

Consultation Response

Targets and action for reducing B&B - the way forward

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Shelter

Part 1 - Setting Targets

Total use of B&B

The main target set by the B&B Unit should be for a net reduction in the number of homeless households in B&B. The quarterly homelessness figures for September 2001 (due out on 11 December 2001) should be adopted as the baseline for the reduction. If current trends bear out the number of households in B&B is likely to exceed 12,000. Whatever the baseline the target should seek to reduce the number of all homeless households in B&B by at least 50% by December 2003.

The impact of long stays in B&B particularly affects families with children. It is important therefore that as well as the overall target the B&B Unit sets a target for a reduction in the number families with children in B&B. This should be based on the proportion of families currently in B&B. For example if 75% of households in B&B are families and to meet the overall 50% target will require a reduction of 6,000, the target for families should be a reduction of at least 4,000.

The B&B Unit should also set a target for further reductions beyond the lifetime of the Unit itself. The further target should be adopted as a key Public Service Agreement between DTLR and the Treasury in the next Spending Review. This would ensure that resources for the medium and long-term changes required to end the widespread use of B&B as temporary accommodation over the period of the next Spending Review cycle (by April 2006) were forthcoming. After April 2006 B&B accommodation should only ever be used during the initial assessment of homeless households applications.

The objective of the targets should be to

- Reduce the number of households that have to live in bed and breakfast
- Focus effort and attract resources, at a local and national level, to tackling the problem

A simple numerical reduction target will be the best way to achieve this. A target based on B&B use as a proportion of all temporary accommodation risks a situation where the target was achieved without significantly improving the position and that the Unit's objectives did not attract enough public and political support.

Length of stay

The extent to which living in B&B impacts on households' well being, health and children's education is likely to increase the longer that families have to stay in B&B. Shelter has worked with some families that have spent over four years in bed and breakfast accommodation. Targets based on the length of time households have to live in bed and breakfast would help to ensure that as well as reducing the overall numbers in B&B, those that still have to live in B&B before they are rehoused, only do so for a limited period of time.

The disruption and instability caused by the experience of homelessness is likely to be compounded by long stays in temporary accommodation and in particular B&B. This can affect the ability of households to sustain a tenancy when they are rehoused. The provision of support services for families in temporary accommodation should also be considered in assisting households having to endure long periods of time spent in temporary accommodation and to minimise its impact.

We support the proposed target maximum length of stay in B&B of three months by December 2003. A target of one month in B&B would be appropriate for the average length of stay target. Like the overall target, the length of stay target should be extended beyond December 2003. The final target should be a maximum length of stay in B&B of one month in B&B by April 2006. This should also be incorporated into the DTLR PSAs in the next spending review.

These targets would be consistent with, and support the introduction of, the proposed Best Value Performance Indicator for the length of time of homeless families spend in temporary accommodation.

Part 2 - How to reduce B&B use

Long-term solutions

It is generally agreed that increasing the supply of affordable housing is the fundamental solution to the current reliance on temporary accommodation. Shelter's submission to the Spending Review will highlight the scale of investment needed to meet the need for new affordable housing and measures that could be taken reduce some of the pressure on existing supply in high demand areas. We do not accept that an evaluation of the current legislative framework will provide a solution to the use of temporary accommodation.

We are concerned that the Unit should be suggesting that an evaluation of the current homelessness legislation should be seen as part of the long-term solution to B&B and temporary accommodation use.

The implication that the homelessness legislation encourages homeless applications because it is the only route in secure housing is misplaced. The reason that homelessness acceptances provides the principle route into secure housing in many areas is precisely because of chronic shortage of affordable housing, not because of the legislation itself.

We would strongly challenge any notion that people make homelessness applications in order to find a route into social housing when they have any other choice. Any homeless household who requires assistance under the homelessness legislation must satisfy several criteria in order to be owed an accommodation duty. The experience of being accepted as homeless in many areas involves months and sometimes years in TA (including B&B), with all the disruption, instability and isolation that this brings with it.

Short to medium term options

Increasing the supply of other existing and new private sector housing available for use as temporary accommodation

Expanding the supply of leased temporary accommodation will be fundamental to reducing reliance on B&B. There are three key areas where action is required to enable local authorities and housing associations to develop more good quality temporary accommodation.

1. Expedited housing benefit arrangements for homeless households in temporary housing.
2. Additional resources for temporary social housing grant for housing associations to lease and improve more accommodation from the private sector.
3. Improvements to the grant regime for temporary housing.

For further details see the joint Shelter, ALG and NHF paper Bed and Breakfast - the way forward.

We look forward to proposals from the B&B Unit and DWP for improvements to the housing benefit arrangements for temporary housing.

Although grant funding is not always required for leasing temporary housing from the private sector it can help to secure longer leases at lower rents and improve properties that would otherwise not be suitable. Ensuring a lasting reduction in the use of B&B accommodation will require a significant increase in the supply of better quality temporary for the medium term. This will require some grant funding.

We support the proposed areas for the development of good practice. We look forward to working with the B&B Unit on some of these areas. We support the development of proposals to reduce the number of homelessness applications, however we are concerned about the focus on family and friends licence terminations (see below).

Reducing the number of homeless households applying as homeless

There are important opportunities in the forthcoming National Homelessness Strategy and the duty to develop local homelessness strategies in the Homelessness Bill for local authorities to develop a more corporate response to homelessness in the area including the prevention of homelessness. Shelter has recommended that the prevention of homelessness should be a theme in the Beacon Council Scheme.

Reducing the number of households accepted as homeless

Shelter's housing advice services report that many authorities that have increased their use of temporary accommodation have sought to reduce the pressures they face by making their homelessness policies and procedures more restrictive. We do not believe that the B&B Unit should encourage authorities to restrict their policies on homelessness acceptances any further. Many local authorities are already operating at the limit of, and sometimes exceeding, the bounds of the homelessness legislation and case law in their interpretation of their homelessness duties.

We are particularly worried about the concern expressed about high levels of family and friends licence terminations. In areas of significant housing pressure, newly forming households are less able to set up home independently because of high house prices and rents and shortage of accessible social housing. As a result they may stay with family or friends until that arrangement collapses. In London more than any other area, rents and house prices are far in excess of the reach of most households, leaving few other options than for people to stay with family.

In addition, London has higher levels of housing need and overcrowding in London than in other parts of the country. According to the Survey Of English Housing (2000), London has the country's highest proportion of households:

- Living in non-self contained accommodation
- Living in housing with less than one room per person
- Living in housing which is two or more below the bedroom standard (an indicator of housing density)

It is not surprising that relationships break down in the face of poor housing conditions and overcrowding and ever longer waits for long term housing to be offered.

Dispersing homeless households from areas of high demand - low supply (in terms of affordable social housing) to areas of lower demand - greater supply (sub-regionally, regionally or nationally)

We support the piloting of voluntary mobility schemes that give existing tenants as well as households in temporary accommodation the opportunity to move to an area of lower housing demand such as LAWNE. It is important that these schemes are voluntary and that there is no coercion or compulsion.

Maximising use of available local authority and Registered Social Landlord (RSL) stock

The consensus behind the new homelessness legislation is evidence of support for the premise that there is no greater housing need than homelessness, and in particular the homelessness of those households to be considered in priority need. Placing homeless households in bed and breakfast accommodation for protracted periods of time is an inappropriate response to that need.

When the use of B&B accommodation last peaked at 13,500 households in 1991 local authorities and housing associations increased the proportion of lettings they made to homeless households. Through this, combined with an increase in the provision of leased temporary accommodation, they managed to reduce the use of B&B by 60% to under 5,000 in just over two years.

Figures from CORE and HIP indicate that there is some scope, albeit limited in the high demand areas, to rehouse more homeless households within the existing levels of available lettings (see Appendix). The proportions of local authority and housing association lettings going to homeless households, although they have begun to increase again in high demand regions, are lower than they were in the early to mid 1990s.

Much of the debate around the future of social housing in recent years has focussed on the need to encourage sustainable communities. Shelter shares the vision that social housing should be part of mixed neighbourhoods where people feel safe, can work and fulfil their potential. However one of the outcomes of moving towards this vision is a presumption that households that have been homeless are likely to be 'bad' tenants, that they are uniform and act only as a drain on communities. These presumptions are unfounded and yet have been allowed to exert a significant influence on lettings policy. Through its work with housing providers the B&B Unit should challenge such assumptions. While some homeless households are vulnerable the experience of tenancy sustainment services for single people and Shelter's Homeless to Home projects for families are that with the right even the most vulnerable households' tenancies can be sustained with the right support.

Challenging housing providers to deliver on reducing B&B

In its work with individual local authorities and their housing association partners the B&B Unit should set challenging local targets. In setting the local target the B&B Unit should take as a starting point the principle that B&B should only be used during the initial period while homeless households' applications are assessed. Local authorities should then be required to prepare statements on why their B&B use extends beyond this period focussing on

- The ratio of homelessness acceptances to available lettings
- The proportion of lettings made to homeless households
- The increase in supply of more suitable alternative temporary accommodation.

The B&B unit should review local authorities' performance on a six monthly basis against these key factors. These processes should be part of local authorities homelessness reviews, and where appropriate their homelessness strategies should identify targets for the proportion of lettings for homeless households and the procurement of additional temporary accommodation.

Other issues that the Unit should be looking at

There are a number of further areas of practice that the Unit should look at as it develops options to be included in action plans.

- Out of area placements - difficulties that households in B&B face can be exacerbated where they are placed in accommodation a distant and unfamiliar area. In particular it can impact on access to informal support from friends and family and statutory services (e.g. health, social services and education).

- Performance on processing homelessness applications - poor performance in the amount of time it takes to process homelessness applications can significantly add to the amount of time households spend in B&B. In 1999/2000 nearly half of the London boroughs took an average of two months or more to decide homelessness applications.
- The impact of regeneration - regeneration can create a significant short term drain on the supply of lettings and can have significant implications for long term supply where replacement housing includes fewer units of affordable housing.
- Support services for homeless families to minimise the impact of homelessness and long periods in temporary accommodation. The findings of an independent evaluation of Shelter's Homeless To Home projects will be available in the new year.

Appendix

Proportion of local authority and registered social landlord lettings made available to new tenants who were homeless households in priority need; and number of homeless households in temporary accommodation arranged by the local authority at 31 March: by region

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000
North East									
LA lettings (%)	27	24	20	18	16	13	9	13	11
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	15	12	6	6	5
Numbers accommodated ¹	400	500	500	500	500	500	700	1,000	1,100
North West									
LA lettings (%)	25	25	24	21	19	16	11	10	10
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	16	13	8	7	6
Numbers accommodated ¹	2,700	3,100	2,800	2,300	2,200	2,100	2,400	2,200	2,000
Yorkshire and the Humber									
LA lettings (%)	29	32	29	23	19	15	16	16	13
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	21	17	10	8	8
Numbers accommodated ¹	2,300	2,200	1,900	1,600	1,400	1,000	1,200	2,200	1,400
East Midlands									
LA lettings (%)	41	40	32	28	26	20	13	14	16
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	25	21	14	12	10
Numbers accommodated ¹	1,900	1,600	1,400	1,600	1,500	1,400	1,300	1,600	2,000
West Midlands									

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LA lettings (%)	41	42	36	31	30	27	29	26	22
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	26	21	16	14	14
Numbers accommodated ¹	1,900	1,700	1,500	1,200	1,200	1,100	2,000	1,500	1,800
East of England									
LA lettings (%)	40	40	34	34	30	28	17	23	21
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	30	25	16	19	19
Numbers accommodated ¹	4,300	3,900	3,200	3,100	2,800	2,600	3,280	3,600	4,500
London									
LA lettings (%)	64	65	56	52	51	49	43	49	57
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	53	51	41	41	44
Numbers accommodated ¹	39,500	38,000	30,100	25,800	24,600	24,000	25,600	30,500	37,700
South East									
LA lettings (%)	41	41	39	39	38	34	23	26	32
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	39	36	25	26	25
Numbers	8,300	8,100	7,300	7,300	6,700	6,400	7,700	8,800	9,700
South West									
LA lettings (%)	40	42	39	37	35	32	18	24	27
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	32	31	22	26	31
Numbers accommodated ¹	2,900	2,800	2,700	2,800	2,600	2,200	3,300	4,700	4,800
England									
LA lettings (%)	38	39	35	31	28	25	20	22	22
RSL lettings (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	30	26	18	18	18
Numbers accommodated ¹	64,300	62,000	51,500	46,300	43,500	41,600	46,400	56,200	64,800

1 Homeless households in temporary accommodation arranged by local authorities

Note:

Homeless households are households in priority need for whom a statutory duty has been accepted by a local authority under homelessness provisions of Housing Acts. Lettings to these households have been expressed as a percentage of all secure LA lettings and all RSL lettings to new tenants, i.e. excluding transfers and exchanges between existing tenants of social landlords

Sources:

DTLR Housing Investment Programme returns (annual):

Housing Corporation "CORE" returns

House of commons Parliamentary Answer, 29 November 2001.