

Stopping homelessness before it starts (again)

Homelessness prevention and day centres

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Introduction

Why talk about homelessness prevention in day centres?

With the passage of the Homelessness Reduction Act, prevention has been placed squarely at the heart of the Government's approach to homelessness. Local authorities across the country now have expectations placed on them to prevent homelessness for a broader category of people than ever before. They will not be able to carry out this task alone. Inevitably, they will look to their partners from across the local community to work with them, support them and share good practice.

Day centres are ideally placed to support this delivery. Not only do they have ready access to those who are homeless or on the margins of homelessness, but they have considerable expertise in building relationships and delivering support to people at all points of the homelessness journey. Day centres intervene with landlords, support people out of debt, maximise incomes, refer into housing, connect people with health services and, significantly, deliver the varied interventions needed to help people retain their accommodation. Ending and preventing homelessness is integral to what day centres do.

However, not all day centres describe their work as 'prevention'. Indeed, most services have a narrow understanding of 'homelessness prevention' as preventing eviction. Yet preventing eviction is only one small part of preventing homelessness. The many other interventions needed to support people to make confident, healthy and happy choices in their lives are everyday business to your average day centre.

This guidance aims to demonstrate the central role day centres play in preventing homelessness, and to help these services to find their voice. The work that we do both structured and unstructured, formal and informal prevents our clients, guests, service users and customers from becoming homeless for the first, second or third time. In the current climate, it will become ever more important for day centres to be able to demonstrate this expertise and champion the crucial work that they do.

What is a day centre?

This guidance refers to day centres but accepts that this is a 'catch all' term for a range of different services. The name 'day centre' can be loaded and, as such, some services prefer to describe themselves as drop-ins, resource centres, hubs or wellbeing centres. The services described in this guidance operate in a variety of ways. However, they are all places where people who are homeless or on the margins of homelessness can come to receive support. The type of support may vary from hot food, to structured advice appointments and anything in between. All of these services are included under the name 'day centre' in this report.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for anyone working within the homelessness sector who would like to gain a better understanding of the range of work that day centres do, and how this helps prevent homelessness.

It is also for anyone working for, volunteering in or using a day centre to help them to articulate the role their work plays in prevention.

Methods

A total of 100 day centres and services took part in the research that informed this report. Information was gathered through the following means:

- Online questionnaire completed by 91 individuals from 87 different services
- Telephone interviews with eight organisations
- Three focus groups involving 38 managers, staff, volunteers and peer mentors from 28 different day centres
- Three focus groups involving 30 individuals with lived experience in London, Manchester and Brighton
- Four one-to-one interviews with individuals with lived experience of homelessness and homeless day centres

All data gathering and analysis was carried out by either Homeless Link's Day Centres Project Manager and the freelance research consultant commissioned for this guidance.

What is homelessness prevention?

Why do definitions matter?

How we define ‘homelessness prevention’ is important because it determines how much of the work that day centres do should be described as prevention. Many services intuitively define prevention as ‘intervening before someone becomes homeless’ and include only a small element of their work. The Government takes a broader view of prevention work, however, and this forms the basis of the work that local authorities do as the Homelessness Reduction Act takes effect.

How has homelessness prevention been defined and categorised in the past?

Homelessness prevention has been defined by the Government as “*providing people with the ways and means to address their housing and other needs to avoid homelessness*”¹.

Prevention has been further defined by academic literature, which has described three categories of prevention², summarised in Table 1 below. While useful, these categories are too broad to usefully describe the range of work undertaken by day centres.

In the Homelessness Prevention Programme in 2016, the Government chose to focus on five strands of prevention³, which are also summarised in Table 1. This is more useful as it has more focus on the areas of work covered by homelessness services. However, it omits the ‘big picture’ view, which focuses on social policy more broadly.

Table 1: Previous categorisations of homelessness prevention

Academic Literature	
Primary Prevention	Reduce risk of homelessness among general population or large parts of population e.g. Housing policy, overall welfare settlement etc
Secondary Prevention	Prevent future homelessness occurring by targeting groups at risk e.g. care leavers, people leaving prison or experiencing crisis situations that may lead to homelessness such as eviction or relationship breakdown
Tertiary Prevention	Targeted at people who have already been affected by homelessness – avoid repeat homelessness.
Homelessness Prevention Programme (2016)	
Universal prevention	Timely support for all about housing and financial issues
Targeted prevention	Better identifying those at risk and providing early interventions
Crisis relief	Effective interventions and advice to resolve a crisis
Recovery	Accommodation and support targeted at helping people to exit homelessness rapidly
Move-on support	Longer term support to sustain independent living

¹ www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-data-notes-and-definitions

² V. Busch-Geertsema V and S Fitzpatrick S (2008) Effective Homelessness Prevention? Explaining Reductions in Homelessness in Germany and England, *European Journal of Homelessness*, 2, pp.69-95

³ www.gov.uk/government/publications/homelessness-prevention-programme

How do day centres define and categorise homelessness prevention?

Three focus groups with 38 Managers and staff from 28 different day centres discussed the meaning of homelessness prevention.

All three groups started with a narrow definition of prevention as intervening prior to a person becoming homeless for the first time. They defined prevention as: stopping someone who is currently housed becoming homeless; preventing someone from becoming homeless in the first place; early intervention to prevent street homelessness. However, the definition of ‘prevention’ became broader as the groups’ discussions progressed. These definitions are summarised in Table 2 below.

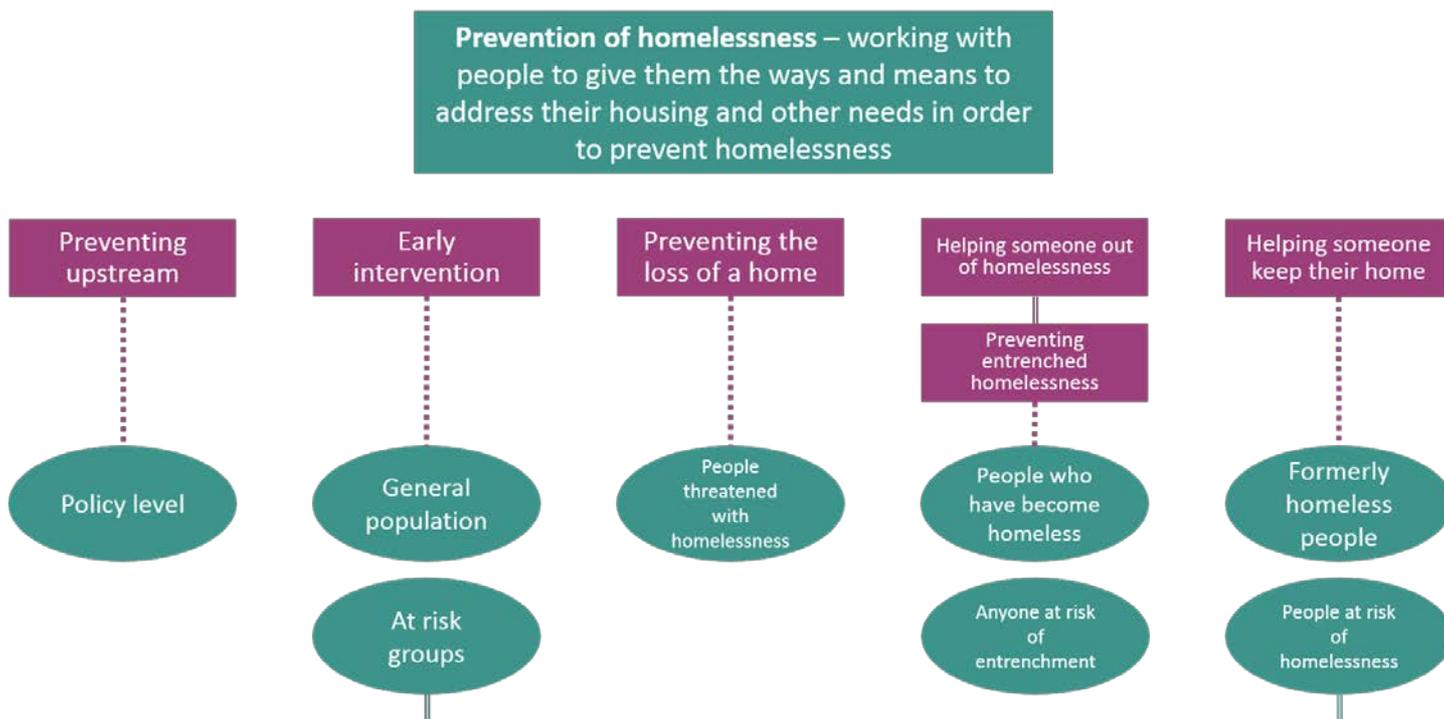
Table 2. Focus groups’ definitions of homelessness prevention

Focus group 1		
Preventing someone from becoming homeless in the first place	Prevention upstream: Housing policy, welfare policy etc	Promoting resilience
	Prevention before homelessness starts	
	Preventing ongoing homelessness	Prevention through intervening with dependency and support needs
	Preventing repeat homelessness	
Focus group 2		
Early intervention to prevent street homelessness	Early intervention	
	Crisis avoidance	
	Crisis intervention	
	Prevention of repeat homelessness	
	Preventing entrenched homelessness	
Focus group 3		
Stopping someone who is currently housed becoming homeless	Preventing someone from losing their home	Early intervention
		Crisis intervention
	Helping people keep their housing	Sticking plasters
		Activities
	Preventing repeat homelessness	Caring
		Socialisation

Combining the work of the focus groups, we have come up with the following categorisation of prevention of homelessness day centres:

- **Preventing upstream** – influencing the legal framework and welfare system
- **Early intervention** – providing opportunities for the general public to seek advice when needed and delivering targeted advice to at risk groups such as those leaving prison or the care system
- **Preventing the loss of a home** – supporting those threatened directly with homelessness to avoid homelessness
- **Helping someone out of homelessness** – working with those who have become homeless to end homelessness as quickly as possible and to prevent people becoming entrenched
- **Helping someone to keep their home** – delivering the support needed to avoid repeat homelessness with those who have experienced homelessness in the past or those who may be vulnerable to it.

Diagram 1. Categorisation of prevention of homelessness in day centres

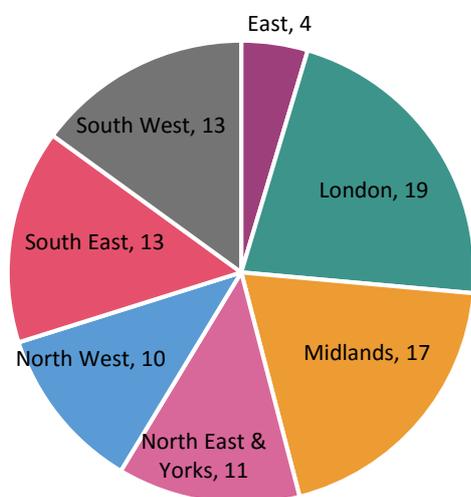


What do day centres say about prevention?

Key points

- Information from 87 day centres/drop-ins was received from the online survey. The median day service works with 400 service users per year with 4.5 staff members. Most service users are either sleeping rough or 'hidden homeless'.
- 95% of day centres said they offered some level of support with housing advice and referrals, benefits advice, debt advice and support, education, training and employment (ETE) and maintaining a tenancy. Day centres also offer advice and support with substance misuse, mental health, physical health, offending behaviour and positive activities such as art and gardening.
- The majority of interactions take the form of signposting or informal conversations but day centres also offered a wide array of specialist advice delivered both by their own staff and by the staff of other organisations based onsite.
- 42% of day centres receive funding that mentions preventing homelessness but very few receive any specific funding to tackle homelessness prevention.
- Day centres are successful at preventing homelessness because they undertake positive partnership work, provide specialist advice and support, have a welcoming, non-judgmental ethos and approach and have ability to build confidence and foster community.
- The key challenges to preventing homelessness are a lack of adequate funding, supporting clients with complex needs and a lack of affordable housing.

Number of survey responses from each region (87 responses)



Who do day centres work with?

Services reported working with between 3 and 3,500 individuals over the past year, with an average of 624. However, the median number of service users is 400, and due to the broad range in service size, this is a more useful measure than the average.

The majority of day centres work with the full range of homeless groups although a small number focus specifically on rough sleepers or another group such as those in temporary accommodation. Rough sleepers account for a small majority of day centre attendees (28.5%), followed closely by those at risk of homelessness (27.5%) and those who are sofa surfing or 'hidden homeless' (26.2%).

Services had up to 108 paid staff, but the average number of paid full-time equivalent staff was 8 (median of 4). This underlines the fact that most centres are doing a great deal of work with very few paid staff. The median number of volunteers is 30. As might be expected in general, the higher the number of clients, the higher the number of staff. However, numbers of volunteers are only marginally related to client numbers.

What do day centres do to prevent homelessness?

The survey reflected the huge range of work being undertaken by day centres nationally. Around 95% of services said they offered some level of support with housing advice and referrals, benefits advice, debt advice and support, education, training and employment (ETE) and maintaining a tenancy. Day centres also offer advice and support with substance misuse, mental health, physical health, offending behaviour and positive activities such as art and gardening.

As might be expected, there was a relatively large proportion of work being undertaken on housing advice and referrals and benefits advice both by day centres themselves and through referral to other services. ETE is usually undertaken onsite either in groups or through referral to specialist services that attend the centre.

Every service offers a range of specialist advice and support either themselves or through an on-site partner agency. The larger services and those with more staff generally offer more specialist advice and support while smaller services offer more signposting (with a few exceptions).

Table 3. Proportion of day centres delivering different types of specialist advice⁴

Includes one-to-one advice from staff or an onsite service.	250 or fewer service users/year (n=25)	251-600 service users/year (n=24)	> 600 service users/year (n=24)
Housing referrals	61%	88%	83%
Specialist housing advice	64%	79%	79%
Advice on welfare benefits	60%	88%	96%
Debt advice and support	52%	46%	71%
ETE (including group work)	52%	83%	92%
Tenancy sustainment (including group work)	60%	83%	79%

Table 4. Proportion of day centres offering specialised support

Includes one-to-one advice, signposting to an onsite service and group work	250 or fewer service users/year (n=25)	600 or fewer service users/year (n=24)	> 600 service users/year (n=24)
Improving mental health	56%	83%	83%
Improving physical health	56%	71%	79%
Addressing drug or alcohol misuse	64%	79%	75%
Reducing offending behaviour	36%	71%	67%
Provision of positive activities	64%	79%	83%

Support was offered in various ways, but signposting to services off-site or 'informal interactions' made up many of the interactions. These casual conversations with service users help them to build relationships and start to discuss important issues and are an important part of day centres' daily work. Almost a quarter of interactions on issues such as housing and benefits advice took the form of one-to-one structured support.

⁴ Statistics on services of different sizes exclude 6 services who did not record their total number of service users. For this reason, overall percentages and those grouped by sizes may be different.

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The majority of positive activities such as gardening and art workshops took place in groups, and centres mentioned a large variety of activities offered.

The most unexpected finding was that, while day centres most frequently signpost their service users to offsite support for debt issues, they less commonly offer support onsite and rarely have informal conversations with service users about this. In contrast, centres discuss offending behaviour relatively often both informally and as part of structured one-to-one sessions but rarely signpost to other support on- or offsite, or offer group activities on related issues.

Day centres also mentioned a selection of other activities and support that they deliver onsite. This includes:

- practical services, such as showers and laundry facilities
- access to primary care services (GP, nurse, optician)
- additional employability training e.g. literacy and numeracy support, IT, a Women into Work course, ESOL and training within the centres' social enterprises
- support around relationships; personal development/life coaching
- support for people who have been trafficked; outreach into local B&B accommodation.

Why are the key features of successful prevention work?

Day centres identified four key elements that made them effective at preventing homelessness: partnership work, the provision of specialist advice and support, overall ethos and approach, and the ability to build confidence and foster community.

Partnership work

“One of our main successes is enabling our clients get whatever help they need in one friendly place” ~ Large centre, Yorkshire

“We provide the vital first contact for service users to access appropriate services to meet their needs.” ~ Medium-sized centre, East of England

The majority of services feel that partnership work is one of the most important component of success. This takes the form both of partnerships with agencies across the local area and the use of day centres to provide hubs where a range of services can be accessed on site.

Some centres highlight their relationships with housing providers – these include local authority housing teams, private rented sector (PRS) landlords and tenancy support schemes. This provides opportunities for centres to find accommodation, as well as to advocate for their service users, including challenging and preventing evictions.

Several day centres highlight the value of their partnerships with specialist support services – including physical and mental health services, substance misuse, debt advice and life skills training – which enables service users to access support that meets their individual needs. One centre highlights its relationship with the police and another with local businesses, who have provided a supportive route into employment.

A number of day centres focus on the role they have developed as community hubs, hosting one or more local agency via drop-ins and/or structured appointments. A variety of services attend these hubs including rough sleeper and local authority housing teams, Department for Work and Pensions staff, GP, nurse and primary care services, local Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAAT), Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) (Probation), Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Several day centres highlight the importance of multi-agency meetings held at the day centre, involving representatives from statutory and other voluntary sector agencies.

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Acting as a hub is perceived to support homelessness prevention because:

- on-site services are more accessible, promoting take-up and enabling the timely referral of service users
- it encourages workers to share skills, improving joint working.
- it opens up new opportunities for service users. For example, one centre negotiated extra beds from the council as a result of relationships developed in the hub.

Specialist advice and support

“Drop-ins play an increasingly vital role in ensuring that vulnerable people are able to have their needs assessed at an early stage and that supportive interventions are planned early on in the process.” ~ Large service, East Midlands

This is delivered in a wide range of areas including housing and benefits, advice, support with training, employment and volunteering, anti-trafficking support and specialist support on substance misuse and health and wellbeing. The breadth of advice given enables services to work flexibly and respond to a wide range of presenting needs. This was described by a number of day centres as delivering a holistic service.

Day centres emphasised that delivery of specialist advice and support is connected to having well trained, skilled staff who are empathetic and consistent in their approach. Specific staff member roles highlighted included housing advice workers, tenancy support worker and an intensive support worker with a wide remit covering tenancy sustainment, sourcing housing options and liaison with other local services. A large number of day centres noted the importance of staff building trusting relationships with service users, highlighting good listening skills and being person centred as key. This ensures that they are able to identify their needs and make referrals to specialist services, where needed. Through their approach, service users receive appropriate and timely interventions.

Ethos and approach

“As statutory services reduce their offer, even in terms of available space to spend time, the need for a safe supportive environment is increasing.” ~ Large centre, East of England

“Clients find it easier to establish relationships and trust with us than more formal approaches.” ~ Medium-sized centre, South-East

Day centres are non-judgmental, safe spaces, which offer open access supportive services. There was an emphasis on building relationships, enabling them to get to know service users in an informal way and build trust. Services are supportive, flexible and person-centred, which enables them to respond to need. Many services are also non-time limited and this was identified by day centres as a strength, as it enabled people to return to them in times of need. Some services also emphasised the importance of being service-user led which enable them to better respond to what their clients want and need, build confidence and has also contributed to more effective partnerships.

Confidence and community

“Confidence and skill raising in our clients in order to help them to help themselves is so important - this includes broadening horizons beyond ourselves to services and activities in their local community and further afield to encourage meaningful use of time and more importantly to reduce isolation.” ~ Small day centre, North-West

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Finally, a number of day centres highlighted the importance of promoting wellbeing through building confidence, skills and promoting a sense of community. Staff and volunteers increase service users' self-esteem and resilience, which contributes to their recovery and independence. This was also accomplished through the provision of activities, including practical learning activities focused on life skills and tenancy sustainment, and general activities such as art workshops and creative writing.

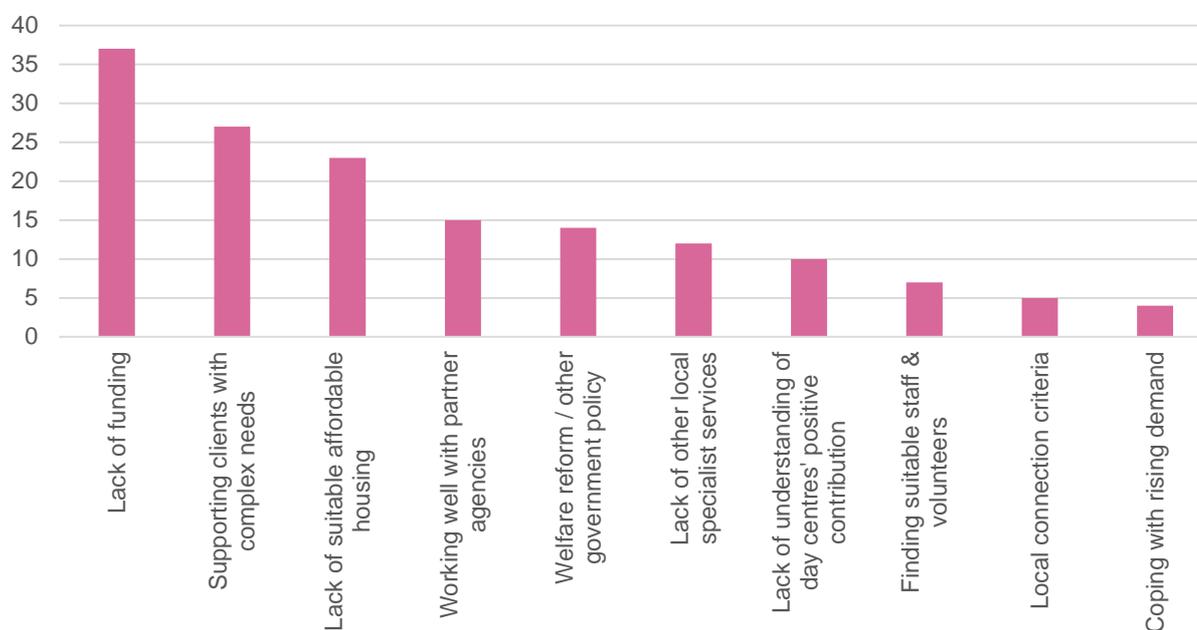
What are the key challenges in preventing homelessness?

“Day centres are integral to preventing homelessness. I think they are undervalued and under resourced and should be recognised for their contribution to enabling homeless people to access the basic and specialist services they need to prevent them from becoming homeless.” ~ Medium-sized day centre, East of England

“Day centres can sometimes be looked at as enabling individuals making poor lifestyle choices but often it is a matter of stopping them from going further backwards. We see many with a background of abuse and neglect going back years into early childhood which is left unaddressed - many are suffering trauma and there is a strong link to poor mental health. Lack of other services dealing with these underlying issues leave a vulnerable group with nowhere else to turn.” ~ Small day centre, South-West

There was agreement about the challenges that were faced by day centres trying to prevent homelessness. Over half of respondents mentioned lack of funding as an issue restricting their ability to have adequate staffing or even remain open. Services also highlighted the challenges of working with the client group – these concerns centred primarily on supporting people with complex needs and the difficulties of engaging with people who either did not want to engage or had little motivation. A lack of suitable and/or affordable housing was also a key challenge to effectively preventing homelessness.

Chart 1. Main challenges in delivering homelessness prevention services



How day centres prevent homelessness

EARLY INTERVENTION		
Type of intervention	Activities	How activities prevent homelessness
Provision of drop-in advice and signposting services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Advice • Benefits Advice • Provision of hub, satellite services or easy access to relevant support • Signposting to other services 	Ensure anyone in need of advice receives it in a timely manner.
Advertising and promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local advertising • Leaflets; posters • Promotional activities • Close partnership with local authority 	Ensure the community is aware of the service and can access it as need arises.
Targeted provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prison through the gates schemes • Hospital discharge support • Schemes aimed at supporting care leavers • Critical time interventions 	Target prevention activities at certain groups during high-risk transition periods.

PREVENTING THE LOSS OF A HOME		
Type of intervention	Activities	How activities prevent homelessness
No First Night Out Schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible support to prevent homelessness and avoid escalation including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Landlord interventions ○ Debt support ○ Housing referrals ○ Family mediation 	Prevent those at risk of rough sleeping from losing their home or find them alternative provision prior to street homelessness
Eviction prevention schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiate with landlords where there may be issues or arrears • Support service users to set up rent repayments if there are arrears • Attend court to delay eviction 	Direct interventions with landlords and the courts to prevent eviction
Family mediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting families to resolve differences in order to avoid homelessness 	Family member can remain within the original home
Basic support package	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of telephone / internet • Support making and keeping appointments • Provision of fares to attend appointments 	Facilitate addressing of issues and support maintaining stable lifestyle
Income maximisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits advice • Budgeting support • Use of furniture schemes and low-cost living alternatives 	Maximise income and support service users to make best use of their resources.
Education, training and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referring to appropriate education 	Ensure service users have good

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employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering schemes • Finding sustainable employment 	opportunities for finding well-paid sustainable employment
Rent deposit schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paying or guaranteeing deposits 	Ensure service users have access to accommodation before becoming homeless
PRS access schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paying or guaranteeing deposits • Guaranteeing rent to landlords • Finding suitable landlords and properties • Supporting tenants to maintain properties • Maintaining positive relationships with landlords to avoid any issues 	Developing a supply of suitable housing for people on low income or who are vulnerable to homelessness
Tenancy support schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting service users to maintain their tenancies by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintaining regular contact ○ Supporting them to set up utilities ○ Supporting them to create a comfortable home ○ Supporting service users to pay bills in a timely manner ○ Assisting service users with any issues that arise ○ Assisting service user to build links within their community 	Ensure service users are successfully managing their accommodation and avoid any potential eviction
Health focused prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing links to healthcare providers • Supporting service users to maintain 	Support service users to have stable healthcare to avoid critical situations and maintain a positive lifestyle

HELPING SOMEONE OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

Type of intervention	Activities	How activities prevent homelessness
Provision of basic essentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referrals to food banks • Free meals/showers etc • Use of laundry facilities 	Assist service users to stabilise and maintain a healthy lifestyle in order to address situation
Provision of specialist advice and referrals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits advice and income maximisation • Housing advice • Referrals to appropriate accommodation 	Ensure each person has timely and efficient support to exit homelessness as soon as possible
Signposting and referral to specialist support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to substance misuse services • Referral to mental health services • Referral to relevant health support services • Referral to counselling or other support 	Ensure each person receives the appropriate help with any support needs as soon as possible

PREVENTING ENTRENCHED HOMELESSNESS		
Type of intervention	Activities	How activities prevent homelessness
Timely advice and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing easy access to services through hub model or satellite service provision • Referral to support • Provision of advice services onsite or through outreach • Support rough sleepers to access support and attend appointments 	Ensure people spend as little time as possible sleeping rough or in unsuitable housing
No second night out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid access to emergency accommodation • Rapid support to resolve homelessness 	Ensure no one spends a prolonged period sleeping rough
Provision of activities and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art, music, creative groups • Practical skills e.g. gardening • Confidence building and community groups 	Develop a sense of self and wellbeing in order to promote move on from homelessness and street lifestyles
Trauma-informed care and PIE approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure services to support service users with trauma • Co-produce services with service users • Design service model to promote recovery 	Enable service users to recover from trauma and move forwards with their lives
Support service users with complex needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) • Complex needs workers • Partnership building 	Ensure service users with complex needs receive the support they need

HELPING SOMEONE KEEP THEIR HOME		
Type of intervention	Activities	How activities prevent homelessness
Tenancy support schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting service users to maintain their tenancies by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintaining regular contact ○ Supporting utility set up ○ Supporting them to create a comfortable home ○ Supporting timely bill payment ○ Assisting with issues that arise 	Ensure service users are successfully managing their accommodation and avoid any potential eviction
Education, training and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathways for referring service users to training and education • Employment support services • Volunteering schemes • Social enterprise; apprenticeships 	Enable service users to develop their employability and maximise their income
Provision of activities and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art, music, creative groups • Practical skills e.g. bricklaying • Confidence building and community groups 	Develop a sense of self and wellbeing in order to promote move on from homelessness and street lifestyles

How do day centres fund and measure prevention?

What funding is received to prevent homelessness?

28 day centres said that they receive homelessness funding that includes an element of prevention. Funding was primarily received from the local authority, statutory bodies or charitable trusts, and typically focused on one or two specific staff posts. Very few organisations received any holistic funding for a 'prevention service' or programme. Whilst most funding applications and grants might mention 'prevention' or 'early intervention', few grants were made specifically for this type of work. This underlines the fact that most of the work done by day centres could be classified as a type of prevention.

Table 5. Source and use of funding

Local authority only	
City or county council	Outreach worker
	Supporting people and no second night out
	Rough sleeper outreach including tenancy support
	Homelessness prevention and welfare services
	Mental health outreach service
	Two advice workers
	Substance misuse worker
Combination of local authority and other sources	
Local authority plus charitable trusts including Oak Foundation and Big Lottery Fund	Day centre advice and support team
	Hospital discharge project
	Learning programme
	Alcohol prevention service
Charitable Trusts	
Including Comic Relief, Big Lottery Fund, Lloyds TSB	Intensive support worker for young people
	Youth worker for homelessness prevention
	Support worker
	Activities coordinator
Other voluntary sector funding	
Funded by a local housing provider and a local charity	Housing advisor
	Outreach worker
Fundraised income	
Donations and fundraising	Funding main centre activities

How do day centres measure their prevention work?

Around a third of day centres gave information on how they measure the prevention work that they do. Very few day centres had any measures specifically for prevention. A few day centres used standard local authority prevention return statistic (these are known as P1E measures and are included in the Appendix to this report). However, most day centres measured outputs in the form of advice/support received, housing, advice and support outcomes and self-assessments such as the Outcomes Star.

Table 6. Prevention outcomes measured by day centres

Type of measurement	
Standard P1E (local authority) returns	(see Appendix I for details)
Housing-based outcomes	Moved into accommodation
	Sustained tenancy for set periods of time
Housing-based outputs	Accommodation advice provided
	Number of acceptances into local accommodation providers
Other outcomes	Substance related outcomes
	Employment outcomes
	Benefits outcomes
	Health and wellbeing outcomes
Other outputs	Day to day successes measured
	Accessing health services
	GP registration
	Accessing substance misuse services
	Support given on issues that could lead to homelessness
Self-assessment tools	Advice given
	Self-assessment form completed several times a year
	Assessment wheel
	Outcomes star (mentioned by several services)

What do people with lived experience say about prevention work in day centres?

Key points

- Having people with lived experience of homelessness volunteering or working in support services helps service users to feel understood, gives them hope and encourages them to move forwards with their recovery.
- The first port of call for someone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is often the local authority, and this can be a negative experience.
- Day centres best prevent homelessness by providing welcoming spaces that deliver specialist advice and support.
- People need community, and day centres can sometimes provide this.
- Day centres can be intimidating if they are chaotic, especially for women.
- Day centres could do more to engage those in active addiction.
- People with lived experience are able to identify gaps in services and develop initiatives to fill those gaps.

This chapter is based on conversations with 30 people with lived experience in three different focus groups, and four individual interviews. The interviewees were either sleeping rough or in insecure housing. Half of one focus group were currently in a temporary hostel. The majority of the other people had moved on from homelessness recently or several years previously.

Focus groups and interviews covered topics from what might have prevented individuals from becoming homeless, to what is needed from services. Some key themes emerged around the importance of lived experience, the essential features valued by day centres, and transition points or gaps in services. While many of the issues raised by those with lived experience had a great deal in common with those raised by services, a few issues, such as the importance of open-ended, open-access services and offering free food, challenge common practices such as charging for lunches, restricting access to specific groups and moving people on within certain timeframes.

Lived experience is key to successful service delivery

Current and former service users place huge value on involving people with lived experience in service delivery. Having people with lived experience (who have already taken steps towards recovery) volunteering or working within services instils hope that a better future is possible – this is instrumental in inspiring change and helps people progress with their recovery.

“[When I was homeless and using drugs], I just thought this was as good as it gets. There’s an element of hope when you speak to someone who you know has been there...a physical presence of what’s possible”

“It was people that was already on the ladder that got me to the stage where I am now and now I’m on that ladder and I hope I’m helping people that come in now to get on that ladder”

“I can confidently say that the only reason I’m sitting here and not in addiction is because I’ve followed peoples’ lived experiences from being at that point where I’m really stuck not knowing what to do, to now sitting here with a job, with somewhere to live. Everything that I’ve done up to now, it’s because someone else has done it before me.”

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Talking to people within services who had lived experiences is preferred because there is often a better connection. Service users feel that there is more empathy and a lack of judgement from those who have experienced similar things. In contrast, some staff teams could stigmatise or be perceived to stigmatise (although certain services were specifically praised for being non-judgmental).

“When the personal experience comes in, you don’t even have to say it generally, when you’re with somebody there’s a connection I feel without even voicing it.”

“You know you’re not going to be judged and you know there’s not going to be any stigma there. There is still judgement and stigma in services. Whether it’s very subconscious, we’ve all experienced it and if you’re working with someone who’s been there and done that, that isn’t there. Even if you just perceived that you’re being judged that can stop you”

“I think the one thing you’ve got to say about the centre is nobody judges anyone. No one is better than anyone. I’m no different now to when I first walked in here with the pack on, well maybe a bit wiser...nobody judges anybody because we all know everyone was exactly the same here.”

Volunteers or advocates with lived experience are also valuable because they ‘speak the same language’ as service users and can break down barriers.

“They say it really quick ‘oh you have to do this and that’ instead of ‘stage 1, stage 2 etc’ the way a professional speaks. Speak quicker and get it all over with. Different way of conversation.”

“I’ve got a long history of addictions so if anyone’s got an addiction, I just take them round [to the substance misuse service] and I know most of the staff there anyway so it’s easy for me to just walk round there.”

Finally, enabling former service users or those with lived experience to become volunteers also helps them to move on – it builds confidence and self-esteem.

“It makes a big difference. To come off the streets and be a volunteer here. I volunteer now, I do peer mentoring. We’re the basic frontline.”

“It gives you confidence when you give us trust – you trust us with lots of things. I’m trusted to go out with money.”

The first port of call is the Council

In most cases, people had attempted to gain support from the council when they first became homeless, and although the participants came from different parts of the country, this was generally reported as a negative experience. Councils had either turned people away without help or made them feel unimportant. Placed in a trauma-informed context, there is a risk that negative interactions (with either local authorities or homelessness services) may contribute to the trauma of homelessness. This underlines the importance of the new duties placed on councils by the Homelessness Reduction Act but is also a reminder that councils need to work differently to avoid re-traumatising homeless people and effectively support those with complex needs. This may involve closer partnerships with local day and advice services who have specialist skills.

“The council is all official. You are just a number.”

“You think that you’re on your bones, you go to the council. You think ‘they’ve got to help me’. They say ‘see you later’.”

“The Council said no, cos we’re over 40 we’re not disabled and don’t have dependent kids so we’re priority zero which is understandable, we’re fit and healthy but it’s difficult when they just say no. I panicked. What the hell do I do now?”

“If I go to the town hall, I get kicked out or the police come for me because all they feed me is bullshit.”

Day centres are welcoming and provide timely, ongoing support

Food can be life saving, but day centres are most valued for delivering ongoing specialist advice and support

The focus groups described what they wanted from services as well as identifying the key features of services they felt were good. They highlighted the importance of meeting basic needs but particularly stressed the need to be able to access timely specialist support and for services to work in partnership to deliver this.

Food, showers and basic facilities are important and can be the hook to draw people in. The importance of being able to use the phone and get support with paperwork is significant, especially as dealing with homelessness, benefits, and other support needs could be bureaucratic and paperwork heavy.

“I used the local day centre. Saved my life. I could have a warm shower and stuff like that - that’s basically all it was. There were caring people who were trying their best. There was no housing advice in there or mental health advice in there.”

“When you’re on the streets and you can’t look after yourself properly obviously there’s food there, there’s a shower – even clothes and that. It’s not just that – just the advice you can get while you’re there about all sorts of different topics, there’s always someone who’ll be able to signpost you to someone who can give you help.”

“I come here for the help with my house, my benefits. Food it’s nice, it’s good but it’s secondary. If I don’t get food, that’s ok. As long as I get my help, I’m happy with that.”

“Without the help of the day centre, I wouldn’t have been able to get through all of the paperwork that you have to do. We’ve got no credit on the phone to do anything”.

Day centres are valued for the support that they offer, especially when this is specialist, ongoing and responsive to need. There were numerous examples given of day centres ending and preventing homelessness by providing support in crisis situations and over the longer-term.

It is important, even for those who have successfully moved on, that they can continue to access support if needed. This helped to avoid future crises.

“When I was first losing my flat, I went to the Council and got no help. Then I came to the advice service here. They helped me find a flat, a deposit, furniture. If something happens, I just talk to them”

“I became homeless because of the council. I came here 4 weeks ago and got lots of support. They contacted the council, helped me fill in the forms. I’m sleeping rough but I’ve got a [flat] viewing this week now.”

“At the moment I’ve had some problems with the jobcentre which I’d sort out for someone else but I’ve asked someone for help sorting it out cos I’d get all flustered so I’m actually using the services now even though I’ve been volunteering here for a long time.”

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“Once you’ve got a flat your problems are not ended. You’ve got more problems. Rents and council tax and the rest so the help continues.”

Day centres should be hubs where specialists from different fields can be present to offer support. Those services that have others affiliated to them or nearby were singled out for praise.

“Within that day centre there should be the council to fill out your council forms, mental health worker tell you how to get help if you come from another area, substance misuse worker...It should be a link in [to other services]. That would have helped me a lot”

“If you buy a box of coloured pencils, you expect all of the colours to be in there.”

Day centres should be fair, open-access, welcoming and non-judgmental.

“They make us feel welcome and also they don’t judge us, everyone is welcome which is great and I’ll carry on coming here as long as possible”

“They treat everybody the same but are able to deal with people individually.”

There was a long discussion at one focus group about some day centres who charge for food. This is felt to be unfair, and even immoral, if the food is donated. People said they find it humiliating to have to explain their circumstances before they are allowed to eat. In particular, this was seen as an issue of equity as not everyone had to pay (for example if they had no recourse to public funds or they were otherwise not in receipt of payments).

“With donated food, right, this day centre gets donated food and I checked – it’s not illegal to sell it but it is immoral.”

“There’s one rule for one and another rule for another.”

People need community; day centres can provide this

One thing that was clear across different focus groups was the value that is placed on community bonds. This can come from other rough sleepers on the streets but can also be provided by the day centre and plays an important role in engaging people and in preventing future homeless episodes. Being housed can trigger loneliness and depression that can easily lead back to homelessness.

“I think a lot of it is a support thing. I know when I got put into emergency housing with my baby. This place I was staying was disgusting but I didn’t want to leave because I had so much support there. I had other women there that were in the same boat. So when I was given this flat I found that transition really hard cos I went from having someone to talk to every day to suddenly being on my own again...you get used to having some sort of family around you even if it’s just a street family. And you’re all in the same boat and there’s a strength in that and I think leaving that is hard.”

In some cases, day centres were felt to be an ongoing source of community. It is important to stress that the day centre described below is engaging users in structured activities and as volunteers rather than simply offering a meal or place to meet. It was clear that service users formed strong bonds with each other and the service and that this had a hugely beneficial effect on their self-esteem and ability to manage their lives.

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The service users at this centre were in the process of setting up a buddying system to help people transition to independent living and get used to new areas where they might be living.

“A lot of people come here now even though they’ve got sorted for friendship, company, something to eat, activities. I’m isolated where I am, I’m on my own.”

“It gives you a purpose in the day to get out of bed. You’re helping them, we’re helping them and they’re helping us.”

“I come here to see people cos I grew up on the streets. Don’t have no family – once I leave here, I got nothing”

Day centres can be intimidating if chaotic, especially for women

Two focus groups discussed the fact that day centres can be intimidating if they are chaotic. The same was said about hostels, and could lead to people choosing to remain on the streets.

“I felt intimidated going there. There are drug users. There’s no one on the door there.”

“A lot of people won’t use a day centre because they don’t touch drugs, they don’t drink but they don’t want to be around that chaotic place so there’s a lot of people who don’t really access the service who could really do with it.”

“Up at the day centre we know for a fact that women are avoiding going there because they don’t want to be around chaotic men.”

“A lot of people don’t want to go to a hostel because it’s a volatile environment. Safer on the streets”

One solution for this was to hold women-only drop-ins which had been successful in some areas. However, this emphasises the need for services to feel safe in order to enable people to feel comfortable and to engage.

Day centres could do more to engage people in active addiction

One focus group discussed what could be done to engage people in active addiction. Firstly, they felt that engaging more people with lived experience, as volunteers, peer mentors or staff would help. Secondly, they suggested ensuring that a range of professional services are available in the same space, and that service users are aware of what is on offer - described as ‘dropping seeds’. Day centres, it was felt, have a captive audience as they are often the only place to go to get warm, get food etc. This could be used better to make sure people are aware of support. Finally, it was suggested that services should ask service users what they wanted.

“It always just bounces back to lived experience. Because how it broke for me in regards to being in addiction and alcoholism was, the lady just identified with me. She just sat there and said, I know how you feel and it blew my mind really because no one knew how I felt. It was such a long time. And it just took a moment. We do all this prep and planning and organisation but it just takes this. It’s very basic”

“I just wanted my drink and my drugs. But that’s no excuse for not dropping little seeds. ‘We’ve got a mental health worker here.’ ‘I’m not interested. I’m interested in my drink and my drugs.’ But at 4am you could be sitting there thinking, ‘oh I need to speak to a mental health worker, my mental health is spiralling who can I speak to, oh hang on...’ So, you know.”

“I think you need to ask people what they want, what services they want, what they want going on. I don't think they often get asked. And they often have stuff shoved at them and it may not even be the thing they want/they need. It's hard to ask when you're down on your luck like that anyway.”

Day centres should empower their service users

Former service users also wanted day centres to equip people to move forwards through empowerment and specialist support.

“What I'm saying is, when you first go into a day centre, you accept what you're given and from the DC you go into a hostel and you accept what you're given, you're not told what rights you actually have at first. You don't have the tools to enquire about stuff that you might want to add on.”

“The word is empowerment. When you go into a day centre, it should be 'we are here to help you. What is it you want to do? We have this on hand, that on hand. And if we put you in a hostel, this is how you work with a key worker'. You know, don't just shut up, sit down, be grateful. Build, grow, fight and progress.”

People with lived experience can develop initiatives to fill gaps in services

People with lived experience are able to identify key points at which they have become homeless and where there are gaps in service provision. These include the following:

- Couples' accommodation (flexible housing)
- Mental health support
- Mental health housing provision
- Provision of dual diagnosis support
- Provision of safe/secure hostel accommodation
- Support for people once they have moved into their own home
- Support for women
- Support leaving prison

“The biggest problem is that if you're substance affected they can't address your mental health and vice versa and it goes on and on and eventually we just have to draw a line in the sand and say, why can't we treat both at the same time?”

“Because I went to prison I made myself intentionally homeless and unless you served 5 years or longer they had no duty to house me. It took me some months to go private. And I used the local drop in centre for, showering, clothes, cheap food. That's the support I got. For people who go to prison and come out they end up homeless – that's wrong, that's so wrong.”

“Once you've got a flat your problems are not ended. You've got more problems. Rents and council tax and the rest so the help continues”

“When I was given this flat I found that transition really hard cos I went from having someone to talk to every day to suddenly being on my own again and I think that's what a lot of people struggle with. They may want to be given their own place but you get used to having some sort of family around you. People can't make that final last step to being rehoused because they're just too lonely and they're not getting the support in other places.”

Many thanks to people with lived experience from Fulfilling Lives South-East, The Booth Centre, the Dellow Centre and Wycombe Homeless Connection for contributing their expertise to this report.

Case studies of homelessness prevention

Supporting engagement through occupational therapy

Beacon Housing Ministries, Colchester

Beacon House worked with around 600 service users in the past 12 months, and currently has seven full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and 30 volunteers.

Beacon House has been providing occupational therapy for the people who use its service since 2012. The occupational therapy approach aims to support recovery by empowering people to take part in activities that they enjoy or may be meaningful to them. People undertake an assessment on arrival, which includes gaining an understanding of what they would like to do. They are then encouraged and supported to organise those activities. Afterwards they might reflect on the activity, whether it met their expectations or needs and if not, what features or other activities they might be looking for. The aim is to support the individual to gain confidence and start to build a more positive enjoyable life.

Occupational Therapy was originally introduced through students, who were supervised by the day centre's Chief Executive. However, following a successful funding bid under Big Lottery Fund's 'Reaching Communities' programme in 2014, Beacon House has employed an Occupational Therapist, who manages two full-time students on placement as well as overseeing all other staff involved in assessment of service users. The Occupational Therapists also give regular presentations to staff about a range of things including different theoretical models, ways of engaging with people and examples from their practice.

Occupational therapy has influenced the whole approach of Beacon House including both policy and practice and a specific model, Kawa, informs all the work they do. For example, assessments no longer include form filling but take the place of a conversation that explores interests and hopes. Collaboration and empowerment are at the heart of the service.

There are opportunities to become involved in a range of activities at Beacon House, including photography and a farm project, which receives funding from DWP. However, new groups and activities are developed regularly according to the interests of those attending. In addition, service users are encouraged to participate in running the day centre's practical services. Individuals can choose the frequency and level at which they wish to be involved.

Occupational Therapy can empower people to take steps forwards in other areas of their lives such as substance use or homelessness. It can help people to identify blocks to their progress and work through them. Crucially, it helps service users to change their perception of themselves and gives them greater life purpose.

Co-producing services - empowering people to move beyond homelessness

The Booth Centre, Manchester

The Booth Centre, a large day centre in Manchester, worked with approximately 2000 service users during the past year, and employs 11 FTE staff and 30 volunteers. Around half of the day centre's service users are rough sleepers and a large proportion have support needs around mental health, substance misuse and/or chaotic behaviour.

The central aim of the day centre's approach is to maximise service users' control over decision-making. Initially, attention focused on increasing their involvement in choosing day centre menus. The centre's move to

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new premises provided further opportunities, and service users became involved in developing the building's layout, décor and furnishing, as well as agreeing its future opening hours and priorities for activities, including sport and gardening.

Now, service users are involved in shaping all aspects of the day centre's work and their involvement is regarded as the default. For example, all staff and volunteer training sessions include contributions from service users about their life experiences, and a group of service users sets interview questions and chairs a stand-alone recruitment panel. Service users routinely attend internal and external meetings, alongside day centre staff. Via the day centre's weekly Arts Committee, service users organise exhibitions of their work and carry out associated publicity. Equally important is the widespread involvement of service users in day-to-day activities, such as clearing tables after meals, carrying out small repairs and painting and decorating the day centre.

Explaining the role of service user involvement when people first visit the day centre, and encouraging them to participate as they feel comfortable, means that everyone - even chaotic service users or people with high needs – can participate, so there is a very high level of involvement.

Participation is supported by opening day centre meetings to all service users, rather than to service user representatives only. The very high participation rate and resulting large pool of volunteers reduces the impact of high service user turnover, and means that recruitment panel members can be replaced fairly easily.

Another key strength of the day centre's approach is that it seeks to treat its service users as equal partners. For example, service user volunteers have the same status as community volunteers and service user panel recruitment decisions carry the same weight as the staff/trustee panel. People are encouraged to be realistic about what they can participate in and supported around these choices. Staff have also shared financial and other information with service users, to support more viable decisions and generate creative fundraising solutions for activities.

The development of service user involvement at the Booth Centre is acknowledged as being time- and resource-intensive and has also involved a degree of culture change. However, staff feel this is more than offset by the positive impacts on service users' skills, confidence and self-esteem. Individuals feel more resilient and less isolated and this improves their chances of sustaining long-term accommodation. They also want to 'give back' to the centre, improving opportunities for currently homeless people to develop skills and social networks.

Improving communication with landlords to prevent evictions

Catching Lives, Canterbury

Catching Lives works in Canterbury and surrounding areas. In the past year, it has supported around 550 service users, who are mainly rough sleepers. The day centre currently employs 5.6 FTE staff and has 80 volunteers.

Catching Lives provides landlord advocacy and other housing support for former homeless people now living in social and private sector tenancies. The service was set up to respond to the increasing numbers of people seeking support from the day centre around rent arrears and other tenancy issues.

Staff carry out an assessment with service users to identify problems and gather relevant information/paperwork, before contacting the landlord. Support may be a brief intervention or open-ended, according to the individual's needs. The advocacy work is led by day centre support workers, who receive relevant training. It is supported by a paralegal with housing law expertise and a retired solicitor, who helps

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with family law issues. Service users can access the service in person, via Catching Lives' website or its Mental Health Outreach team. The service is also well-publicised within local statutory and voluntary agencies.

The project ensures that day centre users receive timely access to advice. Re-establishing communication between landlord and tenant is key and often enables tenancy problems to be sorted out relatively easily. Catching Lives' involvement also means landlords are more willing to be flexible about tenants' rent arrears. In this way, the advocacy service reduces the likelihood of eviction and future homelessness and repeat presentations at the day centre.

Catching Lives estimates that during 2016 it provided advocacy for around 250 people, and believes its interventions helped a large proportion of these people to retain their tenancies.

Streamlining day centres services to more effectively tackle homelessness

Compass Centre, Bristol

St Mungo's Compass Centre forms part of Bristol's homeless accommodation pathway. It is the base for a number of services that support homeless people around their physical and mental health and employability. The Homeless Health Service, provides primary care interventions and a weekly wet clinic for street drinkers; the Assertive Contact and Engagement service (ACE) provides specialist mental health support, which promotes service users' access to mainstream services.

Following consultation with service users and Bristol City Council, Compass has reconfigured its services and now focuses on offering more structured and targeted interventions. Service users requiring support with their immediate/practical needs are signposted to two other day centres in the city centre. St Mungo's outreach team continues to be based at Compass, but now only meets service users there who require full assessment of their accommodation and support needs. People with lower needs are now invited to meet workers at other locations, such as local cafes and/or signposted to other support services.

This more targeted approach helps people to resolve their homelessness more quickly and effectively. For example, there are now fewer incidents of challenging behaviour. Service users feel safer and this promotes positive engagement, especially with people who have complex needs. Staff have more time for casework and referrals to accommodation and support services.

The combined observations of St Mungo's and medical staff from the on-site services ensures that comprehensive service user information is shared with external agencies and advocacy around service access is effective. The arrangements also enable outreach workers to hold sessions at other local sites such as day centres and drug projects, diffusing the concentration of need at Compass and contributing to improved accommodation outcomes for the team.

Working in partnership to prevent homelessness effectively

Freedom Social Projects, Barnstable

Freedom Social Projects is based in Barnstable in North Devon. Over the past year, it has worked with around 1,000 people. This includes between 300 and 400 new service users, of which a very high proportion are experiencing repeat homelessness. The day centre currently employs 5 FTE staff and 30 volunteers.

Since 2013, the day centre has operated a hub model of support. This includes a number of partnerships with local agencies:

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- **Devon & Cornwall Community Rehabilitation Company (probation service)** – this developed out of the Community Rehabilitation Company's (CRC) existing links with the day centre and its wish to strengthen its local partnership arrangements. A Probation Support Officer holds a weekly on-site session, meeting mainly with day centre service users who are known to probation, but are not engaging effectively with its services. Many CRC clients frequently attend the day centre to use its practical services. The centre is also able to build trusting relationships with these service users, provide a safe meeting environment and share information/intelligence around service users of common interest.

The partnership also enables joint work around housing and welfare benefits, which reduces the risk of rent arrears and subsequent homelessness. Although CRC staff initially found the day centre's informal approach to service user engagement challenging, it has since come to view this much more positively.

- **Housing Hub** – this involves fortnightly sessions at the day centre, with representatives from North Devon and Torridge district councils and other local support agencies. Freedom Social Projects supports the Housing Hub by providing access to its own supported accommodation. The Housing Hub utilises a multi-agency casework approach and has been especially effective at finding housing solutions for people who have experienced repeat homelessness.

Day centre staff stress that the hub's success is down to the development of strong and mutually beneficial relationships, although a contract and formal information-sharing agreements are in place with the CRC. In the same way, workers' ability to build trusting relationships with service users, rather than using formal assessment/keyworking approaches, encourages people to talk further about their needs and circumstances and provides the motivation to engage with other on-site services.

Expanding into housing provision to prepare for independent living

Purfleet Trust, Kings Lynn

The Purfleet Trust Health and Wellbeing Centre is based in Kings Lynn in Norfolk. In the past 12 months it has worked with around 570 service users. It has 11 full-time staff and 37 volunteers.

Since 2013, the Purfleet Trust has expanded from centre-based services to managing a number of shared training houses. These provide a structured programme of support for service users, which helps them develop tenancy and employability skills and to prepare for independent living. There are currently six houses, with a total of 29 bed spaces and includes one women-only property for victims of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. Tenants may stay up to two years, though the current average is around 12 months. The properties have been procured in partnership with a local housing association and involve leasing arrangements. Revenue funding is provided via Intensive Housing Management charges.

Purfleet employs three Independent Living Coaches, who provide support and training to tenants, covering practical and soft skills including cooking, budgeting, understanding tenancy rights and managing conflict. Tenants are also encouraged to work with the day centre's Employability Coach, to help increase their choice of move-on accommodation. Tenants receive additional support from health and wellbeing services; the Nationwide Building Society, who deliver sessions around debt/savings advice; and West Norfolk Homechoice, who provide information on homelessness law and accessing the local choice-based lettings system.

The training house model has significantly reduced the rate of abandonments and evictions within local homeless hostels and shared accommodation. To date in 2017, 12 training house tenants have successfully moved to permanent accommodation, of whom nine are also in work. Tenants' move-on rates are enhanced due to the priority band status that Purfleet Trust has negotiated with the local authority in relation to the local

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choice-based lettings scheme. Service users are supported to sustain their accommodation via Purfleet's post-tenancy support and continued access to the day centre for social interaction.

Using expert advice to maximise welfare and other rights

SIFA, Birmingham

SIFA, a large day centre in the centre of Birmingham, works with around 2600 service users each year and currently has 25 FTE staff and 100 volunteers.

When they first arrive at the day centre, a significant proportion of SIFA service users do not have an active welfare benefits claim. In some cases, this is due to benefits sanctions being imposed, but other people, particularly non-UK nationals, have been inadequately advised about their entitlements.

SIFA takes a rights-based approach to welfare benefits, which means that all service users receive a full assessment of their eligibility for benefits, and staff work to maximise service users' income. There is a focus on people claiming ESA or PIP, who have mental health, substance misuse issues and/or physical disabilities.

SIFA commissions Birmingham Community Law Centre to provide specialist welfare benefits advice and casework one day per week, funded via charitable trusts. The caseworker is a lawyer, with expertise around immigration and the Care Act 2014 and can represent service users at benefits tribunals. During 2016/17, the caseworker met with an average of around 45 service users per quarter.

This expertise significantly speeds up the process for benefits applications and/or appeals. Commissioning an external agency also means the caseworker can continue to receive specialist supervision and support within their own organisation. Once service users have an active benefits claim, they can access temporary accommodation. In addition, SIFA supports service users to sustain their accommodation by advocating with local landlords.

Establishing social enterprises to improve employment opportunities and income

Wintercomfort, Cambridge

The day centre currently employs 20 FTE staff and 40 volunteers. In the past 12 months, it has worked with around 700 service users, of which around a third are believed to be rough sleepers.

Wintercomfort has managed social enterprises since 2009. It currently runs food4food, a catering company set up in 2011, which grew out of the day centre's own kitchen service, and Overstream Clean, which provides cleaning and gardening services. Running costs, including employing a social enterprise manager and trainer, are met via funding from Cambridge City Council and charitable trusts. The decision to set up Overstream Clean followed service user consultation and research into similar voluntary sector-led projects. The two businesses now have a range of customers across Cambridge, including schools, church halls and other homeless organisations. With the City Council, Overstream Clean also delivers 'Green Fingers', a gardening service for vulnerable tenants.

Most social enterprise employees are long-term attendees at the day centre, though some come from other local homeless organisations. Many people have significant/ongoing support needs. All potential employees receive training in health & safety and other relevant issues and receive a certificate on completion of the course. Training is aligned with Cambridgeshire County Council's Adult Learning and Skills Team criteria and

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Wintercomfort's trainers are qualified to Education and Training Award Level 3. Following an initial probationary period, employees move to a fixed-hours contract, paid at the Cambridge Living Wage.

Wintercomfort also offers work placement opportunities for its service users, including with housing providers and restaurants. The relatively small size of these organisations makes it easier for Wintercomfort managers to contact and make arrangement with relevant strategic and operational staff, and eight placements have been secured within the last year. However, successful placements require careful matching of service users.

Both Wintercomfort's social enterprises and work placements provide supportive working environments, which enable service users who would not otherwise have these opportunities to enter and keep work. Day centre workers provide on-going support where needed, including managing welfare benefits changes and budgeting monthly pay. These factors mean that employee retention is high, even where workers are not significantly financially better off. Service users on work placements have progressed into other roles within the organisation and from social enterprises into mainstream cleaning and catering work. Day centre staff understand there is a clear link between employment and tenancy sustainment, although this cannot currently be quantified.

Advocating in court to directly prevent eviction

Wycombe Homeless Connection, High Wycombe

Wycombe Homeless Connection operates a drop-in advice service for people who are homeless or vulnerably housed. In addition to paid support workers and volunteers, we employ a Senior Support Worker who focuses specifically on eviction prevention. At first, we received in-house training from Shelter around different aspects of our work, and the next time someone walked in facing eviction we had more of an idea what to do. We continued offering this support as we felt more capable, and it worked, so the role developed into what it is now.

The first stage is to examine the paperwork from the landlord, find out whether they have been to court yet and whether they have had a possession hearing or just a notice seeking possession. Have they had a bailiff's warrant yet?

We then look at managing people's finances. The service often sees people with £3-5K arrears. We try to maximise income and see how we can support them to set up rent arrears payments. We have a very good connection with Wycombe Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme who have a direct link into the Housing Benefit team and are very well trusted by that department. They will complete Housing Benefit forms for us. We usually complete the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) forms, and pass them to them to double check and submit on our behalf. We've had some real success with that.

Next, we support clients at the court stage. This can involve completing N244 forms that ask for evictions proceedings to be extended or postponed. We go to court with the client, taking all evidence with us. So far, every person that we've been to court with has had a positive result.

We pull together the key paperwork and arguments, although often the duty solicitor will do the discussion for us. We support her by being available to give background and detail clearly and directly and helping the client manage any stress. There is an opportunity to talk to the landlord or solicitor beforehand, so you can try to negotiate in advance.

Hearings then take about ten minutes. The judges have questions they work through so you just answer as required. You need to be organised; having a pile of your documents with post-it notes down the side is worthwhile. We've found that Judges generally don't want to evict and if you can give them a sensible reason not to, they will find in your favour. Some of them will be more careful about that than others.

Homeless Link

Busy courts are a good thing for tenants because if they don't have evidence they will adjourn for 28 days, but actually the new date set may not be until several months later.

When people first arrive at our service, it feels like an impossible situation, but we find a way to make it work and have had some real successes. We managed to get one client thousands of pounds from his landlord because the deposit wasn't protected and processes weren't followed properly. We completed a counter-claim form with no previous experience, but achieved a positive result.

The challenge is trying to maintain engagement after court. Some of our clients are serial non-engagers, and can walk out of court happy but then not take action to improve the situation and end up coming back around. We do everything we can to maintain contact with people after court but it isn't always easy. Nonetheless, we have had real success in preventing eviction and we are really pleased and proud of the work we are doing.

Appendix 1

Measures included in P1E (local authority returns) on prevention and relief	
Prevention	
The household was able to stay in own home	Mediation
	Conciliation including home visits
	Financial payments from a homeless prevention fund
	Debt advice
	Resolving housing benefit problems
	Resolving rent or service charge arrears
	Sanctuary scheme measures for domestic violence
	Crisis intervention
	Negotiation or legal advocacy
	Providing assistance to remain in private or socially rented sector
	Mortgage interventions
	Other
The household was assisted to obtain alternative accommodation	Hostel or HMO
	PRS (landlord incentive)
	PRS (no landlord incentive)
	Accommodation arranged with friends or relatives
	Supported accommodation
	Social housing management – move of existing LA tenancy
	Part VI offer
	Social housing – negotiation with a PRP
	Low cost home ownership
Other	
Relief	
The household was assisted to obtain alternative accommodation	Hostel or HMO
	PRS (landlord incentive)
	PRS (no landlord incentive)
	Accommodation arranged with friends or relatives
	Supported accommodation
	Social housing management – move of existing LA tenancy
	Part VI offer
	Social housing – negotiation with a PRP
	Low cost home ownership
Other	
Prevention outcomes	
Cases where positive action was successful at relieving homelessness	
Cases where positive action was successful at preventing homelessness	
Cases where household was assisted to obtain alternative accommodation	
Cases where household was able to remain in existing home	



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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