



THE LGIU GUIDE TO

# Scrutiny of Homelessness Policy and Strategy

in association with Shelter

INDEPENDENT INTELLIGENT INFORMATION

**As local authorities prepare to review their homelessness strategies by 2008, questions will inevitably be raised: What do we mean by homelessness? What is the nature of homelessness in a particular area? How can homelessness best be prevented?**

By Janet Sillett

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**Shelter**

## Foreword to LGIU guide to scrutiny reviews of homelessness services

### **Shelter warmly welcomes this timely LGIU guide.**

As local authorities prepare to review their homelessness strategies by 2008, questions will inevitably be raised: What do we mean by homelessness? What is the nature of homelessness in a particular area? How can homelessness best be prevented? Even a cursory glance back over the recent past reveals a significant change in the way local authorities have tackled homelessness in their areas.

The Homelessness Act 2002 introduced the need for a strategic, corporate approach to homelessness. The emphasis shifted away from responding to homelessness once it had occurred and instead moved to centre stage the idea of homelessness prevention. Progress has been made in the development of local authority homelessness strategies and in the reduction in use of bed and breakfast accommodation for households with children. Shelter has long argued for and supported genuine homelessness prevention strategies and strongly supports the efforts of local authorities to deliver a more strategic approach.

However, Shelter is also concerned that there is still a large number of people who are excluded from assistance, but are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We believe that a close analysis of the true picture on the ground is essential if local authorities are to produce relevant and effective strategies to prevent homelessness and combat social exclusion. Local authorities need to be able to carry out a comprehensive assessment of housing need in order to facilitate the development of solutions to meet this need.

A scrutiny review is an essential tool for examining all aspects of homelessness within a local authority area before strategies are re-drafted. It enables the council to examine the whole range of services provided to those who are homeless and not just those services provided by the homelessness section.



Similarly, reviews are able to draw on a wide range of statistical and qualitative evidence and can avoid concentrating on statutory homeless statistics alone. Scrutiny panels are free to consult widely and in particular can seek evidence from hard-to-reach groups whose voices often go unheard. Such a process is key to ensuring local policy and practice is fine-tuned to fit changing local need.

We anticipate that this very practical LGIU guide will prove to be a most useful manual for all local authorities wishing to examine the true nature of homelessness in their area. As such, Shelter is very pleased to recommend it to you.

**Adam Sampson**  
**Director**  
**Shelter**

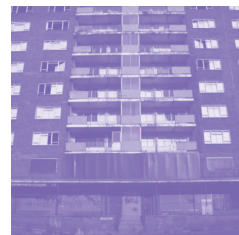
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**This guide aims to assist councillors carrying out scrutiny reviews of their council's performance on homelessness.**

The Homelessness Act 2002 made major changes to dealing with homelessness. Much has been learnt since 2002, but there are still many challenges for councils, particularly in refocusing from a largely responsive service to a more strategic one, looking ahead, and preventing homelessness occurring. The government's objectives are reflected in performance indicators and specific targets for homelessness. Scrutiny reviews can help to review how councils are performing in the light of this challenging agenda.

Homelessness and living in poor and unsuitable housing affects health, employment and education prospects. Dealing with homelessness has wide repercussions inside and outside the council. Scrutiny of homelessness strategies will highlight the relationships between tackling this issue and many other council policies and strategies and the effectiveness of inter-agency working.

Scrutiny can make an important contribution to improving how councils deliver homelessness services. As many authorities are now revisiting their homelessness strategy, it's a good time to begin a scrutiny review.



## Benefits from homelessness scrutiny and overview



- Scrutiny enables non-executive members to address complex and sensitive service issues and bring their perspectives to bear on executive decisions.
- Scrutiny committees can spend time in gathering information and hearing from a range of witnesses: executive committees may not have the time to research in such depth.
- Scrutiny, done well, is an outward looking process. Through different ways of hearing evidence, scrutiny offers an opportunity for communities, groups, employees, service users and partners to make their voices heard and influence policy.
- Homelessness scrutiny can contribute to wider council policies and strategies, such as social inclusion, children's services and Supporting People.
- The users of homelessness services and potential users often feel marginalised: the scrutiny process can use innovative ways of engaging those people who are directly affected by the council's and other agencies homelessness strategies and services.
- Scrutiny can have a significant role in improving performance and in identifying service gaps.
- Scrutiny and overview can help to shape future policies as well as examine existing services: it can address strategic as well as operational issues, and can support the council's objectives to develop longer term strategic policies and policies that focus on prevention.
- Scrutiny and overview can have a significant role in the development of joint working with other public sector agencies, particularly the NHS, the private sector and the community and voluntary sectors. This is especially important given the key role of joint working in providing services for homeless and potentially homeless people. Scrutiny can also monitor the effectiveness of joint working.

- Scrutiny can re-emphasise within a council its homelessness responsibilities – particularly the ongoing role after stock transfer for housing authorities of tackling homelessness and preventing it. Scrutiny can monitor the joint working with stock transfer associations on nominations and the provision of temporary accommodation.
- Scrutiny can examine services that have been outsourced to other agencies, such as the mediation service.
- A homelessness review will involve councillors that previously had only a limited knowledge of the issues and the council's strategy and services.
- Scrutiny can give the homelessness service a higher profile – inside and outside the council.

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**The Homelessness Act 2002 amended parts VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996 that had set out the legislation covering assistance to homeless people and the allocation of social housing.**

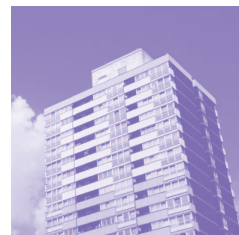
The 2002 Act required housing authorities (councils with a housing function) to take a more strategic and multi-agency approach to tackling all forms of homelessness and to focus on prevention. Authorities need to consider homelessness in the widest sense and refocus policies from an emergency response to supporting people in maintaining their current homes where possible. Authorities have to ensure that everyone accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need is provided with suitable housing until they obtain a settled home. Authorities have more flexibility in assisting non-priority homeless households.

**Authorities need to consider homelessness in the widest sense and refocus policies from an emergency response to supporting people in maintaining their current homes where possible**

There is a duty on social services to assist housing authorities. Councils have to consult other agencies and individuals when developing their homelessness strategy.

## Key changes introduced in 2002 Act

- New duties on local authorities to review and publish homelessness strategies relating to tackling and preventing homelessness.
- A new duty to provide long-term accommodation for unintentionally homeless people in priority need.
- The definition of priority need was extended in secondary legislation to cover new groups of vulnerable homeless people, such as 16 and 17 year olds (other than those social services are responsible for), and care leavers under the age of 21.
- The strengthening of duties to assist homeless people who are not in priority need, such as a duty to provide advice and assistance.
- Significant changes to the framework for allocating social housing, with greater flexibility for councils to develop alternative approaches to lettings and increase applicant choice.
- Greater powers to help those not in priority need but unintentionally homeless if there is stock available.
- Changes to the framework for appeals of homelessness decisions – duty to give advice to homeless people and to enable them to challenge decisions.



Key to refocusing on preventative work was the requirement on councils to review their policies and publish their strategy to tackle and prevent homelessness in their area by July 2003. The strategy needs to be reviewed at intervals of not more than five years. Authorities have to map the current level of homelessness provision in their locality; predict future levels; and identify what they are doing and intend to do to prevent homelessness. The review is the basis for the strategy which has to consider the changes needed to existing services to meet the needs of all homeless people in the council's area, not just those the council has a duty to rehouse.



Local authorities that transfer their housing stock retain the statutory obligations regarding housing allocations, homelessness and the provision of housing advice. They cannot contract out the duty to carry out homelessness reviews and to adopt a homelessness strategy. They can contract out making inquiries and/or decisions on homelessness applicants, securing accommodation to discharge their homelessness duties and the allocation of housing. They still have the duty to provide advisory services but can decide how best to discharge it.

The government set up a Homelessness Directorate within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The government report *More than a roof*, published in 2002, set out the government's new policy proposals to complement the Homelessness Act.

In 2002 the government established targets to reduce the level of rough sleeping and to address the exposure of children to Bed and Breakfast accommodation, which is often of a poor standard and may involve sharing facilities.

The targets were:

- to sustain levels of rough sleeping that are two thirds below the levels recorded in 1998;
- that by March 2004, local authorities will ensure that no homeless family with children has to live in a Bed and Breakfast hotel, except in an emergency, and then for no longer than for six weeks.

A further target has been set to halve the numbers in temporary accommodation by 2010 (TA 2010).

The Audit Commission published *Homelessness: Responding to the new agenda* in January 2003.

In 2005 the government introduced three new best value performance indicators (BVPIs) relating to homelessness: BVPI 213, to measure the effectiveness of interventions to prevent homelessness; BVPI 214, the council's efforts to tackle repeat homelessness; and BVPI 225, the number of domestic violence refuge places provided or supported by the council and the development of sanctuary schemes enabling victims of domestic violence to choose whether to remain in their home with professionally installed security measures.



BVPIs clearly influence the council's priorities in dealing with homelessness – there is a role for scrutiny in evaluating the implications for services of having to deliver these targets, as well as assessing whether the council has the systems in place to meet them. It may also be appropriate for scrutiny reviews to consider whether the targets are the most appropriate ones.

## Different approaches to scrutiny of homelessness services

**Scrutiny reviews of homelessness services vary in scope and can be as comprehensive as a wide-ranging review of the 2002 Act implementation.**

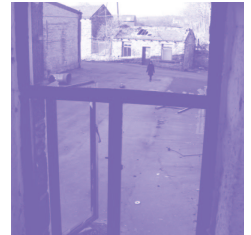
Arun District Council set up a homelessness working party to report to Policy Development Scrutiny Committee. In 2004, the group commissioned a wide-ranging review into homelessness. The terms of reference included consideration of the council's statutory responsibilities for homelessness, the strategy for tackling homelessness, an examination of the accommodation, advice and information available to the homeless, and a review of the impact of the council's policies for tackling homelessness on its wider Housing Strategy and other strategies and to consider the costs of tackling homelessness and the resources allocated.

A review could be restricted to a specific facility or a type of facility, such as direct access accommodation. Some councils have concentrated on how council policies have affected specific groups, such as young people coming out of care. For example, a sub-group of the London Borough of Bexley's Social and Community Services Scrutiny Committee examined alternatives to bed and breakfast accommodation.

**A review may be responsive: analysing why something has happened or looking at how services may need to change**

Some scrutiny committees fed directly into the development of the homelessness review and strategy following the 2002 Act. Milton Keynes Council established a scrutiny sub group of councillors and a co-optee to contribute directly to the preparation of the strategy. The London Borough of Lambeth set up a Commission into Homelessness drawing in members of the housing scrutiny and the social services scrutiny sub-committees to monitor and assist officers undertaking the review of homelessness and formulate the strategy. Many authorities are currently reviewing their strategies and scrutiny committees could make a positive contribution to this.

A review may be responsive: analysing why something has happened or looking at how services may need to change. The review can focus on the council's own services or extend to cover a range of agencies. The review might specifically consider the performance of other agencies, such as stock transfer housing associations – and consider how the two organisations work together and whether the association is providing the appropriate nominations and temporary accommodation for homeless people. Before stock transfer takes place, scrutiny committees could consider what position the council is taking on what functions should remain with the council, and could monitor the results after the transfer has taken place.



A review could be based on a user group, such as a review of health services for homeless people from the perspective of the user: how services are currently arranged and looking beyond the health service to services that have contact with homeless people, such as the police, shelters, and community and voluntary organisations. Medway Council carried out a review in March 2003 into housing for vulnerable young people that analysed the extent of the housing available to care leavers and young offenders leaving custody.

Authorities will have issues particular to their circumstances. Rural authorities, for example, may want to consider the provision of direct access accommodation and services in rural areas: there is often a chronic lack of temporary accommodation in rural areas and those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness may have to travel long distances to access services, and public transport can be very poor or infrequent and expensive.

A review could highlight how the council is identifying service gaps and how it is meeting the needs of different groups. There is some concern, for example, that the issues faced by black and ethnic minority (BME) groups have not been considered sufficiently in many homelessness strategies.

Scrutiny would be an effective tool to look at this issue. Oxford City Council's housing scrutiny committee, for example, monitored the housing department's action plan that it drew up after commissioning external research into homelessness and BME households.

Homelessness services can be looked at as part of the best value process and in relation to how well the council is meeting government homelessness targets. It would be preferable, however, to also consider how well the council meets its own corporate and service objectives and targets, and whether the targets are appropriate. Scrutinising performance should not be about duplicating the council's performance management systems, but instead about ensuring they are in place and are effective in improving services. Scrutinising performance could consider in detail specific issues, such as the how the council is meeting the government's bed and breakfast target.

Consideration of homelessness services and policies is often part of a wider review, such as scrutiny reviews of services for asylum seekers and refugees, looked after children, or health and housing.

**Scrutinising performance should not be about duplicating the council's performance management systems, but instead about ensuring they are in place and are effective in improving services**

**A full list of possible scrutiny review questions is given at the end of the publication.**

**The 2002 legislation meant local authorities had to develop new ways of working, in particular to strengthen partnership working.**

A homelessness scrutiny review could usefully consider how effective joint working is with a range of organisations and within the council itself: such as housing associations as partners and providers; social services and health, particularly in relation to assessment and dealing with health related problems; the voluntary sector as providers and advisors and support; and the private sector, particularly private landlords. The review could look at how joint working could be strengthened – such as doing preventative work with schools, or having joint assessments with social services.

The effectiveness of inter-agency working, including government departments, is an interesting area, such as authorities working with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) to support vulnerable children, and working with the Home Office, the voluntary sector and housing providers to support refugees.

The changing nature of service provision will mean increasingly that the scrutiny of services has to adapt. Devon County Council's Children's Trust, together with Devon district council's housing services, has developed an integrated housing and children's services strategy. The aim is to improve the outcomes for vulnerable young people and their families living in poor and often temporary housing. The strategy involves children's services, housing services, housing providers and Supporting People.

**The changing nature of service provision will mean increasingly that the scrutiny of services has to adapt**

**There are many kinds of partnerships – from informal and advisory to more structured ones that may involve joint commissioning and planning of services**

Devon County Council established a sub-committee of their main scrutiny committee to monitor the new Children's Trust. So far, this group has not reviewed the housing and children's strategy, but it is looking at the process for governance and scrutiny of the Trust, and it will at some stage scrutinise the strategy. It will then need to consider how to involve the partners directly in that review.

An effective way of scrutinising joint strategies and working on homelessness in two-tier areas (or in a sub-region) could be to set up joint reviews. Health scrutiny has involved a number of different models that could be considered.

There are many issues that scrutiny of partnerships can pick up: such as the degree of democratic accountability of partnerships and how communications are working; and the effectiveness of joint working on the ground; whether the staff of the different services understand the issues outside their direct experience; whether joint strategies work for the service users; and whether objectives are really shared.

There are many kinds of partnerships – from informal and advisory to more structured ones that may involve joint commissioning and planning of services. Scrutiny can make a valuable contribution to their development, and can ensure partnerships and joint working arrangements are transparent and politically accountable.

## City of York Council: health and homelessness Access to Services for the Homeless in York with special reference to mental health needs

**This scrutiny review started out as a general investigation into the housing, care and health services available to homeless people, but evolved into a more focused examination of the access to services for homeless people in York with special reference to mental health needs.**

Homeless people have problems in accessing basic services, such as a local GP, because of not having a permanent address; these problems can be more profound for people with mental health needs.

Necessarily, the review examined the effectiveness of joint working and inter-agency working, particularly between the council's services and other statutory and voluntary providers of mental health services for vulnerable homeless people. Many of the recommendations referred to work done with and partnerships with other agencies, such as the recommendation that the council and York PCT should support the aims and long-term financial maintenance of the York Personal Medical Service for Homeless People and Travellers (PMS).

The Board decided on the scope of the review by having a presentation from the Director of Mental Health and Social Inclusion at Selby and York Primary Care Trust (PCT); the chair and vice-chair attending a meeting of the Homelessness Forum; and holding an informal discussion with the York Personal Medical Service (which provides a nurse-led GP service for homeless people and travellers). It is clearly crucial to give sufficient attention to the scope of the review and its terms of reference.

The review gave councillors greater knowledge of the nature and degree of the homelessness problem amongst particular groups. It identified some shortcomings in existing provision but also the strengths in current approaches and directions.

**The briefings also identified positive developments in integrating health and homelessness services**

It showed members the extent and complexities of joint working. It also made clear that problems with access to services were not unique to York, and that it is common for mental health services to be stretched.

The Board used a series of LGIU briefings on Health and Homelessness as one of the sources of information and to compare their services with others: for example, the lack of co-ordination found by inspections in rehabilitation and recovery services and the differences in perceptions between users and workers. The briefings also identified positive developments in integrating health and homelessness services.

Perhaps the most crucial recommendation of the Board was to review progress on the implementation of their recommendations on a six monthly basis. The first monitoring report went to the Board in July 2005. The homelessness strategy had been reviewed since the publication of the scrutiny report and the ongoing action plan had taken account of the Board's recommendations. A further update was requested in six months on specific recommendations where implementation is in progress. This update showed that many of the recommendations have been implemented or are in the course of being implemented.

Some recommendations that involve the PCT may be more difficult to implement because the local PCT is having to cut back on expenditure.

## Conducting scrutiny reviews

**How the review is managed varies in different councils: some councils appoint special panels to oversee specific projects, whilst others involve independent but interested groups or individuals to advise councillors.**

Shelter has acted as an independent expert for several reviews. The LGIU has been an expert adviser in helping to shape reviews and write final reports.

For all the reviews examined in this guide, the review groups went on site visits, held informal meetings with stakeholders outside town halls, attended forums and met users. User involvement can be crucial. There are many examples of effective user involvement in health scrutiny that could be adapted for scrutiny of homelessness services.

Scrutiny panels are usually supported by professional staff – these might be policy officers servicing scrutiny specifically, or seconded to service a specific inquiry. Staffing is vital for the success of an inquiry and the ability to complete work on schedule.

Membership of scrutiny committees must be balanced politically. Ideally, members should produce consensus-based reports.



## The best possible start Islington: scoping a review

The objectives of the review were to consider whether the council's prevention of homelessness activities were effective, to review the activities and to make recommendations to improve performance

### **The London Borough of Islington's Sustainability Review Committee carried out a scrutiny review on the prevention of homelessness which reported in July 2005.**

The objectives of the review were to consider whether the council's prevention of homelessness activities were effective, to review the activities and to make recommendations to improve performance. The committee looked at, and made recommendations on, a range of issues, such as: early intervention; the options for people threatened with homelessness; inter-agency work and rough sleepers; the use of the private rented sector; joint working with social services and housing providers; and cross borough and sub-regional working to maximise provision for those most at risk.

The questions the committee asked itself were comprehensive and challenging, including whether the needs of homeless people, such as people with mental health problems and offenders, were taken into account; whether the council was successful in preventing repeat homelessness; whether the allocation policy struck the right balance between homeless and potentially homeless people, and other groups; and whether the prevention of homelessness was sufficiently prominent in strategic planning.

A diverse group of people and organisations contributed to the review, such as clients of the housing aid centre; the Single Homeless Project and St. Mungo's outreach service; council officers from a variety of departments, including law and public service, regeneration and environment and conservation; and beacon councils. Focus groups were used, and there were surveys (of housing advice clients), site visits, and interviews with users and officers. Existing sub-regional and cross borough forums, such as the ALG homelessness working party, were also consulted.

Experience suggests that the effectiveness of scrutiny is determined to a large degree by the preparation that takes place before the first meeting begins.

Critical elements are:

- Role of the chair: the commitment and effectiveness of the chair are critical to using the committee time well and to enabling the committee to make good use of experts and witnesses. The chair needs to be effective at running the inquiry, contribute to writing its report and be able to present its work to the community and the media.
- Terms of reference: the terms of reference should define the focus of the inquiry and its expected outcomes. A solid starting point is a report with initial data gathering and a proposed scope for the inquiry, prepared with member and officer input. Such a scoping report should provide accurate information and adopt an open approach to defining relevant areas of inquiry, and identifying possible witnesses and investigation methods, so that members can choose among options.

Early agreement on the scope of the inquiry enables the committee to plan its schedule and allow appropriate time for site visits if necessary. The chair may convene an informal scoping meeting to examine initial ideas and data. Undertaking a comprehensive scrutiny review of homelessness strategy will entail a degree of prioritising, and committees will need to decide on what is most relevant and needs to be examined in greater detail. An informal meeting could be used to agree the questions they want to ask.

- Agreement on the use of the outcomes: Understanding and agreeing how the outcomes will be used also helps retain the focus of the inquiry.
- Selection of co-optees, experts and witnesses: the committee may decide in advance that certain witnesses are essential and secure their participation.



**The chair needs to be effective at running the inquiry, contribute to writing its report and be able to present its work to the community and the media**

**Other councils feel that it is better for people with valuable opinions not to be co-opted but rather to be invited as external witnesses so that they can both speak more freely and not exert undue influence**

Wise selection of expert witnesses, or perhaps inviting local academics and experts to assist the committee, can give members access to expertise and enhance the credibility of the committee. The Local Government Information Unit provides expert advisers for a range of inquiries. Shelter is often asked to provide expert advice to homelessness scrutiny reviews.

- Opinions on co-optees are divided. Some councils see co-opted members as a welcome addition to the committee's skill base and credibility. Other councils feel that it is better for people with valuable opinions not to be co-opted but rather to be invited as external witnesses so that they can both speak more freely and not exert undue influence. The difference may, in part, reflect the different capacities of councils to provide professional support for committees internally.
- Overall risk assessment: ensure that the timetable is realistic and takes account of external events; confirm that resources needed are available and consider options in case of any shortfall (for example, less officer support time available than planned).
- In a comprehensive and detailed review, the scrutiny committee or board (or special working group) should be taking evidence from a wide range of people, including council officers, executive members, the public, partners, and other 'stakeholders'. It is good practice to take as much evidence in public as possible.
- Other local authorities may have conducted scrutiny exercises of a similar nature. Reading their reports and contacting those involved could be useful in both scoping the report and in comparing evidence. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) maintains a database of scrutiny reviews on its website – [www.cfps.org.uk](http://www.cfps.org.uk).

### **Redcar and Cleveland's Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee produced their report into homelessness in March 2005 following a review.**

The review was an in-depth study of the areas that affect and are affected by the homelessness team. The committee focused particularly on the relationships with internal departments, external agencies and homeless clients. The terms of reference were to review the council's homelessness strategy in the light of recommendations from the Audit Commission and to make recommendations for service improvement based on client and stakeholder perceptions of the service.

The committee used the tools provided in the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Best Value (Scrutiny) Driver. A key to the process was a facilitated seminar where members identified their perceptions of the current strengths of scrutiny and its opportunities for further development, the hallmarks of an excellent homelessness strategy, and their perceptions of the current performance of the service.

It is important in a homelessness service review to understand the service from the perspective of the client. Officers set up an innovative exercise where one of the committee members carried out a 'walk-through' of the service. The member 'tested' the service from an initial phone call claiming to be homeless through to a full homelessness interview, a visit to a temporary accommodation project and completion of the forms for the homelessness application. The committee visited bed and breakfast accommodation and Nightstop UK that provides emergency accommodation for young people in Redcar.

The committee split into smaller groups to cover issues in greater depth so that they could adequately cover a complex service.



**The review significantly raised members' awareness of all aspects of the homelessness process**

The groups considered homelessness figures and statistics; agency and client feedback; housing benefit and private sector landlords; and supporting people and social services.

What were the benefits of Redcar and Cleveland's approach to the review process? The review significantly raised members' awareness of all aspects of the homelessness process. Members understood the reasons for homelessness (for instance, that homelessness is not predominantly 'rooflessness' or rough sleeping). The 'walk-through' exercise, in particular, gave a real insight into how the service is perceived by the user. It highlighted, for example, certain inadequacies at first point of contact, which were immediately rectified. The experience of going through an interview provided an insight into how an applicant can feel, and how supportive officers were in checking out clients' understanding of information. Members gained a deeper understanding of the intricacies and complexities of the process and experienced it in 'real time'. They also gained an appreciation of the realities of partnership working to address some of the immediate client needs.

The review as a whole widened members' knowledge; it provided an in-depth look at specific elements of the service by splitting the group up; it highlighted how different departments worked together; and working outside the committee environment resulted in a less formal and more flexible approach.

The review raised the profile of the service – an important outcome for a critical service that is not always given a high degree of political priority. Of course, the most important outcome of the review was a better service, including improved access, more proactive publicity about its availability, and generally a more client focused response.

### **It is crucial that scrutiny committees handle their reports and recommendations sensitively and effectively.**

Scrutiny committees will present their reports to the council's executive, but some committees will go further. Committees could invite back everyone who had given evidence or been consulted to feedback key points. In some authorities, draft reports are discussed with executive members and senior officers to get initial feedback and influence the executive's decisions if they are still in the procurement stage of a scheme. Final reports should, if relevant, be distributed to all interested organisations, not just to the executive. Monitoring or follow up meetings should be scheduled to ensure that the executive is taking the report seriously.



**Scrutiny of homelessness services and strategy is valuable in itself, even when it does not significantly change decisions or policy. It can increase accountability and public and user consultation and participation; can raise awareness throughout the council; and provide a fresh look at complex issues.**

It was clear, however, in the reviews researched for this publication that they did influence existing policy and service delivery, and contributed to policy development. Scrutiny committees based their recommendations on an in-depth analysis of the context in which strategies are developed and services delivered. Their views were usually underpinned by gaining an understanding of the services and policies from the perspective of service users and of the service on the ground. This is the real key to success of the scrutiny and overview of homelessness.

**Scrutiny of homelessness services and strategy is valuable in itself, even when it does not significantly change decisions or policy**

### Defining homelessness

- How does the council define homelessness?
- Which groups are included in the definition and which are excluded and therefore not measured?

### In what ways is homelessness being prevented?

- Are there adequate mechanisms in place (for example, duty schemes in county courts and tenancy relations officers) to proactively deal with problems that could lead to homelessness, such as rent arrears and tenancy difficulties?
- Are all possible housing options being explored before homelessness occurs?
- How are the needs of hard-to-reach groups being met?
- Is prevention of homelessness given priority within the strategic planning process?
- How comprehensive is the focus on prevention?  
For example, is the council learning from innovative approaches elsewhere; is it providing good quality education and training for its staff; and is it effective in taking intervention action to prevent homelessness among those groups most at risk?
- Does the council have detailed knowledge of the causes and levels of homelessness in its area, including the reasons for homelessness beyond the immediate cause of someone presenting as homeless?
- How effective is joint working in addressing the causes of and preventing homelessness? Are there, for example, close links to social services, the police and women's aid organisations in dealing with the effects of domestic violence? Is the council working well with neighbouring councils at the sub-regional level to tackle homelessness?
- How effective are the council's efforts to increase housing supply for homeless people?



- Is the council transforming temporary accommodation to permanent homes (including transferring tenants in council accommodation who have been in long-term insecure tenancies to permanent tenancies) and is the quality acceptable?

### **Services and eligibility**

- Are homeless people given proper access to services – for example, choice based lettings?
- Are services configured to change focus from crisis management to prevention?
- What kind of reception does the council offer to those who approach as homeless?
- How does the council interpret ‘vulnerability’ and ‘intentional homelessness’?
- What lies behind the council’s homelessness acceptance rates – does achieving lower rates mean prevention strategies have been effective or are there any concerns that some applicants are facing unreasonable barriers preventing them from applying?

### **Performance**

- Are performance measures appropriate and in place? How does the council measure the outcomes of the homelessness service? Does the council monitor any outcomes beyond the government BVPIs?
- Is the council learning from best practice elsewhere – for example, beacon councils?
- Is the council using all the grants and government resources it has access to – for example, grants from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for front-line services to prevent homelessness, such as dealing with arrears?
- How well does the homelessness service work within the council: what other council services have an impact on preventing or alleviating homelessness, including

**Are homeless people given proper access to services?**

planning, environmental health, housing benefit and social services and children's services (in unitary and metropolitan councils)?

- How effective is the relationship with stock transfer RSL in those councils that have transferred their housing stock?

### **Resources**

- Are current staffing resources adequate?
- Has the council got the balance right between resources for prevention and support?
- Are there adequate staffing resources to carry out a strategy review and have current staff got the appropriate skills, such as research and data analysis skills?
- Are training needs being met, particularly in relation to specific areas, such as consulting with service users?

### **Consultation with and involvement of service users**

- How far does the council involve service users in reviewing strategy?
- How well does the council tackle support for vulnerable groups and special needs groups?
- Does the council consult a wide range of people, including those groups whose voice is often not heard?
- How does the council consult and is it successful – for example, the response rate to surveys?
- Has the council responded to consultations by developing and changing services?
- Are homelessness services aware of innovative ideas in other councils – such as focus groups with young people cared for by the local authority?
- Do the homelessness services have in-house skills to carry out specific consultation, such as with particular minority ethnic groups, and if not, have they considered bringing in specialists?



**Can joint working be improved with, for example, clearer protocols and procedures between departments and with other agencies?**

### **Political support**

- Is there evidence of support for the homelessness strategy from leading members of the council?
- Are other members involved in the monitoring and review of the strategy – are they consulted about it; are all councilors informed about the council's policies on homelessness, the strategy, the extent of the problem and how the council works with other agencies?
- Are members aware of the cost implications of policies, such as employing a dedicated officer to progress a rent deposit scheme?

### **Partnership working**

- How effective are the relationships with outside organisations, including the NHS, the voluntary sector, children's services (in two-tier areas) and county council social services?
- Are there examples of joint training and arrangements for regular liaison with statutory bodies, the voluntary sector and the private sector?
- Can joint working be improved with, for example, clearer protocols and procedures between departments and with other agencies?
- In two-tier areas, how effective is sub-regional working between district councils, and with the county council? Is sub-regional working used to develop strategies in areas such as Supporting People and homelessness prevention?
- How does the council manage joint working – is there a dedicated officer to facilitate it?
- How does the homelessness strategy link up with other council and non council strategies and programmes, such as Supporting People, drug action. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Connexions?

Scrutiny Solutions  
Local Government Information Unit (2003)

Good Scrutiny Guide  
Centre for Public Scrutiny (2004)

Shelter: <http://england.shelter.org.uk/home/index.cfm>

The Centre for Public Scrutiny maintains a library of sample scrutiny reports, accessible through the reviews section of their website: [www.cfps.org.uk](http://www.cfps.org.uk).

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