

Preventing homelessness

**Why a strategic approach
and early intervention can
stop people losing their homes**

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Summary

- Homelessness is not inevitable – it can and should be prevented. Local authorities already have a general legal duty prevent homelessness. However, in practice legislation has embedded a welcome – but limited – safety net, generally offering assistance only when a crisis is imminent and where people are in ‘priority need’. We must move away from a crisis-driven approach to prevention to a more strategic and targeted approach.

Strategic prevention to address structural problems

- New legislation in Wales has strengthened the duty on local authorities to take steps to prevent homelessness. There is some merit to this. But legislative change alone is not the answer. A strategic approach to tackling homelessness must address the structural housing problems at the heart of the problem.
- A strategic approach could be promoted by greater emphasis on Homelessness Reviews and Strategies to identify local causes of homelessness, in order to improve local joint working and service provision.
- However, while valuable, the effectiveness of local Homelessness Strategies is restricted by national housing policy. The growing housing market affordability crisis, combined with recent large reductions in the funding of social rented homes, restrictions to housing benefit and cuts to housing support, have undermined local attempts to prevent homelessness.
- So we need a strategic, cross-Government approach to address the national policy barriers to homelessness prevention.

Individual prevention via ‘housing options’

- ‘Housing options’ advice is meant to prevent homelessness. But, too often, it is offered when people are threatened with homelessness, which is where the homelessness legislation is designed to apply. This has led to an uneasy tension between law and practice, and ‘gate-keeping’ of statutory rehousing assistance¹, which should be there to protect families and other vulnerable households in a crisis.
- In our view, ‘housing options’ advice should be proactively targeted at people at risk of homelessness *much sooner* to avoid them becoming threatened with homelessness. This should be regardless of whether they might be entitled to statutory assistance. It should support, and not replace, statutory rehousing help for vulnerable people.
- There are existing examples of good practice of targeted early intervention by councils working in partnership with others, some of which are highlighted in this briefing. The Government should support and champion good practice to ensure that it can be replicated.
- If prevention services are to be shifted from crisis-management to a more proactive approach, councils must have the resources to ensure there is enough suitable and accessible housing in their areas, and to target early intervention at those most at risk.

¹ Local Government Ombudsman (2011) [Homelessness: How councils can ensure justice for homeless people](#)

Recommendations

Strategic prevention

- Local Homelessness Reviews and Strategies should be reinvigorated and promoted by Government as a vital exercise in identifying causes of homelessness, in order to develop ways to prevent it and improve local service provision, including local and cross-boundary joint working.
- Government should commit to a cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention, involving all relevant departments, including DWP. There must be a renewed focus on improving housing affordability and financial help, particularly the provision of sufficient low rent homes in the areas they are most needed, and specialist housing schemes, such as sheltered housing.
- National statistics and research must provide a better understanding of the scale and underlying causes of homelessness, and what actions are successful in achieving sustainable outcomes to avoid the on-going costs and damage of repeat applications for assistance.

Targeted prevention

- Government should support and champion good practice in targeted early intervention, where councils work in partnership with others to ensure services catch people at risk of homelessness *much sooner* than current crisis-driven 'housing options' advice. This must include locally-accessible legal advocacy to enforce statutory rights, such as defence of possession proceedings.
- Government must ensure councils have the resources to shift services from crisis-management to a more proactive approach that targets early intervention to those most at risk, including enough suitable and accessible housing.
- Every homelessness prevention provider should record their activity so that better data is available both locally and nationally to identify common problems, understand advice needs and monitor sustainable outcomes. Particular attention should be paid to repeat homelessness.

Crisis-driven prevention

- Pre-crisis 'housing options' services should exist alongside, and not impose a barrier to, statutory homelessness duties² designed to protect vulnerable people at crisis-point. Priority should be given to helping applicants to keep their existing home. Where this is not possible, offers of rehousing must be within statutory protections, such as stability, affordability and suitability.
- We strongly support an approach, as introduced in Wales, that English legislation should be amended to extend the period in which an applicant is threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days. This will allow more time for the local housing authority to prevent the loss of the home, or find a suitable settled alternative, avoiding the use of temporary accommodation.
- Those at risk of street homelessness because they are not entitled to statutory rehousing, such as single homeless people, should be entitled to meaningful 'housing options' assistance at crisis point to keep their home, or find emergency accommodation, via new stronger duties to help prevent and alleviate homelessness, similar to those introduced last year in Wales³.

² Shelter (2007) [Policy Briefing: Homelessness Prevention](#)

³ Housing (Wales) Act 2014, Section 60

Introduction

Homelessness is not inevitable. It can and should be prevented.

Homelessness is caused by a lack of accessible, stable homes. If we make it easier for people to find and keep a home, then we can make homelessness a thing of the past. This would not only prevent a great deal of distress to homeless households, particularly those with children, it could also save a great deal of public money.

The Government recently committed to work with homelessness organisations to prevent more people from becoming homeless.

Shelter welcomes this renewed emphasis on prevention. This briefing aims to contribute to the debate by looking at what is meant by homelessness prevention, how this interacts with current homelessness legislation, and setting out Shelter's view on how it can be improved.

As a provider of housing advice and campaign for better housing, our main focus is to prevent homelessness, by ensuring a housing problem doesn't result in the loss of a home:

- Through our policy and campaigning work, Shelter identifies and analyses the root causes of homelessness to ensure that our housing system operates in a way that prevents it.
- Through our housing advice and support services, Shelter encourages people to seek advice as early as possible to address problems or find another suitable home as quickly as possible.

Shelter's Services are primarily about preventing losing their homes, rather than waiting until they are homeless and picking up the pieces. Shelter has led the way in developing high quality advice and advocacy services to prevent homelessness. Every year, we provide information and advice to an enormous number of people through a range of channels. In 2014/15, Shelter helped over 4.5 million people – online, in person and over the phone.

Policy and legislative context

Ever since the very first UK homelessness legislation – the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 – the policy of successive Governments has been to prevent, as well as respond, to homelessness.

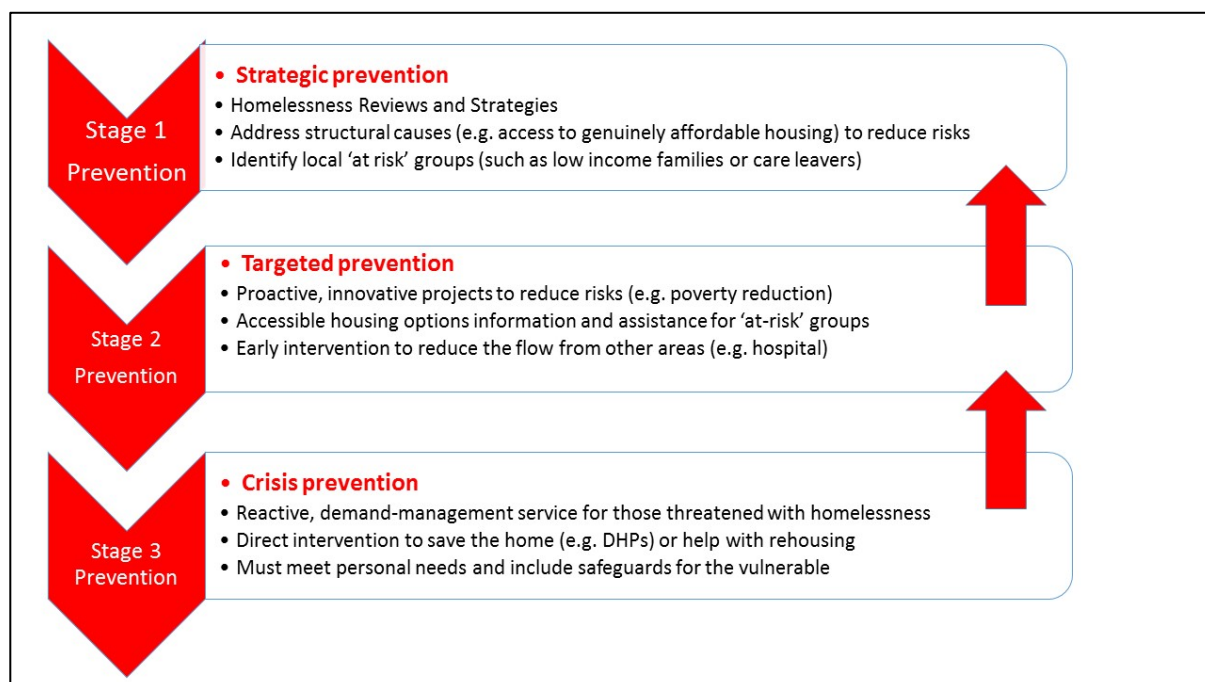
The 1977 Act placed a duty on local housing authorities to ‘take reasonable steps to secure that accommodation does not cease to be available’ in cases where people are threatened with homelessness and in ‘priority need’. Subsequent government policy has never expected local authorities to take a purely responsive approach to homelessness.

But the legislation has been applied inconsistently. While many local authorities accepted the spirit as well as the letter of the law, some have persisted in complying only with the legal minimum, in some cases because of the volume of demand.

Consequently, the legislation has embedded a welcome – but limited – safety net, generally offering assistance only when homelessness is imminent, or has already happened, rather than targeting activity at a much earlier stage.

Strategic prevention of homelessness

We must now make a renewed attempt to move away from a crisis-driven approach to prevention to a more strategic and targeted approach.



Preventing homelessness via Homelessness Reviews and Strategies

The Homelessness Act 2002 further sought to embed a focus on homelessness prevention. As well as reinstating (and expanding) the duties to rehouse homeless people that had been removed by the Housing Act 1996, the 2002 Act aimed to transform local homelessness services by moving away from individual crisis management – simply accommodating people once they became homeless – towards a more strategic and preventative approach.

The 2002 Act required all local authorities to carry out a homelessness review⁴, which should include an assessment of the needs of all homeless people. The review should look at:

1. The current and likely future levels of homelessness in an authority's district
2. The activities carried out in the authority's area for:
 - a) preventing homelessness
 - b) making sure that accommodation is available for people who are, or may become, homeless
 - c) providing support to prevent homelessness, particularly on recurring occasions
3. The resources available to housing and social services authorities, other public authorities, voluntary organisations and others.

This must be followed by a Homelessness Strategy⁵ setting out how the above will be achieved.

Early research by Shelter⁶ found that the process of compiling reviews and strategies had a positive effect, disputing concerns that the strategies would have little practical effect. The process had enabled authorities to identify gaps in their knowledge, build stronger relationships with other departments and agencies, and develop a multi-agency approach to homelessness and wider issues. Consultation with service users had enabled authorities to identify and distinguish between the needs of different groups, rather than taking a 'blanket' approach to homelessness. Importantly, they identified the need to adopt a proactive approach to tackling homelessness.

There have been no specific studies of the impact of reviews and strategies since Shelter's early research. However, recent research⁷ of local authority homelessness services recommended that:

'Homelessness Strategies should continue to be a priority for local authorities because it is evident that local authorities who have robust Homelessness Strategies deliver more effective front line services and have partners fully engaged in achieving their strategic aims and objectives. It is thus essential that the requirement remains for local authorities to develop Homelessness Strategies and clearly sets out how they intend to tackle and prevent homelessness.'

It has recently been suggested that city-regions, such as Greater Manchester, might be given devolved powers on tackling homelessness⁸. With the localism agenda gathering pace, Homelessness Reviews and Strategies remain an important process for identifying local causes of homelessness, identifying ways to tackle it and improving local service provision. However, while valuable, the effectiveness of local Homelessness Strategies is restricted by national housing policy. The growing housing market affordability crisis, large reductions in the funding of social rented homes, restrictions to housing benefit, and cuts to housing-support have undermined local attempts to prevent homelessness.

Preventing homelessness by providing settled homes

The main underlying cause of homelessness is lack of access to stable, affordable and decent homes. So any strategic policy to prevent homelessness must aim to improve access to such homes in all tenures, but especially the social and private rental sectors. This is clearly set out in current statutory guidance⁹.

⁴ Homelessness Act 2002, [Section 2](#)

⁵ Homelessness Act 2002, [Section 3](#)

⁶ Credland, S. (2004) *The Act in Action: An Assessment of Homelessness Reviews and Strategies*, Shelter

⁷ National Practitioner Support Service (September 2015) *The National Gold Standard Programme: Progress to date, lessons learnt and future goals* (p21)

⁸ Spurr, H. (March 2016) *The homelessness power debate*, Inside Housing

⁹ DCLG (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*

For example, the biggest trigger of statutory homelessness is now the ending of a short-term tenancy. There is little that can be done if a private landlord seeks possession and, where finding a new tenancy is problematic, it is difficult to prevent homelessness. So if the private rented sector is to contribute to prevention, then stable, affordable and decent family homes, with support as and when needed, must be available to those most at risk of homelessness.

Targeted prevention of homelessness

Quite rightly, the statutory guidance on homelessness¹⁰ identifies prevention as a key strategic aim. It is vital to identify which groups might be at risk of homelessness to ensure they are aware of rights, options and services and seek assistance at the earliest possible stage. In many cases early, effective intervention can prevent homelessness occurring.

The Code of Guidance¹¹ identifies three stages where intervention can prevent homelessness:

Early identification

- Identifying people who are at risk of homelessness and ensuring that accommodation and any necessary support are available to them.
- Early identification can target people who fall within high risk groups even though they may not currently have a need for housing.

Pre-crisis intervention

- This can take the form of advice services and proactive intervention such as negotiation with landlords to enable people to retain their current tenancies. Such intervention is important even if it only allows time to plan and manage a move to alternative accommodation.

Preventing recurring homelessness

- Ensuring tenancy sustainment is central to preventing repeat homelessness where there is an underlying need for support to keep someone in their home.

Shelter strongly supports this approach. We know from experience that, rather like health problems, the sooner people seek advice the better. It can also provide better value for money to the public purse¹². Where people have previously experienced homelessness, they may be at greater risk of repeat homelessness¹³ and so it should be a priority to avoid a recurrence.

Local authorities have a legal duty to ensure that services providing advice and information about the prevention of homelessness are available to everyone in their area¹⁴. This general duty applies to all households including to 'single homeless' people as well as families and other vulnerable groups.

The statutory guidance sets out how the duty should be met, including: advice and assistance (e.g. legal advice or mediation with a landlord) to enable people to remain in their current home; assistance (e.g. rent deposit or guarantee) to obtain accommodation in the private rented sector; or advice on applying for social housing.

¹⁰ DCLG (2006) [Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities](#) (paragraph 2.3)

¹¹ As above (paragraph 2.6)

¹² Pleace, N. [At what cost? An estimation of the financial costs of single homelessness in the UK](#), Crisis

¹³ Crisis (2014) [Nations apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain](#)

¹⁴ [Housing Act 1996, Section 179](#), as amended by Homelessness Act 2002

Particularly in cases where people are not vulnerable and therefore not entitled to statutory rehousing assistance, it makes sense for them to at least be provided with ‘housing options’ advice to prevent homelessness. But in Shelter’s experience ‘single homeless’ people are rarely offered meaningful assistance. Our advice services regularly encounter people who are roofless or threatened with homelessness, but have not been given meaningful help by their local authority, even when they have nowhere safe to sleep that night.

This is supported by mystery shopping research by Crisis in 2014¹⁵, which found that the most common type of help given was signposting and information leaflets of varying quality. Mystery shoppers frequently reported feeling they had been quickly ‘dismissed’ or even turned away without any help or the opportunity to speak to a ‘housing options’ adviser.

Crisis-driven prevention of homelessness

Despite good intentions the main focus of successive governments has been reactive, crisis-driven activity. Central to the Labour Government’s approach to homelessness prevention was the concept of ‘housing options’.

A DCLG good practice guide¹⁶ set out the six ‘homelessness prevention’ (or ‘housing options’) activities most commonly operated by local authorities:

- housing advice
- rent deposit schemes
- family mediation
- domestic violence victim support
- assistance for ex-offenders
- tenancy sustainment services

However, it contradicted the clear legal position, designed to protect vulnerable people, by suggesting a two-stage process *‘with options and prevention considered first, but with safeguards in place where a person is eligible for and requires assistance under the homelessness legislation’*. This has led to an uneasy tension between law and practice.

The duty to assess and accommodate homelessness cases

The homelessness legislation is very clear that a local housing authority must assess whether a duty is owed if it has reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days.

This is confirmed by the statutory guidance¹⁷, which states:

*‘Housing authorities are reminded that they **must not avoid** their obligations...if they have reason to believe that an applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness, but it is open to them to suggest alternative solutions in cases of potential homelessness where these would be appropriate and acceptable to the applicant.’*

¹⁵ Dobie, S., Sanders, B., Teixeira, L. (2014) [Turned Away: the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England](#)

¹⁶ Pawson, H., Netto, G. and Jones, C., (2006) [Homelessness Prevention: a guide to good practice](#), DCLG

¹⁷ DCLG (2006) [Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities](#) (paragraph 2.3)

In 2006, a test case confirmed the illegality of using homelessness prevention activities as a means to ‘gate keep’ or restrict access to statutory services¹⁸.

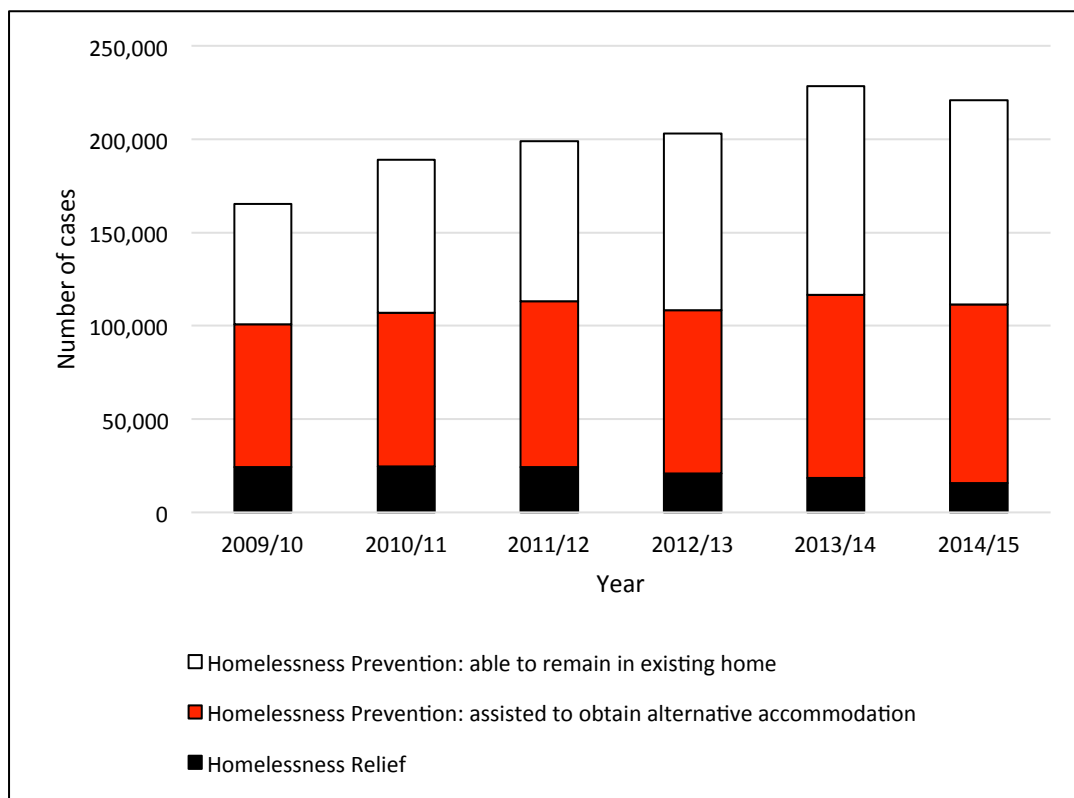
The Court of Appeal confirmed that where a local housing authority has ‘reason to believe’ that a person may be homeless or threatened with homelessness, it is legally required¹⁹ to make inquiries to establish whether the person is eligible for help and, if so, what duty is owed. It is unlawful for the authority to delay these inquiries pending the outcome of homelessness prevention measures.

Despite this, in Shelter’s experience, a ‘housing options’ interview and ‘housing options’ assistance is now routinely offered when it is very apparent that a household is already homeless. We challenge such practices on a weekly basis and they are regularly highlighted by the Local Government Ombudsman²⁰.

Housing options advice

There is evidence to show that cases recorded as prevention are actually responding to homelessness or threatened homelessness that could be in scope of the legislation.

Figure 1: Outcome of homelessness prevention and relief activity 2009/10 to 2014/15



During 2014/15, an estimated total of **220,800 cases of homelessness prevention or relief** took place outside the statutory homelessness framework²¹. This compared to **112,340 decisions** made on applications under the homelessness legislation and **54,430 households accepted** for statutory

¹⁸ [Robinson v Hammersmith & Fulham LBC](#) 2006 EWCA Civ 1122

¹⁹ Section 184, Housing Act 1996

²⁰ Local Government Ombudsman (2011) [Homelessness: How councils can ensure justice for homeless people](#)

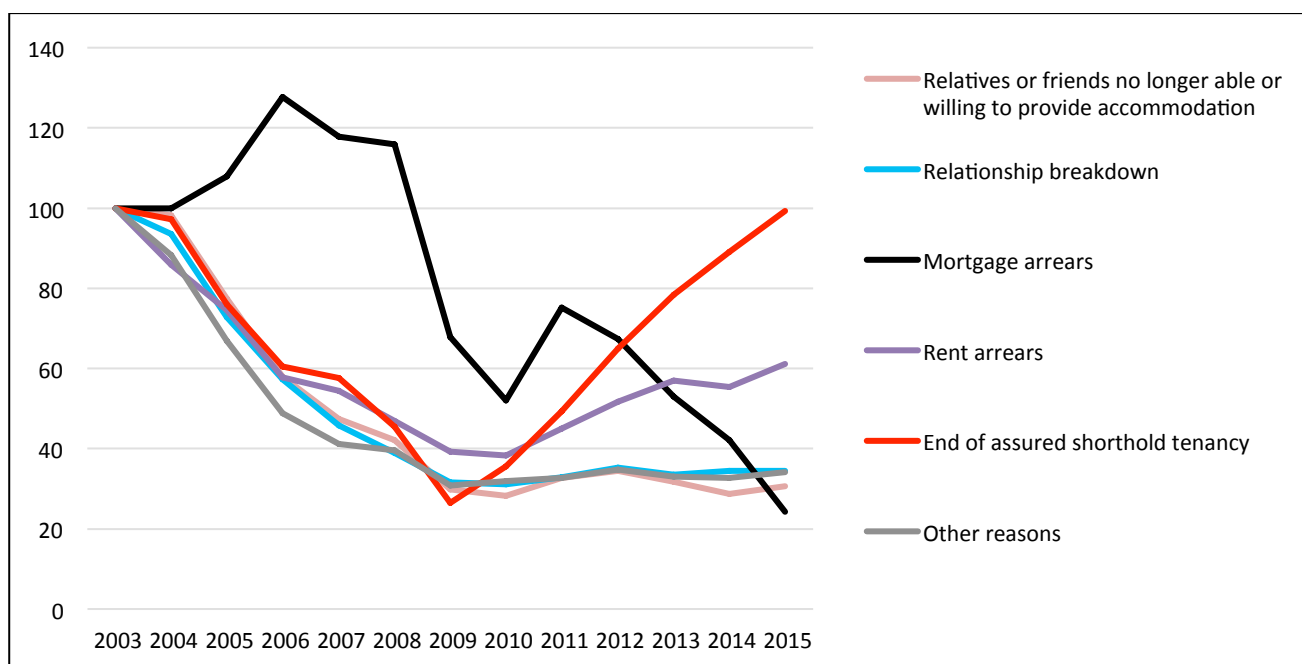
²¹ DCLG (July 2015) [Homelessness prevention and relief: England 2014 to 2015](#)

assistance during the same year²². Further analysis of the statistics reveal that while 93% (205,100) of the ‘prevention and relief’ cases were recorded as being ‘*where positive action was successful in preventing homelessness*’, nearly half of these (47%) were assisted to obtain alternative accommodation, suggesting that it was already too late to prevent them losing their homes.

In such cases, a statutory homelessness assessment should have been undertaken because they may have qualified as statutory homeless and been entitled to assistance under the homelessness legislation, with its safeguards for homeless children and other vulnerable people. Such safeguards require accommodation to be more stable (minimum 12 month contracts), affordable, safe and suitable.

Homelessness statistics²³ show that structural pressures are increasing, for example more people need help with affordability problems. The recent growth in homelessness is primarily due to the instability and unaffordability of private renting. Consequently, a reactive, personalised approach to homelessness prevention is stalling.

Figure 2: The change in the number of households made homeless due to different triggers since the Housing Options model was introduced (Index 2003=100).



Funding of local prevention work

The current Government has committed to maintaining and protecting homelessness prevention funding for local authorities in the form of the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG)²⁴. The 2015 Comprehensive Spending Review confirmed funding of £315 million by 2019/2020. This equates to around £79m per annum. This is very welcome.

²² It should be noted that these statistics are not directly comparable because they relate to cases versus applications from households

²³ DCLG (23 March 2016) [Statutory homelessness in England: October to December 2015](#) and (July 2015) [Homelessness prevention and relief: England 2014 to 2015](#)

²⁴ DCLG (2015) [Radical package of measures announced to tackle homelessness](#)

This (un-ring-fenced) grant is provided to local housing authorities to encourage them to offer homelessness prevention services. It is used to support authorities' 'housing options' and prevention work, and other frontline homelessness services, including for single homeless people and rough sleepers.

However, the grant received by individual councils doesn't usually stretch to cover the resources needed to offer comprehensive homelessness prevention services, especially in large local authorities experiencing the greatest demand for services. Statutory guidance requires them to use local resources. But, since 2010, severe cuts to local authority budgets have compounded resource constraints, with local authorities reporting that in 2014/15 'housing options' and homelessness service resources were more likely to be cut back rather than increased, including in London, which has the greatest demand²⁵.

This is at a time when services have been overwhelmed by the knock on consequences of wider government policy, especially welfare reform. Funding constraints have begun to limit local authorities' homelessness service capacity, particularly with respect to homelessness prevention.

If we are to genuinely prevent homelessness, shifting the approach from a crisis-driven to a more strategic approach, councils must have the resources to ensure there is enough suitable and accessible housing in their area and to target early intervention at those most at risk.

A renewed focus on prevention

The need to focus on strategic prevention

National statistics show that a reactive, crisis-driven approach to homelessness prevention is stalling because crises have become insurmountable for too many families. In the last financial year, there were fewer cases where local authorities were able to prevent or relieve homelessness. This is due to a decline in triggers, such as a relationship or family breakdown, and increasing structural pressures including instability and unaffordability in the private rented sector.

Prevention and relief statistics show how the nature of prevention has changed profoundly since 2009/10. Help with affordability problems (particularly in the private market) has replaced help with family breakdown as a mainstay of homelessness prevention activity. There has been a big increase in help with resolving housing benefit problems and financial payments from a homelessness prevention fund. There has been a drop in use of mediation, conciliation and sanctuary schemes.

Consequently, if overall homelessness is to be prevented, there must be a renewed focus on improving housing affordability and financial help.

The need for a targeted approach to homelessness prevention

To be effective in genuinely preventing homelessness, prevention services must catch people at risk of homelessness *much sooner* than the current, demand-led 'housing options' approach.

²⁵ Crisis (January 2016) [The homelessness monitor: England 2016](#), Appendix 1: Local Authority Survey (2015)

Earlier intervention could be improved if local housing authorities, working with local partner agencies, are supported to:

- 1. Set up systems to identify households at risk of homelessness** via pre-tenancy assessments, ensuring social landlords are alert to triggers (such as significant reductions in income) during a tenancy and by encouraging housing advice referrals by other services (such as health visitors).

Greenwich Opportunities, Learning & Development (GOLD): preventing homelessness from welfare reform

GOLD was launched in April 2013 with £6m funding. Greenwich's Homelessness Strategy set out a robust response to prevent homelessness resulting from welfare reforms by establishing a Welfare Reform Team to proactively contact residents affected by the household benefit cap and under-occupancy charge and to provide appropriate interventions to prevent homelessness, including through providing access to employment.

GOLD participants are offered a 6 month work-experience placement with the council, paying London Living Wage. The scheme also provides additional support for those who need it, including one-to-one mentoring, interview preparation, dedicated childcare support and part-time shifts compatible with school hours. An apprenticeship scheme is targeted at disadvantaged young people, including care leavers and those in supported housing.

So far, the scheme has worked with nearly 400 participants. 72% of those surveyed said they joined the scheme because they wanted to work but could not get into employment. Onward employment is currently at 74%, and 83% for participants affected by the benefit cap. Participants report improvements in confidence as a result of the work experience.

Greenwich calculate the project costs at £9,000 per onward job, which compares favourably to the £8,000 cost of supporting a family who become homeless, or the average Discretionary Housing Payment of £9,000.

- 2. Deal with rent and mortgage arrears before they become a serious problem**, including help with housing benefit claims, discretionary financial assistance, joint working with lenders to overcome mortgage problems and debt advice.

Breathing Space Wakefield: preventing homelessness from repossession

Breathing Space is administered by Wakefield Council, on behalf of almost all local authorities in Yorkshire and Humberside region. It is aimed at those at risk of losing their homes through mortgage repossession.

Wakefield's Homelessness Strategy identifies that nearly two thirds of the homes in the area are owner occupied, and an increase in mortgage lending rates may result in additional pressure on many homeowner finances that are already stretched to the limit.

Breathing Space offers an interest-free secured loan that provides short-term help to people struggling with mortgage repayments because of a drop in income due to job loss, ill health or some other change in circumstances. It allows people time to consider their longer-term options, including selling at a realistic market price and releasing their equity rather than losing their home to repossession action. It also provides financial capability training and debt counselling.

A loan of up to £15,000 can be used in two ways. Either it can clear arrears, and cover monthly instalments, while the property is sold. The loan is then repaid in full as part of the property sale. Alternatively, the loan can clear arrears and cover continuing mortgage instalments for up to 12 months until circumstances improve. In this case, the loan must be repaid in full by the end of a three year term.

- 3. Develop tenancy sustainment schemes** such as ‘floating support’, cross-tenure tenancy sustainment schemes aimed at preventing repeat homelessness, mental health support and early support to address nuisance behaviour, which may lead to a breach of tenancy.

Inspiring Change Manchester: preventing repeat homelessness from lack of support

In Manchester, Shelter's Big Lottery-funded Inspiring Change programme is designed and developed with service users to meet the diverse requirements of people with a variety of complex needs, including a history of problem drug and alcohol use, mental health or emotional well-being issues, accommodation problems and offending.

The project aims to break down barriers that can lead to repeat homelessness by delivering the right range of services at the right time. The Inspiring Change Manchester engagement team, commissioned by Shelter, incorporates Riverside Housing, Addiction Dependency Solutions and Greater Manchester Probation Trust as well as specialist support from Big Life Self Help Services and Shelter.

This team works in partnership with current Manchester multi-agency programmes acting as the ‘glue’ that joins services together to provide the right range of interventions, in the right order, at the right time. This allows individuals to receive wraparound support tailored to their needs.

- 4. Work effectively with other agencies**, particularly social services, housing benefit teams or social landlords, via joint protocols and information-sharing, preferably with a lead agency driving the work forward. This should include joint guidelines on moves in and out of institutional care, such as hospital, prison and local authority care.

Leicestershire Housing Enablement Service: joint working to prevent homelessness

This service was established in September 2014. It works within hospitals to prevent delays in discharge for patients with housing-related issues. Delayed discharges cost a lot of money and reduce the patient’s independence.

The service is a collaboration between NHS Leicestershire Partnership Trust, Leicester Royal Infirmary University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, Leicester City Council and other district councils within Leicestershire.

An initial six month pilot was set up specialising in mental health care. A housing officer and housing support officer were stationed on site to work with the CRISIS team to support patients with housing issues.

Officers have access to a small funding pot, for minor adaptations to ensure the existing home remains suitable or to provide money to access a private rental. Support is offered for a limited time when patients return home, resolving debt issues, helping to apply for benefits and getting individuals set up in new tenancies to prevent readmissions. They also hand over to support services in the community for long term support.

Within the first 3 months the savings to the Trust were so significant that the project was extended. A further pilot was then initiated in the acute hospitals, with a housing officer and support worker again stationed on site. Again, there was a significant impact and so a further six months funding was secured for another officer.

Accessible housing advice and information

5. Develop more accessible and holistic advice and information services (such as health and financial advice) to head off the risk of homelessness. There is a need to improve awareness and access to advice among groups most at risk of homelessness (e.g. via joint-working with established community groups) and providing specialist advice services to young people at risk of homelessness (via raising awareness in schools and peer mentoring). There should also be accessible legal advocacy to assist people in enforcing statutory rights.

Targeted and good quality ‘upstream advice’ can prevent a housing problem turning homelessness. A study²⁶ conducted as part of a Legal Services Research Centre research project found that at the end of the year-long project, a third of participants stated they had avoided eviction and a quarter suggested they avoided the forced sale of their home as a result of the advice received. In another study²⁷ almost half of Citizens Advice clients reporting a more secure housing situation three months after accessing advice.

Shelter works with both statutory and voluntary advice providers to ensure that housing advice to prevent homelessness is suitably targeted and of a good quality. Our Homelessness and Housing Advice Consultancy Services have worked with more than 60 local authorities since 2001, reviewing services and improving planning and performance.

The DCLG funded National Homelessness Advice Service²⁸, a partnership between Shelter and Citizens Advice, enables frontline providers to deliver good quality housing and homelessness advice, and support and facilitate the prevention of homelessness where possible. NHAS has supported more than 80% of local authority frontline housing options services to provide expert advice and assistance in order to prevent homelessness.

Although local authorities are now major providers of free homelessness prevention advice, those turned away – or who prefer independent advice – tend to turn to voluntary agencies. Shelter are expert providers of homelessness prevention advice, although numerous voluntary agencies provide housing advice within their generic provision from to local communities, including Local Citizens Advice, law centres and community advisors. More than 60% of all Local Citizens Advice and other independent frontline organisations have also received expert support and training from NHAS. NHAS estimate²⁹ that the positive outcomes achieved, via both its local authority consultancy line and housing debt casework, may have saved a total of £26m of public expenditure on housing and homelessness related services – the return on investment of the £2.7m grant. NHAS advisers recorded that 87% of cases resulted in homelessness delayed or relieved or household circumstances improved.

²⁶ Pleasence, P., Balmer, N.J., Buck, A. & Williams, K. (2007) [A Helping Hand: The Impact of Debt Advice on People's Lives](#), Legal Services Research Centre

²⁷ Citizens Advice (2015c), [The impact of housing advice](#), Citizens Advice.

²⁸ [National Homelessness Advice Service](#)

²⁹ NHAS Q4 Report for the financial year 2015/16. £26m saving is based on an estimated cost of £3,000 per local authority homeless case accepted, with an anticipated 8,662 homeless preventions or positive outcomes over the 12 month period of grant delivery.

As a major provider of expert housing advice, Shelter aims to meet a wide range of needs. A 2015 independent study³⁰ of our advice services found that participants' experiences across three channels (face-to-face, telephone and website) were very positive, with their key needs, both practical and emotional, typically being met. Notably, many respondents described how they felt more confident, empowered, and able to take action after using Shelter services.

Using digital channels to prevent homelessness

As demand for Shelter's advice services continues to grow, we have continued to be innovative in our provision of preventative advice, exploring the use of different channels to get the right advice to people when and where they need it. Digital information can help to prevent homelessness. This is because some people with housing problems don't proactively ask for help until they reach a crisis point. Digital information helps inform people that there is advice and support available to help them to resolve their problems and how to find it.

Allowing people to get advice and information online in their own space and time, without the pressure of speaking to someone, can help resolve problems at an earlier stage. Our research found that people liked the anonymity and convenience of digital services.

Shelter provides digital information via quick videos, podcasts, self-service tools and other resources, which can be shared on social media. In April 2015, we began piloting a webchat to help people navigate their way around the Shelter 'Get Advice' website. This service went live from October 2015 with the result that during 2015/16, over 10,000 people (500 per week) were helped to obtain information and advice. Shelter is now looking to extend webchat to smart phones to reach more people.

In early 2016, Shelter live Q&A session on Facebook and Twitter, and commenced a pilot to provide assistance via Facebook, mainly on its mobile platform. This was in response to increasing demand for detailed and definitive answers to housing questions via direct messages to the Shelter Facebook page.

The pilot now provides people with direct assistance via private Facebook messages, with dedicated online advisers providing one-to-one expert advice via social media. They are only referred to the Helpline or a specific caseworker where necessary. Shelter is currently dealing with around 30-50 Facebook advice requests per week. This has allowed the Helpline and face-to-face services to focus help on people in the most urgent need.

The continuing need for telephone and face-to-face advice

While digital advice is appropriate for clients at risk of homelessness, supportive telephone and face-to-face services are very important to people who are actually threatened with homelessness. This is particularly true when households are experiencing a combination of housing-related issues or their case is becoming more urgent. Shelter research finds that when homelessness is imminent people often need emotional and practical support and advice, and therefore will be more likely to need to speak to someone.

Shelter continues to review how it can further segment demand for its services, including:

- Integrating face-to-face services with its Helpline for people who prefer offline advice
- Developing further self-service tools, for example for tenancy deposits information, which currently generates a high volume of calls to the Helpline

³⁰ TNS BMRB (January 2015) [Down the line: the future role of digital housing advice and support](#), Shelter

Conclusion

We must move away from a crisis-driven response to prevention to a more strategic and targeted approach.

The recent growth in homelessness is primarily due to the instability and unaffordability of private renting. Consequently, a reactive, personalised approach to homelessness prevention is stalling. If we are to genuinely prevent homelessness we must tackle these structural pressures. Where individuals are threatened with homelessness, a 'housing options' approach is only offered at crisis point, when the protections of the homelessness legislation should apply. This has created an uneasy tension between law and practice.

Homelessness prevention services, such as 'housing options' advice, should be proactively targeted at people at risk of homelessness *much sooner* to avoid them becoming threatened with imminent homelessness. This should be regardless of whether they might be entitled to statutory assistance.

There are existing examples of good practice of targeted early intervention by councils working in partnership with others, some of which are highlighted in this briefing. The Government should support and champion good practice to ensure that it can be replicated. They should support, and not replace, the current statutory framework of rehousing of homeless children and other vulnerable people. This contains vital safeguards require accommodation to be more stable (minimum 12 month contracts), affordable, safe and suitable.

Targeted interventions to prevent homelessness must be adequately resourced. The retention of homeless Prevention Grant, totalling £315 million by 2019/2020, is very welcome. However, at a time when services have been overwhelmed by the knock-on consequences of wider government policy, especially welfare reform, recent funding constraints have begun to limit the capacity of local homelessness services, particularly with respect to homelessness prevention.

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Shelter helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at **shelter.org.uk**

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