



# Implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act

## Learning from Homeless Link's regional events

**Let's end homelessness together**

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### Produced by

Homeless Link

### Acknowledgements

With thanks to MHCLG, London Borough of Southwark, Solace Women's Aid, and the local authority and voluntary sector staff who took part in our events

### Published

November 2018

## Executive Summary

*“No longer are we asking people to jump through 5 hoops before we can help them... The local authority now has to look for a solution, rather than for a point at which to say no”. (Ian Swift, London Borough of Southwark)*

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 came into effect on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2018. It provides an opportunity to transform the way Local Housing Authority (LHA) services are provided to homeless people. The Act is arguably the biggest change in homelessness legislation since 1977<sup>1</sup>. It not only imposes a duty to prevent and relieve homelessness, but it provides opportunities for culture and systems change.

The HRA effectively bolts two new duties to the original statutory rehousing duty: the duty to prevent homelessness, and the duty to relieve homelessness.

New provisions introduced by the HRA include:

- Duty to prevent and relieve homelessness
- Requirement to carry out an assessment and personalised housing plan
- Public bodies now have a duty to refer people whom they know are threatened with homelessness
- Applicants have the right to ask for a review of any points of the new legislation

Homeless Link hosted a series of ten regional events between January and March 2018, bringing together representatives from a range of local authorities (LA) and voluntary organisations to discuss the implications of the Act and to identify opportunities for working together. This report draws together some key themes from these discussions and highlights the priority actions identified by table groups during each event. It sets out some of the key ideas, learning and good practice gathered from the sessions.

Key themes of the discussions included a need to map existing services, to capture this information and make it easily accessible to the whole community; and ensure advice and information meets the needs of more vulnerable groups. It was felt that assessments and personalised housing plans should be client centred, and that voluntary organisations should have a role in these. In terms of achieving culture change, strong partnerships and a willingness to learn were identified as key.

The skills and approaches required to carry out a comprehensive assessment and plan may be new to some services; key skills needed included communication and motivational interviewing skills to identify ways to address underlying causes of a person’s homelessness. Trauma-informed approaches help to develop a better awareness of issues that the person may not want to disclose or discuss and could prevent the applicant from engaging. Psychologically informed approaches help us to look at the physical and social/emotional environment in which we are working. Adopting these approaches will require culture change for many LA housing options services.

The events also identified some of the key challenges around culture change that will be required to make implementation of the legislation a success.

We believe the learning from the events is of value to local authorities and their partners, including voluntary sector organisations, as they embark on a period of change over the coming months and years.

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<sup>1</sup> The Housing (Homelessness Persons) Act 1977.

## Introduction

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017, introduced on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2018, places new legal duties on local authorities so that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness will have access to meaningful help, irrespective of their priority need status, as long as they are eligible for assistance. The Act amends part VII of the Housing Act 1996.

The Act is based on the findings of an independent panel of experts, established by Crisis in 2015, which included Homeless Link as a member. The panel's aim was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the current legislation affecting single homeless people in England and to propose improvements to the legal framework to prevent and tackle single homelessness more effectively in England. The panel recommended a framework similar the one introduced by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.<sup>2</sup> The new framework began as a Private Member's Bill introduced to Parliament in June 2016 by Bob Blackman, Conservative MP for Harrow East, and was then supported by the Government.

The HRA introduces 5 key changes:



## Homeless Link Regional Events

In recognition of the need not only to publicise the new legislation, but also to bring together local authorities and local voluntary organisations, Homeless Link held a series of 10 regional events on the HRA. These events featured presentations from Homeless Link on the legislation, and the London Borough of Southwark<sup>3</sup> and partner agency Solace Women's Aid on their respective experiences introducing key elements of the HRA. Table discussions focused on the advisory duty, personal housing plans, duty to refer, right to review, culture change required to implement the Act, and actions that participants would take forward.

This report brings together the main themes of these discussions, including identifying key learning points and examples of good practice.

<sup>2</sup> The Homelessness Legislation: an independent review of the legal duties owed to homeless people, Crisis, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The London Borough of Southwark is an 'early adopter' trailblazer for the new homelessness legislation focused on new duties to prevent and relieve homelessness

# The Advisory Duty

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, everyone in a local housing authority's district should be able to access free information and advice on:

- preventing homelessness
- securing accommodation when homeless
- the rights of people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and the duties of the authority
- any help that is available from the authority or anyone else
- how to access that help.

Services providing advice and information must be designed to meet the needs of particular groups in the authority's district, for example care leavers, people "suffering with a mental illness or impairment" and groups identified as being at particular risk of homelessness.

Housing authorities will need to work with other relevant statutory and non-statutory service providers to identify groups at particular risk and to develop appropriate, accessible provision. Housing authorities may also wish to consult with particular groups, for example, people in contact with the criminal justice system, before developing resources. It is also important to note that housing authorities can contract out advisory services so they are provided by other organisations

In order to fulfil the duty, local housing authorities should look to ensure information is made available in a number of formats and made available across a range of locations.

## Roundtable Discussions

The roundtable discussions considered:

- How do we best address the advisory duty?
- How do we ensure that information is accessible?

The discussions identified a clear need to map information about services available in the local authority area. This provides opportunities for partnership working. Participants felt that information and advice must be accessible to more vulnerable groups not identified in the guidance, and advice provided needs to be meaningful and of high quality.

## Mapping Services

In some areas, the local authority did not have a clear idea of all services being provided in the community; others reported that the local authority already had systems in place to identify relevant services and had developed an online resource for this purpose.

## Challenges

- The need to identify all the services in the local authority area. Some participants suggested that local authorities will have to acquire a better knowledge of external services.
- Information needs to be easily accessible both to services providing support and to the general community.
- Keeping information up to date once it has been mapped. In many areas, this could be a large-scale project. It can be managed by asking agencies to ensure their own information is up to date.

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- To ensure that services deliver accurate and consistent information about homelessness once the Act is in place.
- The Act includes a duty to provide information about housing but not about support services, or about how to access independent legal advice and this was identified as a key gap.

## Solutions

- The Code of Guidance urges local authorities to work more closely with voluntary organisations. In the discussions at the events, both local authority and voluntary organisations talked about learning from each other, and about taking a new approach to working together. Some local authorities had already prioritised and incorporated this into local strategies and talked about setting up formal agreements, such as SLAs and working protocols.
- Benefits of carrying out a mapping exercise are to increase the capacity to reach more people, and the subsequent setting up of multi-agency groups could avoid duplication of services.
- The idea of a mapping exercise opens up opportunities for services to learn together via training and via more informal methods such as shadowing. It is seen as an opportunity to bring together knowledge and experience.
- Bedford already has a resource in place, the Bedford Partnership database. This was developed in response to high numbers of rough sleeping in 2016: <https://bedfordhomeless.org.uk/>

## Making the service accessible

The needs of vulnerable groups are not mentioned specifically in the guidance but services are encouraged to identify local need and ensure that the needs of relevant groups are included in future planning. People were asked to think about groups in the community who might be at risk of homelessness, then to consider what advice might be useful to them, and how would they access it.

## Challenges

- Homelessness services are keen to ensure that the advisory duty takes into account the needs of vulnerable groups. Where some of these groups are linked to a particular area, provision should be also.
- It is well known that some groups find it difficult to access mainstream services. One group identified those who could be in need of the advisory duty as “(recovering from) trauma, those experiencing poverty, low income, or people with means but who have difficulty managing money”.
- Groups who may face barriers accessing services include:
  - People with no National Insurance number or proof of income
  - Those who ‘do not engage’.
  - Those who lack capacity/understanding.
  - Housing is not always a priority for people, even if a need, and more pressing issues such as family relationships or substance use, could take priority over dealing with rent arrears.
- Other groups in need of information and advice about housing and the prevention of homelessness could include:
  - Those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), requiring specialist advice
  - Migrant workers
  - People living in rural areas
  - Particular communities (e.g. based on religion) living in a specific area who may need a tailored response

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### Solutions

Discussion groups identified a need for outreach and localised drop-in services. Some areas already have well-established drop-in services provided by voluntary organisations and these could provide an opportunity to co-locate advisory services. Others suggested talking to faith and community groups about how information and advice can be reached by more people.

There was a suggestion that in rural areas, GP surgeries and schools could be a valuable source of information about homelessness. Groups explored the practical considerations of how to get information out to people with co-location seen as a good thing, with outreach and surgeries for 'hard to reach' groups.

### Advice and Information services should be of a high quality

#### Challenges

- The need for services to be aware of the new legislation and provide consistent information.
- There was a desire for housing advice and information to be consistent and of high quality. Participants felt strongly that people should be able to obtain the help they need at the right time, and not end up being passed around services. Several groups talked about the need to adopt a 'no wrong door' approach.
- Information and advice must be timely and relevant to be able to reach some of the more 'complex' clients living day to day.
- There is a need for more interpreting services.

#### Solutions

- The local authority should ensure partners providing advice and information about homelessness should have the appropriate level of expertise
- The approach to provision should be tailored to the size of the local authority and to the needs of the community.
- There needs to be a flexible approach to the provision of advice - for some, self-service information will be sufficient, others may need more personalised support.
- Information packs should be accessible and developed in a number of formats, taking into account issues such as literacy or language issues.

## Examples of Good Practice

**Newcastle City Council** has developed the Active Inclusion Newcastle (AIN) approach and this seeks to make the best use of the limited face-to-face specialist advice services in Newcastle by helping other non-specialist services to prevent and respond to financial exclusion and the risk of homelessness. They have developed spectrums of advice for benefits and for money management (which covers both debt and budgeting advice), which also includes housing and homelessness advice.

[www.newcastle.gov.uk/housing/housing-advice-and-homelessness/information-for-professionals](http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/housing/housing-advice-and-homelessness/information-for-professionals)

Bespoke information sheets for people who are particularly at risk of becoming homeless are published on their website. These include information for:

- Former members of the regular armed forces
- People leaving care
- People leaving hospital
- People leaving prison or youth detention

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- People with mental health issues
- Victims of domestic abuse.

See: <https://newcastle.gov.uk/housing/housing-advice-and-homelessness/what-to-do-if-you-need-housing-advice-or-are-homeless>

**Street Support** is an online resource around homelessness, running across a number of cities. The network includes organisations from across different sectors that provide useful services for people who are homeless. As a trusted source of information, the local network set minimum standards around who is included. It allows a level of consistency across services as all have access to the same information. Although a web-based resource doesn't work for everyone, it is a valuable resource for services and those with access to a computer or smartphone. <https://streetsupport.net/manchester/>

**The London Borough of Southwark**<sup>4</sup> provides housing advice at a number of partner agencies across the borough, and many now provide drop-in services at the local authority central hub, including Shelter and Solace Women's Aid. It is recognised that women can encounter barriers accessing local authority homelessness services when fleeing domestic violence: women were being asked to retell stories and for evidence of the domestic violence; there is no automatic award of priority need; mediation is inappropriate and unsafe in cases of domestic violence. Having started with one day a week, Solace Women's Aid are now co-located in Southwark housing options team 5 days a week. As part of the partnership agreement, they are able to get same day appointments for women fleeing violence. The teams have overcome challenges and learned from each other.

## Conclusion and Key Learning Points

It was felt that that information provided will need to be consistent across the different services. This can be achieved by the provision of a designated number of hubs or sites from which information and advice is provided. Concerns about the quality and consistency of advice and information can be addressed by a requirement for services to meet identified quality standards, requiring staff to be trained and information to be accurate and up to date.

In Southwark, services operate from a central hub. Local neighbourhood offices have been closed due to budget cuts. Some groups said that for their local authority area, a more dispersed model would work better as some communities do not travel into the town centres very often, preferring to use services available locally. It was suggested that this approach would support existing local services which are well used, and where positive work is already being done.

Several groups raised the question whether advisory services should be provided by the Council or contracted out. There was a suggestion that the advisory duty should be provided by the voluntary sector, who had better established contacts with local communities, had more experience of working with harder to reach groups, and are more aware of the challenges and barriers faced by individuals with these needs. There was a strong consensus across the events that partnership working is vital to the effective provision of the new advisory services.

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<sup>4</sup> See: [www.southwark.gov.uk/finding-a-new-home/advice-about-homelessness?chapter=2](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/finding-a-new-home/advice-about-homelessness?chapter=2)

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The mapping exercise provides an opportunity for local authorities to talk to service providers and community groups and explore opportunities for partnership and co-production.

Signposting and the provision of advice and information needs to be effective. Services providing advice on behalf of the council should meet recognised quality standards. Some councils have talked about training all signposting services. This would provide a clear structure and framework for accountability.

There should be some clarity about how to capture any cases in which advice is provided before the 56-day period starts.

## Personal Housing Plans

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, housing authorities will conduct an assessment with all eligible applicants who are homeless or threatened with homelessness and develop a personalised housing plan with them.

The assessment should include:

- the circumstances that caused the applicant to become homeless or threatened with homelessness
- what housing the applicant needs, and what accommodation would be suitable, and
- whether the applicant needs support to obtain and keep accommodation

The assessment of an applicant's support needs should be holistic and comprehensive. Some applicants may be reluctant to disclose their needs, and staff will need to have the sufficient skills and training to conduct assessments with these applicants.

The personalised housing plan will set out the steps the individual and the housing authority must take for the individual to remain in or find suitable accommodation.

Examples of this include, but are not limited to: mediation/conciliation, providing financial support to access private rented accommodation and 'helping to secure or securing an immediate safe place to stay for people who are sleeping rough or at high risk of sleeping rough.'

A housing authority does not have to directly secure accommodation, though it can do where appropriate. The housing authority can (with consent) involve other services the applicant is using to develop and agree the personalised housing plan. The plan must set out clearly which steps are mandatory and which are recommended.

Housing authorities can contract out the assessments and personalised housing plans function to other organisations.

### Roundtable Discussions

Roundtable discussions considered:

- What do we want personal housing plans to look like?

The main themes of the discussions were concerns that plans (and assessments) should be done in a person-centred way. Participants discussed who is best placed to complete assessments and plans and how this work could be shared.

### Views on Personal Housing Plans

#### Challenges

Participants felt that plans should give a fair reflection of the needs and wishes of the applicant and should draw upon a comprehensive and holistic assessment. They supported the introduction of a strengths-based approach so that the plan and assessment identify what the applicant has achieved, can do and aspires to do.

The need to identify the underlying issues around a person's circumstances will require a degree of skill and the development of a trusting relationship between the staff member and the applicant. The interviews should take place in a private space and not in an open plan office or reception area.

Participants were invited to review the personal housing plans developed by Southwark. Some rejected the idea of having **template plans** to cover some of the main 'categories' of homelessness. They preferred the idea of starting from a blank page and moving away from the idea of form filling. However, this approach could be challenging for staff not experienced or confident in the role.

Others felt that starting off a meeting by suggesting a phone call to the parents of a young applicant (as outlined on one of the Southwark forms) could promptly create a risk of them disengaging.

The issue of safeguarding was raised – people were concerned that if the applicant was fleeing violence or abuse but had not disclosed it, a phone call could put someone at risk.

There was a concern that the assessment and plan could force applicants to revisit circumstances which were difficult for them, particularly when they had already been disclosed e.g. admission of a traumatic experience.

Another challenge was how to ensure that the applicant has a sense of ownership of the plan and will carry out the actions identified, as well as how to ensure that tasks set are appropriate to the person.

Participants were concerned that any 'reasonable steps' identified as part of the plan and not completed could be used against the applicant as a refusal to co-operate. People felt strongly that the plan should not be used against the applicant in this way and wanted to ensure this did not happen. They want to see a clear distinction between the Personal Housing Plan and the DWP claimant commitment.

#### Solutions

The Code of Guidance states that staff should have sufficient skills and training to conduct assessments. Frontline housing staff should be trained in trauma-informed approaches (and other relevant skills) in order to work positively with vulnerable people.

The personal housing plan relies very much on the completion of a holistic assessment. It was felt that the assessment could be carried out by another worker with whom the applicant has a positive working

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relationship. This suggestion is made in the code of guidance. Participants were keen to identify a way to share responsibility for completing assessments and plans. They looked at how the plans could be accessed electronically and whether the applicant could have their own login. It was generally agreed that partner agencies would have a role to play in starting or feeding into the plan and the plan should be a 'live' working document.

It was felt that the plan should be owned by the applicant and easily accessible by appropriate agencies (who have permissions set up via IT system). The plan should be owned by the applicant also in the sense that they are engaged with it, have agreed the actions and are able to carry them out.

The code of guidance states that it must be made clear which actions are mandatory and which are 'recommended' and that failure to complete one of the recommended tasks does not constitute a 'refusal to co-operate'.

Another practical solution, adopted by Southwark, is to allow two hours for interviews which would previously have been completed in one. This poses a challenge not only on team resources, but also to more vulnerable people who are not able to sustain a long interview or meeting.

The review and development of assessments and personal housing plans provides another opportunity for the individual applicant to be involved. Plans could be developed in a number of different formats and applicants could be given a choice of what format works best for them.

### Could plans be shared across services?

#### Challenges

Some groups fed back that housing options staff do not always have the skills, knowledge and the time to complete a comprehensive assessment with every applicant. Some applicants may have trusting relationships with workers from voluntary organisations, but are reluctant to approach the council. It was recognised that voluntary organisations have an important role to play in the completion of assessments and personal housing plans.

The groups raised some practical questions.

- If the plan is completed online, who would have access to it other than the applicant? Who should update it? How would this be done?
- We should consider digital inclusion and not assume people have access to a computer or smartphone.
- Could the plan link with other support plans? How could this happen?

#### Solutions

A live shared document has been used in other areas of homelessness, such as for clients on a vulnerable adults' pathway. These universal assessment and referral forms (UARF) are used in London boroughs such as Lambeth, Lewisham and Camden, and the assessment is shared across all agencies working with the client.

### Examples of Good Practice

**Hart and Rushmoor:** The council has developed a strengths-based approach to assessments, moving away from a traditional deficit model to take a more positive focus on people's aspirations, capabilities, interests and strengths.

**London Borough of Southwark:** Southwark have developed a set of templates for their personal housing plans, ensuring that key points are covered in particular situations. These were developed with input from client groups and people with lived experience of homelessness.

**Newcastle City Council:** The council intends to align support plans, meaning there is an improved continuity of support through the pathway. This not only prevents duplication of work, but also links up the work being done with that client in other services. It makes the connection between homelessness and issues such as financial inclusion, as a way of preventing or relieving their homelessness.

### Conclusion and Key Learning Points

Participants felt that plans should be completed in a way that accurately reflects the situation and circumstances of the applicant. Where possible, options could be explored to share this task with voluntary organisations who may know the applicant well and are best placed to complete the exercise.

When developing processes and paperwork for personal housing plans, applicants should be invited to give feedback on how the process should work. Training is needed if plans are to be person-centred. Plans need to have input from other services working with the applicant, if they wish. There should be a continuity of support planning across the various services the individual is working with.

Training needs should be assessed to reflect the new skills and approaches needed. Training programmes should be developed to support frontline staff to complete assessments and personal housing plans. These could include the following: communication skills, motivational interviewing, trauma informed approaches, psychologically informed environments (PIE), and reflective practice.

## Duty to Refer

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, public bodies in England will have a duty to refer an individual's case (with consent) to an identified housing authority. These public bodies include prisons, youth offender institutions, social services, hospital in-patient, emergency departments and urgent treatment centres, probation services and Jobcentre plus.<sup>5</sup>

The duty provides an “impetus to develop effective referral arrangements and accommodation pathways to provide appropriate jointly planned help and support to prevent homelessness.”

How the duty works in practice will be determined in each local area. Housing authorities may want to develop standard referral mechanisms/forms and public bodies require training to identify people who may be homeless. This part of the legislation will come into effect in October 2018.

## Roundtable Discussions

Roundtable discussions considered:

- What do we need to put in place to effectively fulfil the duty to refer?

Discussions on this topic were brief, as many groups found the preceding topics more challenging and focussed on those.

The main theme of the discussions was the challenge of working across a number of agencies with varying ways of working and finding a way to reach all relevant frontline staff to make them aware of the new duty. Some of the groups found the prospect of setting this up challenging, with some reporting that, historically, it had been difficult to obtain prison release dates in advance. Others had examples of where things were working well.

## Solutions

Discussion groups identified that there were some protocols in place that were working well, and could be adapted to meet the new requirements. Some suggestions of existing systems which could be adapted to meet the new duty:

- They could adopt a process similar to that used for safeguarding referrals (MASH).
- The StreetLink app could be adapted to create referrals to the local housing authority.
- Other examples include the MEAM approach to partnership working.

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<sup>5</sup> The Homelessness Code of Guidance, Ch. 4: The public authorities which are subject to the duty to refer are specified in the [Homelessness \(Review Procedure etc.\) Regulations 2018](#). The public services included in the duty are as follows:

- (a) prisons;
- (b) youth offender institutions;
- (c) secure training centres;
- (d) secure colleges;
- (e) youth offending teams;
- (f) probation services (including community rehabilitation companies);
- (g) Job Centre+ Plus;
- (h) social service authorities;
- (i) emergency departments;
- (j) urgent treatment centres; and,
- (k) hospitals in their function of providing inpatient care.

### Examples of Good Practice

The **Welsh Prisoners Pathway**<sup>6</sup> Prisoners facing homelessness receive support 56 days before their release. The Pathway also clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all agencies and organisations involved in the process, resulting in a more coordinated approach with better support for people leaving custody.

**Iris**<sup>7</sup> is a domestic violence training programme being delivered to GPs. Learning could be drawn from this model when considering ways to approach health providers around the Duty to Refer and in raising awareness of homelessness in the sector.

**London Borough of Southwark:** Southwark have set up a simple two-page referral form which can be used by any agency to make a referral. They have established strong partnerships with hospitals, prison and probation services involving co-location of services. These support partnerships and provide a more integrated and joined up service.

### Conclusion and Key Learning Points

Although the duty to make the referral lies with the public body, the process does require good partnership working in order to be effective. The local authority should ensure that referral is a simple and easy process and there should be clarity of the roles and responsibilities of all agencies and organisations involved. There are many examples of existing good practice which could be explored before work is done to set up new arrangements.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://gov.wales/topics/housing-and-regeneration/services-and-support/homelessness/national-pathway/?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.irisdomesticviolence.org.uk/iris/>

## Right to Review

The 'right to review' extends the scope of the decisions on which an applicant can ask for a review. Applicants will be able to challenge decisions relating to the new stages of the homelessness application process. These are:

- The steps taken to prevent the applicant from becoming homeless
- The steps taken to help to relieve homelessness
- The duty owed to the eligible applicant who is homeless or threatened with homelessness
- To end the duty to prevent or relieve homelessness
- Serving a notice due to unreasonable refusal to co-operate (s.193A)
- The suitability of any accommodation offered under s.193B (following a notice in case of unreasonable refusal to co-operate)

## Roundtable Discussions

Roundtable discussions considered:

- How do we put in place a healthy review process?

The main themes of the discussions were a concern that an increase in reviews could delay the process of managing the applicant's case. Groups explored how reviews could be conducted more independently.

### Challenges

- There was a concern that introducing more areas for review could delay the process of preventing the applicant's homelessness within the 56-day time period.
- Participants were interested in looking at how the reviews could be conducted independently.
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### Solutions

- The review process should provide an opportunity for staff to reflect and learn from their practice.
- It should be an open and transparent process

## Examples of Good Practice

**London Borough of Southwark:** Southwark has adopted a 'light touch' approach to reviews. This allows applicants to challenge and ask questions throughout the process. There are no 'mistakes', just opportunities to review and learn. This offers staff an opportunity to take risks and work more creatively. An example of this could be to look at non-statutory options to resolve complex housing problems.

## Conclusion and Key Learning Points

The extension of the right to review offers a number of opportunities: applicants can take more responsibility and ownership of their situation, it supports a culture of transparency and learning, and creates better partnership between applicants and the local authority.

Local authorities should review their processes and how they can invite and encourage applicants to question decisions. Provision should be made for an increase in reviews, which will require a more flexible approach and a willingness to reflect and learn from these challenges.

## Culture Change

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is regarded as the biggest change in homelessness legislation since 1977.<sup>8</sup> While it imposes on the local authority a duty to prevent and relieve homelessness, it also provides opportunities for culture and systems change. It creates the potential for a significant shift in the way services are provided, putting the individual or household experiencing homelessness at the centre and having to seek a solution to their situation. The importance of integrating services to address poverty, financial exclusion and homelessness is recognised across local authorities. This means that change can go beyond housing options services to address the wider challenges that people face, providing an opportunity to do things differently.

The Welsh experience of introducing similar legislation, focused on preventing homelessness, has resulted in a positive impact with most non-priority need households getting a superior service. It has also resulted in a reduction in the number of people in temporary accommodation and decreased the number who remain homeless after seeking help.

As well as resulting in a much better service response to single homeless people, the legislation in Wales has effected a genuine reorientation on the culture of local authorities towards a more preventative, person-centred and outcome-focused approach. It has resulted in a service ethos change and the nature of the service being provided by local authorities being more supportive and caring.

It is also envisaged that the HRA in England, in addition to stronger duties, will also be a catalyst for broader cultural change in transforming the way people experiencing homelessness are treated. It is hoped that it will result in change in local authorities offering a more meaningful personalised support focusing on working with individuals and households to identify the best solutions to prevent or resolve their homelessness.

Successful implementation will require effective joint partnership working across different departments within the local authority and with other relevant organisations in the local area, including social care, housing associations, police and other criminal justice agencies, health services including mental health and local voluntary sector providers. This partnership approach should be embedded in local authorities homelessness strategies and continue through every stage of the service, from identifying people at risk of homelessness to prevention and finding suitable accommodation.

### Roundtable Discussions

Roundtable discussions considered:

- How might the HRA affect the culture of our organisations?

The main themes of the discussions were a need for partnerships, a need to develop a learning culture, and a recognition that to be successful, change needs to take place at all levels. Participants reported some negatives associated with the previous culture including:

- Blame culture
- 'Computer says no'
- Gatekeeping culture
- Process-driven
- Adversarial approach

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<sup>8</sup> The Housing (Homelessness Persons) Act 1977.

### A culture of transparency and learning

What came out of the discussions was a desire to change, especially to move away from the previous blame culture and ensuring greater transparency and shared learning. There was also an acknowledgement of the challenges of implementing culture change.

### Challenges

- Having the resources in place reflective practice
- Being able to take risks and moving from the 'covering your back' culture
- Having to follow procedures and the risk averse approach of many authorities
- Having time and space to reflect
- The need to learn
- Adopting new approaches e.g. reflective practice, trauma informed approaches, psychologically informed environments (PIE) etc.

Some participants felt that the need for culture change would very much depend on what the existing culture was like. Some were already working with non-priority need individuals, people with arrears, and those who are intentionally homeless etc and were on the way to implementing approaches underlying the ethos of the HRA.

### Solutions

*"Adopt a solution focused approach. This means fitting the solution around the client, not the other way round... The spirit of the Act is not process-driven"* Event participant

Alongside more formal arrangements for partnership working, staff on the frontline felt a need to understand the roles of others they work with. Many talked about the opportunities the Act would create for shadowing, training each other to get a real understanding of roles, for example opening up training and arranging for a voluntary sector partner to attend team meetings.

The idea of a mapping exercise opens up opportunities for services to learn together via training and via more informal methods such as shadowing. It is seen as an opportunity to bring together knowledge and experience.

The 'right to review' encourages applicants to question decisions, and encourages transparency. Being more open to scrutiny and questioning throughout the process can lead to a decrease in the number of reviews requested at a later stage. In Southwark, the number of review cases open has halved in one year from 106 to 52.

*"The local authority now has to look for an outcome, rather than for the point of saying no."* Event participant

Groups identified ways in which culture could change:

- Learn from mistakes/celebrate learning
- Transparency stands up to closer scrutiny and share learning. Also leads to less reviews
- This requires a change of attitude and some additional problem-solving skills
- Focus on person not process
- Challenge bad practice and old mentality – don't just ignore it
- No more blame culture

## Homeless Link

- A culture of professional challenge
- Learn to trust each other

## Partnerships

The code of guidance talks about the need for local authorities to work closely with partners and stakeholders and the learning from Southwark is that partnership working is essential to effectively implement the HRA.

## Challenges

Some voluntary organisations identified ways in which the local authorities needed to be more like them and could learn from them. But many others recognised that this would need to be a two-way process.

*'We need to work more closely with housing associations to make earlier interventions on rent arrears so that more evictions can be prevented'.*

*'Make private landlords aware of the prevention focus, but also give them reassurances that we will work with them to resolve problems with the aim of preventing homelessness'.*

Local Authorities felt that the Act creates a common ground for shared views and goals:

- We should identify how voluntary organisations can help, rather than being in opposition
- We need to break away from an adversarial approach
- It's an opportunity for councils to treat voluntary organisations as partners
- It's time to let go, and accept what we have doesn't work
- We should think about how voluntary organisations can retain their independence

Voluntary organisations acknowledged a need for a change of approach on both sides:

- We should be prepared to change our own thinking
- Be nice to LAs!
- The local authorities don't always keep us informed of what they are doing: as part of a culture shift, it's about how we talk to each other
- The voluntary sector is here to help you
- We should be more patient and be aware of the pressure that people are under.
- To have human, not just business, conversations.

## Solutions

- Cornwall saw this as an opportunity to talk to the community and were planning a two-day event.
- Preston were organising an event to consult staff and to explore co-production.
- Other opportunities included looking at ways to involve customers, and how to introduce experts by experience working as front-line staff.
- One group identified involvement in a Landlords' Forum as vital, so that landlords know exactly what to expect from the Council.

## Change needs support at all levels

*"Homelessness is everyone's responsibility. We are all leaders, and we all have a role to play in making this a success"* Ian Swift, LB Southwark

## Homeless Link

In order for change to be effective, people need to work together. This starts with people working on the frontline across people at all levels to the senior managers and elected members.

### Challenges

- Some staff will struggle with change
- Change takes time
- Many groups talked about the need for buy-in and support at a senior level and from Councillors. Another talked about a “lack of interest” from councillors, who were more focused on “a couple of key indicators”
- Buy-in needs to come from the top and back down to frontline staff.
- Engagement with housing providers around the prevention of homelessness were also seen as having an important role in the success of the Act.

### Opportunities

- Support via supervision and reflective practice
- The space to make decisions and to make mistakes
- Southwark talked about training elected members as vital

## Examples of Good Practice

### Learning from Southwark around staff resistance

- Staff were involved in rewriting their own job descriptions
- Expect a difficult patch. Acknowledge that some staff will struggle with change: not everyone has the desire or skills to do this.
- Get people involved in shadowing and working groups. Southwark reviewed the way team meetings were run and ensured staff could directly feedback to their managers.
- Co-production, for example include in the development of forms and processes
- Inspire staff to change, to recognise that new skills/experience will enhance the service
- Listen to experience of partner agencies – co-location has helped with this
- Southwark sought corporate commitment for the changes by providing training for elected members to engage their support.

## Conclusion and Key Learning Points

The Act opens up opportunities for services to learn together via training and more informal methods such as job shadowing. It is an opportunity to bring together knowledge and experience. Giving consideration to the work being done in Southwark, the ethos of HRA could be summarised as: a culture of reflection and transparency; continuous improvement and learning; working together and learning from each other. It allows power to be shifted from services who turn people away, to putting ‘customers’ at the centre of the service, and valuing ‘experts by experience’.

The Act can be seen as an opportunity for change across housing options services. Suggested actions supporting culture change could be summarised as follows:

- Local authority services and voluntary organisations should actively seek to develop partnerships and provide joined-up and effective person-centred services.

## Homeless Link

- Local authorities should not only encourage and support their teams to change by making them feel valued, using individual supervision, team reflective practice and opening up the team meeting agenda.
- Opportunities should be explored for learning across the homelessness sector as well as through formal training in key areas (e.g. trauma-informed practice, effective communication etc). Staff should be able to reflect upon and share good practice.
- Opportunities for co-production should be explored, including ways to employ staff with lived experience e.g. Southwark's apprenticeship scheme. We have seen in Southwark how feedback from clients and mystery shopping has provided compelling evidence of a need to change. The Act provides an opportunity to put individuals at the centre of services, and to value lived experience.

## Priority Actions

At the events the participants were asked to identify three priority actions to take forward.



A tally of the action points noted by the discussion groups shows that actions around partnership working were the most important priority. These were actions that could be carried out now in order to build relationships and get a clearer sense of services that are out there. These are also actions that can be carried out by staff at all levels. Shadowing other teams, joint training and attending team meetings all involve frontline staff and provide opportunities for staff to take a lead in organising these and to get a better understanding of the way other services are provided and become more involved in the changes.

The next priorities were taking opportunities to shadow other teams, and addressing culture change issues. This was followed by the need to organise specialist training (to provide the skills to conduct effective interviews, for example), to review or re-establish homelessness forums, and to look at co-production.

The events were a great opportunity for local authorities and voluntary organisations to come together and look at how they could make the HRA a success. The priority actions provide an indication of the enthusiasm and positivity which came out of these discussions.

Set out below are more details about the specific actions agreed to at the events.

### Partnership Working

- Communicate with partner agencies to plan services
- Set up a voluntary sector-wide group to establish expectations on both sides.
- Continue to build relationships between sector and local authority

## Homeless Link

- Work with partners to agree approach and principles
- Establish widespread consultation and engagement between local authorities and providers.
- Share input into drafting plans, forms, etc.
- Networking, mapping and creating working relationships/partnerships
- Strengthen partnerships-exploring existing hubs or creating new ones
- Strengthen existing relationships with prisons and NHS; also reach out to local services we don't have a relationship with.

### **Support that the voluntary sector can offer:**

- Voluntary sector to take on the challenge of supporting local authorities to make culture change
- Identify time to identify how the voluntary sector can help. Examples includes setting up a steering group, establishing a 'champion' in each team
- All organisations to be more proactive in developing partnerships
- Go back to local authority and see where they are up to and offer partnership working and engagement
- Collaborate!
- Take a 'can do' approach to working together
- Voluntary organisations offering specialist advice knowledge and training to LAs

### **Training**

- Softer skills training – supporting staff e.g. active listening, TIC, motivational interviewing. Solution focused approach-reflective practice, creative resilience in staff.
- Share training in adopting new culture e.g. PIE and MI
- Shadowing/joint training
- Invite stakeholders and partners to training sessions.
- Local authorities create SLA to swap training e.g. train each other

### **Culture Change**

- Remove blame culture between agencies
- Culture change, including employment of apprentices
- Be a leader, especially in terms of communicating the requirements of the Act
- Be an example of the culture you want to create. Be the one to create/support partnership work

### **Co-production**

- Co-production of referral forms.
- Learning from Southwark in employing those with lived experience of homelessness as apprentices.

### **Homelessness Forum**

- Homelessness forum should be short and frequent. Transparent dialogue and communications.
- Talk more – set up forums leading to dialogue and conversation. Shared practice.
- There should be a mandatory forum led by the LA; create some requirement for agencies (such as HAs) to attend.

## Homeless Link

- LHA to set up Homeless Network: Co Durham has a partnership meeting in place, every two months. A way to network with providers and share good practice
- Open up homelessness forums to LA and invite them to attend and discuss their challenges informally and honestly.

## Key Learning Points

### Learning for Local Authorities

The Act provides an opportunity for local authorities to talk to and engage with voluntary sector partners and community groups to explore partnerships and co-production.

Tenancy sustainment services should play a key role in the prevention strategy and this should be reflected in how these services are funded.

Local authorities should develop a clear service offer of information and advice about homelessness. It should be developed in partnership with community groups, service users and partner agencies. The service should draw upon existing good practice in the community. Resources should be developed which are easy to use and access.

There should be an identified range of key agencies providing information and advice about housing and homeless and related issues. These agencies should be expected to meet agreed service standards to ensure advice and information provided is robust and consistent.

The client should be given a choice as to which provider they work with to complete the assessment and plan. They can give permission for existing assessments to be shared with housing options services. Personal housing plans should be based on a holistic assessment. This enables the plan to identify recommended actions which are appropriate to the particular client's circumstances.

The personal housing plan should be based on a strengths model and have the capacity to acknowledge small steps taken by the client to address their situation. Staff should be able to develop the skills to do this.

Housing options services should be able to refer clients to services in the community who can help them, and therefore should have access to a directory of local resources.

Local housing authorities should make it easy for any provider to refer a client to the service for assessment, and make the referral process straightforward and transparent. The local authority should proactively engage with public bodies to support them to meet their duties under the Act and thereby work together prevent homelessness in these groups.

Local Authorities should set up a clear and transparent review process which allows clients to easily question and challenge them at various points of the process. Although there are seven key points, it is recommended that the option for review be available more frequently. Reviews should be 'light touch' to prevent delay. Reviews should be seen as opportunities to learn and review the service rather than to identify blame.

Limitations of the Act are that applications are recorded from the point of being threatened with homelessness within 56 days and not before that.

## Homeless Link

### Suggestions for Homeless Link

A range of suggestions were made by participants about how Homeless Link could offer support on the HRA. For Homeless Link to monitor the implementation of the HRA on the ground and gather information and feedback from Homeless Link members identifying what has been working well and the challenges and obstacles.

For Homeless Link to provide training on the HRA as well as training on effectively managing and implementing change including tackling those resisting change.

Other suggestions on training included focusing on prevention and this could cover the following:

- Managing a tenancy. Preparing for change, and practical tenancy skills/life skills which can prevent tenancy breakdown in the future.
- Train people on how to provide tenancy support services, using peer volunteers with lived experience to support the service.
- Develop peer-led life skills support and training for tenants/prospective tenants.

For Homeless Link to develop a toolkit to help LA's develop a set of values and principles around culture change and around the changes the new Act brings. This could be co-produced with service users and staff to ensure their involvement and commitment to change. These principles could then be used to lead change.

### Learning for Central Government

More support is needed for implementation

- More support, with clearer guidance on implementing the HRA, and templates for PHPs etc.
- Stronger commitment to future funding, and ring-fenced.
- Stronger leadership to influence culture change (including greater staffing centrally)
- What are the resources, support and co-ordination provided centrally to LAs to deal with culture change & role change through HRA?
- Minimum standards in order that there is consistency in the way the HRA is implemented, with monitoring of standards.

Provide funding and resources to implement HRA/to deliver services/in context of cuts

- Stop taking money away which results in services closing
- The HRA is positive and innovative but there are not enough resources to implement it.

Address the problem of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and costs of renting, especially in private sector housing

- The LHA rate does not reflect the true cost of private renting
- Raise LHA levels
- Under 35s continue to be too heavily penalised.
- Cap private sector rents instead of allowing landlords to charge extortionate rents.
- Regulation of private landlords
- DHP funds to be more accessible for rent in advance deposits and tackling rent arrears
- Issues with the PRS landlords willingness to house those on benefits and to think about incentives for landlords to accept those on benefits.

## Homeless Link

### Impact of welfare reform and Universal Credit on homelessness.

- MHCLG should acknowledge that welfare reform fundamentally impacts on homelessness and its prevention.
- Universal Credit is a great obstacle to delivering the HRA
- Universal Credit housing cost element should be paid direct to landlords as current vulnerability criteria are set too high.

### Need to increase housing supply

- Increase supply of social and affordable housing
- Funding needed to refurbish existing buildings
- Provision of more Housing First properties

### Need to align policy and legislation

- To consider the conflicting approaches, e.g. between the LA and the DWP. Contradictions with other policies – AST 6 months, benefit cap, LHA levels not meeting local rent levels.
- MHCLG should seek to engage private registered providers (housing associations) in order to improve and maintain their commitment to prevention/homelessness.
- Time given to prevent is underestimated.
- How do the HRA, changes to supported housing and other legislation all fit together?
- Join up legislation in a workable way, i.e. HRA with GDPR.
- Identify and work on gaps in data where services are not working in a joined up way e.g. there is a big gap in data between Health and LA. In criminal justice there are high numbers of people presenting to LAs with no fixed abode coming from custody.
- What is the long-term plan for ending homelessness?



## 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.

## Let's end homelessness together

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