

THE HOMELESS PEOPLE'S COMMISSION

SUMMARY REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Homeless People's Commission is a committee of people with experience of sleeping rough. This first report from the Commission reviews policies and services for people sleeping rough and makes recommendations for their improvement.

The Commission heard evidence from policy makers and analysts, service providers, researchers and campaigning groups.

We have found in our investigations that, since the early 1990s when government first became concerned at the extent of rough sleeping and set up a series of Rough Sleepers Initiatives, there have been great improvements in the quality of services and a resulting reduction in the number of people sleeping rough. However, provision is still patchy and best practice is not followed in all areas. We make a number of recommendations designed to make best practice the norm and to help achieve the goal of ending rough sleeping by 2012.

We understand the constraints on public expenditure, but there have been a succession of studies which show that preventing rough sleeping and ensuring that homeless people are housed saves on very expensive services such as health and the criminal justice system which otherwise have to deal with the casualties. Homeless Link have produced an excellent summary of these studies of cost effectiveness:

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/costs-homelessness>

If present programmes are not maintained and improved we believe that the number of people sleeping rough will begin to rise again.

Our recommendations are included in the body of each chapter and listed together here.

They are classified according to the target of the recommendation with the following abbreviations:

DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
DECC	Department of Energy and Climate Change
DfE	Department for Education
DH	Department of Health
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
HO	Home Office
HSP	Homelessness service provider
LA	Local authorities
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoJ	Ministry of Justice

This report is being published at a time of severe constraints on public expenditure and we have therefore also classified the estimated cost of the recommendations as follows:

- 1: Likely to save expenditure immediately, or incur nil or low extra cost.
- 2: Requires some investment but likely to save on net expenditure, although some further cost benefit analysis may be necessary.
- 3: Would improve service quality at some extra cost and may therefore need to be deferred until resources are available.

We have also prioritised our recommendations using two criteria: which will have the most impact on improving services and which might be achievable in the short term. Priority recommendations are in **bold**.

PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS

Many effective preventive services have been developed but coverage is still patchy and in some areas it is difficult for people to access services.

Our investigations cover:

- **access** to preventive services
- the **structure and quality of services**, including promoting good practice
- **support services**, including improved assessments of need, specialist services and peer involvement
- the role of **health** services
- the cost **effectiveness** of prevention services

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Councils and homelessness agencies should provide better publicity and information on what help is available, so that people can access services before they reach the point of homelessness (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 2: There is a need for more education in schools about the causes of homelessness and preventive services (DfE, 2).

Recommendation 3: There is a need for more resources for the national housing advice helpline run by Shelter to ensure they can answer all calls. One possibility would be for Shelter to train people with experience of homelessness to take helpline calls (DCLG, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 4: Councils should provide a comprehensive housing options service for, and record information on, all people who present as homeless or at risk of homelessness (LA, 2).

Recommendation 5: Comprehensive independent housing advice services should be available in all areas (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 6: There is a need for specialist advice services for all people at risk of homelessness on leaving prisons, hospitals and the armed forces (MoJ, DH, MoD, DCLG, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 7: There is a need for an advice service for private landlords who have tenants in arrears or at risk of eviction, including information on Housing Benefit and other benefits the tenant might be entitled to (DCLG, HSP and landlords' organisations, 2).

PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS

Recommendation 8: There should be specialist teams in all local authority areas for people facing chronic exclusion, for example to deal with alcohol, drugs and mental health problems. These services should include peer support by service users (DH, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 9: Court advice services such as that run by Shelter should be available to everyone: they need better publicity and should be easy to access. Services should be notified in advance of repossession hearings so they can advise people prior to the court date, rather than on the day. Advisers should be able to give more than ten minutes to people attending hearings (MoJ, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 10: GPs should have clear referral routes to services for common problems that lead to homelessness including drug and alcohol advice, relationship counselling and gambling addiction, as well as housing advice (DH, 1).

Recommendation 11: GP consortia should commission research into the health needs of homeless people in their area and involve homeless people in commissioning decisions, for example by consulting local Homeless People's Commissions (DH, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 12: Homeless people should be eligible for temporary accommodation, regardless of their immigration status (LA, HO, 2).

Recommendation 13: Local authorities should provide advice and support for organisations working with vulnerable people who are not eligible for housing (LA, 2).

Recommendation 14: Local authorities should provide information to agencies working with homeless people on the availability of the Homelessness Prevention Fund and what it can be used for (LA,1).

Recommendation 15: More investment should be put into prevention services which can demonstrate savings on the costs of people becoming homeless (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 16: Supporting People funded services have been proved to make savings and should be protected from cuts. The impact of any proposed spending reductions should be assessed, including taking account of the additional costs of not providing services (LA, HSP, 2).

STREET OUTREACH

There have been many improvements in the effectiveness of street outreach which have resulted in reductions in the numbers of people sleeping rough. We would like to see all areas adopt the practices of the best.

Our investigations cover:

- **accurate assessments** of the number of rough sleepers and their support needs
- effective **street outreach** techniques
- **joint work** between agencies
- the role of **day centres**
- homeless people with **no recourse to public funds**
- **personal plans and budgets** for people sleeping rough

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 17: There should be a person with experience of rough sleeping on each street count team (LA, 1).

Recommendation 18: In addition to street counts there should be more accurate local recording of the number of rough sleepers over time, as in the CHAIN system in London (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 19: There is a need for more specialist mental health support and training for outreach workers in recognising and dealing with mental health problems (DH, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 20: It is often effective to identify the leader of a group of rough sleepers and convince them to move into accommodation, others then follow (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 21: There could be a pilot scheme of giving cheap mobile phones to people sleeping rough with contact numbers for various services programmed into them. It would also make it much easier to keep in contact with people sleeping rough, saving time spent looking for them and encourage them return to services for a recharge (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 22: There should be mobile outreach teams to cover areas where there are not enough rough sleepers for a full time service (DCLG, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 23: There is a need for more 'wet centres' where people can drink away from the streets (LA, HSP, 2).

STREET OUTREACH

Recommendation 24: Drug users should be encouraged off the streets and into treatment by the provision of “shooting galleries” where people can use clean needles. This saves money on treatment costs for illnesses such as Hepatitis C and ensures needles are not left in public places (DH, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 25: Funding should be transferred to personalised services for homeless people with flexibility on how such schemes work. Where people are offered services paid for by personal budgets, agencies should discuss the options openly with them and offer choices on how the money might be spent and work with people at their own pace (DCLG, LA, HSP, 1).

TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Hostels have improved in recent years, with many now providing self-contained rooms and a pleasant environment. Much of this improvement has been directed and funded by the government programme, **Places of Change**.

Our investigations cover:

- **access** to temporary accommodation
- **hostel type and design**, including smaller specialised hostels for different needs, but keeping existing hostels open in the meantime
- **staffing**, including recruitment of former service users and better training
- **support** including activities, training, more specialised help, peer support and a wide range of detailed suggestions
- **length of stay** in hostels
- **service charges**, including linking them to the quality of service and choice over self catering

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 26: All remaining nightshelters should be adapted where necessary into assessment centres for short stay emergency assessments before people move to suitable temporary accommodation (DCLG, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 27: The standards established by Places of Change should be implemented in all new hostel programmes. New hostels should be small and cater separately for the full range of specialist needs and for people with low or no support needs. Larger hostels should be kept open until they are replaced by smaller units offering the equivalent number of bedspaces (DCLG, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 28: There should be at least some beds in emergency hostels which allow immediate access, including 24 hour access, without the need to be referred by another agency and with extra emergency beds available in winter (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 29: Homeless people should have access in all areas to temporary accommodation suitable to their needs (LA, HSP, 2).

TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Recommendation 30: Staff attitudes are very important. They can make clients feel valid, wanted and worthwhile. Hostel key workers should have opportunities to engage with residents on a personal level and socialise with them, for example by going out for a coffee or on day outings, when they don't discuss problems but concentrate on positive activities and building relationships (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 31: There should be accredited training for all homelessness support workers, including training in providing specialist support for physical and mental health, drug and alcohol needs (DCLG, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 32: The signing up process should be less formal and more aimed at finding out what service users' aspirations are (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 33: There should be a three-tier approach in hostels, recognising that people often arrive in a chaotic state, then stabilise, then need help to move on. Support should enable people to help themselves to progress through these stages. Support plans should include healthcare, reconnection with family and friends, budgeting, lifeskills training and education. Peer

support should be built in, including use of peer mentors and 'buddies' to give practical support to clients. Service users should take the lead in decisions about their support. People should have a contract with the hostel to achieve mutually agreed goals and this should be reviewed regularly (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 34: People should be encouraged to save perhaps £2 a week while in the hostel to give them some funds for when they move on (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 35: All hostels should have access to specialist support agencies, including dual diagnosis workers (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 36: Hostel residents should be able to invite friends to visit them (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 37: There could be open days in the hostel for local services and people from the local community to visit (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 38: All hostels should provide a wide range of activities and training opportunities, with smaller hostels making use of community based services (LA, HSP, 1).

TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Recommendation 39: The aim should be for people to move out of hostels as soon as they are able to sustain independent housing, if necessary with floating support. This should normally be within six months, but people should be able to stay longer if they need to (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 40: Hostel residents should be able to choose whether to be self catering or to pay a service charge for food. There should be cooking facilities and skills training in cooking (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 41: Service charges should be related to the quality of services and facilities provided. Where these are poor the charges should be reduced or services improved (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 42: There should be peer assessment and audits of hostels, involving service users throughout the process (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 43: Homelessness strategies in all areas should consider the need for all of the alternatives to hostels. They may be particularly useful in areas where the number of rough sleepers is low and does not justify the provision of hostel (LA, HSP, 2).

RESETTLEMENT WORK

Resettlement work is an essential part of a successful programme to help people off the streets. It also helps to shorten the length of time people spend in expensive hostels and to prevent repeat homelessness thereby saving public expenditure.

Our investigations cover:

- **tenancy support**, including support plans
- **staff expertise** and the need for specialist training
- **peer support** from service users and ex-service users
- **managing finances**, including the need for personal financial plans
- **community care grants**: resolving problems over delayed payments
- the need for more help with **training and employment**
- **cost effectiveness** and the need to preserve and improve resettlement services

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 44: Support plans should start at least six weeks before people move into a tenancy (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 45: Vulnerable people should have access to floating support before they move into private rented accommodation (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 46: Before moving into a tenancy, service users should be helped to make a two year financial plan by trained keyworkers (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 47: DWP and other agencies should not try to reclaim debts from newly resettled tenants until they can realistically make payments, as set out in their personal financial plan (DWP, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 48: Utility companies should be obliged to charge the same amount to customers, regardless of the method of payment (DECC, 1).

RESETTLEMENT WORK

Recommendation 49: Community Care Grants should be replaced by direct funding of resettlement grants to agencies which would supervise the spending of them by people who were being resettled. This would also save on the large administrative costs of individual grants (DWP, 1).

Recommendation 50: All Jobcentres should have a back-to-work support scheme with a comprehensive package of financial planning and a grant for back-to-work expenses in the first month for items such as clothing and travel (DWP, 2).

SETTLED HOUSING

SOCIAL HOUSING

Social housing is the most popular option for settled housing among homeless people. There are cost effective ways in which the supply could be increased, but there will still be continuing shortages in many areas for the foreseeable future.

Our investigations cover:

- **housing finance:** support for the LGA campaign to allow local authorities to keep income from rents and sales so they can build more new homes
- **local authority allocation policies:** more consistency in local authority policies and better information for applicants
- **quality of social housing:** new developments should include employment and training opportunities, not concentrating people with problems on troubled estates, mixed developments with private housing and better consultations on housing strategies

THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The shortage of social housing makes it essential to expand options in the private rented sector. Private rented access schemes have made progress in helping homeless people to find housing. Private renting is often a cheaper and more popular option than hostels, although social housing is probably the most cost effective of all.

Our investigations cover:

- **landlord and property standards,** including national good practice standards and the exclusion of bad landlords
- **private rented access schemes,** including national good practice standards, flexibility over local connection rules and rapid payment of deposits
- **shared accommodation,** including more choice of accommodation for people aged under 35 and over who they share with

SETTLED HOUSING

- **tenancy support**, immediate access to floating support
- rents and the **Local Housing Allowance**

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 51: The financing of council housing should be reformed so that councils can keep the proceeds of their rents and sales and re-invest them in housing, as proposed by the LGA (DCLG, 2).

Recommendation 52: There should be clearer information so that people can understand who fits the criteria for social housing (LA, 1).

Recommendation 53: Local authority allocation policies should ensure that they do not create or reinforce 'problem' estates. There should be a mix of social and private housing in new developments with access to social amenities, employment and training opportunities (LA, 1).

Recommendation 54: Local authorities should produce a summary of their housing strategies in plain English for discussion by the local community (LA, 1).

Recommendation 55: Where council housing is demolished it should be carried out with a sensitive, consultative

approach, engaging the local community. Demolitions should be replaced by an equal number of bedspaces (LA, 2).

Recommendation 56: All private rented access schemes should run publicity and education programmes for landlords to persuade them to accept homeless people (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 57: There should be mandatory minimum standards for landlords and private rented properties let through access schemes, which should be vetted by local authorities. Local authorities should set up a register of landlords with a rating system and awards for good practice. Information on landlords letting substandard properties, including those who let properties as a cover for illegal activities such as drug dealing, should be shared by local authorities and other agencies (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 58: Landlords with court orders against them and other landlords letting substandard properties should not be able to receive Housing Benefit. They should be able to apply for re-registration if they improved their standards (DCLG, LA, HSP, 1).

SETTLED HOUSING

Recommendation 59: Private rented access schemes should ensure rent deposits are available the day they are approved (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 60: The government should ensure that any cuts in Housing Benefit do not lead to an increased risk of people becoming homeless (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 61: Private rented schemes should be more flexible to allow people to top up the rent from their own resources (DWP, LA, 1).

Recommendation 62: The proposal to increase the single room rate age limit to 35 should be dropped (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 63: There should be more flexibility in the Local Housing Allowance rules over sharing for young people, to give them more choice (DWP, 3).

Recommendation 64: Tenants placed in shared accommodation by access schemes should have a choice of who they share with (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 65: Local authorities should allow people to keep their place on the housing register if they move out of temporary accommodation into a private rented tenancy (LA, 1).

Recommendation 66: There should be more flexibility over local connection rules in private rented access schemes (LA, 2).

Recommendation 67: Private tenants should be able to move by transferring their deposit to a new property (LA, 2).

Recommendation 68: There should be drop-in centres offering tenancy support for private rented tenants who are not receiving a floating support service (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 69: There should be training for landlords who are willing to support tenants in the private rented sector (LA, HSP, 2).

SELF HELP

There are many inspiring examples of self-help among the Commissioners' own projects and experiences. However, there is at present often little contact between self-help groups and there is much that they could learn from each other.

Drawing on our experience we make a number of recommendations for extending self-help. Many of them would fit in with the government's plans to encourage self-help.

Our investigations cover:

- **service user involvement** in managing projects
- **peer mentoring and support schemes**, how service users can help each other in the resettlement process
- **peer training**
- **peer research**
- **volunteering**
- **employment and training**, including schemes for jobs within homelessness organisations

- **social enterprises**
- **personalised plans**
- **influencing local and national policies**

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 70: Funders and commissioners should encourage client involvement in homelessness organisations. Clients should be offered training in self help and supported to run activities themselves to build their self confidence. They should have more control of hostel rules and more involvement in upkeep, so as to develop a sense of responsibility and achievement. Clients should be enabled to participate in staff recruitment and staff training (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 71: Service users should be encouraged to share information with peers in group sessions to signpost them to other services and to help empower people to move on (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 72: Homelessness organisations should employ a percentage of ex-service users. To achieve this they should help clients to gain qualifications and provide them with a profile of achievements

SELF HELP

including training on both lifeskills and employable skills (LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 73: Jobcentres should help people to find voluntary work where this is the best immediate option for them. Service user volunteers should get reasonable financial incentives without affecting their benefits (DWP, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 74: There is scope for developing more social enterprise self-help models like SEA in Nottingham and Cambridge Link-up (LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 75: Local authorities should resource independent service user groups, based on the Homeless People's Commission model and facilitated by a local homelessness organisation, to inform local policy. There should be service user consultation in the formulation of all new government policies, through local and national independent bodies on the model of the Homeless People's Commission (All government departments, LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 76: National and local government and service providers should recognise that self-help groups are integral to improving services, making them more cost effective and enhancing people's quality of life (DCLG, LA, HSP, 1).

Recommendation 77: Self-help groups should work locally in partnership with each other. There should be a homelessness self-help liaison group in every region to co-ordinate services and disseminate good practice. Central and local government representatives should be invited to these regional service user groups (HSP, 2).

Recommendation 78: It would be useful to have a national service user groups' conference, where groups could share good practice (HSP, 2).

Recommendation 79: There should be a national website to share good practice on self-help, possibly based on the website of a existing homelessness agency (HSP, 2).

Recommendation 80: Service user groups should be informed by providers immediately of any changes to policies or procedures resulting from budget cuts (HSP, 1).

WELFARE BENEFITS

We have found that the current benefits system has failed. Its complexity makes it difficult for staff to administer and for service users to understand. Too often mistakes are made, adding to the poverty and stress of homelessness. We welcome the government's proposals for a simpler system which will mean people will not be penalised for taking work, including part time work.

The government has recognised that by helping people get into work it will save expenditure on benefits

Our investigations cover:

- **service standards and staffing**, including ensuring best practice, service user involvement and enhancing staff skills.
- **Jobcentre procedures**, including timetables for payments and better information.
- reducing the **complexity** of the system
- **training, work opportunities and incentives**, including more suitable job and training offers and better financial incentives.

- **disability benefits**: better assessments of work capabilities

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 81: Information on benefits should be more accessible and easy to understand. Jobcentre staff should be required to inform customers of all the benefits to which they are entitled (DWP, 1).

Recommendation 82: There should be a nominated caseworker for each individual throughout their contact with Jobcentre Plus (DWP, 1).

Recommendation 83: There should be better DWP staff training on policies, service standards, people skills, mentoring, the special needs of homeless people, assessing customers' training needs and on customer relations (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 84: Homelessness advisers should work jointly with Jobcentre Plus (DWP, LA, HSP, 2).

Recommendation 85: DWP should identify lessons from good practice in effective Jobcentres and publish national good practice standards which are independently audited for consistency across all offices (DWP, 2).

WELFARE BENEFITS

Recommendation 86: All claims should be paid within one week, with interim payments if there is any delay. Benefit appeals should be decided within one week. Crisis loan decisions should be made the same day, including a decision on reviews. There should be a staff member available to make immediate decisions on urgent matters (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 87: Benefit payments should not be suspended for minor infringements, accidental errors on the form or changes of circumstances that have not been checked (DWP, 1).

Recommendation 88: Information on how to make a complaint should be widely accessible. When a claim is disputed, free independent advice should be available to claimants (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 89: Each individual should have a training programme designed for their personal needs (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 90: People should be able to earn up to £60 a week (income disregard) before losing benefit (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 91: People on contribution-based benefits should be able to access other benefits available to those who have not worked, such as the social fund and travel costs, so that they are not worse off than people who have not worked (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 92: Where a DWP assessment and the claimant's doctor disagree on a diagnosis there should be an adjudication by a third independent doctor (DWP, 2).

Recommendation 93: Any cut in Housing Benefit after one year on JSA should not apply to people who are actively seeking a reasonable and appropriate job offer (DWP, 2).

CONCLUSIONS



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There have been great improvements in the quality of services and a resulting reduction in the number of people sleeping rough. However, provision is still patchy and best practice is not followed in all areas. We make a number of recommendations designed to make best practice the norm and to help achieve the goal of ending rough sleeping by 2012.

We understand the constraints on public expenditure, but there have been a succession of studies which show that preventing rough sleeping and ensuring that homeless people are housed saves on expensive services such as health and the criminal justice system, which otherwise have to deal with the casualties.

If present programmes are not maintained and improved we believe that the number of people sleeping rough will begin to rise again.

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groundswell
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