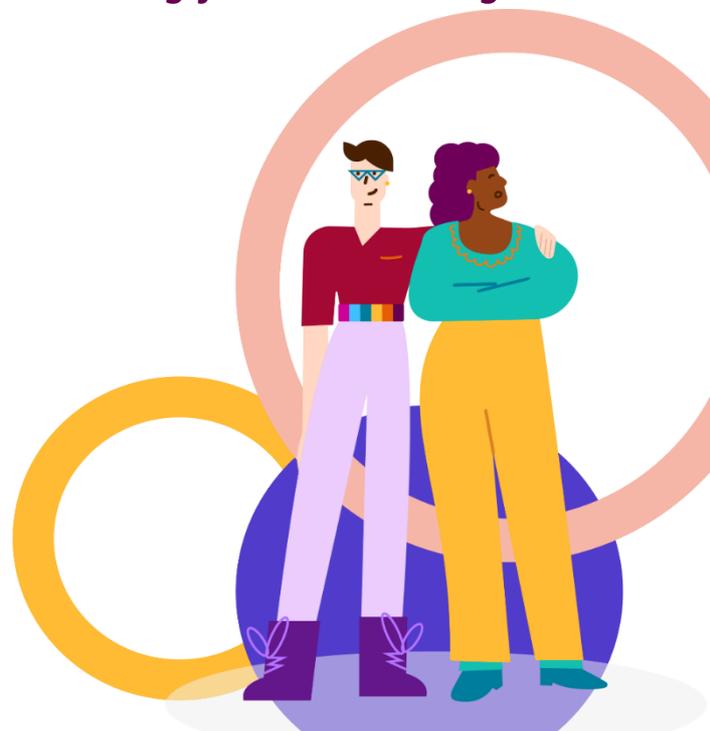


# Tips from the Frontline

## Advocating for Women

Our practice forums bring together those who work with women experiencing homelessness across the country. In the forums practitioners connect, share best practice, and navigate problems together. This series is informed by our most recent presentations and discussions, and provides practical guidance and recommendations for addressing these shared experiences.

***This practice brief is designed to support frontline practitioners build confidence in advocating for the housing needs of women.***



### Why is it relevant?

Women are often entitled to assistance from the local authority when they become homeless, and make up 60% of those who are homeless and in temporary accommodation<sup>1</sup>. Frontline practitioners therefore often work with women to ensure they get the support they are entitled to under the Homeless Reduction Act 2017<sup>2</sup>. This will often involve referring women to legal advice services to ensure they know their rights and have the support to enforce them<sup>3</sup>. It may also involve supporting the person to make a homeless application, and providing advocacy where appropriate.

The cost of temporary accommodation is rising and has created significant financial pressures on local authorities<sup>4</sup>. In this context local authorities may find it challenging to meet their legal obligations towards people at risk of and experiencing homelessness. The introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021 expanded entitlements for women, by inserting a new section into the Housing Act which states that all women fleeing domestic abuse have priority need for assistance<sup>5</sup>. However, a 2022 report by the Public Interest Law Centre found that in London, there was systemic 'gatekeeping' across local councils<sup>1</sup>; a practice that prevents people from accessing the support they might be entitled to. Frontline practitioners who attended our communities of practice reported that in their experience, 'gatekeeping' is common.

Frontline practitioners also reported that it was difficult to secure the right legal help for the women they support. The impact of cuts to legal aid having affected women's ability to access justice<sup>6</sup>. Securing support from a legal adviser should always be the first step to helping someone access legal rights, however when they have been unable to secure legal advice and support, frontline practitioners can be in a position of advocating for the women they support.

This practice brief summarises a presentation that was provided in 2023 by Laura Holland, a senior solicitor at North Yorkshire Citizens Advice and Law Centre and knowledge shared by frontline practitioners on how to advocate successfully on behalf of women.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnnpn0s/3fo63KyM9D5qJedQvxe7A6/df905542ec226fd909388759727059d0/Fobed\\_off\\_women-centred\\_peer\\_research\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnnpn0s/3fo63KyM9D5qJedQvxe7A6/df905542ec226fd909388759727059d0/Fobed_off_women-centred_peer_research_report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

<sup>3</sup> [Find a Solicitor - The Law Society](https://www.lawsociety.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [Councils in England facing bankruptcy as lack of housing pushes up costs | Housing | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/housing/2023/01/11/councils-in-england-facing-bankruptcy-as-lack-of-housing-pushes-up-costs)

<sup>5</sup> s.189(1)(e) Housing Act 1996 as inserted by s. 78 Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

<sup>6</sup> [Gender Gaps in Access to Civil Legal Justice: New Report Reveals Alarming Disadvantages Faced by Women - Womens Budget Group \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.womensbudgetgroup.org.uk)

### Advocacy in Practice

Advocacy in this context means supporting a person to express their needs and wishes and have knowledge and access to their rights and entitlements. When advocating on behalf of the person you are working with to the local authority, it is likely you will follow three key stages. The first stage is **preparation** for engaging with the local authority. The second stage is **direct engagement** with the person or people at the local authority responsible for the case, maybe in a call or meeting. The third stage is the **follow-up** after the direct engagement.

This section sets out important tips for what you need to do at each stage to advocate effectively on behalf of the person you're working with.

#### Preparation

- Identify the person's main goals - what are they hoping you can help them achieve? This could include recognition of their medical needs alongside help to secure housing.
- Actively listen - if you listen and try to understand the person's situation, you may help them uncover more evidence of what's going on and why they need the outcome they are seeking.
- Do your research - both legislation and the person's circumstances. Check out the further resources section to find a list of resources that will help you with your research.
- Find evidence to support your argument- if someone can't evidence their

#### Do your research:

- Use the [Homeless Code of Guidance](#) for local authorities. It is easy to read and applies to all local authorities.
- Speak to NHAS (the [National Homelessness Advice Service](#)) for advice when you are stuck on a case and don't know how to move it forward. NHAS provide free housing advice to professionals. You can find detail of how to access the service in the further resources section.
- Familiarise yourself with the [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)

situation it's very hard to help, so get creative about how things could be evidenced. It is important to connect the evidence to the housing circumstances, for example, if someone's health is getting worse, ask a GP to explain in a letter why the person's housing situation is causing a deterioration in their health.

- Find a solicitor - if you have evidence that the local authority has already failed to comply with their legal duties. It can be hard to find a solicitor to take on a case, but if you offer to work closely with them, for example helping the person

## Homeless Link

you are working with prepare the relevant documents to access legal aid, this can help.

- Manage expectations - sometimes things feel unjust or can't be fixed quickly, but simply being there and doing something is helping more than you know.

### **Legal Advice:**

National Homelessness Advice Service (for local authorities, public authorities and voluntary agencies) Expert advice for professionals

<https://www.nhas.org.uk/professionals/advice-service>

Find a Solicitor- The Law Society <https://solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk>

Shelter helpline [Get help from Shelter - Shelter England](#)

## Direct engagement

- Keep calm and note down the main points before calling. This might include the circumstances that the person has given you permission to share i.e. medical diagnoses.
- Be polite and encourage collaboration with the person you are speaking to at the local authority.

If it the first time you are speaking to the local authority:

- Establish the history of the case and any contact and actions which have previously taken place.
- Explain the risks to the person based on their current circumstances.
- Encourage the local authority to work with you to find solutions.
- Speak clearly and don't be afraid either ask the local authority to simplify or summarise something or take the time to do so yourself.
- Find the answers - if the local authority refers to something you are not aware of, ask for time to look something up if you need it. You can also buy yourself time to think by asking the local authority to explain their reasoning, or details to think about whether what they're offering meets the person's needs. Ask for the relevant email address so that you can supply further information by email.
- Don't make it personal - refer to the failings of the organisation rather than the individual you are speaking to. Use factual statements like 'this hasn't been provided' rather than personal statements like 'you haven't done this'.

**Take time to reflect on positive things that you have done  
when you have gone above and beyond to help!**

### Follow-up

- In an email, summarise the key points and agreed next steps- having a record of discussions and actions can be helpful when you need to escalate a case, hold to account, or make a complaint.

### If advocacy is not successful

- Speak to the local authority's legal team - if you're still struggling and you know the actions of the local authority do not comply with their legal duties (e.g., clear gatekeeping). Provide them the evidence that the local authority has not complied with their legislative duties.
- Find a solicitor- if the local authority has not complied with their legal duties.
- Make a complaint - if the local authority has not treated person you are working with appropriately and in a way that is not in line with legislation/ guidance, you can support them to make a complaint.
- Contact the local MP. They maybe be able to support the case by contacting the local authority on the persons behalf.

### Make a complaint:

- Find the complaint procedure on the local authority's website.
- Make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Contact the LGO for advice on how to follow the complaints procedure and the steps required to escalate a complaint to the Ombudsman.
- Raise a complaint to the local MP. Find out who your MP is using this website <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/> . You can contact them by email, phone or by visiting them in person at their surgery.

### Further Resources

- Shelter Professionals (previously Shelter Legal):  
[https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources](https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources)
- [Homeless Code of Guidance](#)
- NHAS (for local authorities, public authorities and voluntary agencies):  
<https://www.nhas.org.uk/professionals/nhas-free-training>
- NRPF Network: <https://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/>
- Civil Legal Advice: <https://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice>
- House of Commons Domestic Abuse Library:  
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/support-for-victims-of-domestic-abuse/>
- Find your MP: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>

## What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## Homeless Link

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@HomelessLink

Let's End Homelessness  
Together

