



National Homelessness Advice Service

Homelessness Reduction Act 2017: local authority case studies

How four local authorities are preparing for the Homelessness Reduction Act.

February 2018

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 comes into force on 3 April 2018. This document describes how four English local authorities have prepared for the Act's commencement.

If your organisation is a member of the [National Homelessness Advice Service \(NHAS\)](#), you can call the NHAS Housing Consultancy Line to seek further advice and support. Telephone 0300 330 0517 Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm or email NHASConsultancy@shelter.org.uk.

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Brighton and Hove: early intervention

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is a game changer for Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC). Following implementation, there must be a change in how local authorities engage with households who are facing housing difficulties.

Background

Since 2004, 11,000 households have been prevented from becoming homeless under BHCC's 'prevention agenda'. Much of this has relied on a private rented sector (PRS) that could provide the housing. However, as in many areas, accessing the PRS has become increasingly difficult.

There is a huge imperative to tackle rising homelessness in the City – according to [figures published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#) (MHCLG) rough sleeping alone rose from 14 in 2010 to 178 in November 2017. In addition, changes to the way government funds temporary accommodation (TA) require us to cut our use of TA by half.

Trailblazer funding

The main causes of homelessness in our area are family/relationship breakdown and loss of PRS accommodation. Government funding provided under the Trailblazer project has enabled us to look critically at our services to target resources on these issues. Much of our Trailblazer work has been based on an early intervention model. It has given us an insight into how to approach the HRA and how much cultural change is necessary.

Strategic aims

Our key strategic aims are to:

- find solutions to housing problems at the earliest possible stage
- work collaboratively to sustain accommodation where possible
- establish a culture of planning for housing need within households, and make planning a part of the support provided
- establish links with statutory, third sector and community partners so that effective advice can be given at the time it is needed. Where necessary, early referrals can be made when more intensive support is required.

Initial mapping and insights

Based on what we know of our local situation, we anticipate a:

- 50% rise in presentations
- 300% increase in caseloads.

At BHCC we are embracing the implementation of the HRA as a very significant culture change. We have been gradually embedding insights from Trailblazer work into our existing service. We will need to accelerate this process towards April 2018. So far, we have been able to:

- develop and trial personalised housing plans (PHPs) and new ways to engage with customers to get the best outcomes
- work with partners to effect a change of approach across all of the City's advice and support agencies
- make contacts in the wider community to establish a housing advice and planning agenda within voluntary and community groups.

Home visits promote engagement

Home visiting has been long recognised as an important element in homelessness prevention. Our response to the HRA will be to provide a more responsive service based on what we have learned from the visiting officer role. Visiting officers provide engagement at the crucial time it is needed.

It seems obvious but it works. A council officer assessing an applicant at their home can encourage more meaningful disclosure than through an office-based, process-driven approach. A home visit also gives us an insight into the problems the applicant is describing.

This means that we can help applicants put their options in context when agreeing a PHP. For example, we can provide information about local housing conditions to help the applicant to assess whether moving from their current

home is in their best interest. We can explain that alternatives within the current rental market may mean less space, less attractive locations and higher rents.

Assessment and personalised plans

We anticipate that PHPs will form the basis of a more positive work practice.

We are working on standard forms for PHPs, the assessments on which they are based, and notifications and decision making so far as possible. However, the crucial issue is the way we engage with our customers as individuals. The paperwork should be a record of how we assess and make plans with each customer, not an end in itself.

There are undeniable tensions between customers' expectations and how far we can meet them. But conversations about solutions can be more meaningful when they are not driven by the processing of a homelessness application. Try engaging positively with a household facing homelessness after you've told them they're likely to have caused this situation intentionally!

Of course, this may be wishful thinking. We have concerns about legal challenges and the additional pressure on our reviews service. We are also concerned about how we prove that an assessment is acknowledged and a plan agreed by an applicant. If we undertake most assessments and plans on visits we need document signature technology that will evidence agreement by the applicant, bearing in mind that if s/he does not agree with the plan, we will need to take the further step of recording the reasons for this.

We are not sure yet how we will tackle the issue of 'non-cooperation' with actions in the plan. Our options for making suitable offers are limited by high local rents, so if applicants don't comply with the steps outlined for them we may need to discharge duty. We have concerns that by warning of this possibility, we will lose the kind of positive engagement which underpins our early intervention approach and the success of the HRA.

Early intervention a priority

Our first focus must be to encourage early applications, and to prevent homelessness through sustainment of existing accommodation. Where an applicant has already become homeless and the relief duty applies, accommodation secured must be affordable. Given that almost all private sector housing in BHCC is too costly for those on low and medium incomes, and that our duty involves taking into account the wishes and preferences of the applicant, success in complying with the HRA will rely on achieving early positive engagement.

Changing role of the caseworker

Engaging our customers from the very start will require a considerable change in how our caseworkers do their jobs. Officers' roles will need to incorporate a more coaching-centred approach than the traditional processing of applications to reach decisions on accommodation duties. Of course, we will still have to decide on those duties in many cases, but across our applicant cohorts, including non-priority and intentionally homeless households, prevention and relief duties must be applied.

Collaborative working

Trailblazer has enabled us to develop and/or enhance collaborative work, for example:

- social workers work with our housing duty teams to provide quick and holistic interventions when they're needed
- working relationships with existing partners such as Sussex Nightstop and Brighton & Hove Mediation Service have been enhanced. Equinox is being funded to intervene where substance misuse or addiction may be causing homelessness
- Sussex Central YMCA, another existing partner, is working in schools to increase awareness of homelessness
- we are building joint working practices with Southdown Support to enhance their existing early intervention practice.

We need to go beyond understanding service remits and having effective referral pathways to developing joint approaches to mutually agreed outcomes.

Conclusion

There will be a lot to be learned while the HRA is implemented. The new Act does not address housing supply but we are committed to using the changing landscape around homelessness prevention to make the biggest impact we can by preventing homelessness using early intervention. If successful, we envisage our existing service changing from Housing Options to a Housing Solutions service. Certainly, our services must prioritise prevention in a way we have not seen before, and, together with our partners, we must work on building resilience to housing problems and bring about a culture of planning with regard to housing.

Leeds: culture change and the HRA

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) is the biggest shake up to homelessness legislation since 1977. In Leeds, we have welcomed the Act as codifying and extending our current culture and practice. However, we are not complacent about the challenges the HRA will present in terms of procedural change and workload.

Homelessness in Leeds

Leeds has a population of around 781,000 people. Leeds Housing Options sees around 100 people per day in its city centre office, and around 50 more through outreach. The last published figures show that Leeds has 32 households in temporary accommodation (TA) and 27 rough sleepers. This is significantly fewer than might be expected in the current climate, where households in TA and sleeping rough are increasing nationally.

We believe that the changes we have made over the last five years to the culture within Leeds Housing Options are the reason for our performance.

Preparing for the HRA

The first step we took to prepare for the HRA was to get all of our managers in a room with a copy of the Bill. Then we read it. It may sound trivial, but making time to read the legislation and the [accompanying materials](#) was an important step.

As a team, we discussed our understanding of the legislation and its impact on us. We wrote up six case studies - reflecting the most common types of case we see - with a 'what would happen' summary for each one under the existing rules. We then wrote the same brief for each case under the new rules. This helped us to get our heads around what was different, practically, under the HRA.

We attended any courses that we could find on the subject, and with each training course, each seminar, and each new article we went back to our case studies and rewrote our 'what will happen under the new rules' summary.

When we weren't sure of something (eg could we make a section 184 decision before the relief duty had ended?) we wrote the questions down and took them to the next training/conference to ask.

By the end of this period we had six fully worked out examples with detailed explanations of how these would resolve under the new rules. In so doing, we, as a management team, got our heads around the HRA.

Cultural aspects

We had heard that a 'significant culture change' would need to take place post-HRA. No longer would local authorities send 'not in priority need' customers on their way with a smile and some good wishes. Now that we had got our head around the procedural and legal aspects of the HRA, we focused our attention on the cultural aspects.

At its core, the HRA aims to force local authorities to do two things:

- provide assistance to everyone, regardless of their priority need/intentional homelessness status
- make the resolution of housing needs a joint process, with the council and the customer both taking responsibility. This is done in the context of an increasingly bespoke approach to the assessment of need - both housing need and more generally those needs which, when unmet, contribute to homelessness.

What needed to change

Five years ago, if you came in to Leeds Housing Options we would have done two things (badly): we would have forced you down a legislative route to housing (are you homeless? Yes - section 184 assessment / no - go away) and we would have told you a long list of reasons why you could not have the thing you wanted.

This didn't work well, and was reflected in our numbers in TA at that time.

Changing our approach

With a change of management, a new approach swept through our dusty halls.

Firstly, we encouraged our staff to start thinking in terms of 'housing needs' and 'housing outcomes'. What caused the need in front of you and what can you do to assist the person to resolve that need? The focus moved beyond just 'priority need', 'intentional homelessness' and 'decision' to making 'prevention' a first consideration.

Secondly, we stopped saying 'no'. Rather than say 'no, you can't have a council house in the highest demand area of the city', we rather said 'yes', that is an option, here are its advantages and disadvantages. Let's also talk about your other options and the advantages and disadvantages of those'.

It seems simple, but not saying 'no' upfront and acknowledging the right of a customer to self-determine puts the entire interaction on a different footing. No longer does the customer feel that you are trying to deny them. They begin to feel that this is a collegiate endeavour and you are making a plan together – a personal housing plan if you will.

These changes, along with cultural changes within our management team, have had a massive impact.

Our culture and the HRA

The culture we have worked hard to embed over the past five years is very closely aligned with the culture now demanded by the HRA. For us it will be augmented and complemented by the HRA.

It is evident how a culture of joint endeavour and a focus on prevention fit well with the new duties under the HRA. Sitting down with someone, identifying the reasons they are at risk or have become homeless and, together, coming up with a plan to resolve the immediate housing need as well as tackling the reasons for that need - this is the 'bread and butter' of Leeds Housing Options.

While there may be more paperwork, a lot more reviewable decisions and a new framework to learn, the essence of the HRA is already well embedded in the culture here. That has made preparing much easier.

Challenges

There are some challenges for us associated with the implementation of their HRA that we have yet to work out. Two challenges in particular are:

- *administering the HRA*
- *more reviews*

Administering the HRA

We have heard from colleagues in Wales and Southwark that we can expect our 'back office' functions to increase by around a quarter or more. One of the biggest elements of this will be the need to keep personalised housing plans (PHPs) under continual review.

We have not yet settled on how we will do this. Will we text or e-mail people and ask them to contact us if there are any changes to their situation or, given that the client group with whom we work don't always have access to mobile phones or the internet, are regular meetings needed?

We will probably end up with a combination of both, with an emphasis on customers logging on to their 'PHP online' and keeping us updated of any changes to their situation, especially as Leeds, like most other local authorities, is increasingly moving towards online service provision.

More reviews?

Under the HRA, the number of decisions that can be reviewed is increased. Until the Act goes live and local housing solicitors have had an opportunity to engage with clients, there is no way for us to know how many reviews we can expect, or the nature of such reviews.

While we will strive, for example, to agree the steps in the PHP with applicants, it is inevitable that some applicants will not agree to our proposed steps and the plan will have to be produced without agreement. How many of these applicants will then seek a review of the proposed steps? How 'light touch' can these reviews be? Will many of the reviews lead to applications for appeals until there is a body of case law? None of the questions can be answered until we go live.

Technical and other changes

For Leeds Housing Options there is the additional challenge of the implementation of a new ICT system and a move to a new office, both scheduled to happen at roughly the same time as the HRA goes live.

It will, no doubt, be a busy few months for us!

Lewisham: working collaboratively

Lewisham council faces huge challenges in dealing with homelessness. The increasing demand on the service is mainly driven by a shortage of affordable homes.

Despite the pressure, we have seen only a small increase in the number of households living in temporary accommodation, and a significant reduction in nightly-paid accommodation. This is because we:

- recognise that early intervention is a cost-effective way of dealing with homelessness, which provides better outcomes for applicants
- have taken a multi-faceted approach to increasing the supply of permanent housing and more sustainable forms of temporary accommodation.

Driving up supply

To help prevent homelessness, we have increased the supply of housing by:

- buying 100 properties on the open market
- converting a former care home into 21 units of temporary accommodation and an empty office block into 27 units of temporary accommodation
- creating [PLACE/Ladywell](#), an innovative 'pop-up' temporary housing village and community space for 24 families.

Using council-wide data

Through our Trailblazing programme, and alongside existing digital transformation projects, we are combining data across council departments to identify households at risk of homelessness and developing support interventions to target these households.

Rethinking service design

We are developing a prevention hub. The hub pulls together a range of services, both internal and external, and allows us to focus not just on homelessness prevention but also on addressing the root causes of homelessness. The hub will offer a:

- wide-ranging assessment that takes customers' personal circumstances into consideration
- bespoke range of services and options to help customers out of homelessness (or risk of homelessness) in the short term, and to become more resilient against potential causes of homelessness in the long term.

Examples of work facilitated by the hub are:

Benefits: we have tested how our housing benefit department's expertise can increase effective homelessness prevention.

Employment: in partnership with the DWP, we will be recruiting specialist advisers to help clients find sustainable employment.

'Find a home' workshops: these workshops support our customers to find PRS accommodation and arrange viewings. Letting agents often give advice and tips, and share details of available properties.

Children's services: a housing officer is based in Lewisham's multi-agency safeguarding hub to offer advice or earlier interventions. This helps make preventing homelessness a priority across the council.

Deposits and loans: Since November 2016 we have operated a rent deposit scheme using the credit union, which has helped 21 customers secure PRS accommodation. 20 per cent of these loans have already been repaid. We have also provided 100 prevention loans, and over half of these have been repaid.

Rethinking initial contact

We are improving initial customer contact by offering interviews in different locations, such as libraries and a local credit union. We have changed the language we use away from more formal assessment and legal jargon, and we include questions that seek to understand the problem from the customer perspective. As part of this 'collaborative conversation' prototype, we make it clear that both parties have responsibilities by using the word 'we'.

Although appointments take longer, results are encouraging. This work has also fed into our trials of personalised housing plans.

Southend: planning for the unknown

Southend-on-Sea is a densely populated seaside town. Like most of the South-East, it has many private rented sector rents that far exceed the local housing allowance rates.

Increases in rough sleeping over the last year and recorded in the [annual rough sleeping figures published by MHCLG](#) mean that our annual rough sleeper count puts us in the top 10 for numbers nationally. A sobering thought for a small town like ours, particularly as single homeless people are the very cohort the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) was largely brought about to help.

Preparing for the HRA

In preparation for the Act's implementation, my officers and I have been on the training courses delivered by the [National Practitioner Support Service](#) and others. We've been to see how the trailblazer project in Southwark is working and have no doubt exhausted the limits of the manager for Southwark Housing Solutions's patience. He must have been asked the same questions from other councils so many times that he hears them in his sleep.

We've been to conferences, had dedicated team meetings, pored through the draft Code of Guidance and set up our personalised housing plan templates. We are in the process of revamping our information leaflets and website.

We're setting up pathway plans, reviewing our private sector offer and talking to all the agencies and providers we can think of. And that's the easy stuff.

Planning for the unknown

What's especially hard is preparing for the questions we don't know the answers to. You are probably asking them too:

Numbers: how many more people will access our service after the HRA comes into force, and will they arrive in a flood or a trickle?

Stage of approach: will we see more people at the prevention or relief stage?

Single people or families: will we get more approaches from single people?

Process: how will the additional review stages affect the process?

Mind-set: how will officers cope with the massive change of mind-set required?

Initial reception: is our current reception process the right way to deliver the service?

Office space: if our interviews are going to double in length (as Southwark's have), do we have enough interview rooms?

IT: can our IT system deliver on the new requirements?

Funding: will we really generate so many savings that our services will be self-funding within three years? (I'm pretty sure I DO know the answer to this one).

Without the answers, it's hard to decide how many staff to recruit and into which posts, or whether to totally restructure the team or just tweak it. I can't definitively argue the case for redesigning the 'front door' to the service or for spending tens of thousands of pounds on a new software solution.

Building on what we have

Because the HRA introduces a raft of new duties and differs in key ways from the Welsh Act, I can't say with certainty what the impact will be on my service.

However, even though we move into an uncertain future, there are things I can be certain of. My officers deliver a fantastic service now and will continue to do so. My team want to help people and that's what they'll continue to do.

We'll carry on negotiating with landlords and family members to keep people in tenancies. We'll keep clearing arrears when it's the responsible thing to do. We'll keep giving people honest and meaningful advice on what they can do to help themselves. We'll continue to innovate as we did with our Housing First property for rough sleepers with complex needs.

If you're advocating for someone with a local authority come the HRA, just bear in mind that this is all new for us too.