Case Management in the Homelessness Sector

Area-wide data management systems

Let’s end homelessness together

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Contents

Full report
www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/case-management-in-homelessness-sector

Produced by
The Innovation and Good Practice Team

With thanks to
All the organisations who took part and those providing case studies: Mainstay, CHAIN and GM Think.

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Introduction

What do we mean by case management?

Case management is a catch-all term that describes how you support the people who use your services.

It includes the processes that you use (referral forms, assessments, support plans etc), the way that you record information (your database) and your overall approach. Some organisations have a specific approach such as strengths-based working or broker case management. Some have devised their own approaches that may have been named and described in-house. Others don't have a specific approach or haven't yet put it down on paper.

However we describe it, case management is central to the work that we do. Every homelessness organisation aims to deliver high quality support with the aim of moving people forward in their lives. How we deliver this may differ but the intention is the same.

What did Homeless Link do?

This report presents the results of our work from April to September 2018 looking into case management across the homelessness sector. This was neither an evaluation of particular methods nor a formal research project, instead our aim was to gain a better understanding of the case management environment across the sector and to present the status quo.

We held conversations with more than 40 people from around 35 different organisations and services. We discussed a whole range of topics from how they approach support, to how they design their procedures, to how they store their data. A number of key themes emerged that we have written about in this report.

What is this report about?

During our conversations with providers, we heard about a number of places that had implemented an area-wide system, and several more that were considering it. We collated what we learned into this document, which includes case studies from three systems.

For the full report on Case Management in the Homelessness Sector, see: www.homeless.org.uk/our-work/case-management-in-homelessness-sector

Area-wide data management systems

The content in this section is based particularly on information from our three case studies, CHAIN (London), Mainstay (Merseyside) and GM Think (Greater Manchester).

A number of areas have developed area-wide systems for collecting certain types of information on people experiencing homelessness locally. Typically, a large number of services are able to input into these systems and view information. The systems are usually commissioned by one or more local authorities and delivered by a team within a local homelessness service.

The systems can make hugely positive contributions to tackling homelessness but they also come with challenges, some of which can be overcome with constant iteration but others are more endemic. The benefits and challenges vary greatly depending on the aim of the system and how successfully it is used. Some shared systems are designed to hold basic information only and others are designed to include full assessment information. Each model has different potential advantages and challenges.

Potential benefits of an area-wide recording system

- **Creating a comprehensive set of data on homelessness in your area** – as increasing numbers of services contribute information, a large dataset of information on people experiencing homelessness should develop. This level of data and information (if it is accurate and genuinely reflects the local situation) can be hugely useful for understanding needs and how to end homelessness in the area.

- **Reporting** – once you have a comprehensive dataset, it is possible to produce useful reports about homelessness in the area and support needs and to follow an individual's journey. This can flag up people who are circling around the system or where a particular service may be struggling. Being able to view homelessness from this broader perspective is enormously helpful for services and commissioners alike.

- **Identifying gaps and barriers** – having accurate data on people experiencing homelessness locally can help to identify unmet needs. Having clearer information on levels of substance misuse or mental health for example, demonstrates the level of need for these services. If it is also identified that particular groups are not accessing services, this can also support future commissioning. At the same time, you may also notice that certain groups are underestimated in your data which can suggest that those people are not accessing the services signed up to the shared system.

- **Mapping needs** – some systems are able to map where rough sleepers are located. This enables the area to create accurate 'hotspot' maps which can help to guide the work of outreach teams and commissioners.

- **Sharing information and avoiding duplication** – one of the most obvious benefits to an area-wide up data system is that services throughout the area can view up to date information on rough sleepers, their current support networks and their needs. This can avoid duplicate referrals and support work and ensure that there is continuity in the support that is offered to each individual

- **Avoiding repetition** – a related advantage is that the individual does not have to continually repeat their history to different workers. Information that has been shared in an assessment is already held on the system. It is clear from the input of people with experience of homelessness, that most people prefer not to repeat the same information to different workers. A central source of information can prevent this. However, this depends greatly on the amount of information the system holds (in some cases systems intentionally only hold minimal data) and the accuracy of that information. It also depends on the number of services that have access to it. See case study on Mainstay for more information.

- **Consistency** – using shared systems can lead to a greater consistency in the types of questions that services ask across an area. The training that is received to gain access to the shared system can also ensure that services approach assessment in a more similar way. However, this will depend on the nature of the system – those that are designed to hold basic information only will have less impact on consistency as each service is likely to have their own assessment process separate to that related to the shared system.

- **Setting standards**– shared data systems can improve general record-keeping within services. In areas where services are included who previously kept only minimal 'tick sheet' type outcome data, using a shared system can lead to better monitoring overall. Ultimately having good information about the people using the service can ensure that it more effectively meets relevant needs.

- **Shaping practice** – shared data systems can improve practices such as joint working and referrals. Having information to hand about which services may be involved with the same individuals encourages contact and relationships between those services. It also encourages services to learn about one another and can lead to more appropriate referrals as a result.

Things to consider

- **Long assessments** – a potential risk of shared systems is that they can end up including a large number of questions in order to satisfy the needs of all the services involved. This is less of a risk in systems that hold basic information only and that sit alongside the support systems used within individual projects. Systems that take the place of referral forms for a variety of services are more prone to this. This can be minimised with different pathways being built into the system leading to different sets of questions depending on the referral. As a sector overall we are moving towards asking fewer questions and recognising that we should only ask what is essential to operate the service effectively. Care needs to be taken to ensure that shared systems avoid pulling in the opposite direction.

- **GDPR and data processing** – the more information a system holds, the more challenging this can be. This is particularly an issue if systems are set up to include support plans, written notes and attachments such as letters from GPs. Most systems can restrict access to an individual's profile to specific services but if that person is referred elsewhere and a new service gains access to their records, there is a potential risk. If the person in question gave their details to one service or groups of service, they may not have consented to sharing it more widely. While some information sharing by homelessness services may fall under a lawful basis for processing other than consent, it is not good practice to share data without the person's knowledge. In addition, consideration should be given to different types of data and special category data such as that contained in medical or other paperwork that may be attached within the system.[1,2]

- **Data integrity** – a system that has several hundred users will inevitably have varied levels of consistency in terms of accurate data entry. It takes considerable effort to 'clean' the data by removing inaccuracies such as duplicate records. If this process doesn't take place the system becomes cluttered and full of inaccuracies. There is also an issue with missing or incomplete data. This is particularly significant if this data is key to understanding the particular case. As it takes time to build relationships with people who have complex needs, there may be missing information while a trusting working relationship is developed. However, it is important that this is continually monitored to avoid gaps becoming common and undermining the data set. See the case study on CHAIN for more information.

- **Inclusion / exclusion of services** – no system includes every service or drop-in within the locality. Inclusion is often limited to services commissioned by the local authority (where the authority is paying for the system) or to those that are better established. It is important to include only services that will comply with privacy policies and data protection. It is also important that services taking part have the time, equipment and training to enter complete and accurate data. Conversely, excluding services can be problematic as it can 'lock' particular organisations out of the broader referral and networking system. It can make it materially more difficult for smaller services to operate without duplication. In addition, it can be the case that well-established services are excluded from the system as they are differently commissioned or simply because the process for adding a new service is cumbersome. It is essential to consider the impact of including or excluding services when designing the system and to be continually reviewing this to ensure that people experiencing homelessness get the best possible service.

- **Facilitating or blocking access to the homelessness pathway** – a well-designed system can make it easier to access the homelessness pathway. Once information is held on the system, an individual can be more easily referred to services. However, if not working efficiently, a shared system can block access. This can happen if there are significant providers excluded from inputting data who work with client groups that are not accessing services elsewhere. It can also happen if there are barriers or thresholds to being added to the system that eligible people do not always meet (such as being seen by specific outreach teams or at certain times). If registration on the system is a condition for accessing the local homelessness pathway, a review should be undertaken to check for situations in which people may be unintentionally blocked from services. See case study on Mainstay for more information.

- **Designing your system** – it is hard to avoid being deficit-based in a shared system – as there is necessarily information that you want to include, you are guiding workers towards asking those questions. These topics usually include any risks, mental health needs or substance use. However some areas have made significant efforts to consult people with lived experience when designing the questionnaire and to be as person-centred and strengths-based as possible. See the case study on GM Think for more information.

[1] https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/
[2] www.homeless.org.uk/introduction-to-gdpr

- **Giving people access to their data** – it is worth considering whether people will be able to view their own records on the system. This can be complicated as all systems are password protected and it can be sensitive viewing notes made by a range of workers from different services. However, it should be considered good practice to make this option available for those who want it. See case study on GM Think for more information.

- **Buy-in from commissioners** – it is essential to have supportive commissioners who are prepared to fund the necessary staff to maintain the system successfully, and also use their influence to ensure that information is consistency entered by services. They also need to be responsive in enabling change to happen as and when needed without unnecessary delays. All examples identified by this report are commissioned by a local authority or group of authorities. If a system were commissioned externally or funded through grant funding, the operator would need to work hard to ensure that services were fully engaged with the process.

- **Training** – all systems provide a form of training for new users. This training usually includes the practicalities of how to use the system alongside the basic principles and ideas behind it. In particular support workers should understand why certain data is essential and when making further notes is appropriate. Training may need to be updated and this is a consideration when designing a city wide system.

Mainstay – operated by YMCA Liverpool

Mainstay is a de-centralised gateway system across the Merseyside City region. All commissioned short term accommodation and floating support is accessed through the system. There is one common assessment that is completed and a prioritisation process is used to determine access to appropriate services. Services use Mainstay to complete assessments and also to record placements, support and outcomes. As such the system provides comprehensive data on needs, performance and demand to both services and local authorities.

Mainstay is currently in operation across six Local Authorities in the region. There are currently around 1150 users within 156 different services that are delivered by 55 providers. The system currently has information on 27000 clients of whom 9,000 are currently open. Approximately 300 new clients are added each month.

What is most unique about Mainstay is that it has created an unprecedented ability to access the homelessness pathway from any (signed up) service and at any time. Each day a number of services make themselves available for assessments. This includes a number of 24-hour services. As such someone finding themselves homeless should be able to have an assessment undertaken at any time of day or night. As there are multiple locations available, they can also go to the available service nearest to where they are or choose one that they feel most comfortable attending. In reality, assessments tend to fall to a smaller group of the better known services. Nonetheless, the ease of access to the homelessness pathway is unique.

Mainstay operates a matching system whereby services which are most suitable for the client will be allocated more points and therefore appear higher in the list of matches. Certain hostels are specifically for those with complex needs and certain groups such as rough sleepers may get priority. This has created a systematic method for allocating housing. It has also flagged up where there may be gaps in provision, for example for those with lower support needs or who may not be currently sleeping rough.

The system is also used to record comprehensive information on each client including information on support needs risks, referrals, support plans and case notes. To protect privacy, case notes are only visible to services working with the individual and the system will flag up a user attempting to view the notes for a client that is not working with them. Refuges have an additional option to protect the identities of those using their services. A huge range of reports can be provided giving data on all types of needs, referrals and outcomes.

There can be challenges with operating a large system. As with all the area-wide systems, it is necessary to ensure there is a consistently high quality of assessments and that data is entered accurately and comprehensively. It is difficult to avoid long assessments when the system functions as the assessment form for so many different services although Mainstay has been set up to ensure that certain questions only appear if referring to specific services. The Mainstay team work continually to improve the service.

Some comments on Mainstay from those who have experience of it:

“I felt a little daunted as it was a big change. I would recommend that all Local Authorities adopt this method as it is a more streamlined method of meeting the needs of homeless people. It allows commissioners to collate more accurate and up to date quantitative data.” Area Manager for large provider.

“Previously I would have to complete many application forms and visit each service for a separate interview.”

CHAIN – operated by St Mungo’s

CHAIN is perhaps the oldest area-wide system in the UK, established in 2000. It is a system for recording information on rough sleepers and the wider street population in London, and is described as a key actions and outcomes system. It is explicitly not intended to act as a case management system or hold support plans.

CHAIN has approximately 800 users from around 70 different organisations. It is primarily used by commissioned outreach teams who input information on rough sleepers. This includes basic information including contact details and location and support needs. It is also used heavily by No Second Night Out teams who are working with those new to rough sleeping to find solutions to their homelessness.

A range of other services working with rough sleepers in London have ‘view only’ access. This enables them to look up information if a rough sleeper presents to their service but does not allow them to input information. This helps to protect data integrity whilst enabling them to contact appropriate support workers and avoid duplication.

CHAIN holds a comprehensive up to date information on rough sleepers within the London area. It includes details of street contacts and support workers involved, as well as referrals and stays in accommodation. As such it is an invaluable source of information about the changing needs of rough sleeping in the city.

In 2015 a mapping facility was added. This enables outreach teams to put a pin in the map where someone is sleeping (and if they are using the mobile version, it can automatically find their location). This allows the system to produce accurate maps of rough sleeping across the London area which is invaluable both for outreach teams and commissioners planning service provision.

CHAIN is also fully compatible with StreetLink, meaning that referrals received by StreetLink are automatically transferred onto the system including mapping information. This helps outreach teams to prioritise referrals and locate them geographically.

CHAIN has also recently developed a mobile interface to allow outreach workers to input information more easily during their shifts.

The database faces similar challenges to other systems. To tackle issues with data integrity, the CHAIN team creates monthly reports for each service giving them a compliance score. This flags up the percentage of missing essential data that is present across their entries. They also send each service a list of names for whom different types of information is missing. This gives services the opportunity to complete missing information. Whilst the team understands that the nature of the client group means that complete data cannot always be obtained, it is important to continually strive to make data as accurate as possible.

GM Think – operated by Inspiring Change Manchester

GM Think (originally M Think) was created as part of the Fulfilling Lives project in Manchester. Its aim was to create a more joined up system and avoid people having to repeat their story to different disconnected services. GM Think aimed to help shape practice by improving information sharing, how services use data and by identifying gaps in service.

GM Think was developed around people and aims to have a person centred approach. A number of people were involved in its design including people with experience of homelessness. They talked about their experiences including missed opportunities and what they didn't want from a system. The system also aims to be values based with 'doing with, not to' at its heart.

As a result of this consultation, the system includes positive questions about an individual's ideas and ambitions and also uses inclusive language, asking questions of the individual rather than the support worker. It also includes safety plans rather than risk assessments. It does not include risk flags but rather uses a blue symbol to identify that a significant safety issue support need has been identified. The viewer can then click elsewhere on the system to see more information.

People are encouraged to have access to their own record. This would happen alongside a support worker and the individual would be able to view their front page plus any case notes recorded by that service. They can also see if case notes have been recorded by other services although not the detail. If they wish to view those they will be referred over to that service to have a look.
Training is a key part of GM Think and focuses on good practice, supporting users to understand how to share good information and why. Users need to gain an understanding of how their words may be viewed by another service in another context.

There are currently around 300 users of GM Think across 16 services. There are around 10,000 records on the system of which 3,000 are hidden (work undertaken by services working exclusively with sex workers remains hidden from other users). GM Think started as a system for Manchester and is currently being rolled out across the Greater Manchester area.

What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who become homeless or live with multiple and complex support needs. We work to improve services and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

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