

- the person responsible for the statistical returns in an agency leaves without inducing their replacement
- the person responsible for the statistical returns in an agency is off sick.

Both situations can be resolved easily if there is another person within each organisation who is familiar with the scheme and who can liaise with the lead agency.

# How can Shelter help?

## What we can offer

Having run a successful monitoring scheme for many years, the Young Persons Team are keen to share their knowledge with other organisations wishing to undertake common monitoring. We can provide:

- guidance in setting up a common monitoring scheme
- assistance with the design of forms
- design of the database, with which to collate information
- basic training on using the database and producing figures/outcomes.

The cost for this service for 2004 would be £200 for guidance and database design and £300 for initial on-site support on setting up and using the database.

## Areas operating common monitoring based on the Merseyside Multi-Agency Monitoring model:

- Bath and North East Somerset, operated by Bath & NES Council
- North Norfolk, operated by North Norfolk District Council
- Sandwell, operated by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
- Rotherham, operated by Shelter Ricochet Project
- Cumbria, operated by Shelter Cumbria Housing Aid Centre
- Cheshire, operated by Shelter Cheshire Housing Aid Centre
- Lancaster, operated by Lancaster City Council
- Merseyside, operated by Shelter's Young Persons Team.



# Appendices

The following two appendices provide you with a monitoring return-sheet and a sample database layout that have been used by Shelter's Young Persons Team to collate information and produce statistics.

Evaluation of the scheme showed that these formats work well, but both can be modified.

See Appendix one on page 18 for the monitoring return-sheet.

See Appendix two on page 19 for the sample database layout.

# Appendix one: Monitoring return-sheet

**Initials** \_\_\_\_\_

**DOB** \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

**Individual's area of origin**  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Ethnic origin

Asian/British Asian

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Other

Black/British Black

- Caribbean
- African
- Somali
- Other

Chinese

Dual heritage

- W&B Caribbean
- W&B African
- W & Asian
- Other

- Gypsy
- Traveller

White

- British
- Irish
- Other

Other ethnic group

## Household type

- Couple
- Couple with children
- Lone parent man
- Lone parent woman
- Man
- Woman
- Other

## Sexuality

- Bisexual female
- Bisexual male
- Gay male
- Heterosexual
- Lesbian woman
- Other
- Not disclosed

## Referred by

- Advice agency
- CAB
- Councillor
- Counsellor
- Education/school
- Connexions
- Foyer
- Housing association
- LA housing dept
- Housing trust
- Hospital
- Hostel
- Lodging scheme
- Police
- Probation
- Self/friend/relative
- Social services
- Solicitor
- Street worker
- Unknown
- Women's aid
- Youth justice
- Youth service
- YOT
- Other
- Other statutory

## Slept last night

- Armed forces
- B&B
- Children's home
- Foster care
- Friends
- Housing association
- Hospital
- Hostel
- Introductory tenancy
- LA temporary accom

- LA stock
- Licence
- Lodging scheme
- Mobile home
- Owner-occupier
- Parents
- Police station
- Prison/young offenders
- Private tenancy
- Refuge/safe house
- Relatives
- Shared ownership
- Slept rough
- Squatting
- Student accom
- Tied accom

## Source of income

- DLA
- Full-time work
- Incapacity benefit
- Income Support
- Job Seekers Allowance
- New Deal/Trainee
- None
- Part-time work
- Self-employed
- Student
- SS funding
- Unknown
- Other

## Caller type

- Face-to-face
- Telephone

## Housing problem

- Asylum seeker
- Care in community
- Dampness/disrepair
- End of tenancy
- Eviction
- Harassment
- Homeless on day of application
- Homeless/legal terms
- Illegal eviction
- Leaving institution

- Leaving LA care
- Needs deposit/RIA
- Needs furniture
- New arrival
- Request advice
- Roofless/slept rough
- Seeks accom
- Unknown
- Wants transfer
- Other

## Support issues

- Advocacy
- Alcohol problems
- Counselling
- Drug problems
- Emotional support
- Furnishing
- Learning difficulties
- Leaving care
- Life skills – practical
- Life skills – social
- Mental health problems
- Money/debt advice
- Parenting skills
- Risk of re-offending
- No support required

## Contributory causes

- Abuse
- Alcohol problems
- Challenging/difficult to place
- CPO/closing order
- Death in family
- Domestic violence
- Drug abuse
- Ex-forces
- Family breakdown
- Family leave area
- Family violence
- Fuel costs
- Gambling problems
- Household friction
- Housing benefit
- Landlord/tenant other
- Loss of job
- Medical/health

- Mental health probs
- Move for work
- Needs life skills/support
- Offending
- Other financial
- Overcrowded
- Owner selling
- Parent alcohol/drug prob
- Pregnancy
- Racial harassment
- Relationship breakdown
- Rent arrears/levels
- Repossession
- Sexual harassment
- Split household
- Unsuitable accom
- Violence outside home
- Unknown
- None

## Social services involvement

- Current care order
- Accommodated
- Child in need
- Advice & assistance
- Care leaver
- Previous care order (beyond 16th birthday)
- Care history (ended by 16th birthday)
- Youth justice
- Social services
- YOT
- None

## Mental health involvement

- Community care
- Community psychiatric nurse
- Mental health team
- None

## Probation involvement

- Probation
- Supervision order
- None

## Disability

- Combination

- Learning difficulties
- Mental health issues
- Physical disability
- Unknown
- No disability

## Outcome

- Accommodated
- Advice given
- Application declined
- Bed and breakfast
- Bedsit
- Challenged LA decision
- Client found own accom
- Homeless at home
- Hostel full gave advice
- HA housing
- Inappropriate referral
- Income raised
- Interview /coming back
- Life skills course
- LA housing
- LA temporary accom
- Lodging scheme
- Staying with friends
- Staying with relatives
- Other
- No show for appointment

## Support provided

- Floating support
- Pre-tenancy support
- Placed and referred YPT
- Private sector housing
- Put on waiting-list
- Refer to drug rehab
- Refer to health authority
- Refer to homeless dept
- Refer to housing assoc
- Refer to probation service
- Refer to social services
- Refer to solicitor
- Refer to welfare rights
- Refuge
- Refused offer of accom
- Returned to family home
- Unable to provide help

# Appendix two: Sample database layout

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Access database form titled 'Applicant'. The form is divided into several sections with various input fields and dropdown menus. The top section includes fields for 'Initials', 'DOB' (22/05/1986), and 'Probation Inv'. Below this are fields for 'Ethnic Origin', 'Disability', 'Area of Origin', 'Housing Type', 'Social Services Inv', and 'Mental Health Inv'. A 'Contributory factors' section contains a table with columns for 'Factor' and 'Details', and a record navigation bar showing 'Record: 1 of 1'. The bottom section includes fields for 'DateOfVisit', 'Caller Type', 'Agency', 'Date Referred', 'Referred by', 'Slept Last Night', 'Outcome', 'Housing Status', 'Source of Income', and 'Housing Problem'. A final record navigation bar at the bottom shows 'Record: 1 of 1'. The status bar at the very bottom contains the text 'Take this information directly from the monitoring return sheet.' and a 'NUM' button.

Factor	Details

## Bad housing wrecks lives

Registered charity number 263710  
AUGYPT602

We are the fourth richest country in the world, and yet millions of people in Britain wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded, or dangerous. Many others have lost their homes altogether. Bad housing robs us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter believes everyone should have a home.

We help 100,000 people a year fight for their rights, get back on their feet, and find and keep a home. But we also tackle the root causes of Britain's housing crisis by campaigning for new laws, policies, and solutions.

**We can only do this with your help. Please support us.**

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EC1V 9HU

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or visit [www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)**

£7.50

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