

***LOCAL AUTHORITY
PROGRESS AND PRACTICE***

*Local authorities and the Homelessness
Act 2002 – the first year*

Research findings, July 2003

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Summary

This is the third of a series of surveys conducted by Shelter to evaluate the progress and practice of a sample group of 28 local housing authorities in implementing the Homelessness Act 2002. All 28 authorities participated in the research for this third report, which was conducted during July 2003. The research found that:

- Although the majority of authorities had consulted service users in developing their strategies, several accepted that this could be improved on in future.
- All but one of the authorities felt they had gained new knowledge from carrying out the review, with 17 gaining a better understanding of factors causing homelessness in their area. However, 21 felt that gaps remained in the information they had gathered. Many of them had clear plans to address these gaps.
- The problems concerning joint work with social services highlighted in the previous two surveys were repeated. Only five authorities specified that joint working with social services had been useful. Some felt that better structures for joint working were now being set up, but that progress had generally been very slow. This issue has been examined in more detail in the Shelter report *Healthy Relationships?*¹
- All the authorities planned to monitor the implementation of their strategy and most had clear plans for doing this. Just over half planned to review their strategy within 12 months (by July 2004) with a further six planning to do so within 18 months (by January 2005). This shows commitment to achieving objectives and amending plans as necessary.
- A range of preventative services were identified including advice, 'early intervention', mediation and sustainment services. However, over two thirds indicated that the affordability or availability of accommodation in their area remained an outstanding challenge to tackling homelessness.
- Half of the authorities specified that changes were necessary to their rent arrears management practices to prevent homelessness arising unnecessarily. All of these had clear plans for doing this.
- Just over half the authorities accepted that specific changes were needed to ensure they assessed the housing needs of applicants before they provided advice and assistance, as required by the new Act. This contrasts with the first survey in which three quarters of authorities had felt their provision of advice and assistance to be adequate. However, there is still much work to be done, with a number of authorities accepting that they do not keep written records or have monitoring systems in place.
- Almost all the authorities identified gaps in the provision of support either for people with mental health problems, multiple needs and drug and alcohol problems, people experiencing domestic violence or young people. In many cases there were serious concerns that funding for the development of necessary services would not be available through Supporting People.
- Just over half the authorities planned to use the new 'unacceptable behaviour' test as part of their allocations policies. In several cases where it would be applied to tenants with rent arrears, the level of arrears likely to trigger the test was alarmingly low.
- A total of 11 of the authorities identified a lack of parity between their allocations scheme and those of RSLs in the area. In many cases RSLs were felt to be *'slower to take people and quicker to evict'*. This had caused seven authorities difficulty in discharging their homelessness duties and eight had experienced difficulties in making nominations.

Recommendations

Shelter welcomes the commitment authorities have shown in conducting the work needed to complete their strategies and the clear intention to ensure that action plans are implemented and reviewed at an early stage. Many authorities are open about what they have not been able to achieve over the last 12 months but many have plans to improve on this, for example by continuing consultation and developing systems to record and gather better quality information locally.

There was evidence that a lot more work was needed to identify the housing, advice and support needs of specific groups of homeless people. This was particularly the case amongst black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, for whom almost one quarter of authorities accepted they had insufficient information. It is important that this work is carried out and incorporated into the strategies.

There appears to be inconsistency between homelessness and allocations schemes in many authorities. Half the authorities are introducing changes to their rent arrears management policies to prevent unnecessary homelessness, yet there was evidence that very low levels of arrears may prevent people from accessing accommodation through allocations schemes.

It is also clear that some authorities have not had sufficient co-operation from RSLs locally. A number mentioned still not having basic information about RSL lettings practices and policies and one quarter felt that differences in the way RSLs operated their lettings policies had made it difficult for them to discharge their duties to homeless people. Action needs to be taken to improve this situation.

Shelter makes the following recommendations based on this research:

- Authorities must ensure that the commitment to implementing, reviewing and improving strategies is supported and resourced and is not allowed to wane over the next few months.
- Good practice should be promoted in carrying out service user consultation.
- Information gaps have been clearly identified by three quarters of authorities. It is essential that authorities have the resources and, where necessary, training, to fill these gaps to continue to inform and develop their strategies.
- Statutory services should do further work within their respective agencies to raise awareness of the benefits of joint working and enable housing, health and social services staff to better understand how their roles fit within the wider framework. 'Corporate responsibility' for homelessness and health improvement needs to be clarified and adequate senior representation from social services authorities improved. The recent Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*,² sets out proposals, on core training and joint assessment frameworks where children are involved.
- Good practice in arrears management must be promoted to ensure that no authority creates unnecessary homelessness by taking eviction action against its own tenants for rent arrears, unless this is the last resort.³ Those authorities that did not look at their own practices as part of the first review should be strongly encouraged to now do so.
- Good practice also needs to be promoted in the provision of advice and assistance and the conduct of housing needs assessments – many authorities are only just starting this work and need to be supported in developing more robust systems.
- Commissioning bodies within local authorities should update their Shadow Supporting People needs analyses to incorporate needs that have been identified by homelessness strategies and which are not being met. It is important that these be incorporated into the full five-year SP strategies that are due to be produced in 2004. In the long term, homelessness strategies and their subsequent reviews should be used as a tool for strategic expansion of the Supporting People programme.

² DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*, London: DfES

³ Shelter (2003) *House Keeping: preventing homelessness through tackling rent arrears in social housing*, London: Shelter. Citizens Advice (2003) *Possession Action – the last resort? CAB evidence on court action by social landlords to recover rent arrears* London: Citizens Advice.

- Local authorities need to have close regard to the Allocations Code of Guidance on their application of the ineligibility and removing preference provisions. The ODPM should monitor the implementation of these provisions.
- The Housing Corporation should review implementation of its new Regulatory Code and guidance⁴ and ensure that mechanisms for establishing compliance are adequate.

1. Introduction

This is the third and final of a series of surveys of local authorities carried out by Shelter to monitor the implementation of the Homelessness Act 2002.

1.1 The Homelessness Act 2002

The Homelessness Act 2002 makes a significant impact on how local authorities are expected to manage their homelessness provision. The main changes contained in the Act are:

- new duties on local authorities to carry out reviews and publish strategies to tackle and prevent homelessness
- a new duty to provide long term accommodation for unintentionally homeless people in priority need and other reforms to strengthen the homelessness safety net
- the extension of priority need for housing to new groups of vulnerable homeless people
- reforms to the framework for allocating social housing.

The homelessness provisions and priority need regulations of the Act came into force on 31 July 2002. The provisions relating to allocations came into effect on 31 January 2003. The statutory deadline for completing the strategies was 31 July 2003.

1.2 Shelter's Homelessness Act Implementation Project

Shelter has aimed to work collaboratively with as many local authorities in England as possible, to help them with a complex process of developing their reviews and producing their strategies. We committed considerable resources to achieving this aim and produced and made available a range of materials, information and training on the Act. This includes a dedicated website, www.HomelessnessAct.org.uk, which is updated regularly and is free to use.

1.3 Homelessness Act Implementation research

Shelter has conducted research to evaluate the implementation of the new legislation and other relevant changes in housing and homelessness practice over the 12 months from July 2002. One aspect of this is the research covered by this report.

Shelter asked 30 English local authorities to participate in a 12 month research project, evaluating and monitoring their progress and practice in implementing the Homelessness Act 2002. The project has incorporated a broad geographic spread including rural, coastal and urban authorities, small district authorities and city councils. In many of the areas, Shelter's Housing Aid Centres and Projects were asked to recommend an authority that would be willing to participate in the project.

This research has consisted of three surveys conducted with local authority staff involved in the homelessness review and strategy or other relevant operational processes. The surveys took place over the course of 12 months from August 2002. A total of 28 authorities agreed to participate in the research and took part in the first survey, which was conducted during August and early September 2002 and the third survey, which took place in July 2003. These authorities are listed at Appendix 1. Of these authorities, 26 were able to participate in the second survey, which was conducted during February 2003. Interviews for all three surveys were conducted by telephone, based on three pre-designed questionnaires. Copies of the questionnaires for all three surveys can be obtained from the website www.HomelessnessAct.org.uk.

This third survey sought to establish the sample group's progress on certain issues covered in the first two reports and to establish their plans for implementing strategies after the deadline for their completion.

The findings of the third survey are presented in this report. The previous two reports can be obtained from the website www.homelessnessact.org.uk or from Shelter Publications. The first report⁵ is based on findings from the survey that took place in August 2002 and the second⁶ reports findings from a survey conducted six months later, in February 2003.

Shelter has also commissioned research to assess the processes that contributed to the completion of review and strategy documents in another 15 local authorities and to assess the content of their completed documents. The report, *The Act in Action: an assessment of homelessness reviews and strategies*, will be available from Shelter Publications by December 2003.

2. Report structure

Much of this report focuses on homelessness reviews and strategies and considers the progress made on these by the end of the statutory deadline for completion (July 31 2003). It also covers the other main homelessness provisions, allocations policies and other operational issues. The report is broken down into the following sections.

- Section 3 – a profile of the local authorities in the sample group that participated in this phase of the research
- Section 4 – analysis of the processes covered by homelessness reviews and strategies, including consultation, information gaps and the main points for action
- Section 5 – an assessment of changes in awareness about homelessness amongst certain groups and details of plans for dissemination of information about homelessness strategies
- Section 6 – information about implementing homelessness strategies, including plans for monitoring and reviewing strategies and the resources available to authorities in doing so
- Section 7 – learning points from the review and strategy processes; changes to homelessness services as a result of strategies and the main challenges that authorities consider remain to tackling homelessness
- Section 8 – the provision of advice and assistance
- Section 9 – an assessment of whether homelessness strategies and Supporting People strategies have worked together, focussing on service gaps and funding
- Section 10 – details of any changes still to be made to allocations policies, use of the ‘unacceptable behaviour’ test by authorities in their policies and authorities’ views on whether there is parity between their schemes and those of RSL partners.

3. Local authority profiles

3.1 Sample group for third survey

The research project involves a sample group of 28 local authorities, all of which completed this third survey. The sample group includes:

- a total of 13 urban authorities
- eight rural authorities
- two coastal authorities and
- five authorities describing themselves as ‘other’ – a mixture of rural, urban and/or coastal areas.

Five of the participating authorities are London boroughs and five are unitary authorities. The remainder are two tier, with housing provided at a district level and social services functions provided at a county level.

Stock transfer has taken place in ten of the local authorities, seven of which are in rural areas. Transfer was completed in one of the authorities after the first survey was conducted. Of the ten stock transfer areas:

- three authorities currently have their homelessness functions fully contracted out
- two have contracted out homelessness investigations but have retained decision-making responsibilities
- five have kept all of their homelessness functions in-house.

One authority that had contracted out its homelessness and advice functions at the time of the first survey subsequently took these back in-house.

The number of decisions on homelessness applications⁷ made by the local authorities in the sample group varies considerably. In the year April 2002–April 2003:

- a total of nine* authorities made 100–499 homelessness decisions
- nine authorities made 500–999 homelessness decisions
- four authorities made 1000–1999 homelessness decisions and
- five authorities made decisions on more than 2000 homelessness applications.

Data on the number of decisions is not available for one of the authorities in the sample group. Each of the above groups included one authority that did not have figures available for all four quarters of 2002–2003 except the group marked* which included two authorities without figures for all four quarters. Full year figures have been estimated in all these cases.

4. Homelessness reviews and strategies

The Homelessness Act 2002 requires authorities to conduct a review of homelessness in their district and to publish a strategy to address it. This work had to be completed by 31 July 2003 and a new strategy must be published every five years thereafter. This section of the report covers:

- an assessment of any consultation carried out by the authorities for their reviews and strategies
- any gaps in information that have been identified and any plans the authorities have to fill these
- the main points identified in the completed strategies for future joint working and housing and service development.

4.1 Consultation carried out for the first strategy

The Act states that ‘before adopting or modifying a homelessness strategy the authority shall consult such public or local authorities, voluntary organisations or other persons, as they consider appropriate’.

Authorities were asked:

- if any of the groups in table 4.1 had been specifically consulted as part of their review and strategy
- to specify any consultation methods that they had found to be particularly helpful.

Table 4.1 Number of authorities consulting specific groups as part of the homelessness review or strategy

	Number of authorities
Statutory agencies	28
Voluntary agencies	28
LA/ RSL housing staff	27
Service users	25
Council members	25
Staff in other departments of the local authority	24
Private landlords	6
Members of the public	2
Others	3

Base: 28 authorities

Results from the first survey had shown that most authorities planned to consult a range of service users and involve a broad range of other agencies in the strategy groups and consultation systems. From the results of this survey it can be seen that the majority of authorities carried out specific consultation with their own staff, council members, other agencies and service users. All had found a variety of methods to have been helpful. These included:

- focus groups
- interviews
- questionnaires
- consultation days
- the homelessness forum, steering or strategy group
- other meetings, including team meetings.

4.1.1 Service user consultation

Although the majority of authorities said they had conducted some consultation with services users, several accepted they had not done this as well as they would have liked to, or said that they had experienced specific difficulties. One strategy officer felt service user consultation had been ‘shallower’ than that carried out with other groups. However, 19 authorities specified that they had found service user consultation to have been one of the most useful parts of their review and strategy process. It is encouraging to note that several of them were anxious to improve their consultation in future and had specific plans to do so. These included:

- offering payment for attendance at further consultation meetings
- enlisting better help from relevant agencies as there was now good *‘signing up to the strategy’*.

Where consultation had worked well, focus groups, questionnaires and interviews were found to have been particularly helpful. Four authorities had invited service users to consultation days, one had commissioned a university to conduct specific research, and had found this *‘fantastically helpful’*.

Examples of consultation with service users that worked well

- One authority held small focus groups and ‘depersonalised’ meetings by asking participants to look at specific scenarios rather than discuss their individual experiences.
- Another authority held focus groups for young people, face-to-face interviews for rough sleepers and a questionnaire for people in temporary accommodation. This was a collaborative effort, with the council devising questionnaires and agencies then conducting interviews with their clients. The council found these results very helpful.

4.1.2 Consulting others

In the previous two surveys some authorities had voiced concerns about certain agencies that were unwilling to contribute to the review and strategy. Demonstrating the commitment needed to ensure adequate involvement amongst some, one authority said that all agencies who felt homelessness was not their concern had *‘been chased up and stalked’* until they participated.

Involving council members is important to ensure that strategies are understood locally and are given financial backing. Seven authorities invited council members to attend consultation days and five others mentioned that specific council procedures had been helpful. These included:

- weekly briefings and full council meetings
- cabinet meetings
- scrutiny committees.

In a limited number of cases private landlords, letting and estate agents were consulted. This was done by a variety of methods, including a landlords’ forum, specific meetings and consultation days. Two authorities mentioned that landlords had been involved in the homelessness forum or steering group. Methods used to consult members of the public included face-to-face consultation and a postal survey.

4.2 Information gaps

The Act states that homelessness reviews must consider:

- the levels, and likely future levels, of homelessness in their district
- the activities and services provided which help to prevent homelessness, secure that accommodation is or will be available for homeless or potentially homeless people or provide support for them, including support to prevent them becoming homeless again
- the resources available to the authority and other agencies for providing these services.

The strategy must cover all people who are homeless as defined in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 and not just those to whom the authority owe a duty to provide housing. This means, for example, that it must consider the needs of people not in priority need for accommodation. Not all of the information needed for the strategy would be held by the authority or be easily available. In the second survey, authorities were asked to assess the extent to which they felt they had gathered, or would be able to gather, sufficient information to conduct a thorough review. Over half felt they had been able to gather some information, but that much work remained to be done.

When asked in this survey what had been the most useful parts of carrying out the review and strategy, 22 replied that they had found gathering information about homelessness and existing services/agencies to be one of the most useful aspects of the process. A number of authorities were surprised at what they had found out about homelessness locally. This included new information about main causes of homelessness.

However, following on from the previous survey, authorities were asked whether their strategy identified specific information gaps to be filled. Two said that they did not know, but 21 acknowledged specific gaps. These authorities were asked:

- what these were, and
- how their strategy proposed to fill them.

They gave ‘open’ replies, which have been grouped together as follows:

Table 4.2.1 **Specific information gaps identified by authorities**

	Number of times mentioned
Inconsistent data collection	9
Information about black and minority ethnic households	6
Information about repeat homelessness	5
Information about health and homelessness	4
Information about homeless people that do not approach the council/ non priority need groups	4
Information about RSL lettings policies and practices	2
Other information gaps	9

Base: 21 authorities

It is encouraging that three quarters of the authorities were prepared to say that there were gaps in their information at the time of completing their first strategy. One quarter of all the authorities felt that ‘*knowledge about information needs or uses*’ had been a main learning point in this process (see section 7, below).

4.2.1 Proposals for filling information gaps

It is, however, important for authorities to have clear plans to fill gaps identified and ensure that this takes place so that they can build on the work done in this first year. The 21 authorities that identified information gaps were asked to specify how they intended to fill them. Again, they gave ‘open’ replies that were grouped together as follows:

Table 4.2.1.1 **Authorities’ plans for filling information gaps**

	Number of times mentioned
Commissioning research	10
Introducing common monitoring forms with other agencies	9
Improved recording/ performance monitoring	5
Working with specific providers (RSLs, hostel, mental health project)	3
Other	3

Base: 21 authorities

It is encouraging that almost half of the authorities that identified gaps planned to commission research to fill them.

Inconsistent data collection was identified as a main difficulty in conducting a thorough review by seven authorities in the second survey and it is welcome to note that strategies have recorded this, and that several authorities have plans to improve collection in future by improved recording and common monitoring. For some, this has meant developing new homelessness application and other forms, in some cases across county-wide areas. This will provide an important means of establishing a more accurate and comprehensive picture of local homelessness over the next few years, which will be essential in reviewing and updating strategies.

It is a matter of concern that almost one quarter of the authorities felt they had gaps in knowledge about BME households at the end of the first year. Just over half said they had any plans to consult with BME groups at the time of the first survey. This is an area where improvement is needed if authorities are to meet their wider statutory responsibilities. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 imposes a general duty on all public bodies to strategically promote equality of opportunity and good race relations. It is encouraging that a number of the authorities planning to commission research did have specific plans for research into the needs of BME groups.

Information gaps about repeat homelessness and homelessness amongst people not approaching the council for help were noted and are not surprising, as they are not points that have generally been recorded by authorities in the past. Several authorities planned to improve recording to assist with this.

4.3 Main points for action on joint working

The Act requires social services authorities to give such assistance as the housing authority ‘may reasonably require’ in carrying out the homelessness review and drawing up the strategy. The previous two surveys highlighted ongoing difficulties that many authorities were experiencing in engaging such assistance. Also, whilst there is no statutory requirement for housing authorities to work with health services as part of the review and strategy, this is clearly an important area for joint planning and working. It is strongly encouraged as a means of ‘*developing more strategic approaches to tackling homelessness*’ in *More than a roof*.⁸ All but four of the authorities in the second survey had had some involvement with the Primary Care Trust (PCT).

For this survey, 20 of the 28 authorities said they had found joint working and consulting with other agencies to be useful. One authority reported that *'joint working has gained momentum'*, it was now *'delighted at connections made'*. Those authorities that had found joint working to be useful were asked to specify which agencies this had been with. Social services and the Primary Care Trust were each specifically mentioned by five authorities. One of these noted:

'real recognition from social services and others of the need for partnership working'.

This authority felt that this had happened to some extent before but *'now all sides recognise the importance'*.

However, other authorities continued to find joint working difficult, with social services being *'slow to come to the table'*. One authority felt that the information it had obtained from social services had been the *'most disappointing of the whole lot'*. Information it had been given consisted of *'just ticking the box if someone is homeless'*. In the first survey, 21 of the 28 authorities said that joint working with social services needed improving and little improvement was found to have occurred at the time of the second survey. At that point seven authorities specified that they found engaging with social services the most difficult aspect of their review.

Authorities were asked whether joint working with any of the agencies in table 4.3.1 had been identified as main action points in their strategy. Identification would indicate that the matter had been prioritised as something to be taken forward.

Table 4.3.1 Number of authorities identifying joint working as being necessary with specific groups

	Number of authorities
Joint working with social services	27
Joint working with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) or specific health services	19
Joint working with neighbouring authorities	19
Joint working with other agencies (including RSLs)	15
Joint working with other statutory agencies	14
Joint working with the voluntary sector generally	13

Base: 28 authorities

It is welcome to note that almost all authorities have highlighted that work with social services will be a main action point and that two thirds have given high priority to developing work with providers of health services.

However, working relations with social services were still a problem for some authorities. One stated that social services had a budget for implementing the Homelessness Act but had done no work. The authority felt *'inclined to invoice them for the work the authority had to do'*. Another said that social services did come to consultation meetings and the core strategic group, but were *'slow on feedback'*. A county group involving social services had now been set up, but this was *'too late for the strategy'*. The authority hopes this *'will improve joint working in the future'*.

4.4 Other main points for development

Authorities were also asked whether the development of any of the following services had been identified as main points for action in their strategy.

Table 4.4.1 **Number of strategies developing specific services**

	Number of times mentioned
Developing additional temporary accommodation	28
Development/improvement of data collection	25
Development of advice services	24
Development of tenancy sustainment services	23
Developing additional permanent accommodation	22

Base: 28 authorities

It is not surprising that all authorities planned to develop additional temporary accommodation and that 22 of the authorities planned to develop additional permanent accommodation, given that the affordability and availability of accommodation were identified by more than two thirds as the main challenges remaining to tackling homelessness (see section 7.5, below).

For two authorities, developing additional permanent accommodation was an absolute priority – one stated the *'success of the strategy depends on this'* and for the other authority, development of accommodation was *'the highest priority in the housing strategy and corporately'*.

Data collection, advice and sustainment services are considered in subsequent sections of this report.

5. Promoting awareness of homelessness and informing others about the strategy

Producing the homelessness review and strategy is a statutory requirement for authorities and has taken place at a time of considerable government interest in homelessness. Best Value Reviews (BVRs) and Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs) have also focussed attention on the provision of services in some authorities. This section of the report considers:

- any plans authorities may have had for promoting awareness of homelessness locally
- any plans they had for disseminating information about their strategy to relevant groups.

5.1 Promoting awareness of homelessness

Authorities were asked whether, as a result of their work on the homelessness review and strategy, they felt there had been any change in awareness about homelessness and services for homeless people amongst certain groups. It is acknowledged that this is a subjective question and is difficult to quantify.

Table 5.1.1 Groups amongst whom awareness about homelessness was felt to have increased

	Number of times mentioned
Local council members*	22
Other local agencies	22
Local authority staff*	18
Members of the public**	5

Base: 28 replies except where specified

*Of 27 authorities

** Of 25 authorities

Over three quarters of authorities felt awareness had increased amongst council members and other local agencies and two thirds felt it had risen amongst council staff, (council staff in relevant jobs may obviously have had a better awareness in the first place).

Authorities were asked to specify what may have caused any increase in awareness. Consultation and '*participation in the process*' were given as the most important factors amongst councillors, agencies and local authority staff. One authority said that attention had been focussed on the strategy because it was '*a document which had to be published*'. The following were given as other reasons by several authorities:

- information, including council and other magazines and a mailout
- involvement in Beacon Council events
- scrutiny committees (for council members)
- new initiatives and services (amongst the local authority staff and other local agencies)
- amongst council staff, structural changes within the authority.

Others mentioned the importance of consolidation – *‘seeing how homelessness relates to the broader agenda’* amongst other agencies; *‘broadening the context’* and *‘pulling everything together’* amongst local authority staff.

5.1.1 Promoting awareness amongst council members

A number of authorities saw the importance of ensuring that council members understood homelessness and its causes locally and supported their homelessness strategy. For several authorities the local government elections in May 2003 had led to a significant change in council membership and in some cases, considerable political change. For one this led to a hung council and loss of most of the cabinet – *‘to say this made things difficult is an understatement’*. Many authorities had to do a considerable amount of work to brief new councillors about homelessness. This was also felt to be important amongst stock transfer authorities and those without visible homelessness problems. Authorities had to improve awareness where:

- councillors needed to see the *‘big picture’* – the authority *‘needed to ensure they understood the role of strategic housing after LSVT’*
- *‘people thought the stock had gone and the problem had gone with it’*
- there was a longstanding view in one area that because there were voids there was no homelessness problem. The *‘involvement of councillors through the scrutiny committee has challenged this’*.

Success in reducing the use and cost of bed and breakfast accommodation for families raised the profile of homelessness services in one area and council members were now *‘much better informed’* as a result of a Beacon Council bid in another.

However, some authorities still felt that *‘views of some members are still very judgemental’*. Another said awareness amongst some others had increased, though:

‘not as much as was hoped. The test will be when they are asked for funding’.

5.1.2 Promoting awareness amongst the public

Many authorities had not done much work to publicise their strategy and had generally only involved people with current or past experience of homelessness in consultation. Only five of the authorities that replied felt awareness about homelessness and services had increased amongst the public. The following were examples of methods found useful in promoting public awareness.

Examples of methods for promoting public awareness of homelessness

- information and the production of a booklet about services
- local press coverage – housing and homelessness issues had received a lot of coverage in one area
- consultation
- an article about one authority’s Beacon Council success, which was being used to show landlords they were *‘a good bet’*.

5.2 Disseminating information about the strategy

We hope that awareness about homelessness and services for homeless people will be increased further by promoting and disseminating information about the strategy. Authorities were asked whether they had specific plans to disseminate information about their strategy to the following groups. Not all had finalised plans for doing so at the time of the survey.

Table 5.2.1 Groups to whom authorities plan to disseminate information about their strategy

	Number of times mentioned
Local authority housing and homelessness staff	28
Staff in other departments of the authority	27
RSL staff	27
Staff in other statutory agencies	27
Staff in voluntary agencies	26
Current service users	15
Other homeless people	13
Others	12

Base: 28 authorities

Almost all planned to disseminate information to staff in the main agencies that had been involved in the review and strategy. They were asked to specify any particular methods for doing this and their replies included the following.

Examples of methods for disseminating information about the strategy

- distributing hard copies or putting the strategy on the internet
- producing an executive summary
- putting the strategy on the authority's intranet and putting articles in internal newsletters and briefings
- holding a launch day
- discussion at team meetings
- providing training for other agencies and internal staff
- through the strategy, working group or the homelessness forum
- producing a mailshot

Several authorities had taken specific action to involve relevant staff in the development of action points as a means of ensuring these were understood and would be delivered.

Examples of staff involvement on setting action points

- One authority was committed to involving all staff in implementing specific points and had referred to the strategy's objectives when setting *'action plans and individual job plans'*.
- One authority had done a *'test run of action points on staff'*, which had enabled them to clarify some of the points further. It had also done some work to show how targets in the homelessness strategy interacted with those in their BVR.
- Another authority had involved staff from other departments and RSL staff in *'consultation on the action plan'* and saw this as a means of ensuring they were aware of and involved in meeting the strategic objectives.
- One authority said the strategy had been *'referred to in negotiating joint initiatives'* with authority staff and those of other agencies.
- One means of ensuring the strategy and action points were disseminated to staff in other statutory agencies was *'to set up joint inductions and job sharing'*.

Just over half the authorities had plans to disseminate information to people currently using their services and just under half planned to inform other homeless people. One authority had agreed a number of main action points that will be delivered by all agencies. It wanted to ensure *'everyone, including services users is aware of these'*. Those specifying 'other' groups of homeless people to whom information would be disseminated included:

- former service users
- young people
- travellers and gypsies
- hard to reach groups.

Specific means of disseminating information to these groups and current service users included:

- producing a *'leaflet on the strategy and what it means to homeless people'*
- *'looking to revise materials [about homelessness] to include strategy information'*
- *'newsletter to all on waiting list'*
- *'information at hostels and B&Bs'*
- *'reviewing and rerunning' specific research with service users*
- *'through smaller local agencies'*.

6. Implementing homelessness strategies

This section of the report establishes:

- any plans authorities had for monitoring their strategy
- any additional resources that authorities had identified for monitoring and implementing their strategy
- the authorities' plans for carrying out a review of the strategy.

6.1 Monitoring the strategy

The Act suggests that the strategy should establish specific objectives and actions to be taken by the housing authority, the social services authority and other relevant public authorities and agencies. These requirements are about ensuring that the strategy makes a difference to service delivery and that it is translated into specific actions. It will be essential that authorities have mechanisms for monitoring whether the objectives identified in their strategy are met and that specific actions have been undertaken. All 28 authorities planned to monitor implementation of the strategy. In five cases, methods for doing this had yet to be decided, but the remainder were able to specify that one or more of the methods in table 6.1.1 would be employed.

Table 6.1.1 **Structures in place for monitoring the strategy**

	Number of authorities mentioning
Through the homelessness strategy group	15
Through the homelessness forum	10
By specific member(s) of staff	9
Setting up a specific monitoring group	2
By other means	4

Base: 23 authorities

Several authorities had very clear and welcome plans for monitoring implementation of their strategy. This would seem to indicate a high level of commitment and specific responsibility. Examples of plans are shown below.

Examples of plans to monitor implementation of strategies

- Adopting service indicators, which would be disseminated in quarterly meetings and progress bulletins to all stakeholders. The indicators would show comparisons and benchmarks with neighbouring authorities.
- One authority had given high corporate priority to implementation. The homelessness forum would monitor the strategy, but it has also been *'adopted'* by, and will report to, the Community Action Partner Group, part of the Local Strategic Partnership. This was described as a *'very high level group'*, including the Chief Executives of the Health Service and RSLs.
- Two authorities mentioned that strategy or working groups would take the lead to ensure the strategy is implemented and would feed into the local homelessness forum, which would retain a wide membership. One of these authorities also has a new, dedicated, management post to supervise the strategy. Another authority planned to use its final consultation day to recruit key agencies to a monitoring group.
- 'Other' means specified included monitoring by *'all staff in the homelessness section'* and ensuring that specific points were delivered through *'individual staff reviews and development'*.

Those authorities with previous experience of implementing strategies raised important concerns. One stated that one of their most important learning points from carrying out the review and strategy was that:

'implementation is different from drawing up a list of action points and getting them done'.

The authority now has allocated resources for a specific post to implement the strategy. Another authority wanted to *'learn from previous mistakes'*, having had problems implementing the Supporting People strategy because operational staff *'often feel that once a strategy is written, that's that'*. The authority was concerned that the homelessness strategy should be a *'living document'* and had tried to write it in an accessible way so that the public can read it, though this had been *'difficult to tally with the needs of the ODPM'*.

6.2 Additional resources available to the authority

Adequate resources will obviously be essential to the delivery of objectives. A total of ten authorities had or intended to employ specific additional staff to implement the strategy, or deliver specific action points. For six of these, the new post would have specific responsibility for monitoring implementation of the new strategy.

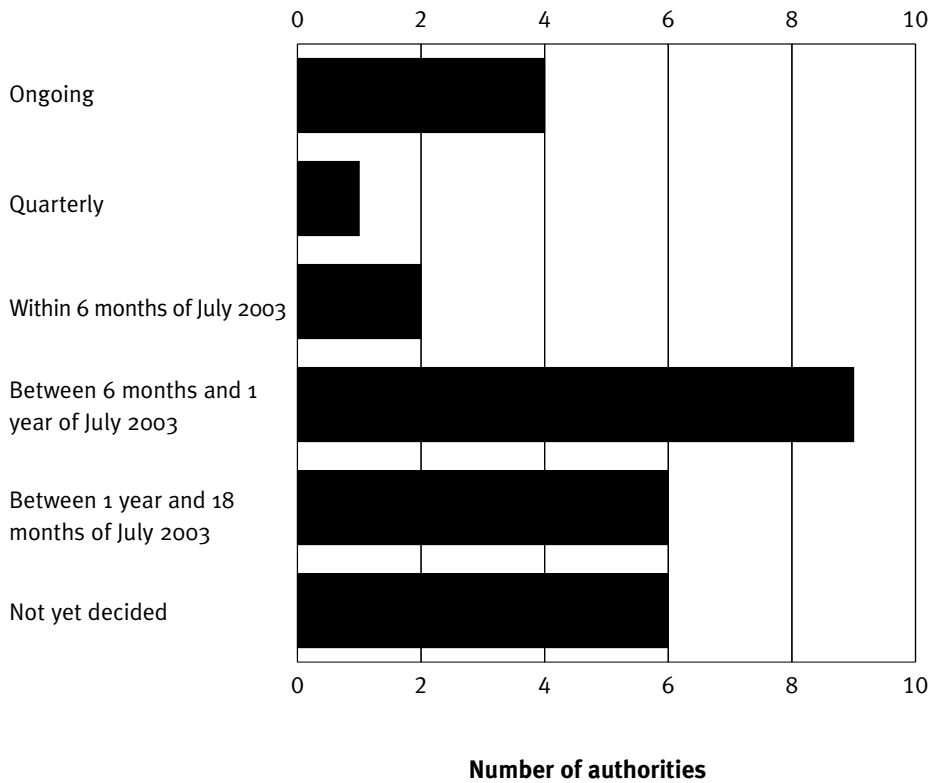
Half of the 28 authorities said that a specific additional budget had been allocated for implementing their strategy, though in many cases this consisted of money allocated by the ODPM. Three authorities identified 'other' specific resources as being available to them. These were:

- *'vast chunks of Supporting People funding'*
- *'use of bed and breakfast reduction funding whilst it lasts'*
- *'seconded staff returning to their original posts'*.

6.3 Plans for the first review of the strategy

The Act requires authorities to keep their strategy under review. Authorities will be required to produce a further strategy within five years (by July 2008), though in view of the amount of work needed and the tight timescale they have had to complete their first strategy, the survey sought to establish whether any had plans to review after shorter periods.

Chart 6.3.1 **Period within which authorities planned to review their first strategy**



Base: 28 authorities

The chart shows that of the 22 authorities that had determined when they would review their strategy, nearly three quarters (16) intended to have done so by July 2004 and the remainder planned to have done so by January 2005. This indicates a significant commitment to ensuring action points are implemented and the strategy amended as necessary.

Those that said their review would be ‘ongoing’ included one that felt the work ‘*will just go on*’ from that being carried out now and another that specified they would monitor against targets – weekly for bed and breakfast, monthly for homelessness and six monthly for rough sleepers.

7. Learning points, changes and challenges

This section of the report considers:

- any learning points that the authorities feel have arisen from their review and strategy
- the authorities' assessment of the main changes to the way homelessness will be prevented in their area, resulting from the implementation of their strategy
- any specific changes to be made to rent arrears management practices and housing benefit administration, as set out in the strategies
- the authorities' assessment of the main challenges that remain in tackling homelessness locally.

7.1 Points learnt from reviews and strategies

Many authorities and other agencies have put a huge amount of work into their review and strategy. Authorities were asked what the three most important learning points about homelessness in their area had been. A total of 27 replied, with only one saying that it had not learnt anything important. Open replies were given and they have been coded as shown in table 7.1.1.

Table 7.1.1 **Most important learning points arising from reviews and strategies**

	Number of times mentioned
Better understanding of the factors causing homelessness locally	17
Need for specific changes to service provision	13
Points arising from or about working with other agencies	7
Appreciation of specific action needed by the council	7
Knowledge about information needs or uses	7
Other	5

Base: 27 authorities

Of the 17 authorities that felt they had learnt something about factors causing homelessness locally, eight felt they had learnt something new about specific groups. Two authorities had been surprised at findings about homeless people in their area, these included:

- *'the extent of hidden homelessness amongst young people'* and
- that *'very high numbers of rough sleepers had spent some time in prison'*.

Two mentioned new information about the *'disproportionate levels of homelessness'* amongst BME households or an *'imbalance between the percentage of BME households and homelessness applications locally'*.

Three authorities had gained new knowledge about local supply issues, including *'a better awareness of the mismatch between supply and demand'* and two had new knowledge about the links between *'health and housing problems'*. The remainder had made findings about the causes of local homelessness generally.

Of those mentioning the need for specific changes to service provision, five felt they had learnt *‘that prevention is key’* or the importance of intervention that *‘can be very early’*. Four authorities mentioned learning about the need for support, including the *‘need to support people in temporary accommodation’*. The provision of housing advice and options was also mentioned. These points follow the recommendations set out by the government in *More than a roof*.⁹

Other specific points learnt by authorities about service delivery included:

- *‘the fact that area offices are not delivering consistent services’*
- the *‘need to improve customer care’*
- the *‘need to improve the information given to people in temporary accommodation’*.

By increasing their knowledge about working with other agencies, two authorities had increased their *‘awareness of the existing commitment to help people’* though in one case it was felt that this *‘commitment is not properly targeted at present’*. Others had learnt about the links between areas such as health, housing and social services and had gained recognition that *‘joint working is the only way to achieve targets in the action plan’*. One had realised the *‘lack of knowledge of the constraints of other statutory agencies’* whilst another had gained a *‘detailed understanding of other agencies’ work’*.

Points learnt about information included the *‘need to present information about statistics more clearly’* and the *‘need to be “foresightful” with information gathered’*.

7.2 Main changes to the prevention of homelessness

Authorities were asked to specify what they thought would be the major change to the way homelessness is prevented in their area, over the next five years. This was an open question and a range of replies were given that were coded into the following categories. They were also asked to give details of plans for new or enhanced services to prevent homelessness.

Table 7.2.1 **Main changes to the prevention of homelessness arising from the strategy**

	Number of times mentioned
Developing or restructuring housing advice or options services	12
Developing prevention/ early intervention services	11
Provision of mediation schemes	9
Increasing access to the private rented sector	7
Tenancy sustainment/ support	7
Joint working	4
Education and life skills training for young people	3
Services for BME households	2
Changes to allocations policies	2
Other	8

Base:28 authorities

Just under half of the authorities recognised the importance of housing advice or options services as a new development. ‘Prevention’ services included specific preventative work for people leaving institutions and those experiencing domestic violence. One authority planned to *‘change agencies’ service contracts to build in a requirement to do preventative work’*.

A total of 24 authorities had plans to introduce mediation services for young people leaving home or people experiencing relationship breakdown, though only nine of these identified this as a main change. Where specific forms of mediation were mentioned, these included services for young people, including 'more planned routes to leaving home' and for people experiencing relationship breakdown and domestic violence. The use of mediation schemes is identified as an 'effective response' to tackling homelessness resulting from family breakdown in the Homelessness Directorate advice note *Achieving Positive Outcomes on Homelessness*.¹⁰ However, one authority that had previously introduced a mediation scheme was concerned to carry out more research on the outcomes.

Achieving Positive Outcomes also recommends responses aimed at sustaining or accessing tenancies in the private rented sector. One quarter of the authorities identified main changes in this area of practice. Three of these specified improving access through bond, deposit or rent in advance schemes. A quarter of all the authorities also said they planned to deliver or expand tenancy relations officer services as a means of prevention.

Where changes to allocations policies were noted as a main difference to the way homelessness was prevented, they included making them 'more responsive to the needs of homeless people' and ensuring the housing register gives 'priority to people 'at risk of homelessness'.

Other changes specified included 'change in expectations of the public and agencies about how difficult the situation is locally' and that the 'basis for better service is in place but needs to be built on and needs to be funded'. Another authority saw changes extending beyond homelessness practice, by linking it to housing policy which would 'develop mixed tenure to provide sustainable communities.

7.3 Specific changes to rent arrears practices

*More than a roof*¹¹ identifies rent arrears as a significant cause of homelessness. Evidence suggests that a significant amount of repeat homelessness is caused by rent arrears, including homelessness from temporary accommodation.¹² The second survey found that 17 of 25 authorities that replied had assessed, or planned to assess the impact of arrears management and lettings practices as part of their review. It is encouraging that in this third survey, half of the 28 authorities accepted that their strategy identified specific changes to rent arrears practices. Of these:

- six identified changes to prevent homelessness resulting from rent arrears, amongst their own tenants and those of RSLs
- four needed to review or agree policies with RSL partners.

Other changes specified included:

- setting up a rent arrears forum
- changing procedures to ensure additional support needs of people in arrears were identified.

¹⁰ Homelessness Directorate (2003) *Achieving Positive Outcomes on Homelessness*, London: ODPM

¹¹ DTLR (2002) *More than a roof: a report into tackling homelessness*, London: DTLR
<http://www.housing.odpm.gov.uk/information/homelessness/morethanaroom/04.htm>

¹² Shelter (2003) *House Keeping: preventing homelessness through tackling rent arrears in social housing*, London: Shelter. Citizens Advice (2003) *Possession Advice – the last resort? CAB evidence on court action by social landlords to recover rent arrears*, London: Citizens Advice.

Examples of improvements to rent arrears practices

- In one authority, the work of rent arrears recovery officers was to be *'refocused'* on prevention.
- Another had a low level of evictions for rent arrears, but its review showed that a high level of suspended possession orders were obtained, incurring court costs for tenants already in debt. The authority was looking at a system of splitting court costs with tenants if they repaid their rent arrears in full.
- Another had introduced a checklist to record whether a person has been advised about housing benefit (HB) problems, referred to the CAB etc. Procedures had been completely reviewed to ensure that if the person had any particular needs they were to be referred to relevant agencies. This council was concerned to reduce court costs, which it felt added to tenants' debts that, in some cases, led to the abandonment of tenancies.
- Another authority had worked with RSLs to set up protocols agreeing to act much earlier on arrears. The RSLs were not informing the council of evictions until it was too late. The authority was concerned that RSLs *'serve notice to get money'* and this was to be addressed.

It is encouraging that 16 authorities planned to develop or expand advice or advocacy services for tenants in arrears as a means of preventing homelessness. Half the authorities in the sample planned to introduce or expand debt or money advice services. Shelter would encourage those authorities that did not assess the impact of rent arrears practices as part of their initial review to do so over the coming months to ensure that unnecessary homelessness does not continue to arise from their own practices, or those of partner RSLs.

7.4 Specific changes to housing benefit administration

In the second survey 20 out of 24 authorities said they planned to assess links between housing benefit (HB) administration and rent arrears. For this survey, nine authorities said that changes were necessary and had been specified in their strategy. Two of these said that their service had improved but that work was needed to convince private landlords that this was the case. Three of the authorities gave specific changes that included the examples below.

Examples of proposed changes to HB administration to prevent homelessness

- Setting a local target to fast-track HB claims for people threatened with homelessness
- Considering paying rent in advance as part of the Rent Deposit Scheme, to compensate for delays in the processing of claims
- One authority produced a report that identified those problems resulting from legislation and those resulting from practice. Evidence from service users and homeless people was included and some of the action points contained are about providing better information to claimants, for example about non-dependant deductions. It was agreed that local reference rent levels needed to be looked at, as they were not realistic.
- Two authorities said they needed to improve joint working with specific partners, including RSLs.
- In another, HB staff were part of the steering group and had agreed joint working with the Benefits Agency and others. New forms had been designed and the council was looking at whether it could obtain information for people to help with verification, for example, by paying for duplicate birth certificates.

One authority that had done a considerable amount of work to improve access to the private rented sector was concerned that the government's proposals to widely introduce a standard local housing allowance would be a *'complete disaster'*. The authority felt that plans to end direct payments to landlords would *'be severely detrimental to homelessness services and strategies'* and that *'they should not take place'* as it was concerned that they would discourage private landlords from letting to benefit claimants.

7.5 Main challenges still remaining

Authorities were then asked to specify what they felt would be the main challenges remaining to tackling homelessness locally. Again, this was an open question and their replies were coded into the following groups:

Table 7.5.1 Main challenges that remain to tackling homelessness locally

	Number of times mentioned
Affordability of accommodation	13
Service delivery/ joint working practices	11
Availability of accommodation	9
Resources available	8
Demand for accommodation	7
Working with clients with multiple needs	6
Accessing accommodation from RSLs and private landlords	4
The attitudes of people seeking accommodation	3
Information gathering	2
Other	4

Base: 28 authorities

Over two thirds of the authorities specified either affordability or availability of accommodation as the main outstanding challenge. There was felt to be a lack of *'affordable accommodation across all tenures'*. One rural authority noted that homeless applications had more than doubled since 2001/2:

'a lot of these are from single people, because of lack of accommodation'.

Another felt that:

'scarcity of housing won't be cured by homelessness or housing strategies'.

Of those mentioning challenges regarding service delivery, three mentioned specific difficulties co-ordinating, restructuring or ensuring continuity of services throughout a large local authority area. One stock transfer authority mentioned that it's Comprehensive Performance Assessment inspection highlighted concerns about the low number of staff it had to achieve any of the points in the strategy.

Whilst joint working was mentioned as a main change by four authorities, above, there was still felt to be a need to *'overcome barriers'*, *'fine tune communication'* and *'make the joins stick'*.

A quarter of the authorities mentioned specific challenges arising from issues of local demand. In one authority this was attributed to an *'influx from out of area'*, another found that *'homelessness is increasing generally'* but was also experiencing *'high numbers of asylum seekers and former asylum seekers'*.

Just under a quarter of the authorities felt that working with clients with multiple needs remained a major challenge. Such challenges may be increased because of the lack of adequate services for people with more complex needs, as discussed in section 9, below.

8. Providing housing aid and advice

This section of the report follows up areas covered by the previous two surveys and establishes:

- any gaps that authorities had found in the provision of advice and assistance services
- any changes that authorities accepted as still being necessary to the way they conduct housing needs assessments for applicants that do not qualify for a housing duty.

8.1 Gaps in the provision of advice and assistance services

Twenty four of the authorities stated that their homelessness strategy identified gaps in the provision of housing aid or advice services. They were then asked to specify whether specific gaps existed in advice services for any of the groups shown in table 8.1. One authority that identified gaps generally did not provide further details.

Table 8.1 **Groups for who gaps in advice services were identified**

	Number of authorities mentioning
Young people	21
People who may be homeless but not in priority need	20
Ex-offenders	18
People found to be homeless intentionally	17
People fleeing violence	17
Black and minority ethnic households	16
Ex-service personnel	6
Gypsies and travellers	2
Others	5

It is encouraging that many authorities have realised the importance of the provision of specific advice and that there is still much to do to ensure there are adequate and appropriate services for all groups. Over two thirds of the authorities that accepted there were still gaps in advice provision said that there were gaps for young people, homeless people found not to be in priority need, ex-offenders, those found to be homeless intentionally and people fleeing violence. These groups contain people who may not be owed a statutory housing duty, and for whom good advice and assistance and the existence of alternative housing options will be essential.

Authorities were asked to give a brief outline of any new or enhanced housing aid or advice services planned for any of the groups. Plans that were common to most of the groups included:

- developing housing 'options' services
- better advice services, either through independent provision or in-house services
- better information to the public about, or marketing of, existing services.

Seven authorities mentioned specific plans to develop education services for young people, including a peer education programme and life skills training. One authority was setting up a service to provide *'counselling to young people experiencing homelessness whilst at school'*. However, another area needed to *'improve links with social services'* before developing new services. Another felt that:

'Young people, their parents and other professionals need to be educated about what the council can and cannot do'.

The provision of advice and assistance to people not owed a housing duty will be limited by the availability of local housing options. To this extent, it is important that authorities work proactively to increase the range of options available. For people who were homeless but were either found not to be in priority need or were found to be homeless intentionally, several authorities mentioned developing or expanding rent deposit schemes or other means of accessing the private rented sector. Four authorities were looking at developing schemes with social services to work with *'vulnerable families'* and other people found to be homeless intentionally, though two of these were still at the review or planning stage.

Of the 18 authorities that identified gaps in advice services for ex-offenders, half were planning or developing pre-release services or other work with prison and probation services, to lessen the chances of people being homeless at the end of a custodial sentence.

Specific gaps in advice and assistance for homeless people fleeing domestic violence included:

- a need for better marketing of existing advice services
- better advice for gay men and lesbians
- establishing domestic violence/multi-agency projects and a domestic violence unit
- improving and extending existing services and improving advice and assistance with safety and reoccupancy.

Over half the authorities identified gaps in the provision of advice or aid services for BME households. Of these authorities:

- six noted that they needed to do more work to establish specific needs, including more consultation with specific groups
- three specified a need to provide better information about services and options. This included provision of information about *'domestic violence in particular'* and *'better advice about realistic housing options'*
- one planned to introduce an *'education campaign and multi-agency training'* amongst agencies to promote better awareness of the needs of BME households.

The majority of authorities felt that homelessness amongst ex-service personnel was not an issue. Amongst the six that did recognise gaps in advice services:

- one needed to do more work to identify specific needs
- another saw a need to work with relevant partner agencies on *'better preparation for civilian life'*.

Two authorities specified gaps in advice and aid services for travellers and gypsies. They planned to:

- build *'better links with existing support services'*
- *'explore issues of site provision'*.

One authority planned to provide a directory of *'services and promotional work'* for people with learning difficulties. Another authority specified gaps in the provision of advice for asylum seekers but felt unable to develop any services *'as funding is not available from the statutory sector'*.

8.2 Housing needs assessments

In cases where an applicant is homeless but not in priority need, or has been deemed to be homeless intentionally, the Housing Act 1996 is amended by schedule 1 (9)–(12) of the Homelessness Act 2002 to require that an ‘applicant’s housing needs shall be assessed before advice and assistance’ is provided. Such advice and assistance must then ‘include information about the likely availability in the authority’s district of types of accommodation appropriate to the applicant’s housing needs (including, in particular, the location and sources of such types of accommodation)’.

In the first survey, authorities were asked whether they were satisfied that their provision of advice and assistance currently met the new requirement to be based on an assessment of the applicant’s housing need. At that time, a total of 21 of the 28 authorities felt that their advice and assistance was sufficient. The second survey found that eight of the 26 authorities that participated had no systems at all to ensure an applicant’s needs were assessed before advice was given. Ten authorities had no system at all for monitoring the quality of advice they provided and a further four had no internal systems for checking quality. The third survey sought to clarify what assessment authorities had reached about their advice services after a year of review and consultation.

Authorities were asked whether their strategy identified any specific changes needed to their advice services. Fifteen authorities said they were needed, whilst one answered ‘don’t know’. The fifteen authorities were asked what those changes were and their answers included the following:

Table 8.2.1 Specific changes needed to improve housing needs assessments

	Number of times mentioned
Improving recording of written advice	4
Providing training and increasing skills	3
Carrying out service review	2
Developing a housing ‘options’ service	2
Ensuring service delivery is consistent across area	2
Other	5

Base: 15 authorities

Shelter would welcome the fact that over half the authorities concluded they did need to improve their systems for establishing an applicant’s housing needs and providing appropriate advice and assistance. However, there is still much work to be done.

One authority accepted it needed to ‘develop a robust monitoring system’. One stock transfer authority was concerned about monitoring the services provided by the transfer association, locally. It ‘could not swear’ that assessments were provided for all applicants, as ‘this wouldn’t be [the transfer association’s] aim’.

Several authorities were able to specify changes that had been or would be made, as shown in the box below.

Examples of changes that have or will be made to advice services

- Two authorities specified that they felt their procedures were 'compliant'. *'Every person is currently assessed and given a decision'*. Assessment processes had been changed when the legislation came in and records were now taken of all cases.
- One authority had produced a new application form, which would record more detail about why advice was needed, *'rather than just gathering data'*.
- Another planned a major reorganisation to ensure that skilled staff, able to take more detailed information, conducted assessments. The authority intended to increase the breadth of knowledge of housing advice staff so they are able *'to do more intervention work, with landlords and parents'*.

9. Homelessness strategies and Supporting People

Supporting People (SP) is a government programme that funds housing-related support services for vulnerable people to enable them to live independently in the community. Many of the target group are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The programme started in April 2003. SP pooled the main existing revenue streams for supported housing and put them into a single budget to be allocated and administered locally.

Unitary authorities and London boroughs will administer SP themselves, whilst this will be the responsibility of county councils in two-tier administrations. The administering authority has to establish a commissioning body to agree a SP strategy and annual plan. This body should include a representative from social services and from each housing authority, local probation board and Primary Care Trust in the area. The SP team is usually located within social services, but in some cases it is in the housing department in unitary authorities.

All needs for commissioned services have to be demonstrated clearly and the SP administering authority will be undertaking reviews of these between 2003 and 2006. A more comprehensive needs mapping exercise is also to take place in 2003/4. Following this exercise, Shadow SP Strategies (which had to be in place by late 2002) will be amended to full five year SP strategies, with an annual update and implementation plan.

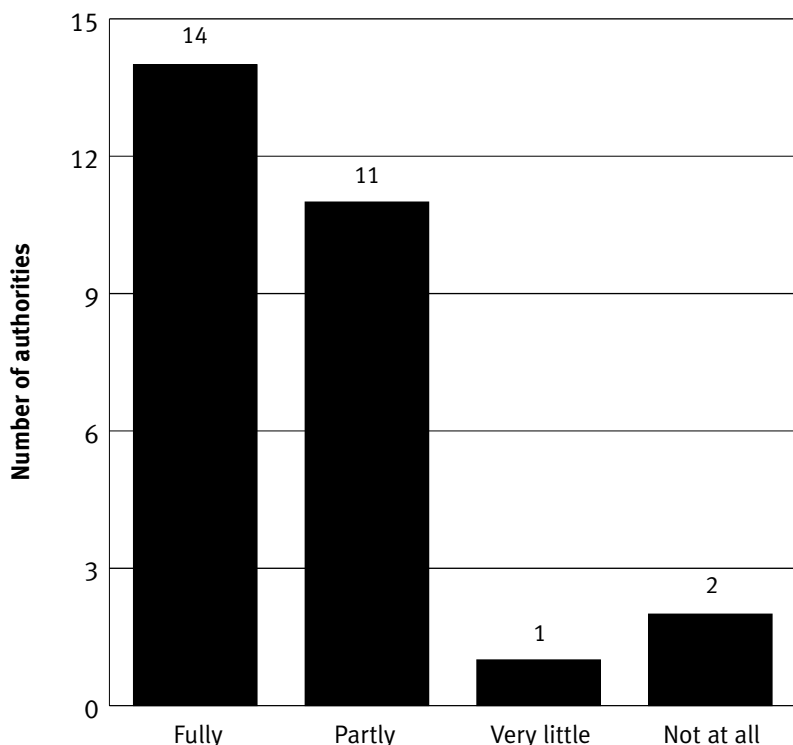
This section of the report examines:

- the authorities' assessment of the level of involvement of SP teams in the development of homelessness strategies
- an assessment of any gaps in the provision of services to meet support needs of homeless people
- an assessment of gaps in services to meet the support needs of specific groups of homeless people.

9.1 Level of involvement of Supporting People teams in developing the homelessness strategy

The interaction between SP strategies and homelessness strategies is therefore essential to the planning and funding of services to vulnerable homeless people. Authorities were asked to what extent they felt SP teams had engaged with their homelessness review and strategy. Their replies are shown in chart 9.1.1, below.

Chart 9.1.1 Extent to which Supporting People teams engaged with homelessness strategies



Base: 28 authorities

Those authorities that found there had been ‘full’ engagement had generally had reciprocal involvement – the lead officer for the homelessness strategy had sat on the SP strategy group and vice versa. In a number of cases where authorities felt SP staff had ‘partly’ engaged this was attributed to changes that took place at county level during the year, causing disruption to the SP team, or other specific staffing shortages. One of the authorities that said the team had not engaged at all said SP staff:

‘were in the next office but have not been encouraged to attend nor had any involvement’.

Another authority reported that SP staff wanted to be more involved than the housing team wanted them to be. This authority felt it was important for priorities to:

‘be set locally and communicated to Supporting People at county level... the time for their involvement is from now on’.

Twenty-three authorities felt they would have an opportunity to feed findings and recommendations from their homelessness strategy into the final SP strategies, whilst five did not know whether this would be possible.

9.2 Gaps in the provision of services to meet support needs

Authorities were asked whether their homelessness strategy identified additional support needs for any of the following groups that had not been recognised in the initial SP strategy. Where such needs were identified, authorities were asked to specify what they were.

Table 9.2.1 Groups for whom additional support needs were identified that were not covered by SP strategies

	Number of times mentioned
People with mental health problems	26
Young people	25
People with 'multiple needs'	25
People experiencing domestic violence	25
People with alcohol/ drug abuse problems	24
Households with children	19
Older people	8
Refugees and asylum seekers	5
People with learning difficulties	3
Ex-offenders	2
Other	4

Base: 28 authorities

Gaps were identified both in the range and capacity of support services. Overall, many authorities expressed concerns about SP strategies and funding. One stated:

'the Shadow Strategy and research didn't have much feel for the gaps. Having done the homelessness strategy and priority need order changes, we see more gaps. They've been done the wrong way round'.

Lack of money for one area *'came as a shock'*. Agencies were gearing up to provide services *'but have not been able to'*. The funding situation was *'very bad'* and several services would be discontinued. Another reported difficulty with recruitment of staff for new schemes, as funding was time limited. This had also been raised as a concern regarding ODPM funding for new initiatives in the first survey.

Another major concern was lack of capital funds for building projects throughout one county. Floating support was seen as the most important way of delivering services because of this. Another area needed *'core and cluster units'* for young people, but was having difficulty obtaining funds for hostel development. One authority was concerned that it had identified lots of new needs, but needed to make reductions before they can *'free up money'*. *'The potential for creativity has been lost'*.

Where funding did exist for all the specific groups mentioned below, a number of authorities felt there would be difficulties in expanding the capacity of services to meet any increase in demand.

9.2.1 Additional support needs for people with mental health problems, drug and alcohol problems or multiple support needs

People with 'multiple support needs' include those with a combination of mental health, drug, alcohol or other problems who may find it more difficult to engage with services. Almost all the authorities identified support needs for people in these groups that had not been identified or would not be met through SP programmes.

One authority felt there was a need to make '*more co-ordinated links between existing support services and housing*' for all of these groups. Another felt that '*skilled, appropriate and consistent support is not always available at present*'. For each of these groups, between three and five of the authorities felt that they needed to do more work to establish what those specific needs were. One was concerned that it needed social services to provide more information about people with mental health problems, but was not currently given this and could not properly establish need. This caused concerns about difficulties getting funding in the future. Authorities are dependent on the SP review process to identify those services that will be closed to free up funds for new services.

In another area, services were limited to those for clients with very severe problems. Funding was stretched over a range of groups, but services were not adequate to meet demand.

For people with mental health problems, identified gaps in service provision included:

- '*respite for people to prevent hospital admission*'
- services for '*people with "mid-term" problems*'
- a '*discharge project for high needs*'
- '*better support for people with personality disorders*'.

Specific needs for people with 'multiple needs' problems included:

- services for people with mental health/drug and alcohol problems and disabilities
- '*more accommodation for people with chaotic behaviour*'.

Outside the SP programme, there were identified needs for high support provision such as detox services and accommodation for people continuing to use alcohol and drugs. There were also needs for non-housing related support, such as that provided by day centres. Some authorities reported particular problems with lack of funding for such services and were concerned that this was having a '*knock-on effect*', making it more difficult to work with and provide appropriate accommodation for people with such specific needs.

9.2.2 Additional support needs for young people

Almost all of the authorities identified additional support needs for young people. Of these, 14 specified a need for general or specific forms of support, including:

- floating support
- supported interim accommodation
- support for longer term tenancies
- supported accommodation for teenage parents
- support for '*chaotic*' young people
- drug and alcohol support for young people.

Other specific services needed included:

- mediation
- foyer schemes
- education projects.

Three of the authorities saw a need for the development of specific accommodation for young people, including *'specific temporary accommodation'*, *'move on accommodation'* and *'respite accommodation for young people in crises'*.

9.2.3 Additional support needs for people experiencing domestic violence

Almost all of the authorities felt there were additional support needs for people experiencing domestic violence, though one needed to do *'more work to assess needs'*, echoing information gaps for other groups. Another felt there were *'basic services, but not enough of them'*. Of those identifying specific gaps:

- five identified a lack of refuges/ safe houses
- five felt there was a need for outreach services
- three identified a need for floating support and
- three needed additional services to assist homeless people to re-occupy their homes or to provide better security.

One authority was conducting a review of refuges in its area as many had been open for years and their locations were well known.

Concern was expressed about the promotion of *'enforced mediation services'* that some authorities felt were being developed. One authority felt these might deter people from making a homeless application, but *'won't work'*. That authority had a domestic violence counsellor, who dealt with *'the emotional and practical difficulties of separating'*.

Views differed on the impact of SP funding for domestic violence services. One authority felt that refuges and support services were now being fully funded and stabilised by SP, but was concerned about how capacity could be increased. Another suggested that domestic violence was a process that people moved through, so having to increase service capacity in future should not be such a problem as for other groups.

9.2.4 Additional support needs for households with children

A total of 19 authorities identified additional support gaps for households with children, many of which included a need for tenancy sustainment or general family support services. As with other groups, two authorities felt they had adequate services, but their capacity needed to be increased. A number of 'non-housing' support requirements that would not necessarily be covered by SP programmes were identified. These included:

- *'free child care to allow people to attend appointments'*
- *'access to "fun and recreation" services'*
- *'health care and school inclusion services'*
- *'access to education'*
- *'provision of services to children'*.

Some of these services were felt to be particularly important to families in temporary accommodation.

Two authorities identified specific gaps in support for families that included someone with mental health problems. One authority was *'looking to extend multi-agency assessment panels to families'* and another identified a need for:

'improved support to families of women fleeing drug problems or prostitution'.

9.2.5 Additional support needs for other groups

Most authorities did not feel that homelessness was an issue amongst older people in their area. Amongst the eight authorities identifying additional support needs for older people, one of these needed *'general support because of the high numbers of people retiring to the area'*, another needed *'better support to carers and older BME households'* and one specified the need for an *'older people's tenancy sustainment service'*. One suggested that services for older people were not a problem at the moment, but may become so over the next ten years. This may be dealt with in the authority's next strategy.

Other groups for whom gaps were identified included:

- asylum seekers and refugees, for whom better advice and language facilities were seen as necessary
- people with learning difficulties, for whom better advice and community-based services were seen as gaps
- ex-offenders, who required better advice and tenancy support services
- travellers, for whom one authority planned a *'large piece of research'* and had obtained SP funding for support on sites.

10. Allocations policies

This section of the report examines:

- any changes to allocations policies that remain outstanding
- details of plans authorities may have for using the ‘unacceptable behaviour’ test as part of their allocations policies
- any other plans authorities may have for adjusting the priority of housing applicants on the basis of their behaviour
- the authorities’ assessment of whether there is parity between their allocations schemes and those of partner RSLs.

10.1 Changes to allocations policies

Authorities were obliged to make changes to their allocations policies to comply with the requirements of the Homelessness Act by 31 January 2003. However, for the majority of the sample, this has been part of a programme of ongoing change. Of the 27 authorities that replied, only 12 felt they had completed all planned changes to their allocations system. One felt its policy was *‘currently legal but poor’* and needed a lot more work. Nine of the authorities said they would be making further changes as a result of considering or introducing choice based lettings policies or other systems. Three authorities planned a review of their arrangements for working with RSLs, in one case, *‘to see if it fulfils nominations targets’*.

10.2 Adopting the ‘unacceptable behaviour’ test

One of the policy objectives behind the amendments to Part VI of the Housing Act 1996, contained in the Homelessness Act 2002, was *‘to ensure the widest possible access to social housing for applicants by’*: *Removing the power for authorities to implement blanket exclusions of certain categories of applicant. In its place housing authorities were given the power to decide that individual applicants are unsuitable to be tenants as a result of serious unacceptable behaviour*(Code of Guidance paragraph 2.2).

A local housing authority may decide that an applicant (or a member of the applicant’s household) is ineligible to be allocated housing. This decision can be taken if:

- the applicant has been guilty of ‘unacceptable behaviour’
- that behaviour is serious enough to make her/him unsuitable to be a tenant of the authority
- that behaviour makes her/him unsuitable to be a tenant at the time of the application.

‘Unacceptable behaviour’ is defined as behaviour that would entitle the authority to a possession order under the Housing Act 1985 Schedule 2 part 1 (other than for ground 8), had the applicant been a secure tenant. The test requires authorities to consider how the court would treat a possession claim. It also requires the authority to take into account the applicants’ circumstances at the time of the application.

Local authorities are also able to remove all preference from an applicant who has already had their application for housing considered and has been considered to be guilty of unacceptable behaviour subsequently. No preference need be given to an applicant if the authority is satisfied that they are guilty of unacceptable behaviour serious enough to make them be unsuitable to be a tenant (the test applied here is the same as at the eligibility stage).

Authorities were asked whether they had decided to adopt the ‘unacceptable behaviour’ test. Six authorities did not answer this section of questions; so all replies are of 22. Not all these authorities had

yet applied the test, and some found it difficult to give definite answers to all of the subsequent questions.

A total of 16 authorities said they had used, or would use the test at some point. Of these:

- half of the 16 authorities using the test planned to use it both when establishing whether applicants were ineligible to be allocated housing and when establishing whether to remove preference
- five would use the test only when establishing whether applicants were ineligible to be allocated (though three of these did not know whether it would also be applied at the ‘no preference’ point)
- three said the test would only be used when establishing whether ‘no preference’ would be given to an allocation.

Of the 16 authorities, 15 said the test would be applied to all applicants and one said only to those that had previously held secure tenancies. One would not consider ‘*behaviour that took place more than two years ago*’ and another said it would refer to the Rehabilitation of Offenders guidelines in deciding whether behaviour over a certain time ago was relevant. In all other cases authorities said no upper time limit was specified in considering unacceptable behaviour, though several mentioned that they would consider the ‘*severity*’ of the behaviour and the time elapsed.

10.2.1 Factors likely to trigger the test

During the passage of the Homelessness Bill the then Housing Minister Lord Falconer of Thoroton offered guidance about how authorities should operate the new provisions. Essentially, cases of modest rent arrears, particularly where they have resulted from factors outside the applicant’s control, are likely to result in a suspended possession order and should not be considered serious enough to make a person unsuitable to be a tenant. The applicants’ circumstances, for example, whether they have children, or physical or mental health problems, should be taken into account when making a decision on eligibility.¹³

Authorities were asked whether they would apply the test to cases of nuisance or rent arrears. One was not certain; of the remaining 15, all said the test would be applied in cases of ‘nuisance’ and 14 said it would be applied to cases where there had been rent arrears. Whilst authorities are required to consider each case on its own merits, those using the test were asked to clarify what type of evidence would trigger the test to be applied.

With regard to ‘nuisance’ behaviour:

- five authorities said they would seek evidence that there had been a previous eviction
- four would look for an Anti-Social Behaviour Order/injunction or other court action
- three would consider complaints or ‘*serious allegations*’ from other tenants or the involvement of housing management.

With rent arrears, three authorities specified that cases would be assessed individually. Others gave specific sums that would trigger the test to be applied, if they were outstanding, ranging from ‘*any level*’ of arrears to ‘*any outstanding arrears*’. Where levels were given they were very low and did not appear to be in accordance with the guidance suggested above. Specific replies given were between ‘*a minimum of £100*’ and ‘*over £250*’.

Another authority said the test would be applied at the ‘*level at which possession could be obtained*’. Others said arrears would have to be ‘*large scale with some element of wilfulness*’ and “‘*serious*”, though not defined’.

As the test is complex, those authorities using it were asked if they could specify the level of seniority that staff making decisions on these cases would have. Their replies are shown in table 10.2.1.

Table 10.2.1 Level at which decisions would be made on ‘unacceptable behaviour’

	Number of times mentioned
Senior managers only	5
Managers and senior managers	1
Managers only	6
Officers and managers	1
Officers only	3

Base: 16 authorities

10.2.2. Consulting with relevant agencies

Paragraph 4.25 of the Code of Guidance on allocations states that:

Where an authority has reason to believe that an applicant’s unacceptable behaviour is due to a physical, mental or learning disability, they must not treat that applicant as ineligible for an allocation without first considering whether he would be able to maintain a tenancy with appropriate care and support. In considering the applicant’s case, the housing authority will need to consult with relevant agencies, including social services, health professionals, and providers of suitable housing, care and related support services.

Authorities were asked whether they had arrangements for consultation in place. A total of ten authorities replied that they did. However, the majority of these authorities described arrangements as ‘informal’ or said other agencies ‘would be contacted if [the authority] was aware of their involvement’. One authority stated that ‘good relations exist’ with housing providers and care and support agencies and that they would be ‘included in decision making panels’. Two authorities were aware of multi-agency panels involving the probation service ‘for serious offenders’ that they believed would address such housing difficulties. Overall though, it seemed that authorities had not considered this aspect of the guidance formally, and would ‘work with these as appropriate once the policy comes in’.

10.3 Adjusting priority on the basis of behaviour

The Act specifies that in deciding its priorities for allocating housing, the authority is required to ensure that reasonable preference is given to specific groups of people in housing need; this includes homeless people. Additional preference may be given to people with ‘urgent housing needs’. However, authorities also have discretion to ‘adjust’ or determine different levels of priority to particular groups. The Act includes three factors that may affect the priority of applicants, which are:

- the financial resources available to applicants to meet their housing costs
- any behaviour of the applicant or a member of the household, which affects the applicant’s suitability to be a tenant
- any local connection between the applicant and the district

Findings about authorities’ plans to adjust priority on the basis of an applicant’s local connection are covered in the second survey report.¹⁴ This survey sought to establish whether authorities planned to adjust priority by considering the behaviour of the applicant.

‘Any behaviour’ that affects a person’s suitability to be a tenant can clearly include a wide range of factors. Authorities need to act reasonably and proportionally in ensuring factors taken into account are relevant. Consideration can be given at this point regardless of whether or not the ‘unacceptable behaviour’ test was previously applied.

¹⁴ Shelter (2003) *Local authority progress and practice: Local authorities and the Homelessness Act six months on*, London: Shelter

Only two authorities said that they would use this power, with one stating they would consider examples of ‘good’ behaviour, being *‘reform from previous problem behaviour’*. The other would consider ‘bad’ behaviour and would defer an application for 12 months if the applicant was felt to have *“‘deliberately worsened” their housing conditions after advice’*.

One authority said it was interested in introducing *‘excellent tenancy’* points in future for existing tenants who wanted transfers. However, it was concerned that this would have to be fair, for example ensuring it did not penalise tenants in arrears because of HB delays. Another authority felt differently, stating it was concerned that:

‘rewarding good behaviour goes back to the bad old days of subjective lettings’.

10.4 Parity with RSL lettings policies

Shelter has been concerned for some time about the accessibility of some RSLs lettings policies to homeless people.¹⁵ The survey asked authorities whether they felt there was parity between their allocations scheme and that of partner RSLs. Taking action to *‘maximise choice and access to settled housing for homeless people through effective allocations and lettings schemes [and] protocols for nominations to registered social landlords...’* is part of the homelessness performance assessment for excellent or Beacon authorities.¹⁶ Of the 25 authorities that answered the question on parity, 11 felt there were significant differences between their policies and those of RSLs locally. These authorities were asked to state what the differences were and gave the following replies:

Table 10.4.1 **Differences between RSL and local authority lettings policies**

	Number of times mentioned
RSL is more stringent in considering applicants’ past conduct	7
RSL gives preference to groups other than those identified by the authority as being in housing need	6
RSL requires references from applicants	4
Other differences	5

Base: 11 authorities

‘Other’ differences included two positive points, that RSLs were more flexible in considering household size. However, other authorities noted that RSLs:

- *‘require a month’s rent in advance’*
- *‘don’t give the quota of lettings that have been agreed’*
- were *‘slower to take people and quicker to evict’*.

Seven authorities felt the discrepancies had caused them difficulties in discharging their duty to homeless applicants and eight had experienced difficulties making nominations generally. One authority mentioned that some RSLs routinely asked for information on criminal records for people accepted as homeless, turn them down and then will not accept another homeless referral. *‘They prefer to take nominations as they have more choice’*. One transfer authority that did not have problems with the major RSL, did have concerns about smaller landlords. This involved *‘landlords refusing to house people with prior debts’*.

A couple of authorities had found lack of parity in allocations to be a major difficulty. One of them stated that the percentage of nominations going to homeless households had decreased noticeably. Its homelessness strategy identified this as a main problem to be addressed *‘at a high level’*. Another

transfer authority had found that the council only had access to 25 per cent of RSL nominations in the area, despite having agreements for 50 per cent to smaller RSLs and 75 per cent to the transfer association. The homelessness manager had written to all local partners expressing concern and advising that the council will be monitoring on a monthly basis from now on. The council planned to *'name and shame'* those not performing to their agreements.

It is important that authorities are able to work with RSLs locally to ensure adequate and appropriate nominations if homeless people are to have equality of *'choice and access to settled housing'*.

Appendix 1

List of authorities participating in the third survey:

Birmingham City Council
Blackpool Borough Council
Canterbury City Council
Chester-le-Street District Council
Colchester Borough Council
Eden District Council
Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council
Great Yarmouth Borough Council
Herefordshire Council
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Leicester City Council
London Borough of Camden
London Borough of Hillingdon
London Borough of Lambeth
London Borough of Merton
London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Mendip District Council
Mid Sussex District Council
Milton Keynes Council
Nottingham City Council
Restormel Borough Council
Ryedale District Council
Sheffield City Council
South Bedfordshire District Council
South Gloucestershire Council
Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council
Vale of White Horse District Council
West Devon Borough Council

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