

Setting up a new service

A guide for individuals and organisations developing a response to homelessness.

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Introduction

Homeless Link has a vision of a country free from homelessness. We believe that everyone should have a place to call home and the support they need to keep it. There must be an alternative to the streets for every person in every area. This will only be possible with a whole community response, which means the voluntary and community sector, local authorities and Government working together to support people out of homelessness and towards stable and fulfilling lives.

Who is the guide for?

This guide is aimed at people or small organisations who are considering setting up a service in response to homelessness in their area. It can also be used by local authorities working with community services as a good practice resource.

What is the aim of the guide?

This guide focuses mainly on the strategic and over-arching aspects of setting up a service. Practical advice is included but it should be noted that there are a number of variables such as type of service, group of people, and local area context, which preclude offering a comprehensive step-by-step guide or 'one size fits all' model. Each service is different and only adequate scoping, preparation and research will ensure that you choose the best model to meet the need in your area.

For individuals or organisations new to the homelessness sector, the most effective response may be to work with an existing service rather than create new provision. This guide should help you to reflect on where your strengths lie and how best to make a difference.

Policy Context

According to official statistics from 2021, rough sleeping has decreased by 49% since 2017.¹ On 5th September 2022, the Government published their long awaited and updated rough sleeping strategy: "Ending rough sleeping for good", reiterating their commitment to end rough sleeping during this parliament (2019-2024). The strategy is organised into four key themes: Prevention, Intervention, Recovery and a Transparent and Joined up System. A summary of the strategy can be found on [Homeless Link's website](#).

¹ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: Ending Rough Sleeping for Good – September 2022 - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1102408/20220903_Ending_rough_sleeping_for_good.pdf

The 2017 Homeless Reduction Act² places an emphasis on homelessness prevention, extending the period in which a household can be considered 'threatened with homelessness' from 28 to 56 days. The HRA also sets out what should happen to support those currently homeless by offering a 'relief' duty to 'take reasonable steps' to help individuals to find accommodation.

Practice

Homeless Link's National Practice Development team is responsible for sharing best practice guidance. It would be helpful for you to familiarise yourself with [relevant guidance](#) if you are planning to set up a service which addresses homelessness and rough sleeping.

The design of new services should be informed by an awareness of existing good practice and specialist interventions. For example, trauma-informed care is an approach which can be adopted by organisations in order to improve awareness of trauma and its impact, to ensure that the services provided offer effective support and do not re-traumatise those accessing or working in them. More information on trauma-informed care, can be found [here](#).

You should also understand how and why people become homeless, as well as pathways out of homelessness. Please use the resources/training on our website to find out more:

- [What is homelessness?](#)
- [What causes homelessness?](#)
- [Homeless Legislation](#)
- [Existing Homelessness Services](#)

Scoping

Is this the right approach?

Setting up a new homelessness service is appropriate when:

- Need has been established
- A clear method has been identified to meet that need
- Other local provision does not exist, or cannot, meet the need identified
- All alternatives have been explored
- You are the right organisation for the job

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/13/contents/enacted>

Assess your skills

Working in homelessness requires a range of skills and knowledge, from the ability to train and manage staff and volunteers, to an awareness and understanding of the range of support needs people experiencing homelessness may have, and how to respond to them. For individuals seeking to make a difference in homelessness, there are opportunities to develop skills and experience through [frontline volunteering](#) or becoming a trustee of an existing charity. Using the [Homeless England](#) database can help you find existing organisations in your area that may have volunteering opportunities, and many organisations also advertise roles on the [Homeless Link jobs board](#).

Assess your skills objectively: an effective homelessness service has to be based on practical skills and sector-specific expertise, as well as good intentions. The people you offer your services to will benefit in the long term if you develop skills and knowledge in existing services, rather than setting up a new service without this grounding.

It is also worth reflecting on your motivation to set up a service – are you meeting the needs of homeless individuals, or being driven more by your own need to take action? Taking time to reflect, research and plan will ensure that your good intentions are matched by effective action.

Establish need

The impetus to set up a new service is often a humane response that seeks to alleviate the hardship of others, for example, by providing free food, clothing, or shelter. This may be prompted by visible street activity such as rough sleeping or begging, or from concerns about the impact of changes in wider society such as rising inflation, the cost-of-living crisis, and welfare reform.

Before setting up a new service, it is crucial to establish that the activity meets a real, rather than perceived, need in your local area. For example, a service offering free food will always experience high demand, but this may reflect an underlying need for welfare benefits and budgeting advice, as much as a need for the food itself.

In some cases, it may appear that no service is meeting a need because there is a visible problem, when in fact, there are often a multitude of services working with individuals whose complex needs mean there are no quick solutions. There is a risk that a new service can undermine or duplicate the work these services are doing, for example, by sustaining rough sleepers on the streets through provision of basic support alone.

Speaking to existing services and finding ways to improve and extend their support can be an effective way of responding to need without undermining or duplicating existing

provision. To find out what is happening already in your local area, visit the [Homeless England website](#).

Rough sleeping is associated with deterioration in health, well-being, safety, social networks, and employment prospects. The average age of death for rough sleepers is just 45.9 years for men and 41.6 years for women.³ Those establishing new services should acknowledge that, while meeting basic needs is a humane response, services that fail to tackle rough sleeping and address a person's needs holistically could have a seriously detrimental effect on the individual's long-term outcomes.

To ensure you are going to make real difference and fill a gap in provision, you need to work in collaboration with other organisations. To establish need and make a case for your service, you should:

- Record the visual or reported issue/need (including numbers and related issues).
- Speak with your local authority and other local services to get their view – many areas have a multi-agency homelessness forum whose chair will know about the local context.
- Speak with local funders – if you keep in touch with them, and keep them updated on your plans, they will be more likely to fund you.
- Meet with local business and community agencies such as the police to gather intelligence.
- Carry out a survey.
- Gather statistics.
- Use the [Homeless Link annual reviews](#) - to look at the capacity, support and services available to single people who become homeless in England.
- Find out what homelessness services already exist (outreach, hostels, day centres, night shelters etc) by searching [here](#).
- Explore potential partnerships to meet need.

If you feel that contributing to an existing service would be more beneficial, Housing Justice provides some [useful guidance](#) on how you can play a part in pre-existing work.

3

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deaths-ofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2020registrations>

Understand your local area

The context of homelessness varies greatly across England, with different needs and issues depending on the region or geographical context (e.g. urban vs rural authorities). Examples of local issues that impact on homelessness include: proximity to a transport hub, rural areas with dispersed housing/services, a seasonal work economy, housing used for summer tourist lets, and the presence of a prison or hospital. The structure of the local authority, the type of accommodation and other support available, and issues with neighbouring authorities can also affect the way you are able to set up and deliver a service. If you want to support people experiencing homelessness, it is crucial you understand your local area and what it already offers.

A key issue for new services is the 'magnet effect' – the possibility that creating a service attracts people from outside the local area, with the increased demand on local services this implies. Many services can only work with people who have a local connection, as this is a condition for accessing housing services. The magnet effect should be addressed while identifying need and planning a new service, ideally in consultation with the local authority. A reconnection protocol based on working relationships with services in neighbouring areas is one solution. Local connection is an issue because of the risk that a person will end up sleeping rough until they establish a local connection, which places pressure on services and puts people at risk.

What are the models of provision? What works?

The most common services set up by people without prior experience of service delivery usually respond to a visible need by offering immediate relief of hardship, such as:

- Night shelters
- Soup runs and soup kitchens
- Open access drop-in day centres
- Non-commissioned street outreach teams, usually linked to one of the above services

While popular, these are not necessarily the most effective response to support people out of homelessness. Basic provision may have unintended consequences such as sustaining unsafe rough sleeping by undermining support from other services.

The homelessness sector on the whole has moved away from offering basic provision only, towards more sustainable and holistic responses. This includes improved partnership working with health services, and the delivery of services that offer a pathway into training, employment and independent move on accommodation. There are also new models of provision for people with complex needs that aim to break the cycle of repeat homelessness, such as an approach called [Housing First](#). Other models

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of provision are usually commissioned by local authorities from experienced providers (although not always), such as:

- Hostels
- Specialist projects e.g. abstinence-based or accommodation options for people with high and complex needs
- Street outreach
- Drug and alcohol services
- Rent deposit and private rented schemes

These types of service are not the only way to tackle homelessness in your area. The prevention of homelessness and rough sleeping involves a holistic approach that goes beyond the provision of food and shelter. If you have followed the guidance in this document and found that direct provision might not be the best response, consider taking an alternative approach that makes best use of your skills and resources, such as:

- Fundraising for existing services
- Training and supporting befrienders to work with people of existing services
- Providing in-reach to existing services, such as life skills training or specialist advice workers
- Developing and funding a sustainable volunteer training programme to support existing services, involving people with lived experience of homelessness.
- A social enterprise that employs people accessing homelessness services to enable them to gain independence, such as catering or a charity shop. For guidance on how to set up a social enterprise in a fair way, have a read of Homeless Link and Inclusive Insight's ['A Fair Deal: Insights for Best Practice Guide'](#).

Homeless Link's Consultancy Service can support organisations to review their service, embed best practice, meet people's needs and complement existing provision. For more information, visit our [website](#).

Preparation

What type of organisation?

Services can be delivered by different types of organisations. After establishing need, and assessing the best way to meet this need, you should research which type of organisation is appropriate and how you will meet related legal and governance requirements. If you have concerns about setting up an organisation, an alternative is to speak to existing providers about how you can support them within an existing

service. Working in partnership could reduce the time you have to spend on organisational administration, which start-up services often underestimate.

Types of organisations include **community groups** and **charities**. A community group can be small, for example, a group of individuals who access homelessness services and want to fundraise for a project of their own. The group will need at least five people and a written constitution. Community groups may be able to access specific types of funding not available to larger organisations. On the other hand, a charity is a legal entity and must comply with specific rules and regulations, including governance by capable trustees. You should explore the requirements of each type of organisation in order to decide which is best suited to your purposes. Information on setting up charities and alternative organisations can be found [here](#).

Social enterprises can be run by different types of organisations, for example a charity or a **Community Interest Company (CIC)**, which can offer different advantages in terms of financing, tax and regulation. The resources below include details on business structures for trading:

- [Setting up a Social Enterprise](#)
- [Community Interest Company](#)

Vision, Mission, and Values

Defining your vision, mission and values means you can be confident about what your service is trying to achieve and how you are going to do it. This will also support staff, volunteers, and service users to understand the organisation, as well as helping to explain the service to potential funders.

The NCVO provides some [useful guidance](#) on writing organisational vision, mission and value statements.

When defining your vision, mission and values, it is important to be broad to start with, and as things change in terms of policy, government and the needs of people experiencing homelessness, you can review your statements.

Outputs and Outcomes

Defining outputs and outcomes will distinguish between what you are doing and what impact you want to make. Services can fall into the trap of focusing on outputs (e.g. how many people attend their service) instead of the outcomes (e.g., what benefit people

gained from attending the service). Funders will often require information on outcomes as part of their application process.

- **Outputs** are all the detailed activities, services and products of your organisation. Outputs might include 1:1 support sessions, group-work sessions, or offering advice and information.
- **Outcomes** are the effects of your activities: the changes, benefits or learning that occur as a result of the work you do. For most homelessness organisations, [outcomes](#) will describe a change they have enabled in the people they support, for example, improved living skills, moving to more stable or independent accommodation, addressing drug or alcohol use or accessing mental health treatment.

Risk and Practical Requirements

Understand the risks involved in setting up a new service. This includes risk to your organisation and its staff and volunteers, risk to the community and risks that the service will present along the way. You need to establish what these are and how you intend to mitigate them. Key risks and practical considerations to consider include:

- Building insurance
- Licence/planning for new buildings, i.e. change of purpose
- Health and safety: for the building, staff, volunteers and people using the service
- Risk assessments: for the building, staff, volunteers and people using the service
- Increasing demand in a local area – the ‘magnet effect’
- Working with people posing a higher risk to themselves or others
- Not being able to meet need
- Lack of suitable solutions for people
- Overlap with and opposition from existing organisations
- Negative reactions from the local community
- Being unable to achieve sustainable funding

There are a variety of simple business analysis tools that can be used to reflect on risk for your service, for example a SWOT analysis (covering strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) or PESTLE analysis (covering political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental areas of impact).

There are a wide range of free internet resources about using these sorts of business analysis tools, for example:

- [SWOT Analysis](#)

- [PESTLE/PEST Analysis](#)

Alternatively, use the table below as a prompt to consider potential risks and what actions can mitigate them. The areas of risk will vary between locations. Create a version of the table that includes risks relevant to your service.

Area of Risk	What is the risk?	Mitigating Actions & Future Planning
Community	<i>Example: neighbours object to the service opening</i>	<i>Example: attend community meeting to talk through their concerns</i>
People using the service	<i>Example: people presenting with challenging behaviour</i>	<i>Example: staff trained in trauma informed care and safety planning.</i>
Funding	<i>Example: funding might not be renewed</i>	<i>Example: ensure service is funded from diverse income streams, use NCVO Sustainable Funding tools to create fundraising strategy</i>
Building	<i>Example: concerns about safety re: people numbers and exits</i>	<i>Example: Fire Officer to assess building and provide guidance</i>
External Relationships & Joint Working	<i>Example: people are working with multiple providers and support may be duplicated</i>	<i>Example: establish joint working protocols and individual consent procedures so that staff know what work is in process elsewhere</i>
Service	<i>Example: service is increasing need within your local area</i>	<i>Example: reconnection procedure in place</i>

Training and Expertise

You must ensure that staff and volunteers are adequately trained and supported to deliver a service effectively. People experiencing homelessness can often present with complex needs such as poor physical and mental health, drug and alcohol dependency, and social isolation. As well as understanding how these issues impact on people's needs and risks, staff and volunteers should recognise their limits and know how to refer or signpost to other services when appropriate.

Involving people with lived experience in shaping your organisation and recruiting these individuals based on their expertise is essential. For more information on employing people with lived experience, visit our [website](#).

Alongside issues affecting people, the team will need to be trained on practical aspects of running a service to ensure that both the building and people in the service are safe. Some of the areas in which a new service team will require training and expertise include:

- Health and safety
- Recruitment and referencing of staff and volunteers
- Managing risk and conflict
- Policies and procedures e.g. incidents and exclusions
- Drug and alcohol use
- Homelessness and Housing Law
- Managing volunteers
- Welfare and benefits training
- Safeguarding vulnerable adults
- Mental health
- Staff and volunteer supervision
- Trauma-informed Care

Some of these areas, such as health & safety and working with people using drugs, carry legal implications. You must seek advice to ensure that your service operates in a safe and legal manner. Please refer to websites such as those listed below for guidance and training opportunities.

- [Homeless Link](#)
- [National Homelessness Advice Service](#)
- [NCVO](#)
- [Charity Commission](#)

Implementation

Developing a Business Plan and Funding

A business (or strategic) plan should form the basis of effective service development. It helps everyone in the organisation to understand how their role relates to the organisation's objectives, as well as priority areas for service development. A business plan can be used to support funding applications by demonstrating a coherent vision for the service through its short, medium and long term goals. Writing a business plan is a particular skill and if you do not have experience in doing this, it is advisable to reach out to consultants who specialise in this area.

Securing funding for new services is hard work, with each funding application requiring time and skill to ensure it is relevant to a funders' specific requirements. Funding can be obtained from a number of places, such as local authorities, trusts, foundations or charitable donations. All require thorough administration processes to ensure funds are allocated and spent in accordance with funder specifications. Time will be needed to

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build and maintain relationships with funders. It is recommended that you have a phone call or if possible, a face-to-face meeting with the funder prior to completing your application so they can advise you on the best way to fill it in.

You should also consider how the service will achieve sustainability in its funding. Use the below resources to look at business planning and funding opportunities:

- [NCVO \(Support for Small Charities\)](#)
- [NCVO \(Funding and Income Guide\)](#)
- [Homeless Link \(Latest announcements about funding\)](#)

Can you measure your impact?

Measuring your impact will allow you to demonstrate your successes, develop your service and secure sustainable funding in the future. Following on from the initial steps to evidence need, this should become a continuous cycle of evaluation and reflection to ensure your service is still relevant a year down the line. Make sure you have suitable methods in place to measure your impact, for example, using these tools and resources:

- [Measuring your impact](#)
- [Defining your impact outcomes](#)
- [Data Analysis Toolkit](#)
- [NCVO strategy impact](#)

Mapping Services and Making Contacts

In setting up a service to support people experiencing homelessness, you need to define the service's role and know when it is appropriate to signpost people elsewhere. This is particularly important when a person needs to access statutory services e.g. housing or mental health support. Ideally, you should set up a meeting with a lead worker at these agencies and agree a joint working protocol with details of how referrals or self-referrals can be made, and what information will be shared with the person's informed consent.

It is important to note here the difference between your local borough council and the county council. Your local borough council has a duty of care to support people experiencing homelessness, not the county council. For more information on the different types of councils, visit [here](#).

Map the local services in your area using [Homeless England](#) and local resources. Find out what services are in your local area, who the key contacts are, and produce a resource list or file. This resource should be updated regularly – don't forget to ask for

people's input as they might have additional local intelligence. This table suggests some useful agencies:

Service	Contact
Housing Benefit contact (local authority)	
Job Centre	
Rent Deposit Scheme / local landlords	
Housing Options (local authority)	
Day centres	
Local hostels and night shelters	
Housing advice services	
Outreach service	
Police (Safer Neighbourhood Team)	
Local women's service	
Drug & Alcohol Team	
Mental health services	
Employment support centres	
Local law centres	
Libraries and places with free internet access	
Reconnection services	
Citizens Advice Bureau	
Furniture projects	
Specialist homeless health services	
Food bank	

Getting the most from your Volunteers

New services often rely heavily on volunteers. Make sure you recruit people with relevant skills, values and commitment to your project. Volunteers want to feel helpful and to develop in their roles. If volunteers have nothing to do, you may need to consider whether your service is indeed necessary, or whether you have the right volunteers. Learning to delegate can be difficult, but if you want to support the community, working together is the first, and most crucial step. At the same time, supporting the needs of volunteers should not be the service's main purpose.

When recruiting volunteers, ensure:

- You have a suitable job description and person specification

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- Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
- Reference and DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) disclosures are in place. [DBS checks](#) are good practice and essential if there is any chance that volunteers will be lone working with people experiencing homelessness, at least some of whom will be vulnerable.
- You have an induction pack
- Training and supervision are in place
- Volunteers are included in processes around organisational change as much as paid staff
- Development opportunities are available.

More information on managing volunteers can be found [here](#). Considering fairness in social enterprise, including involving people on a voluntary basis, can be found [here](#).

It is important to note here that if you can fund paid staff at the beginning, you should do this. To begin, you need staff who are legally accountable and who are able to get your organisation off the ground. Once you are more established, it is important to get volunteers on board.

Achieving Sustainability

Once you are established, achieving sustainable funding can be tough, especially in the current economic climate. You will need to keep in touch with your funders, establish new funding streams early, and continue identifying new and emerging needs. Your service could even resolve the issue it set out to address, in which case, the best response may be to repeat the planning stage to see how resources can best be used, even if this means closing the service. Please utilise the resources listed in this guidance.

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.

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