Shelter factsheet

Homelessness

A decent home is fundamental to people's well-being. Despite Britain being one of the richest countries in the world, many people live in accommodation that is run-down, overcrowded or dangerous. Others have lost their homes altogether. Bad housing robs people of their security, health, and a fair chance in life.

This factsheet focuses on what homelessness is; how it is defined by law; and how it impacts on people's lives, particularly in the areas of health and education. It also looks at what is being done to tackle the crisis, and how Shelter is working to prevent homelessness.

Updated October 2007

Call Shelter's free housing advice helpline on 0808 800 4444, 8am–midnight, or visit www.shelter.org.uk

What is homelessness?

Broadly speaking, the law defines somebody as being homeless if they do not have a legal right to occupy any accommodation, or if their accommodation is unsuitable to live in. This can cover a wide range of circumstances, including but not restricted to, the following:

- having no accommodation at all

- having accommodation that is not reasonable to live in, even in the short-term (eg because of violence or health reasons)

- having a legal right to accommodation that you cannot access (eg if you have been illegally evicted)

- living in accommodation you have no legal right to occupy (eg living in a squat or temporarily staying with friends).

Many people only associate homelessness with sleeping on the streets, but this conceals the range and scale of the problem. The reality is that the vast majority of homeless people are families or single people who are not 'sleeping rough'. Some may be staying with relatives and friends on a temporary basis. Others live in temporary accommodation, such as bed and breakfast hotels, hostels, night shelters and refuges. For many, this means living in poor quality accommodation that is detrimental to their health and well-being.

To understand what homelessness really is, it's important to first consider what a 'home' is. A home isn't just a roof over your head. It's a place that provides security, privacy, and links to a community and support network. It needs to be affordable, with support if necessary.

> 'Homelessness means loss, loss, loss… It is not just the loss of a home, maybe of a partner or of family life, of supportive friends or of a known community. It involves the loss of confidence and self-esteem. The loss of opportunities. These losses are less obvious… and the long-term effects on children in particular, and the stigma of homelessness, are not ever really taken on board. It's not just the reasons why people become homeless that are important but what it does to you.'

> **Health worker[1]**

The original duties to homeless people were placed on local authorities by the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977. The current duties are set out in the Housing Act 1996, recently amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, and place local authorities under a duty to rehouse certain homeless people. However, it is

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[1] Collard, A. *Settling up towards a strategy for resettling homeless families*, London Housing Forum, London, 1997.

important to note that not everyone who falls under the above definition of homelessness will qualify for accommodation.

Households entitled to help with housing

There is an immediate duty on the local authority to provide interim accommodation for anyone they have reason to believe may be homeless and in priority need whilst they investigate the individual's circumstances.

To access long-term housing under the homelessness legislation, a household must make an application to a local authority. The local authority has a duty to house individuals or households who meet the following criteria:

- eligible for assistance – which will not apply to certain people who have lived abroad

- legally classed as homeless – by having nowhere that is available and reasonable to occupy, anywhere in the world (fitting the definition on page 2)

- in priority need – applying to all households that contain a pregnant woman or are responsible for dependent children; to some households made up of a 16- to 17-year-old or a care leaver aged 18 to 21; or where someone in the household is vulnerable, eg because of old age, mental or physical health problems; or by being in prison, care or the armed forces

- unintentionally homeless – those who have not deliberately done, or failed to do, something that caused them to become homeless, such as failing to make rent or mortgage payments when they could have afforded to do so.

Authorities also have a duty to continue to provide temporary accommodation for these households until settled accommodation can be found for them. For further information on the local authority's duty to provide accommodation see the following page on Shelter's Advice Online service:
http://england.shelter.org.uk/advice/advice-145.cfm

Households not entitled to help with housing

Many households who approach local authorities as homeless do not fit all four criteria above and therefore do not qualify for rehousing, even though they may have a serious housing need. For example, the local authority will not have a duty to house a family with children if they are deemed intentionally homeless. There will also be no duty owed to an asylum seeker suffering ill health as they will not be eligible due to their immigration status. Groups who do not qualify for assistance under the homelessness legislation may receive help from other agencies, for example social services departments or the New Asylum Model (NAM).

For a number of reasons many other people do not approach their local authority at all. A single person may feel he/she will not be regarded as a priority, others may have friends or family who have had a previous negative experience when seeking

help. Many homeless people end up staying in hostels, or moving between friends and relatives. Some may sleep on the streets. Single people or couples without children, to whom the local authority does not owe a duty to house, are often referred to as 'single homeless people'.

Extent of homelessness

It's difficult to quantify the scale of homelessness, because of the often hidden nature of the problem. Homelessness can be temporary with people experiencing episodes of homelessness between more settled periods. It is also difficult to count the number of people who are homeless at any point in time, or those who have experienced homelessness at some time in the previous year.

However, some Government statistics are available on the number of households that approach local authorities and are given assistance under homelessness legislation. This also includes the number of homeless households placed in temporary accommodation by local authorities. Communities and Local Government (CLG), formerly the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), publishes these figures quarterly.

The Government also gathers statistics to estimate the number of people sleeping on the streets on any given night. According to latest estimates, there are nearly 500 people sleeping on the streets in England.[2] However Government research has acknowledged that at least 10 times that number sleep rough over the course of a year.[3]

These statistics do not provide a comprehensive measure of all instances of homelessness. There is little information about the number of people who may be homeless according to the legal definition but do not approach their council for help, or who move from one temporary place to another, or stay with friends. Some local authorities collect information about homelessness in their areas, and some voluntary agencies keep systematic records and carry out surveys. However, coverage is patchy and individual local surveys cannot just be 'added together' to produce a national picture.

Repeat homelessness
For many people, homelessness is not a one-off experience. Statistics for 2006/07 collected for CLG by local authorities on repeat homelessness shows that only three per cent of those households accepted as homeless had previously been homeless.

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[2] CLG. Estimates of the number of people sleeping rough in England, 2007: available at
http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/homelessness/publicationsabouthomelessness/

[3] Randall, G and Brown, S. *Helping rough sleepers off the streets: a report to the Homelessness Directorate*, OPDM, London, 2002.

However, the way it is measured is very limited – it only captures the households accepted as homeless in the previous two years by the same local authority.

A survey in Scotland[4] found that more than a quarter (27 per cent) of homelessness applications were from households that had previously made an application. Most repeat homelessness applications were separated by relatively short intervals of fewer than six months.

The survey also found that the most common causes of repeated loss of accommodation were the breakdown of relationships with parents or partners; debt; and neighbourhood problems.

Homelessness trends
Table 1 shows that the number of households found to be homeless[5] by local authorities increased 31 per cent between 1997/98 and 2003/04. Since then the numbers have decreased by 47 per cent.

Table 1: Homelessness trends

Year	Total number households found to be homeless	Total number homeless households accepted by local authorities for rehousing
1997/98	164,620	102,430
1998/99	166,660	104,260
1999/00	168,230	105,580
2000/01	174,430	114,670
2002/03	201,500	128,540
2003/04	216,080	135,430
2004/05	193,860	120,860
2005/06	152,780	93,980
2006/07	115,430	73,360

Source: CLG, *Statutory homelessness*, England, 2007

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[4] H Pawson et al. *Repeat homelessness in Scotland*, Scottish Homes, Edinburgh, 2001.

[5] This figure includes the total number of homeless households who were found to be: (1) unintentionally homeless and in priority need; (2) intentionally homeless; (3) homeless but not in priority need. Local authorities only have a duty to rehouse those households in the first group.

Table 2 shows, in 2006/07, in addition to London; the North East, North West, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside regions also had a higher-than-national average rate of homelessness acceptances.

Table 2: Households accepted by local authorities for rehousing by region in 2006/07

Regions	Number of homeless households accepted by local authorities for rehousing	Number of acceptances per 1,000 households
North East	4,790	4.4
North West	11,380	3.9
Yorkshire and Humberside	8,220	3.9
East Midlands	6,020	3.3
West Midlands	8,740	4.0
East of England	6,890	3.0
London	15,390	4.9
South East	6,660	2.0
South West	5,270	2.4
National total/average	73,360	3.5

Source: CLG, *Statutory homelessness*, England, 2007

Causes of homelessness

The causes of homelessness are varied and complex. Homelessness is likely to result from the complex interplay between structural and personal factors.

Structural factors

Structural factors may include:

- unemployment
- poverty
- housing market shortages and lack of affordable housing
- how the national housing system operates
- the extent of people's housing rights
- social trends, such as the increasing incidence of relationship breakdown, and rising numbers of people living alone

- the structure and administration of Housing Benefit
- wider policy developments, such as the closure of long-stay psychiatric hospitals.

Low income, unemployment and poverty are almost universal factors in homelessness.[6] These factors restrict people's ability to pay their mortgage or rent, sometimes resulting in homelessness. Having no fixed address also makes finding employment difficult, creating a cycle, which is hard to break. Almost all those who experience homelessness are poor, and only a minority are employed.[7]

Certain groups of people in society are more likely to be economically and socially disadvantaged. Groups such as lone parents, people with mental health problems, care leavers and other people leaving institutions, and people from ethnic minorities are more likely to experience homelessness. Ethnic minority households[8] make up 11 per cent of England's population, but account for 21 per cent of households accepted as homeless by local authorities.

Research carried out in Scotland suggests that in the past two decades homelessness trends have also been affected by factors such as housing supply and demand, affordability and unemployment; as well as the number of people leaving institutions, such as prison, children's homes and long-stay psychiatric hospitals.[9]

Homeless households face further problems due to the lack of supply of social rented homes and poor access to social tenancies in some areas. Currently, 31 per cent of council and 17 per cent of housing association lettings are made to homeless households whom local authorities have a duty to rehouse.[10] Delays in Housing Benefit payments can cause rent arrears, which may lead to eviction and homelessness. The main causes of arrears are problems with claiming benefits, including delays in receiving them, and shortfalls between Housing Benefit paid and the cost of rent.[11]

Personal factors
Personal and social factors relate to the individual, family or community. They play a key role in people's vulnerability to becoming homeless. These may include one or more of the following:

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[6] Anderson, I Dr. *Pathways through homelessness: towards a dynamic analysis*, Housing Policy and Practice Unit, University of Stirling, Stirling, 2001.

[7] ibid.

[8] Includes all non-British white ethnic groups.

[9] Kemp, P.A et al. *Structural trends and homelessness: A quantitative analysis*, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh, 2001.

[10] DCLG: Housing Strategy statistical analysis, 2006 and CORE statistics 2005/06.

[11] Neuberger, J. *House keeping: preventing homelessness through tackling rent arrears in social housing*, Shelter, London, 2003.

- individual factors – including drug and alcohol misuse; difficulties at school; lack of qualifications; lack of social support; debts, especially mortgage or rent arrears; poor physical and mental health; and getting involved in crime at an early age

- family background – including family breakdown and disputes; sexual and physical abuse in childhood or adolescence; having parents with drug or alcohol problems; and previous experience of family homelessness

- an institutional background – including having been in care; the armed forces; or in prison.

Research examining routes into homelessness found that family conflict was the most common starting point for homelessness, regardless of age. Family conflict in the past can also trigger homelessness in later life.[12]

For many people, there's no single event that results in sudden homelessness. Instead, over time, the cumulative effects of a number of unresolved problems can lead to homelessness, and often to repeat episodes of homelessness. A study suggests that it can take about nine years for this cumulative effect to result in homelessness.[13]

The main cause of homelessness, as recorded by local authorities, is family and friends no longer being able to provide accommodation. However, it is important to note that this doesn't necessarily reflect the root causes of why people lose their homes. After losing a home, many households turn to family or friends for accommodation in the first instance. They may only approach the local authority if their family or friends are either unwilling or unable to continue to accommodate them before they are able to secure their own home.

Temporary accommodation

Under current homelessness legislation, local authorities must ensure that suitable temporary accommodation is available for homeless households who are in priority need and unintentionally homeless until settled accommodation can be found. Households found to be intentionally homeless may be provided with temporary accommodation for a 'reasonable period' (normally about 28 days).

Temporary accommodation can include local authority's housing stock; short-term housing leased from private landlords; council or registered social landlords' hostels; or bed and breakfast hotels.

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[12] Ravenhill, M. *Routes into homelessness: A study by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion of the paths into homelessness of homeless clients of the London Borough of Camden's Homeless Persons Unit,* Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, London, 2000.
[13] ibid.

A considerable amount of research has identified serious problems regarding the impact of living in bed and breakfast hotels, particularly on children, and the additional cost of using this type of accommodation. In 2002 the Government made a commitment to end the use of bed and breakfast hotels as temporary accommodation for families with children, except for emergencies and for no longer than six weeks. However, families continue to spend long periods of time in other types of temporary accommodation. The Government also announced in November 2006, plans to end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless 16-and17-year-olds by 2010, unless in an emergency, and for no longer than six weeks.

The figures in table 3 show the number of homeless households placed in temporary accommodation of all types, by local authorities.
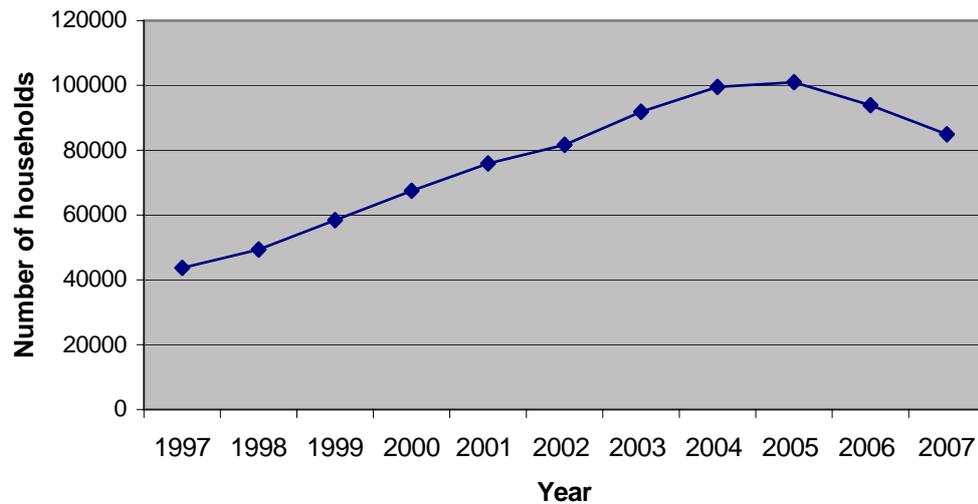
Table 3: Homeless households in temporary accommodation at June 2007

Region	Number of households
North East	470
North West	2,180
Yorkshire and Humberside	1,930
East Midlands	1,910
West Midlands	1,610
East of England	4,830
London	59,130
South East	7,860
South West	4,970
England	84,900

Source: CLG, *Statutory homelessness*, England, 2007

As table 3 shows, there is a considerable regional variation in the numbers of households living in temporary accommodation. The numbers of households in temporary accommodation are particularly high in London, where the pressure on social housing is the greatest. Currently, 70 per cent of all households living in temporary accommodation are in London.

Chart 1: Trend in the use of temporary accommodation

Source: CLG, *Statutory homelessness*, England, 2007

Despite the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation decreasing since 2005, it is still 94 per cent higher than in 1997. One of the main reasons for this increase is the growing and acute shortage of social rented housing. In its 2005 Five Year Plan[14], the Government set a target to halve the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation by 2010, which would mean a reduction by 50,000 households. The Government's strategy to achieve this relies heavily on local authorities preventing homelessness as a means to reduce homelessness acceptances, and the flow of households into temporary accommodation.

Length of stay in temporary accommodation
There is no legal definition of how long temporary accommodation may last for, and for many homeless households their stay in this kind of accommodation is anything but temporary.

Homeless households are often forced to spend a long time in temporary accommodation, due to the shortage of social rented homes. A Shelter survey of homeless households found that about half the respondents had been living in temporary accommodation for a year or more. However, 62 per cent of households in temporary accommodation in London had been living in it for more than two years.[15] According to latest Government figures, 27 per cent of homeless households leaving temporary accommodation in England had spent longer than a year there before a settled home was found, compared with only eight per cent in

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[14] ODPM. *Sustainable communities: homes for all – a five year plan,* ODPM, London, 2005.

[15] Mitchell, F et al. *Living in limbo: survey of homeless households living in temporary accommodation*, Shelter, London, 2004.

1998/99. In London, this figure was 13 per cent in 1998/99, rising to 61 per cent in June 2007.[16]

Financial cost of temporary accommodation
In England in 2005/06, local authorities' gross expenditure on providing temporary accommodation to homeless households was estimated at £906 million, of which 70 per cent (£623 million) was spent by local authorities in London.[17]

The impact of homelessness

The experience of homelessness is traumatic. Additionally, many people may have suffered distressing experiences that have led to homelessness, such as domestic violence; breakdown of a relationship; loss of their home through repossession or rent arrears; fleeing persecution from another country; drug and alcohol misuse; or mental health problems.

Some of the effects of homelessness are disempowerment, isolation and poverty. Disempowerment results from not being able to secure your own home and spending time in temporary accommodation, over which you have no control.

Isolation occurs because, in many cases, temporary accommodation is provided at a distance from the household's local community, and sometimes out of the local authority area. Homeless families in such situations are more likely to face isolation and disruption in their lives. Informal support from friends and family can become strained by distance at a time when people are most vulnerable. They can be cut off from cultural links and vital support, and access to health and education services may be disrupted.

Most homeless households who live in temporary accommodation rely on benefits. Temporary accommodation traps people in poverty because often it is provided at a high rent. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are reduced when income rises. This means that when a person gets a low paid job they may actually end up with very little extra money. When travel costs and other costs associated with working are taken into account (eg childcare), moving off benefits can actually increase the risk of poverty and debt. A Shelter survey found that high rents were one of the main barriers to work and training for households living in temporary accommodation.[18]

The detrimental impact of homelessness is felt across all aspects of people's quality of life. The next section of this factsheet examines the impact of homelessness on health and children's education.

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[16] CLG, *Statutory homelessness*, England, 2007.

[17] Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, *Homelessness statistics 2005/06 actuals*, London, 2005.

[18] Neuberger, J. *House keeping: preventing homelessness through tackling rent arrears in social housing*, Shelter, London, 2003.

Health

In 1999, the Government's report: *Saving lives: our healthier nation*[19] recognised that poor housing and homelessness can be a significant cause of ill health.

Research shows that homelessness and bad housing conditions greatly affect both physical and mental health. Homeless people sleeping on the streets experience the most severe health problems, but other homeless adults and children are also affected. In one study, a youth centre reported that after three months of sleeping rough, most young people's mental and physical health deteriorated to a noticeable extent.[20]

A national survey shows that the health problems of single homeless people are considerably worse than those of the general population. More than 30 per cent of people in hostels and bed and breakfast hotels, and significantly more than half of people sleeping rough, reported more than one health problem, compared with a quarter of the general population.[21]

Surveys conducted by Shelter found that:

- seventy-eight per cent of homeless households surveyed reported having at least one specific health problem[22]

- people who had been living in temporary accommodation for more than a year reported more health problems and greater use of health services[23] with 58 per cent of families in temporary accommodation (other than bed and breakfast) saying their health had suffered as a result of living in temporary accommodation

- almost half those surveyed said they were depressed, rising to 64 per cent of those living in homeless households in which no one was working[24]

- high levels of distress existed due to respondents' lack of control over their housing situation, and lack of knowledge about what was happening due to little or no information being provided by the local authority[25]

- insecurity in temporary accommodation can also affect children's mental health and development. About half the families taking part in one study conducted by Shelter said their children were frightened, insecure or worried about the

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[19] Department of Health. *Saving lives: our healthier nation*, TSO, London, 1999.

[20] Ravenhill, M. *Routes into homelessness: A study by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion of the paths into homelessness of homeless clients of the London Borough of Camden's Homeless Persons Unit,* Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, London, 2000.

[21] Bines, W. *The health of single homeless people. Homelessness and social policy*, Routledge, London, 1997.

[22] Mitchell, F et al. *Living in limbo: survey of homeless households living in temporary accommodation*, Shelter, London, 2004.

[23] Credland, S. et al *Sick and tired: the impact of temporary accommodation on the health of homeless families*, Shelter, London, 2004.

[24] ibid.

[25] ibid.

future as a result of their homelessness.[26] There is evidence among homeless children of mood swings, nervousness and bad tempers, bed-wetting and disturbed sleep patterns.

The impact of homelessness on children may be long lasting. A study undertaken in Birmingham found that 40 per cent of the homeless children studied were still suffering mental and development problems one year after being rehoused.[27]

Education

Homelessness has an adverse effect on children's educational progress because of problems relating to accessing schools, attendance, and the isolation that children can feel because of their circumstances. Evidence suggests that homeless children tend to have lower academic achievements and this can be related to their housing status. [28]

One study found that almost a third of children moving into or between temporary accommodation had to change schools.[29] Moving school at non-standard times can affect children emotionally and psychologically.

'… for four months we didn't go to school, we went to six houses, no, seven houses and six new schools… I don't like moving because every time I make new friends and then I have to move again and again and again.'

Girl, 10[30]

School can offer a source of constancy and security in a time of considerable change for children. However, leaving children in their existing school can be difficult when families are placed in temporary accommodation outside the local area. The time spent travelling longer distances to school and cost of transport can result in lateness or missed education for children.[31]

The lack of security of temporary accommodation, and lack of information about where or when they will be rehoused, increase difficulties and cause anxiety for parents trying to plan for their children's education.[32] Some parents may be reluctant to register the children at a new school when they don't know how long they will be

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[26] Robinson, B. *Where's home? Children and homelessness in Bristol*, Shelter, London, 2002.

[27] Harker, L. *Chance of a lifetime: the impact of bad housing on children's lives*, Shelter, London, 2006.

[28] ibid.

[29] Stanley, K. *Home is not just a place to keep our stuff: a study of the effects of living in temporary accommodation on children in Oxford City*, Save the Children, 2002.

[30] Mustafa, Z. *Listen up: the voices of homeless children*, Shelter, London, 2004.

[31] Power, S et al. *No place to learn: homelessness and education*, Shelter, London, 1995.

[32] Credland, S. et al *Sick and tired: the impact of temporary accommodation on the health of homeless families*, Shelter, London, 2004.

staying in the area, meaning that children miss out on schooling altogether. There can also be specific difficulties for parents of children with special educational needs.

A Shelter survey found that homeless children missed an average of 55 school days a year due to the disruption of moving into or between temporary accommodation. A third of parents responded that their children had problems at school, and almost half described their children as 'often unhappy or depressed'.[33]

> 'Since he started school last September, this is his third school. He's got a lack of self-confidence, and he is easily distracted because he's never actually settled into a school routine, and because he entered when all the other children had already formed their peer groups… There's things like bed-wetting and his anxiety and him not knowing the future. It is very hard for him to feel secure knowing we have to move again soon.'

> **Mother of a five-year-old[34]**

Tackling and preventing homelessness

The obligation of local authorities to prevent as well as to respond to homelessness is long-standing, both in law and good practice. Since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, authorities have been legally required to assist people under the threat of homelessness by taking reasonable steps to prevent them from losing their existing homes.

Since the introduction of the Homelessness Act 2002, central Government has increasingly encouraged local authorities to take a more proactive approach to tackling homelessness. One of local authorities' specific responsibilities is to develop a strategy to assess and prevent homelessness in the local area. There is a duty on each local authority to produce a homelessness strategy and to review and update it at least every five years.

> 'Strategies must aim to prevent homelessness and ensure that accommodation and support will be available for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.'[35]

The most widely adopted approaches to homelessness prevention are the provision of housing advice, a deposit for private sector accommodation and similar schemes

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[33] Mitchell, F et al. *Living in limbo: survey of homeless households living in temporary accommodation*, Shelter, London, 2004.

[34] Credland, S. et al *Sick and tired: the impact of temporary accommodation on the health of homeless families*, Shelter, London, 2004.

[35] Pawson, H et al. *Homelessness prevention: a guide to good practice*, DCLG, London, 2006.

to increase access to private tenancies, family mediation, domestic violence support and tenancy sustainment.[36]

Housing options approach
Prior to the Homelessness Act 2002 the main role of local authorities in relation to people presenting as homeless was to process a homelessness application. Following the Act, there has been a strong emphasis on finding alternatives to processing homelessness applications. Instead of providing temporary accommodation and processing applications, local authorities now offer a 'housing options' interview as a first response.

Housing options interviews are a crucial component of the new approach to homelessness work. Under this approach all new housing applicants[37] participate in an initial interview. During the interview, alternative ways of addressing the immediate housing need are identified, only relying on a homelessness application once other avenues have been exhausted. For example, those who have been living with family or friends and are asked to leave may be offered mediation with a view to enabling them to return; those who experience domestic violence are offered 'sanctuary schemes', involving the installation of security measures within the home, which remove the need for rehousing. A significant part of this new preventative approach involves referring households to the private rented sector, often facilitating the move through payment of rent deposits.

This new approach has resulted in a significant drop in the number of homelessness applications taken by local authorities. However, some believe that housing options interviews can prevent or discourage people from making a homelessness application.

Supporting People
The Supporting People programme provides housing-related support to help vulnerable people, including those who may be at risk of homelessness, to sustain independent living.

The main groups helped by the Supporting People scheme are older people; people with mental health problems or disabilities; women fleeing domestic violence; people with learning difficulties; and young homeless people. Under this programme, housing and social services departments have to work in partnership with their health department and probation services to address the mix of housing and housing-related support needs of vulnerable people. Services provided under the scheme include housing management; independent living skills; home care; meals services; and personal care.

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[36] *Homelessness Research Summary: Evaluating homelessness prevention,* CLG, London, 2006.

[37] People facing homelessness and others seeking to move into social rented housing.

Shelter's work in preventing homelessness

Shelter helps more than 170,000 people a year. Help is provided through Shelter's free housing advice helpline, housing aid centres, and tenancy sustainment projects.

Housing advice services

Housing advice is a vital and cost-effective means of preventing homelessness. Housing advice services prevent homelessness through a number of interventions, including:

- providing factual and practical information about available services and housing options
- giving advice on housing and related problems, such as Housing Benefit and rent arrears, and assisting people to find solutions
- carrying out casework and advocacy on a client's behalf, with landlords and statutory services, and helping people to achieve their legal rights, sometimes by representing them at possession hearings.

Some users of housing advice services will only require information and signposting to other services to enable them to resolve their housing problems. However, many other people – those whose problems are more complex and in need of immediate attention, and those whose support needs make them more vulnerable – will require additional and more intensive help. An effective means of providing this support is via casework.

Every Shelter housing aid centre has a casework service, working on a one-to-one basis with service users in providing expertise on a range of housing law and related issues. Their work includes giving detailed and practical advice setting out people's housing options, for example their legal rights to remain in their current home, how to access a private sector tenancy, how to make a homelessness application, and representation and formal advocacy.

Tenancy sustainment projects

In some cases, advice is not sufficient to prevent or solve homelessness. Homeless people have often experienced many social problems, including poor health, alcohol and drug misuse, and financial problems, that make it difficult for them to keep a tenancy and can result in recurring homelessness. Some homeless households need support in order to keep their tenancies, or settle into a new home. Shelter operates a number of projects to support tenants to remain in their homes and to successfully establish new homes after experiencing homelessness.

Homeless to Home projects are designed to help formerly homeless families sustain their tenancy and live successfully in the community, preventing repeat homelessness. The projects help families access benefits, enrol and settle children

into school, and find a GP. They also offer housing advice and advocacy on a range of issues, as well as practical help, such as decorating and gardening.[38]

An independent evaluation of Shelter's Homeless to Home service found that more than 80 per cent of families who used the services were still housed after nine or more months.

> 'I have been to refuge after refuge since I was 17… I've done that for nine years but never had help like this… I have never been in a house so long. I'm only still here because of Shelter.'

> **Homeless to Home service user[39]**

The Shelter Inclusion Project provides support to households that are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, as a result of reported antisocial behaviour. The project works with households who have had, or are having, difficulty in complying with the terms of their tenancy agreements or are at risk of repossession, and aims to provide assessments and tailored support. In many instances, antisocial behaviour is due to unmet support needs.

The project evaluation found high levels of support need among adults and children. Sixty per cent of adults using the project reported that they had depression or other mental health problems, and more than one in ten children were reported as having behavioural or mental health problems.[40]

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[38] Jones et al. *Firm foundations: an evaluation of the Shelter Homeless to Home service*, Shelter, London, 2002.

[39] ibid.

[40] Jones, A et al. *Shelter Inclusion Project: two years on*, Shelter, London, 2005.