Homelessness
Responding to the new agenda
The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, through inspection, audit, research and other methods, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

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Preface

This report sets out the current learning from inspections, audits and research on homelessness and housing advice services in England and Wales. It is one in a series of such reports published by the Commission, including those on housing repairs and maintenance (Ref. 1) and on housing benefit administration (Ref. 2).

This report is aimed mainly at service managers and staff in homelessness and housing advice services but it also has wider messages relevant to social services staff, independent advice agencies and others involved in providing services for homeless people. It is not an exhaustive guide but is intended to highlight areas commented on by housing inspectors and auditors at a local level. Its main objectives are to help local authorities to:

- improve services to those who are ‘statutory’ homeless and those in other insecure accommodation;
- strengthen the management of homelessness and housing advice services;
- implement their new duties under the Homelessness Act 2002 (Ref. 10), including reviewing services and developing homelessness strategies working in partnership with other stakeholders;
- improve service users’ experiences; and
- identify and share good practice and ways to use resources more effectively.

The report focuses on services in England, since the Welsh Assembly Government is carrying out its own review in Wales, and, to date, only two inspections of homelessness services have been completed in Wales. However, many of the messages will be relevant to Welsh councils.

The Commission is also producing additional information and tools for service managers that will be available on our website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/homelessness. References are flagged up in this paper where more information is available on the website with the following symbol 🌐. Two short briefings summarising the main messages are also available: one highlights the key issues for chief officers and staff in homelessness and housing advice services; the other is aimed at local authority members who have a policy interest in homelessness. A one-page summary sets out the overall key messages. All of these will be available on the website.

The project was carried out by Katharine Knox and Aoife McNamara, under the overall direction of Greg Birdseye, in the Commission’s Public Services Research Directorate. Colleagues from the inspection service provided assistance, particularly Victoria Meyer and James Edwards, as well as operational staff.

A full list of references is available on our website 🌐. A short bibliography is available at the end of this report.
A wide range of people gave helpful comments on drafts of the report. The Audit Commission is grateful to them all, and to the local authorities and others who directly contributed to the work. As always, however, responsibility for the contents and conclusions rests solely with the Audit Commission.

The team has gathered evidence from a range of sources for the study:

- **Shadowing inspectors on four housing inspections of councils’ homelessness and housing advice services** – working alongside inspectors to interview council staff, housing providers and housing advice agencies, to conduct focus groups and discussions with stakeholders, and to assist with ‘reality checks’ such as reviews of case files and visits to local temporary accommodation used for homeless people. Where possible, the team interviewed individuals who had experienced homelessness in these areas.

- **Additional visits to six sites to explore potential good practice** – interviews with staff and additional case file reviews in selected sites to obtain further examples of good practice.

- **Analysis of inspection and audit reports** – in light of the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) framework requirements for housing (Ref. 3).

- **Interviews with stakeholders** – including academics, government departments and voluntary sector agencies involved with homelessness, and a panel of stakeholders who met during the project to discuss issues arising.

- **Work with the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB)** – examining housing advice case files provided by citizens’ advice bureaux (CABx) to NACAB for national policy campaigning.

- **Analysis of other sources** – performance indicators (PIs), data from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), council P1E returns to Government and data from the Welsh Assembly Government (setting out details of councils’ homelessness activity) and other reports on homelessness and housing advice.

The team has also been able to draw on learning from other Audit Commission studies of housing needs after stock transfer, housing benefit and neighbourhood renewal. The expertise of inspectors and auditors has also helped to shape this report.
The role of homelessness services

Homelessness can be seen as having its roots in an inadequate supply of affordable housing in areas where people want to live. However, it often reflects broader issues, where people face complex social and financial problems that make it difficult for them to sustain tenancies or property ownership. The *Homelessness Act 2002* introduces new duties for councils to assist the increasing numbers of homeless people.
Who is homeless?

1 When considering homelessness, the instinctive response is to think of people who are literally roofless and sleeping rough on the streets. However, rough sleepers are only the tip of the iceberg [Exhibit 1]. In addition, there are people seeking assistance from councils under the homelessness legislation who may be termed the ‘statutory homeless’, and, beyond this, a wider group of people in insecure housing or overcrowded households, who are less visible and may be termed the ‘hidden homeless’. In all these cases, policy analysts Fitzpatrick, Kemp and Klinker suggest that people have a ‘lack of right to or access to their own secure and minimally adequate housing space’ (Ref. 4).

Exhibit 1
Defining homelessness
Rough sleepers are only the tip of the iceberg.

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Source: Audit Commission

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2 The scale of homelessness is thus difficult to quantify, due to the varying definitions of homelessness and the sometimes hidden nature of the problem. It is also affected by the transience of the phenomenon, with people moving in and out of homelessness at different times. In its most visible form, 1,850 people were counted sleeping rough on a single night in England in 1998; and many more may be affected over a year, although the Government has recently claimed success in reducing the number of rough sleepers, with just over 500 people identified in 2001 (Ref. 5). In 2001/02, over a quarter of a million households in England and over 12,000 in Wales sought help and received decisions from councils under the homelessness legislation. This number has increased substantially since the 1970s, but is not currently at the peak level of the early 1990s, when over 315,000 households were affected. II
Who do councils help?

3 The statutory framework for assessing homeless applicants and deciding what duties a council must fulfil is complex (see ‘Decision-making flowchart’ in pull out section in centre of report). The council must decide if an applicant is eligible for assistance, is indeed homeless or threatened with homelessness, is unintentionally so and is in priority need. While the legislation has changed since the first major Housing Act in 1977 (Ref. 9), most recently with the Homelessness Act (Ref. 10), the emphasis remains on providing assistance to those most ‘deserving’ of help – those considered vulnerable and victims of circumstances beyond their control. Council assistance has, therefore, focused on families and more vulnerable single people.

4 The statutory responsibilities of councils diminish according to the decisions made, with a duty to provide permanent housing only for those found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need. There is thus a disincentive to accepting people. While the number of households seeking assistance from councils is increasing slightly, outcomes have remained fairly consistent; in 2001/02, less than one-half of decisions resulted in a long-term duty to house. There are also regional differences, with London experiencing double the rate of homelessness acceptances compared with other regions [Exhibit 2].

Exhibit 2
Rates of homelessness by region
London experiences double the rate of homelessness acceptances compared with other regions.

Councils must provide those who are accepted as homeless with temporary accommodation (TA) until a longer-term home can be found. At the end of September 2002, there were over 81,000 households in TA, almost double the number in 1997. Over 12,000 households were living in bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation, and this number has increased in recent years (Ref. 11). Some authorities, particularly in London and the south east, have also been accommodating asylum seekers under the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Children Act 1989, if they arrived prior to the introduction of dispersal by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). This further increases the pressure on housing stock.

Councils must also provide free advice and information about homelessness to anyone in their area (including those for whom they have no long-term housing duty) and this advice and assistance must be appropriate to individuals’ needs. Councils may also offer grants and loans, or make furniture and other goods available, or fund voluntary organisations to assist people.

What do homelessness services cost?

The costs involved in meeting the needs of homeless people have caused problems, particularly for London boroughs that bear the brunt of demand. Councils in England and Wales spent some £313 million on homelessness services in 2000/01 (Ref. 12) [Exhibit 3, overleaf]. Most of these costs relate to providing B&B accommodation. Councils recoup some of the costs through the housing benefit (HB) system; however, the net costs can still be significant. Housing advice expenditure is not recorded separately, and may also be delivered by other agencies, making the costs difficult to quantify.

Details of these Acts can be found on www.hmso.gov.uk
Exhibit 3
Gross expenditure on homelessness services
Councils in England and Wales spent some £313 million on services in 2000/01.

What are councils’ new duties?

- Homelessness has moved up the political agenda, particularly with the new Homelessness Act 2002, (Ref. 10), which sets out new duties and powers for councils:
  - a duty to carry out homelessness reviews and develop homelessness strategies; these should address the needs of all homeless people, including those who are intentionally homeless, people who are not in priority need and rough sleepers, as well as setting out plans for preventing homelessness;
  - a duty to provide accommodation until a settled home is found for homeless households in priority need (repealing the existing two-year time limit);
  - a power to secure housing for households that are not in priority need;
  - an entitlement for single homeless people to receive advice and assistance from a local authority; and
  - following a new Priority Needs Order (Ref. 13), a duty to house 16-and 17 year-olds and care leavers aged 18 to 20, and those who are vulnerable due to racist or domestic violence, leaving institutionalised care, prison or the armed forces.

Source: Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), based on latest data available [Ref. 12]

In Wales, a Priority Needs Order, which extended the groups for whom councils have a duty, was introduced earlier and has broader parameters (Ref. 14). The Welsh Assembly Government is assessing the impact of this in its service review, due to report in spring 2003.
The Government has set out new Codes of Guidance for local authorities on both homelessness (Ref. 15) and allocations (Ref. 16), along with targets that no families should be accommodated in B&B by the end of March 2004, except in emergencies (Ref. 17). From April 2003, under the new Supporting People Programme, housing and social services departments will be required to work in partnership with other stakeholders to address the support needs of vulnerable people (Ref. 18). New funding streams are being provided to help authorities to meet these changing responsibilities. Alongside £18 million of Revenue Support Grant funding to implement the Homelessness Act and new Priority Needs Order\(^\text{II}\): £25 million has been allocated to reduce B&B use, £35 million to prevent rough sleeping, and a further £10 million for other projects\(^\text{I}\).

How are councils performing?

Overall, the Commissions inspection findings reveal a disappointing picture of performance by council homelessness and housing advice services in England and Wales. Only about one in five of the 50 services inspected focusing on housing needs has so far been judged to be good\(^\text{III}\), and only one has been deemed excellent (Herefordshire’s homelessness and housing advice service). However, almost three-quarters are considered to have promising or excellent prospects for future improvement (Table 1)\(^\text{IV}\). This is similar to the overall picture for housing inspections where most councils are receiving ‘fair’ scores. There has also been strong performance by some councils whose housing inspections have covered broader areas but included some aspects of work impacting on homelessness, including Derby’s inspections of frontline housing services and private sector housing which both received three stars.

Table 1

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Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service. Note: the table excludes inspection scores for whole housing services where homelessness services were covered in less detail.
What are the issues?

There are three key areas that councils need to consider [Exhibit 4]:

- preventing homelessness, by offering advice and support to enable people to stay in their homes and assisting those for whom the council has no housing duty;
- providing a safety net of good-quality services as a contingency to respond to those people who do become homeless; and
- reducing or minimising potential homelessness in the longer term through interagency working to develop and implement homelessness strategies.

Exhibit 4
The key areas for service delivery

There are three key areas that councils need to consider.
Conclusion

Councils work within a complex statutory framework in deciding what help to provide to homeless people, but are facing increasing pressures and costs in fulfilling their duties. The Homelessness Act 2002 adds new responsibilities and is likely to fuel demand on services. The Commission’s inspections completed by the end of 2002 suggest that generally, councils’ performance is at the lower end of the spectrum, with most achieving no more than a fair score; however, most services are judged to have promising or excellent prospects for future improvement. The next chapter considers the direct experiences of people who face homelessness, as a way of bringing the issues to life, in order to explore further the three areas identified in Exhibit 4.
The experience of homelessness

A wide range of risk factors make people more vulnerable to homelessness. The most frequent reason given for homelessness is that parents or friends are no longer able or willing to provide accommodation. Whatever the causes of homelessness, the consequences can be severe, and councils and other services need to offer a holistic response to address these issues.
Why do people become homeless?

13 Homelessness can be seen as having its roots in the inadequate supply of affordable housing in areas where people want to live. However, it often reflects broader issues, where people face complex social and financial problems that make it difficult for them to sustain tenancies or property ownership. Both an individual’s circumstances and broader structural issues in the local area may interlink to trigger homelessness. For example, unemployment due to the closure of a local industry may have a negative impact on family relationships and mean people turn to alcohol or drugs, leading to family breakdown and homelessness.

14 A wide range of risk factors make people more vulnerable to homelessness [Exhibit 5]. These risks may result in actual homelessness at particular crisis points, for example, following the death of a family member, or when people leave care, prison or another institution, or are evicted, particularly if people lack other support networks.

Exhibit 5
Risk factors for homelessness

A wide range of risk factors make people more vulnerable to homelessness.

Source: Audit Commission
Government statistics show that the most frequent reason given for homelessness is that parents or friends are no longer able or willing to accommodate people [Exhibit 6]. The second most common reason – violent relationship breakdown – accounts for more than one in six cases of homelessness. Only 6 per cent of cases are directly attributed to financial problems where people fall into arrears on either rent payments or a mortgage.

**Exhibit 6**

**Individual causes of homelessness**

The most frequently recorded reason given for homelessness is that parents or friends are no longer able or willing to provide accommodation.

However, the links between factors are not always clear. Where friends or relatives are unwilling to accommodate people, this may include young people who have never left home, but also people living as concealed or ‘hidden homeless’ households who stay with friends having exhausted all other options and then seek council help as a last resort. This may follow periods when they have successfully either owned or rented their own property.

For some people, homelessness is a one-off event, but for others, who face entrenched social or economic difficulties, it can be a recurring experience. Councils often do not monitor repeat homelessness, but in Manchester, a study of families in TA found that over 40 per cent had been homeless before (Ref. 21). Where people experience repeat homelessness, each episode may involve different service interventions and outcomes.

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1. The DETR found that 66 per cent of applicants had tried to find their own housing before seeking council help (Ref. 20).
People’s pathways through the system are complex and varied; progress can sometimes be followed by repeated setbacks that leave people back where they started [Exhibit 7]. More is known about people’s routes into homelessness than their routes out, or the success of these. Some people may find their own solutions outside statutory services. Others may seek help from a variety of sources before ending up at the door of the local authority (Ref. 22). Once there, the solutions available will very much depend on the statutory framework for assistance. For people whose support networks have broken down completely, agencies will need to play a more proactive role in breaking the cycle of homelessness.

### Exhibit 7

**Pathways through the system**

People’s pathways through the system are complex and varied and progress can sometimes be followed by repeated setbacks.

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**Note:** HPU=Council homeless person’s unit

**Source:** Audit Commission
In identifying routes out of homelessness, it is important to note that councils may not always be at the hub of local provision, particularly when people feel that there is a stigma attached to seeking help. People may not be aware of what support is available or they may be unwilling to go to the council if they have concerns about what help they may receive. Voluntary sector agencies, housing associations and friends and family can all play a part in resolving people’s housing problems.

Whatever the individual’s circumstances, the consequences of being homeless can be severe. For instance, when people fall into rent arrears, this can impact on their credit rating and make them more vulnerable to loan sharks, putting them at risk of intimidation and extortion. The lack of a fixed address will make getting a job more difficult for those who are unemployed. Living in overcrowded housing, in a poor state of repair, will impact on people’s health and welfare, and it can be particularly damaging for children. Enforced moves to unfamiliar areas may reduce people’s access to their support networks. All of these issues can contribute to social exclusion and marginalisation.

To highlight the complexity of individual needs and service interventions, the Commission has developed a series of user scenarios (see cards insert ‘Training Pack on User Experiences’). While these cannot represent every eventuality, they exemplify the complexities of the problems that people face and their varied routes in to and through the system seeking assistance. The cases are based on an amalgamation of real experiences identified by interviewing users, examining the case files of people who have presented at councils or advice agencies for help, and research on people’s experiences of homelessness. The cases highlight both the problems and pitfalls in service delivery and the areas of concern for users, which councils need to consider if they are to provide more customer-focused services. Each case presents the profile of the household, followed by the user’s experience, and a summary of the issues raised. These cards can be used by councils in staff training to develop ideas for service improvement. The issues raised by the user scenarios are addressed in the following chapters.

Conclusion

As this chapter and the user scenarios highlight, there are many routes into services, and outcomes vary. The route in depends upon the user’s background and experience of statutory and voluntary services. Successful routes out of homelessness may be achieved with or without the council. Councils could examine a sample of their own case files or consult users directly and talk to other local providers to identify any potential sticking points; this should alert them to problems requiring attention. The next chapter examines how prevention initiatives could address some of the issues raised by users, drawing on findings from inspection reports.

Sources include: Shelter’s website; a sample of 34 case files from NACAB on homelessness; over 125 case files reviewed in a mix of local authorities; and research, including Refs. 23, 24, 25.
Preventing homelessness

If councils are to prevent homelessness they need to:

● ensure that services are accessible to enable people to get help when they have housing problems;

● offer clear and effective advice on housing and related issues; and

● provide support to help people to stay in their own homes.
The user scenarios illustrate the range of issues facing councils and other service providers. At the heart of the new agenda is prevention. This chapter outlines some of the issues and related good practice identified through inspection, audit and research which could help to prevent homelessness. The local context will impact on which issues are of most concern, and the most viable solutions. Pull-out checklists in the centre of this report, also available on our website, will help authorities to assess their current performance and priorities for action.

Accessible services

There’s some people out there who don’t know where to look or where to start… there should be some sort of organisation that will give people a head start to actually get themselves on their feet.

Homeless person, Shelter research (Ref. 26)

Not all those who face housing problems know how or where to find help: many people rely on word of mouth or referral to find services. Links between councils and other providers are important to ensure that people can access the help that they need, and flexibility will be needed to respond to varying demand. Access issues that council homelessness services could consider include:

- raising awareness about services;
- enabling different forms of access;
- offering welcoming reception staff and facilities; and
- developing a one-stop needs assessment.

It will be equally important for other providers, including voluntary sector housing advice agencies, to consider these issues.

Raising awareness about services

Services that are highly visible and located in busy areas will attract more attention, but they may not cater for everyone: networking between agencies to raise awareness is important to promote access. Effective information provision and dissemination to general reception areas in council offices and to other agencies in contact with homeless people (such as CABx, community groups and the police) can help.

Publishing service standards in plain English, in appropriate formats, and ensuring that these are kept up to date, can help to clarify the service’s role and enable users to understand what they can expect. In stock transfer authorities, the respective roles of the council and housing association can be particularly confusing. Inspectors found that Herefordshire is one council with comprehensive service standards for the housing advice service and the homelessness service; users were also consulted on these prior to their introduction.
Enabling different forms of access

27 In locating their services, authorities have sometimes made decisions that run counter to user need, which may hinder access. Where services are centralised and councils cover a wide geographical area, with little public transport, use of housing area offices, mobile surgeries or home visits can facilitate access (Case study 1). Where dispersed services are provided, it is of course essential that staff have the expertise or back-up to assist clients.

28 While many clients like to access services face to face, providers may also wish to consider other forms of access, including telephone contact, email, websites and, where available, council information points. Councils need to ensure that phone contact is monitored and that callers are not lost due to delays in pick-up or problems with the transfer of calls. Websites and information points can be a useful tool (though perhaps more for other advisers than for service users directly). Siting access points in agencies or locations that homeless people already use will be more effective. Councils could also make better links between electronic information on their own services and existing national websites that offer advice and information.

29 Some clients may have particular difficulties in accessing services. For example, procedures for assisting non-English speakers, including use of interpreters (Case study 2) will be important, particularly if non-English speakers only present occasionally. People with physical disabilities should be catered for in access to buildings and toilet facilities. Councils should also consider provision for other clients with special needs, such as induction loops for people with hearing difficulties. In improving prevention, links with community groups (including refugee communities) that provide housing advice could help to target groups at risk. Longer-term housing solutions should also take account of special needs, household size and adaptations to cater for all client groups.

Case study 1
Access in rural areas

Herefordshire District Council covers over 850 square miles and is a sparsely populated rural district council. It has overcome some of the difficulties of operating in this context by providing services for homeless people at three area offices, and at two additional offices owned by Elgar Housing Association on an outreach/surgery basis.

West Berkshire District Council is also mainly rural, and providing advice across the whole area has been difficult. To address this, surgery advice sessions are carried out on market day in one town, and the council makes good use of libraries to give advice and to direct people to information in a range of leaflets. The Community Learning and Information Vehicle (CLiVe), established in partnership with education, employment and information services, visits a range of villages and towns over a three-weekly cycle; and the council’s website includes information about the housing register, homelessness and the points scheme.

Source: Audit Commission

Case study 2
Promoting equal opportunities for all clients

Leicester City Council was commended by inspectors for its efforts to respond to applicants whose first language is not English. As well as interpreting services provided by the corporate Community Language Unit, customers can get help from Refugee Action and Language Line. Arrangements are made in advance for interpreters to be present at interviews. In addition, a number of frontline staff can speak community languages to help people coming to the Housing Options Centre. A wide range of quality advice leaflets is available, which inspectors considered to be thorough and clear in their advice. Staff send follow-up letters to all customers who have received general housing advice, confirming the advice given.

The City of Bradford has a diverse minority ethnic population; in 2001/02 almost one-quarter of homelessness acceptances were for non-white applicants. To deliver an accessible and responsive service, the council has a number of initiatives in place:

- information about homelessness and advice is translated into a variety of community languages;
● assessment forms are used to establish whether applicants require translation or have any other special needs;
● ‘flash’ sheets are used with customers to pinpoint languages required;
● all but one of the advice teams has a bi-lingual Homelessness Officer post; and
● staff have received some training on race and cultural awareness and a comprehensive programme is being developed to cover issues around the Race Relations Act and Race Equality Framework. The intention is to include such training as part of the induction process for all new staff.

Source: Audit Commission

Providing welcoming reception staff and facilities

Receptionists serve as the front line in dealing with applicants when they first arrive and can act as gatekeepers to assistance. Councils and other agencies need to ensure that receptionists are aware of the role that they can play in helping homeless applicants on arrival. Appropriately trained receptionists can give out information and direct people to the right place to resolve their queries.

People visiting services may sometimes have to wait for an hour or more to see a member of staff. Reception areas should therefore be made as welcoming as possible (Case study 3). Parents with children should be able to access baby changing facilities and ideally some toys or a play area; free information leaflets and bright displays can provide practical information and help people to pass the time. A smart, clean waiting area with drinks facilities can create a more conducive atmosphere, at a time when people may be particularly anxious.

Developing a one-stop needs assessment

Users may present to a number of agencies for help with a housing problem, including CABx and other advice agencies, landlords, or council services. In reality, their difficulties may mask more complex problems, including wider support needs or financial problems. Councils could help to provide a holistic response by working both internally and externally to improve assessment procedures and make appropriate cross-referrals. In some cases, homelessness services and social services have already developed joint assessment procedures for young people. However, councils could also think more broadly and work with partners to encourage common assessment procedures.

When agreeing a common approach, councils and other agencies should also develop greater clarity over their respective roles and responsibilities. Agencies will then be better placed to develop clear signposting and referral arrangements to ensure that users are appropriately serviced. A one-stop assessment process would reduce the need for users repeatedly to explain their experiences to different stakeholders.

Case study 3

Improving reception areas

A high volume of clients attend Westminster City Council’s housing advice and assessment centre. The waiting area has recently been improved to make it more welcoming and child-friendly. Mother and baby changing facilities and toilets can be accessed from the waiting area. Posters display information on services (and how to make a complaint) and leaflets are available in the ten languages that are most highly used, while a queuing system and electronic display equipment enable people in the reception area to see likely waiting times for caseworkers.

Source: Audit Commission
Effective housing advice

Housing advice can take various forms and may be delivered through a whole host of agencies, but early intervention and outreach can play a central role in prevention. Enabling people to stay in their existing accommodation and avoiding the need for a formal homelessness assessment works to the benefit of both client and council. Clear routes into, and links between, services will help people to obtain advice. Issues to consider include:

- structure and role of services;
- resourcing requirements;
- quality of advice; and
- impact on prevention.

Structure and role of services

There are many potential sources of both formal and informal advice; people often turn to family and friends first before going elsewhere. Housing advice services can play a number of roles, from providing factual information and education in schools to advocacy and intervention to prevent homelessness. Some services offer advice on housing options, including access to the private sector or social housing; others advocate for clients to challenge illegal evictions and council homelessness decisions. There may be gaps in the services available; a good starting point for councils trying to develop their provision is a local audit of existing advice services in their area.

Exhibit 8
Sources of advice

There are many potential sources of both formal and informal advice; services can play a number of roles.
Differences in service structures can impact on the services offered. There are generally four models of housing advice provision:

- in-house provision by officers who also carry out homelessness assessment;
- in-house provision by officers who are separate from the homelessness service;
- external provision by a generalist agency; and
- external provision by a specialist agency.

Some areas may have more than one model and services can be quite different in each council (Case study 4). Councils may or may not provide funding to external agencies and their influence in shaping services may depend on whether they are a direct provider, an enabler or a commissioner, and how the links are made between advice and assessment in local service configuration.

Case Study 4

Different models of advice services

**Westminster City Council** has a homelessness and advice centre run by a private contractor. Most staff are generic, rotating between roles from taking calls in the call centre to assessment and decision making. Service managers believe that this encourages flexibility and enables staff to gain a rounded understanding of services. Contractual arrangements emphasise customer care, and the council monitors performance regularly against targets, for example, looking at waiting times for applicants. However, few dedicated advice staff are available for the large number of non-priority applicants.

**Bristol City Council** has a well-known one-stop service for housing advice in its centre called the Hub. Users are able to access housing advice and other services under one roof. Services include independent advice from Bristol Cyrenians and Shelter, council services, including homelessness and HB, the Benefits Agency and other services. The advantages for customers are evident, with high numbers of visitors and quick inter-service referrals. However, access is not always immediate, with some services operating appointments systems, which may necessitate repeat visits. Co-location also raises challenges (for example, where advisers dispute statutory service decisions) and the service has had to adapt to cater to demand.

**The Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames** has an in-house council advice service and a separate service run by Kingston Churches Action on Homelessness (KCAH). The council’s advice service is separate from the homelessness service. While this can be confusing for users, it enables the provision of more distinct, independent advice. The council focuses on assisting private sector tenants, and staff have built up significant expertise in tenancy law in order to provide comprehensive services focusing on preventing homelessness. KCAH assists social housing tenants and single people for whom the council has no duty, providing a separate forum for challenging council decisions.

*Source: Audit Commission*
Each model for advice provision has pros and cons and raises its own challenges. Using generic officers can dilute the level of expertise available and lead to an unhelpful blurring of advice and decision making. In some cases, advice may simply serve as a filtering process to screen out applicants for whom the council is unlikely to have a re-housing duty. This gatekeeping approach can mean that people’s broader needs are not fully addressed. Separating advice from assessment offers advantages, enabling wider housing options to be considered, and providing users with an avenue for support to challenge council decisions where appropriate. Separation of roles can also enable staff to develop greater expertise in the relevant areas of housing law. Some authorities have worked with partner agencies to develop independent housing services offering specialist expertise to improve provision for users. Getting agreement locally on the roles of each provider, making the links and encouraging appropriate cross-referrals will be important to ensure that people can access the right service.

Resourcing requirements

In about one-half of homelessness cases, councils have no long-term housing duty, only a duty to provide advice and assistance, but levels of resourcing do not reflect this. Although councils have a statutory duty to provide housing advice, this may be seen as a non-essential service, making it vulnerable to funding cuts (Ref. 27) and the complexity of the structure and role of services can mean that the costs and benefits are difficult to quantify. Stock transfer can also impact on how housing advice services are delivered as housing may be reduced in the process of transfer (Ref. 29).

A review of services in Wales showed that six of the twenty-two unitary authorities had a distinct housing advice service; but their budgets ranged from £30,000 to £482,000, and the number of designated staff also varied substantially. The total grant funding of advice services was over £742,000, but some councils did not provide any funds (Ref. 27). Nationally, NACAB records that £56 million – 54 per cent of local CAB funding derives from local authorities (Ref. 30). The challenge for councils is to unravel the costs of their own arrangements and work with external providers to assess their costs with the outcomes of services provided. Demonstrating the impact of advice on prevention can make a case for greater funding but councils will first need to record and monitor the quality of advice services more effectively.

Quality of advice

The quality of housing advice has sometimes proved difficult to assess, especially if it is not distinct from other activities. In some cases, councils provide advice without a homelessness assessment and no records are kept, particularly if people seek assistance by phone. In other cases, people may be given advice as part of the assessment process, but, again, this may not be recorded. Until councils record the advice that they provide more thoroughly, assessing their impact will remain difficult. Distinct agencies, including voluntary sector organisations, often have clearer systems for case recording and monitoring.

Shelter has audited housing advice services in a dozen councils across England but has found that poor recording systems and a lack of distinction between assessment and advice make it difficult to assess service quality.
Peer review and mystery shopping can be useful methods for uncovering problems and assessing the performance of both advice and homelessness services. Westminster City Council, for example, has arranged annual peer reviews with the London Borough of Brent, whereby staff pose as ‘model clients’ or applicants to test out each other’s services. Other councils have worked with Shelter to improve services following audits of provision. For example, in South Kesteven District Council mystery shopping revealed inadequate case recording; the council now uses an enquiry sheet for all enquiries. These are then recorded on a database to improve cross-referral. Elmbridge Borough Council has also worked with Shelter to drive up standards (Case study 5).

**Case study 5**

**Working in partnership to drive up standards**

Elmbridge Borough Council worked with Shelter during its best value review, seeking their help to improve local advice services, identify staff training needs and challenge poor practice. Shelter carried out various pieces of work, including: mystery shopping and an audit of housing advice services; postal and telephone surveys of people on the housing register, including homeless applicants; and focus groups with service users and staff. Issues identified during the review included the need for a more personal approach from staff; problems contacting services by phone; long waits for homelessness interviews; a lack of recording of housing advice; and a need for more proactive and practical assistance.

The council decided to bring the homelessness service back in-house, but faced difficulties because there were insufficient experienced staff. Solutions included regular knowledge-based training, procedures to improve communication, case file reviews with staff to identify strengths and weaknesses of case recording and improving formal supervision. Shelter worked with Elmbridge to identify minimum service standards and has developed a homelessness manual outlining policies and procedures for staff. The council wanted to introduce an independent advice service but due to cost constraints felt that it could only fund a part-time specialist adviser.

*Source:* Audit Commission (interview and information from Shelter)

The Legal Services Commission (LSC) can also play an important role in driving up service standards. Agencies can apply for a Community Legal Service (CLS) quality mark, which is awarded to providers that meet certain standards (*Box A*). Camden is one council that has been successful in gaining this. However, the availability of services offering generalist or specialist advice with a quality mark is uneven. Some councils have few or even no centres with the specialist quality mark for housing advice services in their area [*Exhibit 9, overleaf*]. Working through Community Legal Services Partnerships can help councils to identify local needs for housing and related advice (such as debt, immigration and welfare benefits). Councils can also take steps to encourage other agencies to reach these standards; Gwynedd Council, for example, has proposed that all providers receiving council funding should possess the relevant CLS quality mark by April 2003 (*Ref. 27*).
The aim of the CLS is to improve public access to high-quality legal information, advice and services, via an inclusive network of legal service suppliers and Community Legal Service Partnerships. The Quality Mark is the standard underpinning the CLS. The Legal Services Commission carries out audits of advice services and can award successful providers with a Quality Mark. The standards are set at different levels to cater for the different roles that agencies can play:

1) **Information (Self-help information or Assisted information)**
   Agencies that provide leaflets and directories but have little interaction with clients, for example, libraries and doctor’s surgeries.

2) **General help (General help or General help with casework)**
   Agencies that provide advice, including client interviews, for example, CABx and community groups.

3) **Specialist help (this is required for services seeking LSC funding)**
   Agencies that provide legal help and a full range of services, including court representation, and demonstrate greater expertise and client care, for example, solicitors’ firms and Shelter Housing Aid Centres.

**Source:** Based on Legal Services Commission (Ref. 31). For more information see their website: www.legalservices.gov.uk/qmark

**Impact on prevention**

A previous Commission study identified that a failed tenancy could potentially cost over £2,000 (Ref. 32). Timely advice can make a real difference to the outcomes for those facing a possible eviction; some councils are monitoring their impact to assess this (Case study 6). In 2001, social landlords applied for over 150,000 possession orders, but only 30,350 were granted, with the remainder being either suspended or rejected by the courts (Ref. 33). Most possession actions are taken for rent arrears, with a small minority attributed to antisocial behaviour. Some arrears cases are at least partly due to problems with HB. Closer working between homelessness and HB services, landlords and tenants could help to avoid costly court proceedings and anxiety for tenants. Financial advice and court interventions can also enable people to maintain their housing and avoid the costs incurred in re-housing.

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**Case study 6**

**Monitoring the impact of advice on prevention**

The Royal Borough of Kingston-Upon-Thames has a private sector housing advice service which is separate from its homelessness service. Largely reliant on a small number of staff, the service keeps detailed records of advice and monitors the outcomes of its actions where possible. The council managed to prevent homelessness for 147 households in 2000/01 and 157 households in 2001/02.
The London Borough of Camden also has an in-house council advice service for private sector tenants and uses a range of performance indicators to monitor outcomes. The London Borough of Camden aims to prevent 300 cases of homelessness a year and to delay homelessness in a further 250 cases. It also aims to assist clients to access funds to prevent future homelessness and has an annual ‘income generation’ target of £250,000; this is achieved by advocacy for clients on HB issues, accessing grants from charities and liaising with landlords to reduce rent levels or retrieve deposits. In the financial year 2001/02, the two council advice centres raised £322,645 from compensation, rent saved, benefits, charity money and deposits gained for their clients.

Source: Audit Commission

Exhibit 9
Advice agencies with the LSC specialist quality mark
The availability of housing advice services offering quality marked services is uneven; some councils have none in their area.

Number of advice centres with LSC specialist quality mark per 100,000 population
(number of councils)

- 5+ (19)
- 2-5 (69)
- 1-2 (88)
- 0-1 (49)
- 0 (153)

Source: Legal Services Commission. Additional services may be operating at the LSC general help and general help with casework levels.
Support to maintain housing

To combat the ‘revolving door’ of repeat clients, councils could be more proactive in helping people to sustain tenancies. For some people, short-term interventions focused on housing may be enough. Others will need broader support, ranging from practical assistance with moving house or accessing benefits, to emotional support to help overcome loss, depression or isolation. Interagency working will be critical. Aspects to consider include:

- the Supporting People Programme;
- delivering social care;
- housing benefit;
- health services;
- the criminal justice system; and
- providing flexible integrated services.

The Supporting People Programme

Many agencies provide support and people can experience a whole range of interventions, from social workers, home carers, housing association support workers, district and community psychiatric nurses, community mental health workers and voluntary services. All play a part in meeting people’s needs across a range of issues [Exhibit 10, overleaf].

When assisting homeless applicants, councils tend to focus on housing rather than support needs. However, the Government has recognised the importance of support with its new Supporting People Programme. This seeks to bring together the finance used to assist vulnerable people living in the community into a local budget to be administered by councils [Exhibit 11, overleaf]. The intention is that this will be used for housing-related support costs – in the form of floating support or accommodation-based support. Other services, including housing management, personal and health care will continue to be resourced by the relevant agency.

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The information was so useful: when you move out, where you could go and how much it would cost. But most important [the support worker] was very empathetic, very kind. She was sorry about my situation and she was trying to help me but also tried to stop me from making a mistake.

15 year-old girl (Ref. 35)

See the Government’s website for more information on Supporting People at www.spkweb.org.uk
Exhibit 10
Support issues to consider
People’s needs may cover a range of issues.

- Financial/debt advice for people with rent arrears, financial problems (including benefits problems) or those needing Social Fund grants or loans.
- Family mediation for people experiencing a relationship breakdown where prevention is still an option.
- Legal advice for those whose relationships are irreparable, to enable them to establish access to belongings, rights of care for children and, possibly, divorce.
- Counselling for refugees or people with mental health problems, including those who have suffered domestic violence or abuse.
- Healthcare, including access to primary care or more specialist provision, like drug or alcohol treatment services.

Source: Audit Commission
Transitional HB funding is being used prior to the transfer of monies to the Supporting People pot and the allocation of grants to the administering local authorities from April 2003. It is important that needs and spending levels are calculated carefully if the Programme is to be appropriately resourced and targeted. If the financial calculations are too low or too high this could have far-reaching implications for the size of the overall Programme budget. Homeless people are only one client group that fall under the new regime and it is important that their needs are not marginalised in favour of more prominent groups. Partnership working between districts and counties in two tier areas and work with other providers is therefore critical. Some councils are seeking to reconfigure services in response to the Supporting People agenda (Case study 7).

Exhibit 11
The transfer of funding for support under the Supporting People Programme
The Supporting People Programme brings together finance for vulnerable people.

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Case study 7
Supporting People in practice

Derby City Council has 54 sheltered housing schemes providing over 2,600 units of accommodation for older, vulnerable people. Just under 1,500 further units are provided by housing associations. Council research has highlighted an over-supply of sheltered housing in the areas of lowest demand. The nine wards covering areas where housing designated for older people is likely to be in demand, and which have a sustainable future, contain only 37 per cent of the city’s sheltered housing stock. Conversely, 63 per cent of housing for older people is concentrated in 11 wards where demand is at best only fair. Derby City Council has now developed an action plan to deal with this mismatch and is using the Supporting People regime to reconfigure services in partnership with social services, health services and the voluntary sector. Options being considered include alternative use of some low-demand stock for other vulnerable groups.

Source: Audit Commission

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Source: ODPM, Supporting People Implementation Team

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The impact of the new regime on charging for services will also need consideration in light of Government guidance on ‘Fairer Charging’ (Ref. 36). Users of long-term (but not short-term) services are liable to charges and have to be means-tested, but no one receiving both community care and housing support should be means-tested more than once, and service users receiving HB should be passported to free support.
Delivering social care

50 Inspection reports show that some authorities could improve the social care offered to homeless households. Some services have made little attempt to systematically address applicants’ support needs, which may be particularly important for repeat applicants. During investigations, councils contact a range of providers for evidence of vulnerability, including social services, GPs, consultants and voluntary organisations. However, case files offer little evidence of systematic onward referrals from homelessness services to other services when clients need help from these services but are not in touch with them. Homelessness staff should play a pivotal role in support, due to their contact with people during assessments, but this requires a shift in emphasis. Staff will need up-to-date contact information and an understanding of eligibility criteria in order to make appropriate onward referrals, with the client’s consent.

51 While Supporting People will change funding arrangements, supported housing, with staff on site to assist people, may still be needed for those with higher care needs or young people who have not lived independently before, as part of an overall care plan. Alternatively, ‘floating support’ can be offered; as it is tied to the individual rather than the property, it can be more flexible and responsive to changing needs. Contracts with providers will be needed for allocating Supporting People funding.

52 Social services have particular responsibilities to assist children in need under the Children Act 1989, and to assist people with mental health problems under the NHS and Community Care Act 1990. Sometimes, however, qualifying for assistance may require a higher level of need under social services legislation than housing legislation and people can fall through the gap between services. Links need to be made to ensure that services are co-ordinated. In Derby City Council, for example, a member of staff carries out community care assessments within the Housing Options Centre. The Commission’s survey of stock transfer authorities showed that a substantial minority of authorities had no arrangements for dealing with 16-17 year olds or care leavers and most had no protocols for dealing with other vulnerable clients, such as those with mental health or drug and alcohol problems (Ref. 29). More work is needed to address this.

Housing benefit

53 Many homeless people rely on HB to pay for their accommodation. The Commission’s recent reports on HB outline significant problems with the current system (Ref. 2, 38). In 2001/02, new claims took, on average, 51 days to be processed in England and only 66 per cent of renewal claims were processed on time (Ref. 39). The new verification framework requires councils to check documentary proof of eligibility – obtaining the necessary information may be more problematic for some homeless people.
Even when administered efficiently, the HB system can itself exacerbate homelessness in several ways. Non-dependent deductions can act as a disincentive to families to continue accommodating their children when they turn 18 if they have no income for paying rent. Shortfalls between HB and private sector rents reduce affordability for people on low incomes, particularly for young people under 25 who face restrictions, where HB is only paid at rates equating to the market rents for a single room in a shared house. And, as payments are made in arrears to tenants in private sector and housing association properties, people can immediately fall behind in paying rent. Delays in processing claims and difficulties in renewing them can add to these problems. A combination of these factors can mean that people end up with rent arrears, which may encourage landlords to repossess their property. When people fall into arrears, they may also forfeit their rights to assistance under the homelessness legislation if they are judged to be ‘intentionally homeless’.

For households accepted as homeless, falling into arrears during a TA placement may impact on their ability to move into permanent accommodation, as some providers may refuse to take them. Some clients who are housed, particularly those with mental health problems, may need particular assistance in renewing HB claims to ensure continuity in their payments. Difficulties over payments during the transitional period when people move from TA to longer-term housing can also create problems. Closer working with HB services could make a big difference, both in preventing homelessness and ensuring that homeless people do not face additional problems that threaten their housing situation.

Health services

Both rough sleepers and those in TA may suffer specific health problems. For example, rough sleepers may have foot and skincare problems, poor dental health, respiratory and other problems following prolonged life on the streets. Injecting drug users may suffer from associated diseases including Hepatitis B and C. Mental health problems, ranging from mild depression or anxiety to severe ill health and self-harm may both contribute to and develop from people’s homelessness.

Healthcare is therefore particularly important, but low self esteem, perceived or actual negative experiences of services and a lack of confidence can hinder homeless people from accessing it. Inappropriate use of A&E can occur, which is costly and may indicate a need for better primary care. While GPs should offer temporary registration, there can be problems if they are reluctant to register homeless people permanently due to their transience, or if they have concerns about people’s behaviour or disproportionate demands being made on their time. GP targets for immunisation and screening can also be more difficult to achieve if people move, reducing the financial incentive to assist homeless people.

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I A recent Government announcement of changes in the HB regime may encourage tenants to shop around more for their housing (Ref. 40).

II For evidence and examples of schemes to assist people (Refs. 41 and 42).
Specialist services, such as drug detox and rehabilitation, often have long waiting lists, reducing people’s opportunities to access treatment (Ref. 43). There are also issues about how housing providers deal with illegal drug use on their premises, which may put them at risk of prosecution. Councils need to work with their strategic health authorities and local primary care trusts to identify whether there is a need for more specialist services for homeless people or whether access to mainstream services can be improved. Personal Medical Services pilots have been used in some London boroughs to fund targeted services, including outreach by nurse practitioners (Ref. 41).

The criminal justice system

Prisons, police and probation officers may all come into contact with homeless people and their staff need to be aware of available homelessness advice and support services. The Social Exclusion Unit’s recent report (Ref. 45) identifies particular problems for prisoners that make them more vulnerable to homelessness, including loss of access to HB after relatively short sentences. Housing advice may not always be provided prior to discharge, but could help to prevent homelessness. Some agencies are now meeting this need, such as St Mungo’s Housing Advice Service in Pentonville Prison. Authorities should work with local criminal justice service partners (including prison counselling, assessment, referral, advice and throughput teams – CARATs) to identify needs and respond with timely support. This could include offering advice to help people to sustain tenancies or make housing applications prior to discharge and ensuring that applications are followed through after release.

Providing flexible integrated services

While people’s support needs may vary according to their circumstances, there is often commonality. For example, help with accessing services, benefits advice, budgeting, moving house and repairs are all issues that concern many service users. Research suggests that users value practical help, but also less tangible benefits, including support to develop their potential, and friendship. Flexibility about the number of visits made by workers, continuity and choice are all important issues for users. Some authorities have support teams to assist certain groups, such as people with mental health needs, or provide help with certain aspects of resettlement (Case study 8). Interagency working will be critical to the delivery of an integrated service.

Where support services are available, inspection reports show that there tends to be a greater emphasis on assisting young single people than families or non-priority applicants. Shelter’s Homeless to Home service, however, also shows how support can make a real difference to families who are at risk of abandoning tenancies. Over 80 per cent of those that had been out of contact with the service for nine months or more were still housed following assistance, although some had moved away from the area or into more suitable accommodation (Ref. 46). Substantive interventions may be needed for people with antisocial behaviour problems to prevent homelessness (Case study 9).

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Case study 8
Providing support

Westminster City Council has identified vulnerable tenants and groups at risk, enabling the authority to direct known individuals to tenancy sustainment schemes. The homelessness service has panels to ensure joint working with social services for people with mental health needs and older people, and an education worker who liaises with families needing to help children into schools. On a practical level, the council has an IT group, linked to English language classes, for homeless people in one of its B&Bs, which not only helps people to develop practical skills, but also offers opportunities for interaction and mutual support, which is highly valued by those attending.

Source: Audit Commission

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Drugscope offers brief guidance on the framework for drug treatment services and the role that homelessness services can play in identifying the need for such services (Ref. 44).

Users often appreciated support workers’ ability to develop a good relationship with them, regardless of the organisational or funding arrangements in place (Ref. 37).
Case study 9
Helping people with antisocial behaviour

Between 1996 and 2000, the Dundee Families Project worked with 126 households whose antisocial behaviour included conflict with neighbours and damage to property. Intensive support was provided for a 9-12 month period or longer. Services included counselling, family support and group work. The scheme included three components: core accommodation for four families with staff on site; support for dispersed tenancies, and preventative outreach to families in their existing homes. Most clients had low incomes and were headed by a lone parent. Many had both housing difficulties and serious social problems, including difficulties with childcare and control, physical and mental health problems, and drug or alcohol misuse. Information on closed cases indicated that most families had fewer housing problems following involvement, though many still had serious childcare problems. While the costs and benefits of the service were not easy to quantify, some long-term savings were achieved by avoiding eviction, homelessness administration and re-housing costs, and by preventing the need for children to be placed in residential or foster care.

Source: Based on Scottish Executive [Ref. 47]

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A detailed independent evaluation of a housing association tenancy support service provided by New Leaf, part of the Places for People group, also suggests that providing support can be cost effective. Comparing those assisted with clients where no support was offered, rent arrears were lower at the end of the period and a smaller proportion had ended their tenancies. Based on a single worker’s caseload, the difference between the rent arrears incurred by those who had and had not been assisted equated to one-half of the cost of the tenancy support officer’s post.

Conclusion

Preventing people from becoming homeless is at the heart of the new policy agenda. Some councils have made great strides in this area, but others need to shift their emphasis to increase opportunities for intervention. Reviewing arrangements for advice and support will be particularly important and councils will need to take a robust and inclusive partnership approach in developing their Supporting People strategies and commissioning related services. However, for some people, such initiatives may come too late or may be insufficient to prevent them from losing their homes. The next chapter examines how councils are delivering services for those who do become homeless.
Providing a safety net

If councils are to provide an effective safety net, with good-quality services for people who become homeless, they need to:

- provide thorough, consistent and timely assessments and decisions for homeless applicants;

- offer suitable emergency or temporary accommodation where this is needed; and

- offer longer-term housing options to enable people to move into more settled accommodation, taking account of where they want to live.
Where homelessness cannot be prevented, council services are there to provide a safety net. This chapter outlines some of the issues for councils to consider in providing high-quality, cost efficient services. Again, the checklists in the centre of this report may help councils to assess their current performance.

**Effective assessment and decision making**

The homelessness assessment process follows a complex legal framework raising the possibility of differing interpretation of the law, which will affect individuals’ housing outcomes. There are a number of issues to consider:

- improving record keeping;
- investigation procedures and the consistency of decisions;
- reviews and appeals procedures; and
- maintaining contact with users.

**Improving record keeping**

National performance monitoring identifies the number of councils’ decisions but not the number of applications for assistance. However, Commission fieldwork indicated that these figures could be very different and that not all applicants receive decisions. Sometimes this may reflect a loss of contact, but it is not always clear whether applicants are offered emergency accommodation while cases are investigated. In one council, applicants were initially assessed but would not be considered ‘live cases’ unless they returned for a full interview. These issues highlight problems with data recording; they also suggest that processes are being used to filter out, and not fulfil duties to, some applicants. Fieldwork and case file reviews highlight various points that could be improved in record keeping [Exhibit 12, overleaf].

Vulnerability is really a judgement call – those who are less able to fend for themselves and would suffer detriment, for example, to their health, would be vulnerable. A lot of local authorities do turn people away at the first stage, we don’t.

Service manager, Commission fieldwork
Investigation procedures and the consistency of decisions

Families automatically fall into a priority need category; single applicants have to satisfy councils that they are vulnerable due to old age, mental illness, physical disability or for some other special reason. The new Priority Needs Order for England extends assistance to 16/17 year-olds and care leavers aged 18-20, as well as people found to be vulnerable due to time spent in care, the armed forces, prison or custody or due to violence. This step should increase consistency within and between councils dealing with different people sharing similar characteristics. However, obtaining evidence of vulnerability can be difficult, and it is sometimes unclear whether the onus is on the individual or the council, although legally it is the council’s responsibility. Legally, councils should also give those who are refused help an opportunity to respond and submit additional evidence.
Investigation is an important part of the process, but the Commission’s inspectors and auditors have found that some authorities make decisions without formal acceptance policies or guidance for staff, resulting in investigations that are not rigorous. More commonly, however, councils are failing to meet the best value performance indicator (BVPI) target. In 2001/02, on average, councils in England reported that in 86 per cent of cases, applicants received decisions and notifications within 33 days. But, there is a wide range of performance: some councils achieve this in only 50 per cent of cases [Exhibit 13]. The speed of decision making needs to be balanced against its thoroughness and consistency. Improving guidance and procedures could help staff (Case study 10); better staff supervision, with periodic monitoring of case files could also help to identify problems or training needs.

**Exhibit 13**

**Decision making within 33 days in England**

On average, councils report that in 86 per cent of cases, applicants receive decisions and notifications within 33 days.

Source: Audit Commission, based on BV67 data (Ref. 39). See www.bvpi.gov.uk/interactive.asp for interactive comparative data.
Case study 10
Assessment and decision-making procedures

In the Borough of Telford and Wrekin, a thorough policy and procedures manual sets out guidance for staff on assessment and decision making. While this is currently being updated to take account of the new Act, it sets out the process clearly and includes helpful flow charts. Application forms are well-designed and allow room for all case notes to be recorded together. To aid decision making, staff use an investigation summary, which provides a quick, simple record of outcomes. Applicants are given personalised letters written in plain English, which clearly explain the reasons for the decision and the individual’s rights to a review. A case file review also indicated that advice is offered; for example, former asylum seekers were given details of the local Benefits Agency and appointments were made to assist them. The council recognises that its relatively personalised service may be jeopardised if the volume of clients increases substantially, but it wishes to maintain a customer-focused approach.

In Westminster City Council, due to the high number of clients, the service had problems keeping track of all the information entering the service. Staffing arrangements also meant that more than one caseworker could be involved in each case. The service therefore introduced a system to scan all case documents on to a computer, using a unique identifier code for each applicant and type of document. The system enables any caseworker to access information and prevents loss of documents. As staff can change roles frequently, their levels of expertise vary so, to assist in decision making, the service uses standard investigation forms. A qualified barrister reviews a sample of case files each year and provides detailed comments on compliance and the quality of investigation and decision making.

Source: Audit Commission

Most comments by inspectors on compliance refer to a failure to respond to Government guidance issued in April 2000 (Ref. 48) advising authorities that 16- and 17-year olds should normally be deemed to be in priority need (a requirement of the 2002 Act) and suggesting that authorities develop protocols between housing and social services departments to respond to this age group. Some councils have no protocols in place, and have not been accepting under-18s as in priority need. Young people can only be referred to social services with their consent; authorities need to ensure that this group do not miss out on assistance from housing departments under homelessness legislation.

Reviews and appeals procedures

Local authorities have been required to offer internal reviews of decisions since the introduction of the Housing Act 1996 but research suggests that few reviews are carried out. In 2001, one in ten authorities had not had any requests in the previous six months, while six out of ten had five or fewer. Most reviews were in London and the south east – almost all the London boroughs had over 40, with one experiencing 261. Most of these focused on homelessness, priority need, intentionality or suitability, with intentionality featuring prominently (Ref. 49).
Councils need to consider how to conduct reviews. Fifty-eight per cent use one person, usually an officer. Where panels are used, in over one-half of cases they are member-only. Some councils use a two-tiered approach – involving first a senior officer and then a panel. Each approach raises difficulties. Using senior officers can be difficult for smaller districts and raise concerns if, ‘The senior officer has no housing experience – no training [is] provided. Therefore [it] tends to go on the recommendation of whoever made the decision.’ However, members can ‘make decisions based on a sympathy vote, ignoring the legislation’ (Ref. 49).

The information that users have about their rights will influence the rates of review. Inspectors have found that applicants are not always informed of their rights in decision letters, and, where they are, they may not know how to apply them. Other research has also found ‘considerable diversity in the quantity and quality of information available to applicants relating to the statutory review’ (Ref. 50). A lack of specialist advice may also affect rates of review; fewer than one-quarter of clients use advisers at their reviews (Ref. 49). A person’s situation can also impact on his or her ability to pursue this action; a regional survey found that only one-half of the authorities would always offer interim accommodation pending a review decision (Ref. 50).

There may be resource incentives for authorities to house applicants directly via the housing register under Part VI of the Housing Act 1996 (Ref. 9) rather than to pursue a costly homelessness investigation. Some authorities appear not to have made the distinction between the two routes, making applicants’ rights to review unclear. Offers of accommodation may be made informally rather than in writing and applicants may not be informed of their right to review. Many authorities have informally ‘reconsidered’ decisions outside the statutory structure.1

Maintaining contact with users

Councils need to ensure that users understand their rights and options during the assessment process. They also need to consider how they will maintain contact with people in order to inform them of decisions. If people are ‘homeless at home’ and change addresses, or if they are in TA but for some reason have to move, councils need to maintain contact. When users lose touch, it is common practice for councils to keep a record of their homelessness decisions on file that people can ask for at reception, but it is unclear if users are always told about this.

More attention could be paid to contacting users that have long-term stays in TA while they wait for move-on accommodation to ensure that they are clear about local allocations policies and about their position on the council housing register or waiting list. A lack of transparency can mean that people repeatedly contact the council to find out their position on the register and are confused when they move up and down; causing uncertainty and anxiety.

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1 Research suggests that significant informal decision making occurs from the point when applicants present themselves at the statutory review stage (Ref. 50).
Suitable temporary accommodation

TA serves as a staging post on the route to more permanent and settled housing when this cannot be provided immediately. People’s experiences at this stage can impact substantially on their overall health and welfare and, in some cases, on housing outcomes, as people may fall out of the system during a TA placement. Concerns over current arrangements focus on:

- addressing suitability and standards;
- linking people to services;
- risk assessment in placements; and
- managing costs.

Addressing suitability and standards

The quality of TA varies markedly and different types of accommodation are subject to different levels of scrutiny. Currently, there are no national standards, although the Government is considering introducing them (Ref. 51). While some authorities have developed their own standards for TA and thoroughly vet providers against specified criteria, others do not make checks. Environmental health officers (EHOs) often take the lead in visiting providers, but for out-of-area placements, staff may rely on other councils to inspect premises and may not check to make sure that this happens. Inspections should be ongoing and followed up to ensure that standards are met.

The private rented sector has the highest proportion of unfit properties (Ref. 52) but schemes assisting clients to find accommodation in this sector conduct varying levels of investigation (Ref. 53). Some schemes admit that EHOs would like to close properties they are using, but that this would exacerbate housing shortages. Legislation proposed in the Queen’s speech to register houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) remains a priority.

Women’s refuges operated by Women’s Aid are available to victims of domestic violence. In 2001/02, there were, on average, 0.55 refuge places per 10,000 population1, (Ref. 39), but refuges do not exist in all councils and waiting lists sometimes apply. Refuges can be overcrowded, with many women and children sharing a single kitchen and few bathrooms, and communal areas may serve as temporary bedrooms in emergencies. Councils should monitor demand to ensure that they have sufficient provision.

B&Bs are perhaps the greatest area for concern. The Commission’s inspectors have seen considerable variation; some providers offer well-maintained rooms, cleaning staff and health and safety checks, while in other cases, B&Bs are dirty and in a poor state of repair. The degree of independence that users have in TA can vary enormously. People do not always have access to their own cooking or washing facilities or to a communal area, and their freedom can be inhibited by restrictions on the times that they need to be in or out of their rooms. Special facilities, such as

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1 The recommended level of refuge provision is 1 family space per 10,000 population which derives from a 1975 Select Committee investigation into violence in marriage (ODPM response to consultation).
children’s play areas or laundry facilities, are often locked, limiting access. In B&Bs used for other paying guests, people may have to change rooms at short notice.

81 In London, the high reliance on B&Bs is a longstanding problem and there have been attempts through the Bed and Breakfast Information Exchange (BABIE) to contain costs and work to set standards. In practice, at times of particular pressure, these standards have not been maintained due to high demand and competition for accommodation. Some councils have taken steps to improve TA (Case study 11). Unfortunately, demand is such that others soon move in to vacated supply.

Linking people to services

82 Linking people in TA to services is particularly important for those staying for prolonged periods. The new Code of Guidance states that authorities should ensure that all babies and young children placed in TA have the opportunity to receive health and developmental checks from health visitors and/or primary care professionals (Ref. 15). People’s mental and physical health can both contribute to their homelessness and be affected by this situation and people should be assisted to access appropriate treatment.

83 Disrupted education can also be an immediate consequence of homelessness. A Birmingham study found that only 29 per cent of homeless children were attending mainstream school; 73 per cent were attending before they became homeless (Ref. 54). Frequent moves may mean repeated changes of school and this can be particularly disruptive for children in an exam year; poor results can perpetuate future social exclusion. Ensuring that families are given help with finding new schools and that children are linked in with homework clubs and other activities while in TA should be a higher priority.

Risk assessment in placements

84 Out-of-area placements and frequent moves can hinder people’s ability to resettle. In London, one in six homeless households in TA may be placed outside their home borough (Ref. 55); movements between authorities are also common elsewhere. This can raise problems in ensuring that links to education, support and other services are provided. Councils are required to notify the local housing authority in the placement area within 14 days of housing being made available for out-of-area placements, but this can be problematic. London boroughs are working on an electronic notification system (NOTIFY) to improve arrangements.
People’s support needs, their ability to attend work or for their children to reach school, may also be overlooked in placements. There is a risk that where more than one authority is using a hostel or B&B, they may place vulnerable groups inappropriately. Risk assessment when placing individuals and written statements or agreements between authorities setting out which clients they will accommodate with a shared provider could help.

Managing costs

Other than spending on staffing, the majority of costs borne by authorities relate to providing TA, and the shortfall between expenditure and the income received through Government subsidy. This is particularly acute where councils rely on B&Bs, which are usually the most expensive form of accommodation. B&B use has been increasing as homelessness has increased, even in low demand areas. With the new requirement for authorities to provide housing for people for as long as it takes for them to find a settled home, the need to manage this effectively becomes more pressing. While some expenditure will be difficult to control, the Commission’s auditors have identified a number of factors that councils could consider [Exhibit 14] and that could deliver significant savings. Each of these is considered in turn in the following paragraphs.

Exhibit 14
Factors affecting TA costs

Auditors have identified a number of factors that councils could consider and that could deliver significant savings.

Source: Adapted from a District Audit report
Type of accommodation used – authorities should be examining trends in TA use and demand for longer-term housing for their broader housing strategies. There may be a case for developing hostel accommodation. If a hostel is held and accounted for outside the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) there are no subsidy controls, which, in effect, means that the authority can charge a rent that it considers to be reasonable and receive 95 per cent subsidy on HB awarded. However, occupancy levels need careful consideration. Some councils have developed housing association leasing (HAL) or private sector leasing (PSL) schemes. Working with the private rented sector has, for example, helped the Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames and the Borough of Telford and Wrekin to meet TA needs (Case study 12). Using hard-to-let properties that are awaiting redevelopment for a short time could be further exploited, particularly where major decanting is required following stock transfer, but health and safety and social inclusion issues should be considered. If properties are passed to a housing association for development, agreements covering their use for TA should be made in advance. In some authorities with low demand, there is still high use of B&B, which suggests that this option is not being used effectively.

Case study 12
Working with the private sector to provide TA

The Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames is an affluent borough with high market rents and increasing homeless applications. The Council has historically had problems accessing private rented sector stock due to the cost, delays in HB payments and competition from students. However, staff have improved relationships with landlords and have developed a tenant finder service (TFS), using private sector accommodation as an alternative to B&B for applicants for whom a duty is accepted. Under the TFS, accommodation is provided for a year on a renewable basis until people are re-housed – the wait for social housing can be two years. Landlords are offered a month’s rent in advance and a deposit; this money is effectively loaned to the household, which is expected to contribute towards payments; to ensure affordability, properties are let at rents equal to the eligible rent for HB. With changes in the market, the service has successfully recruited enough landlords to provide 90 active tenancies. The council is now extending the scheme to accommodate households who are threatened with homelessness, are in priority need and not intentionally homeless, but who do not wish to apply to the council for housing.

In the Borough of Telford and Wrekin, renovation grants are used to help landlords to carry out repairs and improvements to older properties (including installing new windows or central heating) so that they can be leased to the council as TA. This has enabled the council to find TA in smaller centres, like Newport and the more rural areas of the Council, and means that homeless households can be housed closer to support networks while waiting for permanent offers.

Source: Audit Commission
Other alternatives – the cheapest, and arguably most desirable, alternative is to encourage households to stay with friends or relatives while applications are investigated. This may be reasonable when councils are likely to have a re-housing duty, if there are no problems with the applicant staying there and if the council can ensure that a client can be moved on quickly. This may be easier for young single people than families, where there is greater risk of overcrowding.

Household size – household size impacts on costs, with families being particularly expensive to accommodate in B&B. In one council, for example, auditors found that 17 of the 67 families in B&B accounted for 50 per cent of the net costs of benefits to homeless people. The Government’s new target to end the use of B&B for families makes it even more pressing to find alternatives for this group.

Acceptance and allocations policies – making a quick transition from temporary to permanent housing relies on councils having clear acceptance and allocations policies. In one council, problems with TA costs led to changing its re-housing policy to use all available housing for homeless people II. The availability and the effective management of social housing stock may facilitate move on, but with the increasing transfer of stock to housing associations, quick access will also rely on relationships with these housing associations. Councils should also consider other factors to help clients to move quickly, such as assisting people with buying furniture, removals and access to grants.

Length of stay – the time that people stay in TA is both a concern for users and a cost issue. The average length of stay in B&B varies widely between authorities, with households in London sometimes staying a year or more, reflecting how difficult it is to provide alternatives and move people on in high-demand areas. In some areas, stock is easily available and people may be able to move quickly into permanent accommodation. Effective housing management and allocations arrangements can speed up the transition. Length of stay will also depend on the efficiency of decision making, which, in turn, may be affected by staffing capacity.

Generating income – income can be gained in two ways – from Government HB subsidy and clients paying service charges. Complex arrangements govern the levels of HB subsidy that authorities can access for homeless households in TA, depending on the accommodation used. The framework ensures that the Government does not meet the cost of excessive charges. For B&B provision, for each authority the Government specifies a threshold equivalent to twice the average weekly rent for council owned property IV and a further subsidy of 12.5 per cent between the threshold and an overall maximum (or cap). Therefore, councils receive only limited subsidy where B&B charges exceed the threshold. As subsidy does not take account of household size, councils bear a far higher proportion of costs for families than single people. Auditors of a unitary council in south west England found that, typically, it was six times more expensive to place a four person family than a single person in B&B (Table 3).

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I Anon.
II Anon.
III Audit Commission PIs for 2000/01, showed that, on average, households stayed 22 weeks in B&B in London, compared with seven weeks in England overall.
IV Up to 2000/01, the thresholds and caps were derived by applying agreed multipliers to the average council rents for the previous year, updated with the proposed guideline increase for the year in question. For authorities with no housing stock, a regional average actual rent figure was used. Outside London a multiplier of 1.5 was used to calculate the threshold and a multiplier of 2 for the cap. In London the multipliers were 2 and 3 respectively to reflect the higher cost of living. The thresholds used were authority specific, except for London, where a common rate applied.
There is, therefore, in some councils, a shortfall between expenditure on homeless households in TA and the income recouped from Government. In 2000/01, authorities spent some £40 million more than they were able to reclaim in non-HRA rent rebate; three-quarters of this shortfall was experienced by London boroughs. Authorities can maximise their income by encouraging applicants to apply for HB promptly and assisting people to complete HB applications. Without a proactive approach, the authority may be in a position where clients move from temporary to permanent accommodation without making a claim, preventing the council from recouping its costs.

The council’s duty is limited to providing suitable accommodation to homeless households. However, payments to B&Bs usually include the cost of non-housing components, including meals, heating and lighting. Given that these costs could be covered by income support (IS), many councils have opted to charge households. In 2000/01, overall, councils generated income equivalent to 27 per cent of the net expenditure remaining after HB subsidy through service charges. General charging policies will impact on what councils do. Approaches to charging need to be balanced against the costs of administration for identifying and collecting charges; the authority will also need to decide what action to take if a client falls into arrears and how this could impact on their homeless status. Councils need to be sensitive to problems that could be incurred by low-income families and those with high support needs.

Table 3
How HB subsidy controls affect costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Four person household</th>
<th>Single person household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Typical B&amp;B charge per week in the council area</td>
<td>£455.00</td>
<td>£157.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Charges ineligible for HB</td>
<td>£59.80</td>
<td>£14.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Maximum benefit (A-B) (Gross cost)</td>
<td>£395.20</td>
<td>£142.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D 95% subsidy up to threshold of £92.31</td>
<td>£87.69</td>
<td>£87.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E 12.5% subsidy between threshold and cap of £153.84</td>
<td>£7.69</td>
<td>£6.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Subsidy due (D+E)</td>
<td>£95.38</td>
<td>£94.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net cost to the council after subsidy (C-F)</td>
<td>£299.82</td>
<td>£48.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: charges ineligible for HB could be service charges, such as charges for utilities. Example assumes household receives 100% HB.

Source: District Audit report.

This included a £34.8 million shortfall on spending on homeless people in board and lodging (B&B), £1.4 million shortfall for licensed accommodation, £3.8 million for short-term leased accommodation and £283,000 shortfall between spending on support charges under the transitional HB scheme and the subsidy for supported accommodation.
The longer-term housing options for users will reflect local housing markets. In some cases, homeless people may be able to access council stock relatively easily, but the available housing may be in undesirable areas. Standards may vary, reflecting both local stock conditions and providers’ expectations of what is acceptable for a relatively disempowered and marginalised group. The options open to homeless people, the speed of the transition to permanent housing and the success of placements will depend on various factors:

- availability of, and access to, social housing;
- options in the private rented sector;
- effective housing management;
- suitability and choice; and
- affordable housing strategies.

Availability of, and access to, social housing

Councils, like other social housing providers, have to balance a range of considerations in delivering social housing, including meeting housing need, addressing applicants’ preferences, promoting sustainable communities and managing housing efficiently. Homeless applicants’ needs have to be balanced with those of other groups. Many local authorities in England have now transferred part or all of their stock to housing associations; one-quarter of local authorities are no longer landlords. Some have also contracted out their homelessness and housing register services. Stock transfer has fundamentally changed councils’ relationships with housing; those councils affected will now be partially or wholly reliant on nomination arrangements and policies put in place at transfer (or revised since) with their associations to access provision. In some cases, all TA and permanent accommodation is in the hands of the association.

Ownership of housing allocations policies can be confused after transfer, even though councils maintain the duty to house homeless people. Council allocation policies vary, but most rely on awarding points according to applicants’ needs. Councils no longer have to hold a register, but they may still find this necessary to organise allocations. A joint or common register with local housing associations can facilitate access for users and avoid the potential need for them to wait in more than one queue. Currently, however, allocations systems can suffer from a lack of transparency and legitimacy, as well as from complicated administration. Some councils have improved arrangements (Case study 13).
Case study 13
Using allocations policies to assist people facing homelessness

Canterbury City Council is using its allocations policy to try to prevent homelessness by awarding priority to those households most at risk of becoming homeless. A family does not lose priority on the housing waiting list if it moves from sharing accommodation to an assured shorthold tenancy. This enables families to seek accommodation in the private rented sector without being penalised.

The council also has a banding system in place that complements the allocations policy: high priority health and community care referrals are placed in band 1 (the highest band), victims of domestic violence and those with no fixed abode for over six months are placed in band 2 and those in temporary accommodation are placed in band 3. Once in each band, households are considered in date order alongside those with other housing needs.

In addition, people in council-owned TA are now offered an introductory tenancy after one year. They are not penalised if they prefer to be re-housed through the housing register once a more suitable property becomes available.

Source: Audit Commission

Improving users’ influence in terms of where they are re-housed and increasing choice is likely to encourage tenancy sustainment in the longer term. Although applicants may be invited to express a preference about where they are re-housed, in practice this is difficult to deliver; only 40 per cent of authorities always bear preferences in mind and 60 per cent restrict their offers to one or two vacancies (Ref. 56). The introduction of choice-based lettings (CBL) schemes may give users greater choice; the Government expects 25 per cent of councils to have adopted CBL by 2005, and all councils to have such a system by 2010. However, the pilot schemes are still in the early stages of evaluation (Ref. 57). Some appear to be improving re-let times for hard-to-let properties, but, in themselves, CBL schemes will not be a panacea for a lack of desirable, affordable local housing.
On surveying stock transfer authorities to assess the impact of transfer on housing need, the Commission found that, while almost all authorities had nominations arrangements, most still had at least occasional problems where housing associations rejected nominees (Ref. 29). The most common reasons were rent arrears, antisocial behaviour or, occasionally, special needs. Sometimes, those refused had already been housed by the association and were known for poor conduct, problems with their tenancy or a previous eviction prior to returning as statutorily homeless. Where a stock transfer association also owned the council’s TA it could be unwilling to move people with arrears on to permanent stock. The situation may be resolved by the council offering additional resettlement support for those with complex needs or looking to alternative housing associations for accommodation for larger families or people who need adapted housing. Authorities need to work with housing associations to address these problems. Regulatory guidance from the Housing Corporation sets out expectations that housing associations will co-operate with councils to address homelessness (Ref. 58).

The Commission’s recent report on meeting housing needs after stock transfer also notes that the point of transfer is not a sensible time to make decisions about contracting out homelessness services, as requirements are likely to be overshadowed by the bigger political considerations at stake (Ref. 29). A decision to contract out should be made in light of a scrutiny report or best value review. Where services are contracted out, councils need to ensure that contracts or service level agreements stipulate their requirements, and that these are monitored effectively, so that they do not lose sight of how services are being delivered and ensure that they are fulfilling their duties effectively. Regardless of transfer, both the strategic, enabling roles and operational duties relating to homelessness remain for councils.

Options in the private rented sector

One effect of the Homelessness Act 2002 is that, without the written agreement of the household, councils cannot bring their housing duty to an end by offering homeless households a tenancy with a private landlord. In such cases, applicants must confirm in writing that they understand the terms of the tenancy offered and the fact that they can refuse the offer without affecting the duty that the council has to house them.

Some people may prefer to be accommodated in the private rented sector and some people facing homelessness may look to this sector without approaching the council. They may, however, have problems due to the;

- reluctance of landlords to accept those on HB due to potential delays in processing HB payments, and concerns about people falling into rent arrears;
- potential shortfalls between the HB that a claimant receives and their rent;
- difficulty in providing a deposit or rent in advance;
- lack of affordable, good-quality rental accommodation where they want to live; and
- competition from other prospective tenants, such as students and seasonal tourists.

Authorities can offer various forms of assistance to address these issues [Exhibit 15].
Exhibit 15
Assisting people to access the private rented sector

Authorities can offer various forms of assistance.

- Improve relationships with landlords by working with them through landlord forums.
- Provide applicants with lists of accommodation where landlords are willing to take benefit claimants.
- Assist homeless clients to complete HB forms, fast-track their applications and negotiate with landlords on rent levels.
- Liaise with rent officers over local market rents.
- Assist clients with deposits by providing landlords with a written guarantee for a certain number of weeks’ rent to underwrite damage (or damage and theft, rent arrears/rent in lieu of notice) or provide cash up front direct to the landlord.
- Assist clients to apply for help to pay for rent in advance from the Social Fund.
- Assist clients to pay for rent in advance by providing a loan recoverable from HB.
- Vet landlords’ accommodation and negotiate rent levels and deposits.
- Develop long-term schemes that guarantee rent to landlords during vacant periods.

Source: Audit Commission, drawing on inspection reports and Ref. 53

The NRDF has 163 members in England and Wales, including 29 English and 2 Welsh council-operated projects – 19 per cent of NRDF membership in England and Wales. There may also be council schemes that are not members, and voluntary sector members part-financed by councils.

These figures relate to the whole of Britain and both council and voluntary sector organisations.

Rent in advance, deposit or guarantee schemes can often improve access. The National Rent Deposit Forum (NRDF) notes that there are over 160 schemes in England and Wales, 29 – or one in five – are operated by councils. In 2001/02, the average number of people offered advice and assistance per scheme was 286; the average number housed was 57; and most schemes had a claim rate of less than 20 per cent on their funds (Ref. 59). Currently, schemes take many different forms and most apply some restrictions to the clients that they assist; often they only provide rent guarantees to people with lower support needs in order to maintain good relationships with landlords (Ref. 53). The local market context and the efficiency of HB administration may impact on the success of these schemes.
Effective housing management

The Empty Homes Agency estimates that there are over 750,000 empty homes in England, 17 per cent of which belong to the public sector and 83 per cent to the private sector (Ref. 60). Helping to bring empty properties back into use by providing grants to the private sector and using compulsory purchase orders can be useful. Councils also need to work with housing associations to look at turnover and ensure that they are managing placements effectively (Ref. 61). Carrying out repairs and maintenance and offering furnished tenancies could improve the sustainability of lettings, although this will have cost implications (Case study 14).

Case study 14
Managing stock effectively

In Mid Devon District Council, a lettable standard has been developed in consultation with tenants that sets specific requirements for new lettings, such as plumbing for washing machine facilities. A dedicated voids team works with allocations officers to re-let properties quickly.

Herefordshire District Council has been awarded the Empty Homes Agency Good Practice Award 2001 for the Best Rural Empty Property Strategy for maximising use of its stock. On average, vacant properties are let in less than two weeks and the number of council-owned dwellings that are empty and available or awaiting repair is 0.2 per cent. The council employs an empty homes officer who helps to provide advice and support to owners of private properties.

Source: Audit Commission

Suitability and choice

Poor quality housing can be a barrier to resettlement. Cold and damp can cause health problems (Ref. 62) and a lack of special needs housing or properties for large families can mean that people are placed in unsuitable housing. Homeless applicants can seek reviews of offers on suitability grounds but, in practice, take-up is low. Once housed, however, many applicants seek a council housing transfer or simply vote with their feet and leave if they feel that a property is unsuitable. Some councils are trying to improve access and promote choice (Case study 15). Choice-based lettings schemes may also be cause for optimism in improving sustainability in the longer term.

Affordable housing strategies

In addition to ensuring good relations with housing associations to enable homeless people to access social housing, councils could do more within their broader housing strategies to improve access to affordable housing in the longer term, which could help to prevent homelessness. Working with planning and housing colleagues, homelessness services should try to ensure that section 106 planning agreements for new developments include affordable housing (Case study 16).
Case study 15  
**Reviewing allocations arrangements**

In Leicester City Council, an allocations issues group meets regularly to review allocations policy, and joint working with social services has led to changes in medical priority awards. The council also systematically considers special needs in placements using an adapted housing matching service to ensure that people with disabilities are offered appropriate accommodation. Applications for adapted can be made online and the council hopes in future to enable applicants to search directly for their own adapted homes on the internet. Leicester also has a Homeswap scheme to promote mutual exchanges between tenants both within and outside the city. Printed lists are circulated to 13 offices each month and sent to applicants every six weeks. Applicants can also look online.

*Source:* Audit Commission

Case study 16  
**Effective planning policies for affordable housing**

West Berkshire District Council is trying to generate more affordable housing by lowering the threshold above which developers must contribute land for affordable housing and increasing the percentage of affordable housing it wishes to see. This has resulted in enough land to accommodate 526 rented shared-ownership homes, 104 of which will be shared equity or ‘cost rent’ homes, available for key workers. Planning policies also make reference to the ‘pepper-potting’ of affordable housing and the mix of housing to reflect the need for smaller homes.

Runnymede Borough Council’s corporate approach to section 106 agreements outlines that a proportion of each residential development site must contain affordable housing. This has generally been 25 per cent on sites of one hectare, or 25 dwellings, or more. The council is now looking to increase this to 40 per cent.

*Source:* Audit Commission

**Conclusion**

As this chapter shows, council performance in providing a safety net for the homeless varies. Using the pull-out checklists at the centre of this report should enable authorities to assess their performance and identify problems and gaps in services that need action. This will then place them in a good position to develop their homelessness strategies, which should help to reduce or minimise homelessness in the longer term.
Minimising homelessness

If councils are to minimise homelessness in the longer term they need to develop and implement effective homelessness strategies, and:

- make better use of data on local needs to identify gaps in services and set priorities to address local needs;
- manage their resources and performance effectively to maximise their impact; and
- work closely with their partners at both strategic and operational levels to deliver change.
Working in partnership with other providers to deliver durable solutions may help to minimise homelessness in the longer term. The requirements of best value for councils to review services, and the new duty to develop strategies for homelessness and Supporting People, offer councils opportunities to be more proactive, shifting from a reactive, crisis intervention role to a preventative approach. This should help to improve service users’ experiences by offering a holistic response to their needs, including support and advice, to break the cycle of repeat homelessness.

Homelessness strategies should bring together all the aspects of services discussed in the previous chapters, and in some councils such strategies are beginning to emerge. Rather than replicating the substantial existing guidance, this chapter briefly sets out some of the key factors involved.

Assessing needs, gaps and priorities

Developing a full understanding of the nature and causes of homelessness locally, and how to make best use of new national funding streams to address these, will be crucial. Marrying an understanding of the reasons for homelessness and trends in housing supply and demand will also be critical for planning. Some councils could do more to examine the extent of rough sleeping and hidden homelessness; some feel that they do not have a rough sleeping problem, but have made little attempt to verify this. Councils should look at the local housing and economic context to assess potential demand, with an awareness of the local population profile and changing trends, including levels of unemployment and the proportion of the population on low incomes who are at risk of homelessness (identifying people with rent arrears who are receiving possession notices, local prison and care leavers, and so on). A fuller analysis of existing performance information and data sources could help councils to assess local needs.

Mapping current services against needs will help to identify gaps and priorities and should inform any decisions for reconfiguring services. Reviewing housing advice provision and capacity within homelessness services will be important. In areas with high levels of surplus housing and low demand, providing accommodation for homeless people may be easier, although it may not be in desirable areas. In the short term, more effective use of council stock for TA may help to reduce B&B costs. In the long term, policies governing land use, planning for housing developments and initiatives to regenerate neighbourhoods will all be important to encourage the development of sustainable communities.

In areas with a shortage of affordable housing, particularly where council stock has been sold off, partnerships with housing associations and the private sector will be critical. In councils that have transferred their housing stock, overall levels of investment in social housing may increase, but access to housing for homeless people may be affected, especially if large-scale works are needed. In extreme cases, housing associations may block ‘undesirable’ individuals or families from permanent housing. Local authorities will need to work closely with housing providers to ensure that they can fulfil their duties effectively.
Engaging with users is fundamental to meeting their needs. Homeless people can be seen as a difficult group to consult, due to their high mobility and sometimes complex needs. However, councils could make better use of the information that they collect during advice and assessment to identify problems, inform users about their housing options and make links with other services. Councils could also take simple steps to improve relations with users (for example, by providing them with a copy of their assessment form and service standards) and to improve correspondence, especially on decisions, to make them aware of their rights. Making use of accommodation settings to hold meetings with users is also relatively straightforward. Inspectors noted, for example, that Westminster has a user forum and holds meetings with residents of B&Bs.

The level of political priority accorded to homelessness may be affected by the scale of the issue and the resources spent on services. A broad strategic approach can be undermined where councillors seek inappropriate interventions on individual cases. Raising the local political priority for homelessness as a whole is important if changes are to be made, particularly if all housing stock has been transferred and the housing service and its staff have been substantially reduced. Ensuring that an elected member has an executive portfolio for homelessness could raise the profile of services. Members also have an important role to play in ensuring that policymaking is not contradictory and that there are links between policies on homelessness and other services [Exhibit 16].

Managing resources and performance

Delivering better services will require efficient management of both resources and performance. Reducing TA costs, especially for B&B accommodation, may be a priority to maximise resources. Members should also monitor the overall costs and outcomes of other aspects of services, including housing advice and support, and ensure that priority areas are properly resourced. Capacity issues may be a concern and councils must ensure that staffing levels enable them to meet their duties at all times. Taking account of annual leave and sickness cover, some services may have insufficient staff to deliver their everyday duties, particularly if they rely on only one or two officers. Out-of-hours access arrangements are also important; while these often exist, the staff servicing them are not always sufficiently trained to respond effectively. Where services are not provided by homelessness officers – for instance, where a duty social worker provides cover – training may be needed to ensure that staff can offer appropriate advice. Training could also be developed for receptionists, who play a vital role in helping people to access services.
The complexities of the law applying to homelessness and rights of tenure mean that staff need to have considerable expertise. Ensuring that both advice staff and homelessness caseworkers have access to information that enables them to update their knowledge as case law changes is important if users are to receive a good service and if councils are to comply with the law. Some councils have encouraged staff to develop specific responsibilities to improve expertise (Case study 17). Training will be even more critical where turnover is high, or there are few staff, giving less opportunity to pool expertise. Staff burnout can occur due to the pressures involved in frontline service delivery, the difficulties of meeting client needs and cynicism about users exploiting the system. Training should address these issues, as well as the more fundamental legal process.
Conducting a review offers an opportunity for councils to systematically examine their performance and identify areas for improvement. A thorough review process, which engages staff, can help to ensure that action plans are well targeted (Case study 18). Involving users and critical friends can help councils to focus on what matters most.

Case study 18
Using best value reviews to change services

In its best value review of frontline housing services and sustainable estates, Derby City Council made use of an extensive network to enable service users, tenants and leaseholders, frontline staff, relevant internal and external partners, individuals and organisations to participate. Process Improvement Teams (PITs), already charged with monitoring performance and identifying areas for improvement, subjected each area to review. Additional PITs were established where gaps were identified. The Council secured the services of a critical friend, a senior officer from a housing association.

Each stage of the best value review process was used to identify the key issues impacting on tenants, leaseholders and service delivery. These key issues were translated into action points where weaknesses, or gaps, in the current services were identified and where further work was required to achieve improvement. Each identified improvement was linked to a service objective that in turn was evaluated in the context of its impact on the sustainability of estates. The monitoring arrangements for actions were explicit and each action was evaluated for its impact on the public.

Source: Audit Commission

Interagency working

Interagency working at both an operational and strategic level can help to meet users’ needs holistically (Case study 19). The statutory sector has clear duties to provide certain services but statutory and voluntary providers may take on different roles in different areas to complete the jigsaw. In trying to improve services, councils should ensure that homelessness services, HB services, education and social services, housing advice agencies, housing providers, health bodies and criminal justice partners are all engaged in developing their homelessness strategy and that they play a role in service development.

Case study 19
Promoting interagency working

To aid partnership working and mutual understanding between local organisations, Leicester City Council has set up ‘job swapping’ at all levels of organisations within its homelessness partnership. This has led to a better understanding of each provider’s priorities and constraints. The partnership has also developed a framework of meetings to deliver a joined up approach to both strategic and operational issues. These include:
● a group that looks at strategic and city-wide issues;
● a commissioning group that considers service procurement; and
● a ‘managers and frontline’ group, which meets on a regular basis to discuss more complex cases that require multi-agency input.

Joint protocols between partners have also been developed including:

● a protocol for care leavers with social services, which aims to ensure that care leaves are accepted as statutorily homeless and have a support package assessment. There is also an agreement between housing and social services that no family is evicted for antisocial behaviour or rent arrears without an opportunity for positive intervention by social services; and

● a protocol with the probation service and the police for re-housing high-risk offenders, which ensures that serious offenders are housed sensitively and appropriately, providing that the applicant satisfies the local connection rule. The Council also part-funds two resettlement workers based within the probation service.

Source: Audit Commission

Members can play a central role in making the links with the council’s broader agenda, for example, in Local Strategic Partnerships, community strategies and housing strategies, to ensure that homeless people are considered in planning processes and schemes to deliver affordable housing. Partnership forums offer good opportunities to address their needs with partners; for example, Drug Action Teams can address the needs of homeless people with substance misuse problems and Community Legal Service Partnerships can be used to raise the profile and performance of housing advice.

Conclusion

The current agenda sets great challenges for homelessness services. Inspectors have found a range of activity and performance in addressing the needs of homeless people. Future inspections of homelessness services, arrangements for Supporting People and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of districts, which is examining corporate work on balancing housing markets, will also serve as a reference point for those seeking to improve services. The Commission’s recommendations overleaf may assist councils in prioritising this demanding agenda.
Recommendations

Preventing homelessness

1. Councils should maximise prevention by:
   - improving their information recording systems so that they can identify all cases where advice is given, ensure that all homelessness applicants receive decisions and that repeat applications are monitored;
   - examining local causes of homelessness and developing early intervention initiatives for those at risk; and
   - ensuring that advice and support services play a full role in prevention and that all service providers develop accessible services, in particular, doing more to help non-priority groups, especially single people.

2. Councils should develop housing advice services and their role in prevention by:
   - carrying out a gap analysis of local provision, ideally through Community Legal Service Partnerships, and targeting resources at areas of need;
   - ensuring that advice services – distinct and separate from the assessment process – are available to assist people with broader housing options and choices, and, ideally, enabling people to access independent advice; and
   - assessing the costs, benefits and quality of services and driving up standards by encouraging providers to obtain the appropriate Legal Services Commission quality mark.

3. Councils should deliver services that respond to people’s needs holistically by:
   - ensuring that staff are clear about the respective roles of local agencies and that mechanisms are in place for appropriate information provision, signposting and referral between services, with the client’s consent; and
   - offering a one-stop or common assessment process, where possible, to deal with support as well as housing needs.

Providing a safety net

4. Councils should improve homelessness assessment and decision making by:
   - providing better supervision and regularly reviewing case files with staff to examine the speed, consistency and thoroughness of decisions, both to ensure overall legal compliance and to identify areas where staff need training; and
   - providing training, guidance and information for staff (including out-of-hours staff and receptionists) to enable them to deliver customer-focused services and keep up to date on changing legislation and local priorities.
5. Councils should drive up standards and drive down costs for temporary accommodation by:
- agreeing a set of standards to be used for TA provision (in light of the possible introduction of national standards for B&Bs) and ensuring that service providers reach these standards where the council is paying for placements; and
- reviewing TA costs and developing alternatives to B&B, particularly for families, both to ensure compliance with Government targets and to obtain value for money.

Minimising homelessness

6. Councils should work on longer-term measures to minimise homelessness by:
- ensuring that their homelessness strategies serve as a vehicle for delivering local needs, involving all local stakeholders;
- making the most of new Government funding streams for prevention work, developing alternatives to B&B and reducing rough sleeping; and
- encouraging housing and planning services to work together to deliver more desirable and affordable local housing.

7. Councils should improve interagency working to tackle homelessness considering all local priorities identified in their strategies, but, in particular, work with:
- housing providers (including housing associations and private sector landlords) to deliver affordable housing and ensure that homeless people can access provision;
- HB services to reduce delays in processing or renewing payments, and prevent unnecessary evictions for rent arrears related to HB problems;
- social services and other partners to improve arrangements for responding to young people, including care leavers, people with mental health needs and those needing drug or alcohol treatment and to make best use of the new Supporting People funding for homeless people;
- education services to minimise disruption to education for children and young people affected by homelessness and to link them in to new school places or courses if they have to move;
- health providers to ensure links to primary healthcare for people in TA and to address mental health or substance misuse problems among homeless people; and
- criminal justice services to ensure that timely assistance is offered to prison leavers to prevent homelessness.
Bibliography

For further information, readers may find it useful to look at the following reports:


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Housing after Transfer: The Local Authority Role
This report examines the impact of stock transfer on local authority housing services. It considers the impact that the loss of the housing management function can have on local authorities, both on their role as community leaders and on the services that they are responsible for, such as homelessness and housing strategy. It also explores the variety of different approaches to the organisation of local housing services, in governance issues and in the quality of services for local people.


Housing Benefit: The National Perspective
This report describes practical steps that many councils could take to improve housing benefit services locally. Based on fieldwork within councils, inspection reports and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, this report examines how all bodies responsible for – or involved in – housing benefit can contribute to a better service to claimants, both in the short and longer term.


Housing Benefit Administration: Learning from Inspection
Although much has been written about the shortcomings of housing benefit services, less has been published about how authorities can achieve change. Drawing on Commission and BFI inspections, and also initiatives at authorities yet to be inspected, this paper from the Audit Commission shows how some authorities have achieved change in their housing benefit services – improving the accuracy and speed of processing and building good customer service.


Housing Repairs and Maintenance: Learning from Inspection
More than 50 best value inspections have looked at repairs and maintenance. The Commission has distilled the lessons emerging from these – together with audit work, wider discussions with relevant stakeholders and national data – into two products aimed at helping councils to improve the services that they provide so that they match the levels of the best performers. These are a report looking at the challenges facing housing repairs and maintenance teams as they strive to improve their service delivery, and a handbook containing more detailed discussion of the key issues, good practice case studies and checklists for managers and providers of housing repairs and maintenance services.


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