Homelessness
Responding to the new agenda
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 – the ‘statutory homeless’, and a wider group of people in insecure housing or overcrowded households – the ‘hidden homeless’. The Government recently claimed success in reducing the number of people sleeping rough each night. The number of rough sleepers identified in counts has fallen from several thousand to a little over 500, but in 2001/02, over a quarter of million households in England and Wales sought help and received decisions from councils under the homelessness legislation.

Exhibit 1
Defining homelessness

Rough sleepers are only the tip of the iceberg.

What challenges do councils face?

2 Councils work within a complex statutory framework in deciding what help to provide to homeless people, but they face increasing pressures and costs in fulfilling their duties. They have a duty to secure permanent housing only for those found ‘unintentionally homeless and in priority need’; in 2001/02, less than one-half of decisions resulted in this duty. The Homelessness Act 2002 adds new responsibilities and is likely to increase the demand for services as councils are now expected to assist a broader range of priority need groups (Box A).

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Source: Audit Commission

Box A

Councils’ duties

The council must decide if applicants are eligible for assistance, if they are indeed homeless or threatened with homelessness, whether this is unintentional and whether they are in priority need. The 2002 Act sets out additional requirements for councils:

- a duty to carry out reviews of homelessness services and to develop strategies to prevent homelessness and support homeless people, with the first strategy due in July 2003;
- a duty to provide accommodation until a settled home is found for homeless households that are in priority need (repealing the existing two-year time limit);
- a power to secure housing for households that are not in priority need;
- a strengthened entitlement for single homeless people to receive advice and assistance from a local authority; and
- following a new Priority Needs Order, a duty to house homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and care leavers aged 18 to 20, and those who are vulnerable due to facing racist or domestic violence, leaving institutionalised care, prison or the armed forces.

The Government has also set targets for councils to reduce the use of bed and breakfast (B&B) for housing homeless people temporarily; with the aim that no families are housed in B&B by the end of March 2004. At the end of September 2002, over 12,000 of the 81,000 homeless households in temporary accommodation (TA) were living in B&B; meeting the target will therefore be a challenge for many councils. From April 2003, under the new Supporting People Programme, housing and social services departments will also be required to work in partnership to address the support needs of vulnerable people – homeless people should be a priority.

How are councils performing?

Overall, 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 have so far been judged to be good, and only one has been deemed excellent, although almost three-quarters are considered to have promising or excellent prospects for future improvement. There are three key areas that members need to consider:

- increasing the emphasis on prevention, by offering more advice and support to enable people to stay in their homes and to assist those for whom they have no housing duty;
- providing a better safety net through improving the quality and cost effectiveness of services offered 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.
What role can members play?

Members can play an important role in addressing these issues by ensuring that policies on homelessness do not conflict with other policies (Box B) and by making the links; for example, working with Community Legal Service Partnerships to develop housing advice services and with Drug Action Teams to tackle substance misuse problems. The Commission’s recommendations may help members to prioritise (Box C provides a shortlist; more detail is set out in the Commission’s main report: Homelessness: Responding to the New Agenda).

Box B
Issues for members

Members should consider homelessness alongside other policy areas, for example:

- *the housing management/ landlord function* – members should think through the consequences for homeless people of allocations policies, the operation of the housing register and the enforcement of tenancy conditions, such as rent arrears, or anti-social behaviour;

- *housing benefit (HB) arrangements* – delays in the processing and payment of HB will impact on people’s ability to pay rent and could lead to rent arrears and the threat of eviction;

- *grant aid to the voluntary sector* – the voluntary sector often plays a key part in delivering services, such as housing advice and support; arrangements for funding and monitoring voluntary bodies can facilitate this and ensure that they play a full role in assisting people facing homelessness; and

- *stock transfer* – in stock transfer areas, authorities need to ensure that arrangements with housing associations enable them to fulfil their duties effectively, particularly where services are contracted out. The council may be unaware of problems if it does not set out clear service requirements and monitoring arrangements in a contract or service level agreement.

Box C
Headline recommendations for councils

1. Maximise the prevention of homelessness.
2. Develop housing advice services and their role in prevention, considering the need for an independent advice service.
3. Deliver services that respond to people’s needs holistically, considering both housing and wider support needs.
4. Improve homelessness assessment and decision making.
5. Drive up standards and drive down costs for temporary accommodation.
6. Work on longer-term measures to minimise homelessness and develop affordable housing.
7. Improve interagency working to tackle homelessness in light of all the local priorities identified in their strategies.