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Evaluating Homelessness Prevention

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Executive Summary

Background

Local authorities' obligation to prevent as well as respond to homelessness is longstanding, both in law and in good practice advice. Ever since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, authorities have been legally required to assist people under imminent threat of homelessness (and classed as 'in priority need') by taking reasonable steps to prevent them from losing existing accommodation.

Since 1997, however, central government has increasingly encouraged local authorities to adopt a more pro-active stance in tackling homelessness. The Homelessness Act 2002 and its requirement for local authorities to devise homelessness strategies is central to this new emphasis. Since 2002 Communities and Local Government (formerly ODPM) has invested more than £360 million in grant funding to help local authorities deliver the preventative schemes envisaged in their strategies.

The introduction of prevention-focused homelessness strategies in 2003 needs to be seen against the backdrop of homelessness trends since the late 1990s, which saw the numbers of acceptances rising by over 30 per cent in the six years to 2003-04. Falling rates of tenancy turnover have compounded the pressures on many local authorities – particularly in London and the South. The consequent doubling in temporary accommodation placements created a situation calling for urgent action.

Key findings

- Homelessness prevention is being actively embraced by growing numbers of local authorities.

- Central to the homelessness prevention ethos is a pro-active rather than a reactive approach; a central focus on helping resolving applicants' housing problems.

- The most widely adopted approaches to homelessness prevention are enhanced housing advice, rent deposit and similar schemes to enhance access to private tenancies, family mediation, domestic violence victim support and tenancy sustainment.

- In many local authorities homelessness prevention activities are targeted at persons who are not in priority need as well as those likely to be assessed as being homeless and in priority need ('potentially priority need'). However, the impact of the new approach is most clearly demonstrated by the sharp post-2003 reduction in homelessness acceptances which has coincided with housing affordability continuing

to decline (see figure A below). It is highly likely that a substantial part of the 50 per cent post-2003 drop in acceptances is attributable to homelessness prevention activities;

- Homelessness prevention practices – particularly those involving households otherwise liable to be 'priority need' cases – can be highly cost-effective. Especially in areas such as Greater London, the unit costs associated with a homelessness acceptance far outweigh unit homelessness prevention costs.

- At least until recently, the monitoring of homelessness prevention outcomes has been patchy, though it is anticipated that this will improve due to the recent establishment of Best Value Performance Indicators covering this area.

- Most of the homelessness prevention initiatives that could be assessed appeared to be cost effective, in that savings in the costs of temporary accommodation and administration associated with homelessness exceeded the operating costs of services. Especially in areas such as Greater London, the unit costs associated with a homelessness acceptance far outweigh unit homelessness prevention costs.

This study

This research was commissioned in 2004 to investigate the practical implementation of homelessness prevention on the part of local authorities and their partner agencies. The main objectives were to:

- evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to preventing homelessness;

- provide evidence on the value for money of homelessness prevention work;

- produce a good practice guide on homelessness prevention; and

- make recommendations on the future monitoring of homelessness prevention work by local authorities and central government.

The research focused mainly on activities launched under local authorities' homelessness strategies, some of which were funded through Housing and Homelessness Directorate (HHSD) grants. It was based mainly on detailed case study work in ten local authorities. In order to provide examples of practice in this field the local authorities selected as case studies for the research were chosen from among those believed by HHSD and key stakeholders such as Shelter, to be 'relatively active' in this field.

The research was commissioned partly to inform the production of Communities and Local Government good practice advice on homelessness prevention (see Pawson, Netto and Jones, 2006). However, in publishing this research report Communities and Local Government is not specifically endorsing any particular scheme or practice described.

Since 2004 when the research was carried out, the case of Robinson[1] has highlighted the illegality of 'gatekeeping' practices: where a local authority delays or postpones Section 184 Housing Act 1996 enquiries pending the outcome of homelessness prevention measures (e.g. family mediation). In the light of the reminder provided by this case, local authorities should be reviewing their procedures and practices to ensure that they are complying with their duties under Housing Act 1996 Part 7; in particular their duty to undertake enquiries where they have reason to believe that an applicant for assistance may be homeless or threatened with homelessness.

The ethos of homelessness prevention

Many local authorities have enthusiastically embraced the homelessness prevention ethos advocated by Communities and Local Government and actively piloted by a small number of leading councils. This partly reflects a coincidence of interests on the part of central and local government. As encapsulated by the phrase 'more than a roof', central government sees homelessness prevention as tailoring housing solutions to individual needs which – for some of those concerned – are not limited to the absence of accommodation. Whilst these sentiments are widely shared by homelessness staff, many local authorities also see homelessness prevention as attractive in its potential contributions to financial savings, as well as easing the pressure on shrinking rehousing resources.

Impact on local authority homelessness work

Adoption of the homelessness prevention ethos has had a considerable impact on the nature and organisation of local authority homelessness work, and homelessness prevention initiatives have re-shaped the roles of many local authority staff.

A prevention-centred approach can mean a pro-active rather than reactive style, with an increased stress on networking, negotiation and creativity.

'Housing options' interviews have a central role within this new framework. Such meetings explore, in detail, the feasibility of securing an applicant's existing accommodation or, failing that, examining the full range of possible routes to accessing a new tenancy, asking 'how can we help?' rather than 'who can we help?'

Some critics have argued that local authority procedures involving an initial 'housing options' interview can mean a failure to formally acknowledge that a person is homeless or threatened with homelessness and amount to a "denial" of their legal rights. This should never be the intention or result of the adoption of a preventative approach to housing advice and assistance. In any event, such criticisms do not recognise that a good

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[1] See: Robinson v Hammersmith & Fulham LBC 2006 EWCA Civ 1122 http://www.familylawweek.co.uk/library.asp?i=2311

housing options approach not only ensures that people are given homelessness assistance, in the sense that their legal rights are met, but also that a broader range of options are available to meet the needs of applicants, and that more people - i.e. not just those in priority need – can be given pro-active help to avoid or overcome homelessness.

A prevention-centred approach is not an easy option for a local authority. It generally requires a more proactive approach, and demands greater flexibility and effort in order to achieve results.

Preventing homelessness through improved housing advice

Improved or expanded housing advice services have featured widely as an aspect of local authorities' post-2002 homelessness prevention activities. In many authorities advice has become more closely interlinked with homelessness assessment. In some cases this has involved homelessness staff taking on advice-type functions. Increasingly, the scope of advice work is shifting towards a greater role for 'landlord liaison'. This term describes the development of close working relations with private landlords to create 'early warning systems' to alert a local authority that a tenancy may be at risk.

Housing advice work has increasingly targeted identified 'high risk' or 'high priority' groups. This can take the form of outreach sessions staged in selected locations such as community centres or jobcentre plus offices. While securing or accessing private tenancies remains an important function for many housing advice services, there is an increasing focus on assisting households to access or retain social rented tenancies.

Some voluntary organisations can add substantial value in providing housing advice services. Whilst the benefits of independence and impartiality may be placed at risk where services are substantially funded by local authorities, such arrangements facilitate partnership working and are consistent with the local authority's responsibility for the homelessness strategy.

The monitoring of housing advice service user outcomes has remained fairly patchy. At least until recently, much monitoring activity continued to be confined to fairly crude caseload or throughput figures. Outcomes data recorded by certain case study local authorities appears to demonstrate the potentially significant impact of housing advice intervention in preventing homelessness. The extent to which such interventions remain robust in the medium term is likely to emerge only with the 2005-06 implementation of the housing advice (homelessness prevention) Best Value Performance Indicator (see below).

From a cost-effectiveness perspective, it appears that investment in housing advice to prevent homelessness can certainly be fully justified. This is particularly evident where there are savings that arise from not having to house homeless households in temporary

accommodation. The case for cost-effectiveness is less clear-cut where assisted households would be unlikely to qualify as homeless and in priority need if they were assessed under the homelessness legislation. However, it is likely that wider public expenditure savings accrue from helping such households access better housing solutions.

Facilitating access to private tenancies

Recent years have seen growing efforts to facilitate homeless households' access to private tenancies. Increasingly, initiatives with this objective have focused on 'priority homeless' households as well as on generally 'non-priority' single people and childless couples. Such schemes are partly motivated by a recognition that – unlike social housing – the private rented sector has been expanding and that it produces twice the volume of lettings made by social landlords (albeit, tenancies with little legal security).

Rent deposit-type schemes are widely operated and are playing a growing role in rehousing people at risk of homelessness. Generally, at the time of the research, such projects involved households being informally referred without having been formally assessed under the homelessness legislation, where the household agreed that this was a suitable solution. Arrangements of this kind raise legal concerns as explained in paras 2.40-2.41 and 2.47-2.50. Such schemes can, however, be unproblematically used to secure rehousing (a qualifying Assured or Assured Shorthold Tenancy) for households accepted as homeless to bring a local authority's homelessness duty to an end[2].

In practice, some local authorities had, by 2004, moved away from making payments to landlords ostensibly on a 'returnable deposit' basis. Whilst the overall costs may be greater, it is argued that explicit 'premium' payments provide a stronger incentive for landlords as well as simplifying local authority administration. Rent deposit-type schemes also varied in the extent to which they involved (a) official checks of property quality and affordability, and (b) an obligation on landlords to agree 'preferential terms' – such as a tenancy of a minimum 12-months duration. Whilst the numbers of households rehoused in this way were, in some authorities, substantial, there was little if any data collected about the long term sustainability of the tenancies created.

Alongside rent deposit-type schemes many local authorities were operating or commissioning a range of other initiatives aimed at securing access to private tenancies for households at risk of homelessness. These included introductory services for landlords and intensive 'housing advice-style' assistance for specific groups of house-seekers. Such initiatives appeared to play a significant role in contributing to local homelessness prevention efforts in some areas.

[2] See para 14.19 in Communities and Local Government , DoH, DfES (2006)
Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities

Rent deposit and similar schemes targeted at households otherwise likely to be accepted as statutory homeless can be highly cost-effective from the local authority viewpoint. That is, the savings in probable temporary accommodation expenditure outweigh the outlays involved in securing access to private tenancies (whether or not actual deposit/premium payments are successfully recovered).

Family mediation services

Family mediation schemes are one of the most commonly identified responses envisaged in local authority homelessness strategies to reduce or prevent youth homelessness by eviction from the parental home. However, there were important distinctions between mediation schemes being operated in different authorities in 2004 in terms of (a) the extent to which engagement with the process was presented as obligatory, and (b) whether the service was independent of the homelessness assessment process or integral to it. Under schemes involving a 'default expectation' that young people claiming 'family/friend exclusion' will participate in mediation there is clearly a need for sensitive implementation in terms of the essentially subjective judgement as to whether encouraging an applicant to return to their former home could place them at any risk of violence or abuse. Important issues also arise from homelessness caselaw arising since the research fieldwork[3].

Case study monitoring evidence suggests that family mediation can be effective in reconciling relationships for a significant proportion of young adults facing possible homelessness due to disputes with parents or others. This will certainly have helped authorities reduce homelessness acceptances involving 'family/friend exclusions' in the short term, at least. At the same time, however, few authorities appeared to monitor whether mediation-assisted family reconciliations were sustained in the medium or longer term.

At least initially, some mediation schemes fell short of aspirations – for example where a high proportion of mediation referrals were reported as 'failing' due to the refusal of one or other party to participate. In certain instances authorities had successfully modified their procedures to counter such problems – e.g. by prioritising early referrals, by dropping requirements for both parties to participate, or making engagement with mediation a 'default expectation' at least for the young person concerned.

Subject to reservations about the appropriate selection of referrals and the sustainability of 'return home' solutions, all three mediation services examined here in detail appear highly cost-effective. That is, their operating costs are likely to be well below the consequent savings in relation to temporary accommodation expenditure.

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[3] In Robinson v Hammersmith & Fulham LBC (July 2006) the Court of Appeal ruled that family mediation and full homelessness assessment, where appropriate, should be simultaneous and not sequential. See footnote 1.

Preventing homelessness through domestic violence victim support

Relationship breakdown involving domestic violence was the main reason for loss of settled home for 13 per cent of households accepted as homeless in 2004-05. Domestic violence victim support was a major strand of homelessness prevention activity as reflected in local authority homelessness strategies. However, little research has previously been undertaken on this.

The main types of homelessness prevention activities identified in this area included 'sanctuary' schemes to enable those who have experienced domestic violence to stay in their own homes, supporting households at risk of domestic violence in making planned moves, crisis intervention services, floating support and resettlement support.

While such approaches are not appropriate in every case, there appears to be solid evidence of sanctuary schemes' potential to prevent homelessness. Subject to qualifications about the need to ensure that they are appropriately targeted, such schemes are clearly capable of being highly cost-effective.

Prison-based homelessness prevention

As acknowledged by Prison Service good practice recommendations, intervention to identify and address prisoners' housing problems is crucial both at reception into, and at release from, prison. The general lack of suitable post-release supported and mainstream accommodation remains a challenge. However, it appears that prison-based housing advice has the potential to improve ex-offenders' chances of avoiding post-release homelessness. By saving existing tenancies, by assisting prisoners to find new post-release accommodation and by providing post-release support, such projects can help to stem re-offending and the public and private sector costs which result.

Key messages emerging from the research include the importance of close collaboration between prison-based housing advice staff and a range of external agencies including training providers, outreach providers, other advice agencies and social landlords.

The research also testified to the potential benefits of 'peer involvement' models of prison-based housing advice (i.e. schemes involving prisoners trained to help others with their housing problems). The benefits of such approaches were evident not only for housing advice recipients but also for prisoners involved in dispensing the service. Prisoners themselves benefited in terms of increased confidence, and the experience gained was seen as having the potential to boost their future employability. There is undoubtedly a need for further evaluation of peer-led and peer-involving initiatives to explore the success factors and emerging lessons associated with different models, with different groups of prisoners, and in different prison environments.

Partly because few ex-prisoners are likely to be classed as 'priority homeless'[4], such schemes are less likely to generate savings in temporary accommodation expenditure compared to other forms of homelessness prevention. Consequently, the cost-effectiveness benefits of such schemes are not as easy to identify. However, given the very substantial public costs associated with re-offending (e.g. for Prison and Probation services) and the known close association between lack of accommodation and re-offending, there is a strong case that activities of this kind are economically beneficial.

Tenancy sustainment services

Many local authorities offer some form of support to help vulnerable tenants retain their tenancies. Whilst such services play a potentially important role in preventing homelessness, they are highly diverse in character in relation to, for example, the intensity and duration of support provision, the clients they target, and how they are funded.

Tenancy support, as examined in this research, typically included help with claiming benefits, budgeting and debt management, accessing community resources and services, furnishing accommodation, and helping individuals find meaningful occupation. Support tended to be client-centred and based on the regular monitoring and review of clients' needs.

Service providers argued that tenancy sustainment services were essential in enabling vulnerable people and those with complex support needs to maintain tenancies or to plan successful moves into settled accommodation. However, partly due to typically under-developed monitoring systems, there is relatively little hard evidence to demonstrate service effectiveness. Case study evidence suggested, for example, that services rarely recorded the proportion of supported tenancies remaining intact after a given period.

Key elements of 'what works' included flexible and client-centred provision, close liaison with key agencies, and building in support from other agencies when necessary. The need for timely intervention was also highlighted, as was the need for active promotion of the availability of the service and early contact with clients on referral. Some common barriers and constraints experienced by projects included the 'short term' nature of funding, weaknesses in inter-agency working, difficulties in recruiting or retaining appropriate staff, and the challenges involved in bench-marking and target-setting for a new kind of service.

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[4] The legal framework allows for the possibility of persons emerging from custody being judged 'vulnerable' in terms of the individual's ability to fend for him/herself. However, in receiving homelessness applications involving members of this group local authorities must use their discretion to assess whether the vulnerability test is, in fact, met.

Assessing the cost-effectiveness of tenancy sustainment is problematic, mainly because the counter-factual scenario is not easily identified (how many 'assisted households' would otherwise have lost their tenancy?). Nevertheless, our case study scheme for which cost effectiveness analysis was carried out, appeared to be highly cost-effective due to its assumed role in helping to reduce council evictions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The effectiveness of homelessness prevention

Whilst the evidence is fragmentary, project level data confirms that a significant proportion of certain types of interventions to prevent homelessness succeed in their objective (see especially chapters on landlord liaison, housing advice and family mediation).

This appears consistent with the observed downward trend in homelessness acceptances since the introduction of homelessness strategies in 2003 (see Figure A). As shown in Figure A, private sector housing continued to become less affordable throughout 2004 and 2005, whilst homelessness acceptances fell sharply during this period. Historically, homelessness trends have been closely related to changing patterns of housing affordability. And whilst other economic factors (e.g. unemployment rates) are also clearly important in influencing rates of homelessness, there has been little change in such factors over such recent years. Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that the counterfactual scenario to that shown in Figure A would have involved a continuing rise in homelessness acceptances since 2003.

Figure A: Trends in Home Ownership Affordability and Homelessness in England, 1998 - 2006
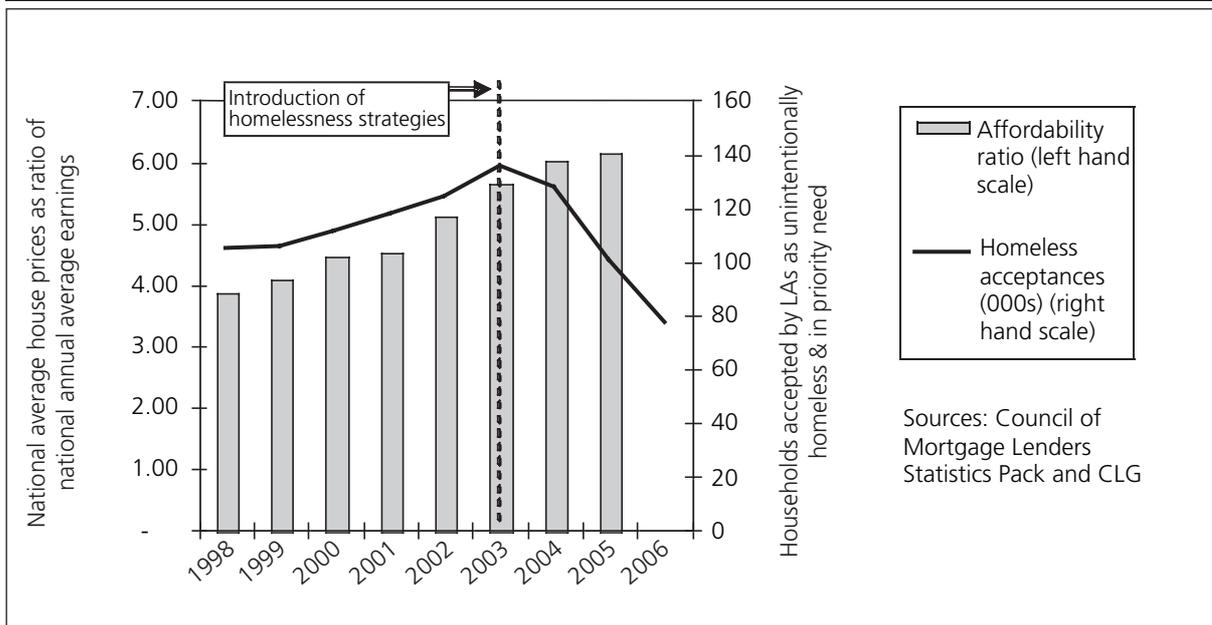
The scale of the post-2003 reduction in official homelessness numbers is also striking (see Figure A). By the end of 2006 households accepted as eligible, homeless and in priority need ('acceptances') had fallen by over 50 per cent from the peak figure of Q2 2003. This is by far the sharpest reduction in the figures on record. Similarly, the number of recorded assessment decisions has also fallen sharply (see Figure 2.5).

It therefore appears that, at least in part, dwindling acceptance numbers in recent years reflect the growing impact of homelessness prevention practices in constructively helping people avoid being without accommodation. The post-2003 trend shown in Figure A might also be influenced by the expanding private rented sector which may be affording low income households improved access to accommodation and thus reducing the pressures underlying 'homelessness demand'.

Recently declining acceptances are also likely to result from changed local authority practices in handling approaches from people claiming homelessness. This might, for example, reflect authorities developing a better understanding of their duties under the homelessness legislation thanks to help from a team of Central Government specialist advisers. At the same time, however, while the direct evidence from this research is limited, it seems highly likely that falling homelessness numbers post-2003 have to some extent resulted from changed LA procedures of two kinds. Firstly, where prevention efforts precede formal homelessness assessment and, secondly where authorities have adopted a stricter interpretation of having a 'reason to believe' that a household 'may be homeless' (thereby triggering a statutory duty to conduct a formal assessment). As explained in detail in paras 2.38 and 2.40-2.41 the first of these approaches could in some cases amount to unacceptable gate-keeping whilst the second approach fails to recognise that the threshold for triggering the statutory duty is very low.

It should be noted however, that the fieldwork for this research took place in 2004, when positive action to prevent homelessness represented a new departure for many local authorities (see above). Since then, Communities and Local Government, have taken steps to advise local authorities on the operation of homelessness prevention schemes, including publishing a good practice guide on homelessness prevention, and revising the statutory code of guidance on homelessness[5]. In 2006 Yvette Cooper, the Minister for Housing, also wrote to all local authorities reminding them that reductions in homelessness acceptances should not be achieved by illegal gate keeping practices.

Following Robinson, and in response to this recent advice from Communities and Local Government some authorities may have found it necessary to modify their arrangements for handling cases of households claiming homelessness so that the authorities concerned can ensure that their practices are compliant with their legal obligations.

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[5] See Communities and Local Government (2006) *Homelessness Prevention: A Guide to Good Practice*; Communities and Local Government, DoH, DfES (2006) *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities*.

Recommendations for Future Monitoring of Homelessness Prevention

Since the commissioning of this research Communities and Local Government (formerly ODPM) has made a crucial enhancement to the official monitoring regime. The 2005-06 introduction of Best Value Performance Indicators on housing advice (homelessness prevention) and repeat homelessness is to be welcomed in reinforcing official policy in favour of a new approach to local authority homelessness work. Guidance on the BVPIs has emphasized that, for these purposes, 'housing advice' as provided under s179 (Housing Act 1996, as amended) should be broadly defined to encompass the full range of interventions to prevent homelessness. It should include, for example, activities such as facilitating access to private tenancies through rent deposit or similar payments.

Collation of figures comprehensively recording 'homelessness presentations' could provide a vital context against which to judge the scale and effectiveness of a local authority's homelessness prevention activities.

The repeat homelessness indicator (BV214) is valuable in focusing attention on securing appropriate rehousing (and, where necessary, support) for statutory homeless households. Over and above this indicator, however, social landlords should be encouraged – and possibly required – to monitor tenancy sustainment rates more generally. Such a measure would gauge the number of tenancies created during a given time period (e.g. financial year) remaining intact for a given period (e.g. six or 12 months).

Local authorities should be more strongly encouraged to monitor the effectiveness of homelessness prevention at the level of individual projects. Such monitoring needs to involve direct recording of service user outcomes (for example the proportion of cases referred for family mediation where a reconciliation of a young person with their parents leads to homelessness being averted). Assessment of service effectiveness solely with reference to changing numbers of households accepted as homeless for specific reasons can only offer an indication of effectiveness.

In quality assuring homelessness prevention services – at least those revolving around mainstream housing advice – local authorities should be encouraged to seek the Community Legal Services kitemark for service excellence. There is also potential for the Housing Inspectorate to play an enhanced role in this area.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The policy context

1.1 Local authorities' obligation to prevent as well as respond to homelessness is longstanding, both in law and in good practice. Ever since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, authorities have been legally required to assist people threatened with homelessness (and classed as 'in priority need') by taking reasonable steps to prevent them from losing existing accommodation.

1.2 Since 1997, however, central government has increasingly encouraged local authorities to adopt a more pro-active stance in tackling homelessness. This is in keeping with the stronger post-1997 official focus on addressing social exclusion more generally. A fore-runner of this approach in respect of homelessness was the Rough Sleepers Initiative of the early 1990s. A renewed drive to reduce street homelessness was among the main policy priorities as identified by the Social Exclusion Unit after its creation in 1997. Action in this area was crystallised around the 1999 establishment of a dedicated central government team, the Rough Sleepers Unit, tasked with reducing rough sleeper numbers to two thirds of the 1998 level by 2002 (Randall and Brown, 2002a).

1.3 The government's wish for local authorities to develop a more interventionist approach to homelessness more generally was signalled in its 2002 policy paper *More than a Roof* (DTLR, 2002). The report acknowledged that structural, as well as individual factors contribute to the incidence of homelessness. As existing research evidence demonstrates, homelessness trends not only reflect the state of the housing market and the wider economy – e.g. as measured by unemployment rates (Kemp et al, 2001), but also, as noted by *More than a Roof*, many people lose (or fail to sustain) tenancies due to specific personal problems, which need to be addressed directly if homelessness is to be prevented or – failing that – if sustainable housing solutions are to be found. Such an approach had already been shown as fundamental to the success of the rough sleeper reduction strategy.

1.4 *More than a Roof* advocated a number of practical initiatives seen as contributing to homelessness prevention. These included a greater stress on the provision of advice on housing, employment and welfare benefits, together with the development of services such as family mediation, support in dealing with domestic violence, access to detoxification services, and employment training.

1.5   The Homelessness Act 2002 is central to the new 'prevention-focused' approach, having placed a new duty on every housing authority in England, to develop a strategy based on a review of homelessness in their area. Government guidance stated that strategies must aim to prevent homelessness and ensure that accommodation and support will be available for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. According to this guidance an effective homelessness strategy will:

- Provide information on the scale and nature of homelessness in the area;
- Identify the additional accommodation and support required to meet those needs;
- Identify the services needed to prevent homelessness occurring or reoccurring;
- Identify the resources currently available to meet these needs;
- Identify additional resources as required;
- Involve other public voluntary and private agencies in partnership work; and
- Spread best practice among agencies.

(Randall and Brown, 2002b).

1.6   Confirming that the rough sleeping reduction target (see above) had been met ahead of time, '*More Than a Roof*' committed government to sustaining this improved position. It also set a new specific homelessness target: the elimination of (non-emergency) family placements in Bed & Breakfast hotels[6].

1.7   To assist local authorities in implementing prevention measures envisaged in their homelessness strategies, ODPM (now Communities and Local Government) Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate (HHSD) allocated revenue funding of £100 million in 2002-03 and a further £260 million for the following three years. Ministers subsequently confirmed annual funding averaging some £67 million is to be rolled forward until at least 2008 (ODPM, 2005a) These resources are intended mainly as 'pump-priming' grants to help kick-start new initiatives designed to help people retain existing accommodation or to find and sustain new tenancies where necessary.

1.8   Alongside this funding package, the government launched its *Supporting People* funding regime in 2003. In its first year (2003-04) more than £1.8 billion in *Supporting People* funding was made available for housing-related support to assist over a million people to sustain independent living. Budgeted Supporting People spending for 2006-07 was just over £1.7 billion. An appreciable proportion of this expenditure underpins tenancy sustainment projects aimed at preventing homelessness.

[6] The target stated that by 31 March 2004, local authorities should ensure that no homeless family with children should live in a bed and breakfast hotel except in an emergency, and even then, for no more than six weeks. Since 1 April 2004 this target has been given statutory force by the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003.

1.9 In 2003, the Government's expectations of local authorities in relation to preventing homelessness were made more explicit in an advice note 'Achieving Positive Outcomes on Homelessness' (ODPM, 2003a). Homelessness prevention was defined here as 'activities that enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or that provide options to enable a planned and timely move and help to sustain independent living'. Alongside the requirement for local authorities to help achieve the rough sleeping and Bed & Breakfast targets cited above, all authorities were invited to adopt at least one of the following additional 'positive outcomes':

- Reduced levels of repeat homelessness;
- Reduced levels of homelessness against main causes; and[7]
- Reduced inappropriate use of temporary accommodation[8].

Authorities receiving grant funding exceeding £100,000 in 2003-04 were required, as a grant condition, to commit to one or more of these objectives. For all local authorities, progress against these goals is measured both through quarterly monitoring returns to Communities and Local Government, and routine P1E monitoring of statutory homelessness.

1.10 Another official policy briefing (ODPM, 2003b) identified three stages where local authority (or other agency) intervention can prevent homelessness:

- Early intervention: where those at risk are identified and services provided to support the person and their environment;
- Pre-crisis intervention: which can take the form of advice services, mediation services, negotiation with landlords to avoid imminent loss of a home, and services targeted at people at known risk points such as those leaving local authority care, prison or the armed forces; and
- Preventing recurring homelessness: Tenancy sustainment is seen as key to preventing recurring homelessness where there are problems that cannot be resolved by rehousing alone.

1.11 In 'Reducing B&B Use and Homelessness – What's Working: A Good Practice Handbook' (ODPM, 2003c) ODPM detailed a range of success stories reported by councils across England as helping to reduce Bed & Breakfast use for homeless households. To achieve a sustained reduction, the guide suggested that authorities needed to address three areas concurrently:

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[7] The main causes of homelessness are identified as the main reasons for loss of last settled home, as recorded by the P1E homelessness legislation monitoring system.
[8] This is distinct from the more recently announced aim to halve the total number of households in temporary accommodation between 2005 and 2010 (ODPM, 2005a)

● Preventing homelessness, i.e. reducing the inflow of homeless households potentially requiring temporary accommodation;

● Maximising settled housing opportunities, i.e. increasing the outflow from temporary accommodation; and

● Increasing the supply of alternative forms of temporary accommodation.

1.12 The guide used the slogan 'spend to save' to emphasize its contention that relatively modest investment in prevention initiatives could yield very substantial longer-term economies through the avoidance of Bed & Breakfast placements. Examples of cost-effective approaches suggested included small grants or loans to repay rent arrears putting a tenancy at risk, or to pay an agency fee to secure the extension of a fixed-term tenancy. The guide also proposed the use of mobility incentives such as regional relocations, incentives for under-occupiers to trade down to smaller properties, and ensuring an appropriate proportion of social housing allocations to homeless households. In addition, the guide advocated boosting the supply of alternative temporary accommodation through private lettings and the direct leasing of good quality homes by local authorities or housing associations.

1.13 Significantly, the guide went further than previous official publications in advocating new approaches to administering homelessness work. It argued, for instance, that authorities should make more determined efforts to reach out to other local agencies to seek their help in identifying impending instances of homelessness before they occur. This was seen as greatly improving the prospects of preventing homelessness through, for example, negotiation with a landlord. The guide also emphasized the potential utility of home visits in cases where young people reported facing eviction by parents or other relatives, but where pro-active investigation could help to avert homelessness.

1.14 The guide was also important in popularising the term 'housing options'. For example, it suggested that councils could routinely offer 'housing options' interviews to all households seeking accommodation, with these sessions being entirely separate from homelessness assessment processes (ODPM, 2003c, p47). The 'housing options' concept is central to addressing housing need as a means of preventing homelessness. Also, whilst in tune with the government's wider commitment to customer choice, it is symptomatic of an approach which seeks to move away from an assumption that a social rented tenancy is the only appropriate solution for every homeless household. Housing Options approaches are further discussed in Chapter 2.

1.15 An assessment of the first round of homelessness strategies (submitted in 2003) confirmed that the great majority focused on the development of prevention and support. More than 80 per cent of local authorities reported that 'a main aim of their strategy was prevention of homelessness and development of advice services' (HQNS, 2004, p63).

The research: purpose, objectives, and methods

1.16 This research was commissioned in 2004 to examine approaches to homelessness prevention on the part of local authorities and their partner agencies. The main objectives were to:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to preventing homelessness;
- Provide evidence on value for money of homelessness prevention work;
- Produce a good practice guide on homelessness prevention; and
- Make recommendations on the future monitoring of homelessness prevention work by local authorities and central government.

1.17 The research focused mainly on activities launched under local authorities' homelessness strategies, some of which were funded through Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate (HHSD) grants. It also looked at initiatives which pre-dated this.

1.18 The research involved four main elements:

(i) An analysis of monitoring returns by 40 local authorities in receipt of HHSD grants exceeding £100,000 in 2003-04.

(ii) A review of existing research on homelessness prevention.

(iii) Detailed case study work evaluating local homelessness prevention initiatives commissioned or undertaken by ten local authorities. This included:
   - Interviews with local authority housing officers and staff in partner organisations commissioned to deliver specific homelessness prevention services.
   - Individual interviews and group discussions with people who had used homelessness prevention services (see Annex 2).
   - A cost effectiveness analysis of 14 homelessness prevention initiatives in seven case study local authorities.

(iv) Two case studies focusing on Prison Service initiatives to prevent homelessness (see Annex 3).

1.19 So as to investigate emerging practice, the local authorities selected as case studies for the research were chosen from among those believed by HHSD and key stakeholders such as Shelter, to be 'relatively active' in this field. Further details of the case study work and the selection of case study local authorities are set out in Annex 1. It must be acknowledged that the relatively small number of case study authorities (and the fact that certain scheme types (e.g. private sector leasing, landlord mediation)) were investigated only in one or two places means that the evidence base for the report is limited in parts. This needs to be borne in mind in interpreting attempts to draw wider conclusions from the findings. However, in relation to services deemed particularly key to homelessness prevention, such as family mediation and housing advice, several services were examined, and the evidence here is stronger.

1.20 Alongside the current research, members of the team also undertook a related study – an evaluation of Tenancy Sustainment Teams assisting the resettlement of former rough sleepers in London. Whilst that study is the subject of a separate report (Lomax and Netto, 2007) we have drawn on this evidence to inform Chapter 8.

1.21 The approach used to assess cost-effectiveness was to examine the costs and outcomes of individual schemes, and to consider the public sector costs had these services not existed. To assess the latter, the approach involved considering what would have been the housing outcomes for those households receiving the service. In a few instances, services lacked specific aims and objectives, and this meant that an assessment based on individual outcomes was not possible. In these cases, an aggregate assessment was undertaken. A fuller description of the cost-effectiveness assessment method is set out in Annex 4, together with a list of the schemes covered by this analysis.

Structure of the report

1.22 The main body of the report (Chapters 3-9) deals with specific types of initiatives which aim to contribute to the homelessness prevention agenda in different ways. Each chapter is structured in a similar way to look at the substance of the activities involved, and at how services are targeted, procured and monitored. In each chapter there is also a cost-effectiveness analysis of the activities involved. These 'subject specific' chapters are preceded in Chapter 2 by a broader consideration of the new ethos of homelessness prevention and the requirements of the homelessness legislation. In Chapter 10 the most significant findings are drawn together and recommendations for the future monitoring of homelessness prevention activities are summarised.

Chapter 2

Homelessness prevention: overview

Trends in homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation

2.1 Central government's emphasis on a more pro-active approach to homelessness prevention has clearly been well received by many local authorities. In part, this reflects authorities' own concerns at the impact of rising homelessness numbers and, more particularly, rising numbers of homeless households in Bed & Breakfast hotels and other types of temporary accommodation. Before discussing the new ways of working involved, it is worth reviewing these trends.

2.2 As Figure 2.1 illustrates, the number of households accepted by local authorities as unintentionally homeless and in priority need ('homeless acceptances') rose steadily after 1997-98. By 2003-04 the national total had risen by more than 33 per cent and was close to the peak reached at the start of the previous decade.

2.3 In the three years to 2002-03 homelessness acceptances rose significantly in every region (see Figure 2.2). In 2003-04, however, the picture changed with the upward trend being reversed in London, a pattern reinforced in 2004-05 as acceptances fell back in all other regions.

2.4 In the main, rising homelessness over the period 1997-2003 probably reflected general trends in the housing market, as house prices increased at a faster rate than income, making home ownership steadily less affordable. Figure 2.3 shows that the ratio of national average house prices to national average earnings rose steadily from the late 1990s, continuing well into 2004.

Figure 2.1: Households Classed as (Unintentionally) Homeless and in Priority Need in England, 1988-89 – 2005-06
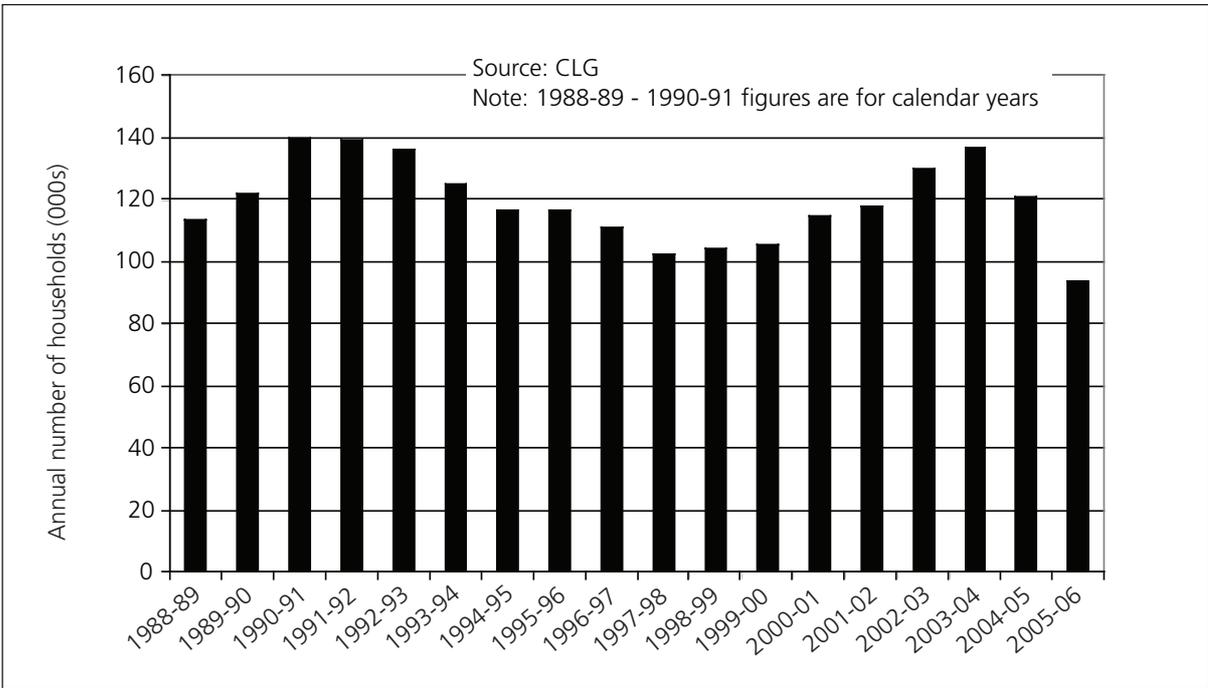
Figure 2.2: Households Classed as (Unintentionally) Homeless and in Priority Need in England, 1997-98 – 2005-06: Regional Trends
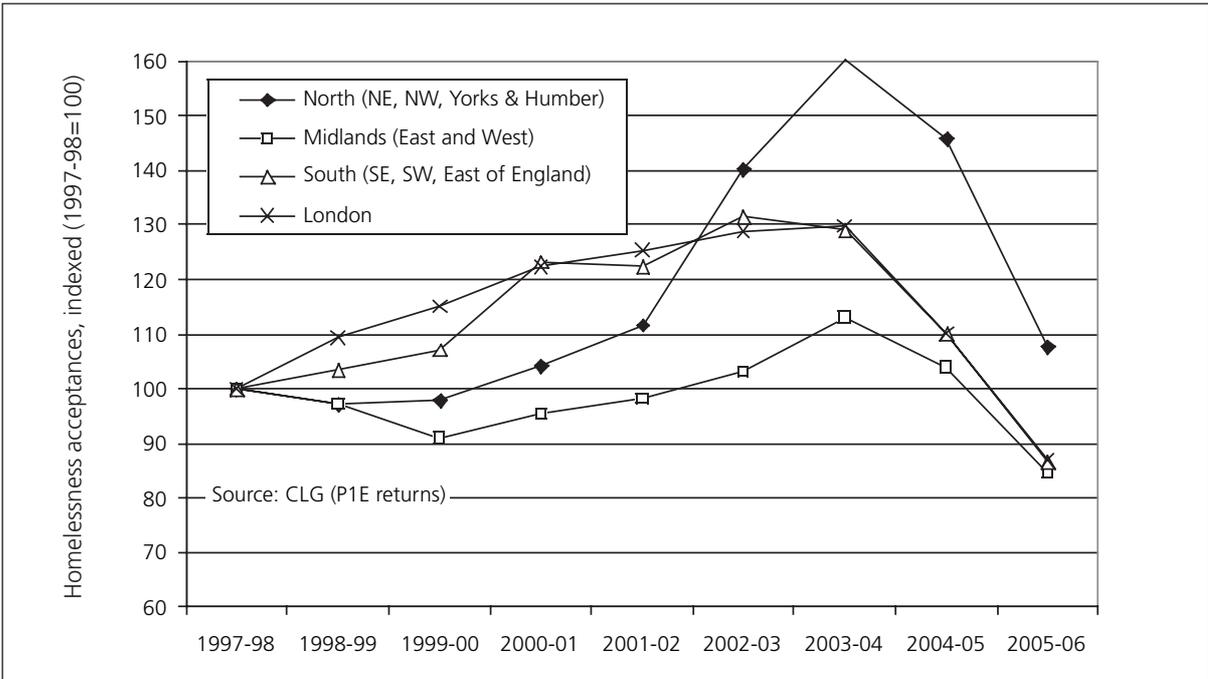
2.5 A more specific factor contributing to the upward trend in homelessness was probably the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002, or the "Priority Need Order", introduced under the power in section 189(2) of the Housing Act 1996. This broadened local authorities' responsibilities towards homeless households by expanding the 'priority need' categories to encompass a number of new groups, including young people aged 16-17 and care leavers aged under 21. However, it is not possible to estimate with certainty the precise impact of this change in terms of the number of homelessness acceptances.

Figure 2.3: Trend in Home Ownership Affordability, 1997-2005

Source: Council of Mortgage Lenders Statistics Pack
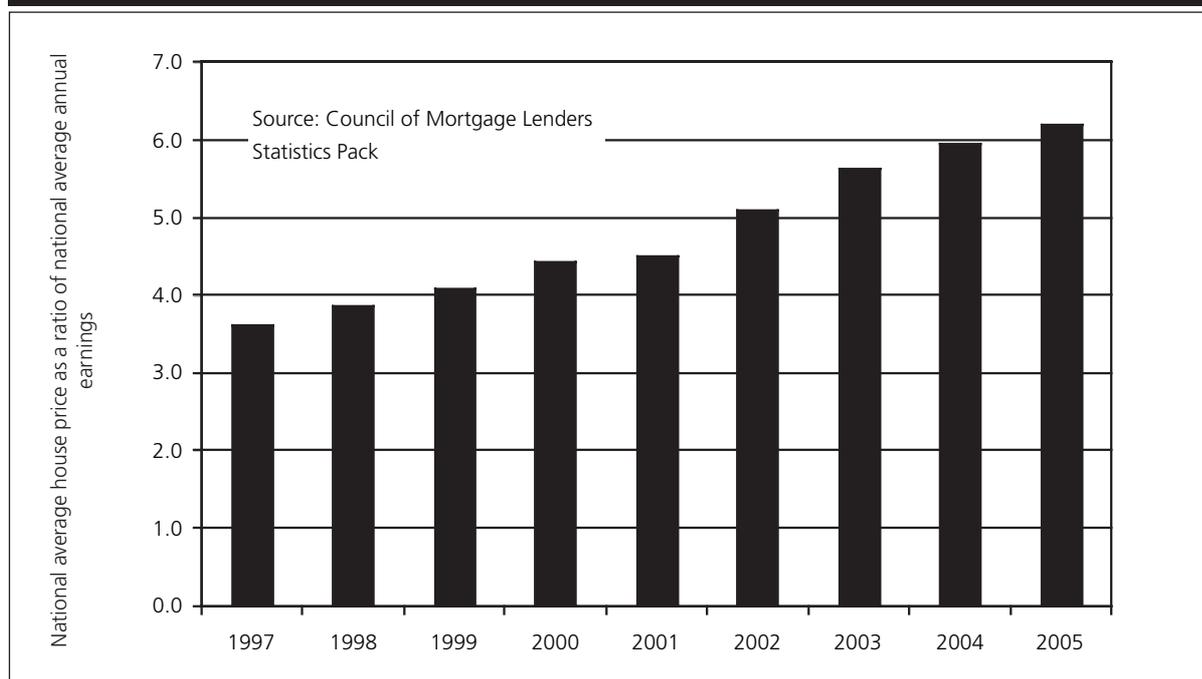
Local authority motivations

2.6 An important effect of rising homelessness during the period 1997-2002 was the expansion in the use of Bed & Breakfast hotels as temporary accommodation for applicants under investigation and those accepted as homeless but awaiting resettled housing (see Figure 2.4). The use of temporary housing rose disproportionately to the increase in homelessness. For example, whilst acceptances rose by 34 per cent between 1997-98 and 2003-04, temporary accommodation placements rose by 125 per cent over this period. Bed & Breakfast placements peaked at the end of 2002, 223 per cent higher than in 1997. These figures probably reflected the shrinking supply of social rented housing seen over this period. With sales under Right to Buy continuing to erode the social rented stock, the number of properties available for re-letting each year fell steadily. Between 1997-98 and 2002-03, for example, the combined total number of lettings by local authorities and housing associations fell by 21 per cent (Wilcox, 2004).

2.7 Given the particularly high unit costs of Bed & Breakfast placements, local authority receptiveness to the homelessness prevention agenda was, no doubt, greatly enhanced by concerns at the financial impact of rising Bed & Breakfast numbers seen in the five years to 2002.

2.8 An additional local motivation to prevent homelessness has been the concern that lettings to priority homeless households were increasingly 'crowding out' lettings to non-homeless applicants. Local authority Housing Strategy Statistical Annex (HSSA) returns show that by 2003-04 the proportion of lettings to new tenants accounted for by households accepted as homeless had exceeded 50 per cent in one landlord local authority in every six (more than half of the 39 authorities involved being outside London).

Figure 2.4: Local Authorities' use of Temporary accommodation for Homeless Households, 1992-2006

Source: CLG P1E data

All temporary accom (left hand scale)
B&B hotel placements(right hand scale)
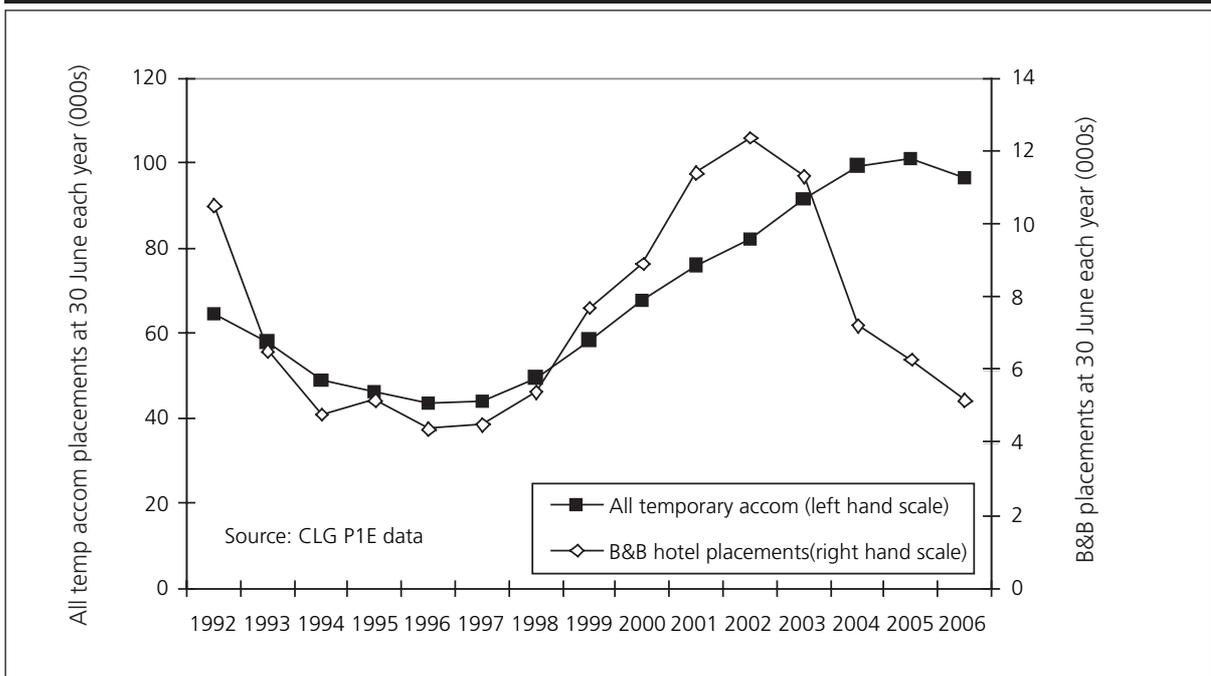
2.9 Such 'crowding out' is seen as creating the danger of a vicious circle where people in housing need (particularly young people seeking to form new households) come to see homelessness as the only viable route into social housing. Hence people who might otherwise have been expected to 'wait their turn' are subject to a perverse incentive to 'go the homeless route'. The concern here is that the perceived 'unfairness' of 'rewarding queue-jumpers' can undermine the legitimacy of the allocations process, particularly at a time of growing housing need among the non-homeless population. In London, for example, the number of households on borough housing registers rose by 32 per cent between 2001 and 2004 (unpublished Communities and Local Government data drawing on local authority HSSA returns).

2.10 It should be acknowledged that the homelessness legislation incorporates substantial checks against people voluntarily surrendering accommodation in that a 'receiving' local authority may find, in the course of their investigations, an applicant 'not homeless' or 'intentionally homeless' and as a result with no statutory right to rehousing. It is also fair to say that there is no sound research evidence demonstrating that significant numbers of people 'voluntarily' declare themselves homeless in such a way that they evade these checks. Such research would be difficult to undertake.

2.11 However, the absence of such evidence does not change the fact that the view described above has currency among some housing staff, and underlies policy thinking in some local authorities.

2.12 In certain authorities, such concerns have been a factor motivating the introduction of choice-based lettings where one of the objectives of making the switch is to restore a more orderly approach to rehousing prioritisation (Marsh et al, 2004).

Changing trends in homelessness acceptances

2.13 Figure 2.1 shows that annual homelessness acceptances continued to increase in 2003-04. However, quarterly figures show that acceptances peaked in the second quarter of 2003, with the total for the same quarter of 2004 having fallen by five percent (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5: Homelessness Assessment Decisions, Q1 2002 - Q1 2006
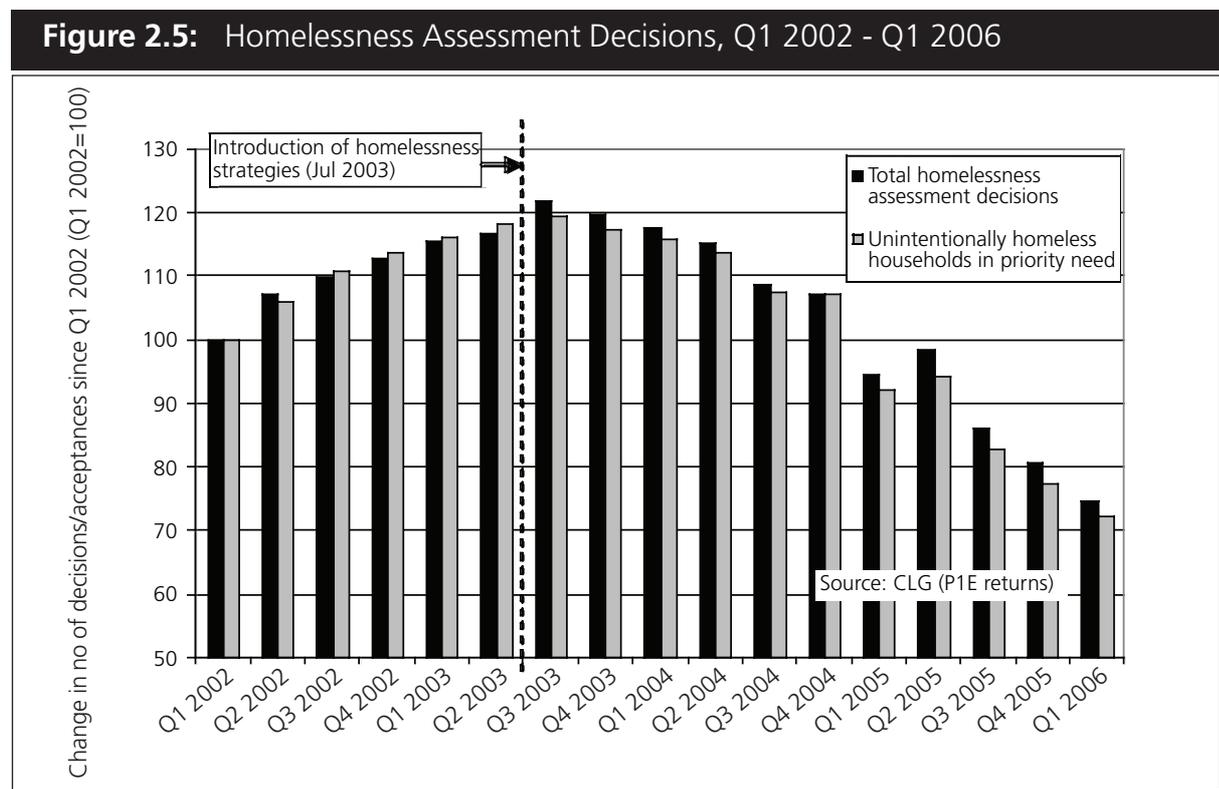
2.14 The ongoing national trend of declining housing affordability running into 2004 and 2005 (see Figure 2.3) would probably be seen as creating the conditions for continuing increases in homelessness. It is, therefore, striking that both homelessness applications (as measured by assessment decisions), and acceptances, began to decline from mid-2003.

2.15 Based upon the limited evidence of the role of structural and individual factors in causing homelessness, it seems highly likely that stepped-up prevention measures and changed local authority procedures following from the 2003 introduction of homelessness strategies have contributed to the subsequent downward trend in decisions and acceptances.

The ethos of homelessness prevention and its practical application

Impact on the nature and organisation of Local Authority Homelessness Work

2.16 As noted in para 1.1, the expectation that local authorities will attempt to prevent – as well as respond to – homelessness has been enshrined in legislation and guidance since the 1970s. A purely responsive stance towards homelessness has never been condoned by official policy. A range of preventative approaches have been promoted by successive versions of the ministerial Code of Guidance on Homelessness, designed to help councils interpret legislative requirements (see, for example, Chapters 2 and 14 of the current Code of Guidance – Communities and Local Government, DoH, DfES, 2006). There is therefore, nothing inherently controversial or novel in an authority assisting a tenant in defence of their legal right to retain a private tenancy, for example.

2.17 It is, nevertheless, significant that recent government guidance has adopted an explicit commitment to a fundamentally pro-active ethos for homelessness work (e.g. ODPM 2003a and b). This is not an entirely 'top down' initiative. An important contribution was made by one local authority – Harrow LBC – which published its own 'tackling homelessness' good practice guide (Harrow LBC, 2003). Harrow's motivation here was sharpened by the need to cope with a relatively high rate of homelessness coupled with the second smallest social rented sector in London. The Harrow guide summed up its central aim as changing (local authority) attitudes from "nothing can be done to prevent homelessness in high demand areas' to 'every case is preventable" (Harrow LBC, 2003, p37).

2.18 From case study evidence gathered for this research, it is clear that – in conjunction with official guidance and central funding – Harrow's approach has been immensely influential. Many local authority homelessness teams have been encouraged to lift

their sights in attempting to break with the traditional legalistic focus on the council's statutory obligations towards people claiming to be homeless or threatened with homelessness. At its most positive, this might be described as an aspiration to replace a welfare rights ethic with a customer service ethic; a move from bureaucratic gatekeeping to customer empowerment. Fundamental to this approach was a challenge to the assumption that a social rented tenancy is necessarily the only appropriate or realistic solution for most homeless people. This sentiment is further explored in Chapter 4.

2.19 The case study work shed interesting light on the implications of the renewed emphasis on homelessness prevention for the nature and organisation of local authority homelessness work. A number of case study councils had re-directed homelessness officer staff resources by designating specific team members to develop particular skills. In Leicester's Housing Options team for example, individual staff had been assigned to specialise in rehousing offenders, in Housing Benefit liaison, and in tenancy relations. In Bournemouth, specialisms were being developed by homelessness officers in respect of landlord liaison, domestic violence victim support, and the provision of assistance to young people.

2.20 More generally, a homelessness service oriented towards prevention calls for somewhat different skills and approaches to traditional local authority homelessness work. There is a greater emphasis on networking with community organisations and with private landlords, and a greater stress on negotiation and creativity. Inherent within this style of work is an implication that front-line staff are allowed greater discretion, and are encouraged to think more imaginatively. Partly in recognition of these new skills requirements, the Harrow guide recommends that local authorities should rethink the common assumption that previous experience of housing work is essential for homelessness team recruits. Instead, authorities are advised to 'look to bring in fresh people with enquiring minds and a desire to problem solve' (p4).

2.21 Although our case study work did not explore this in any depth, the evidence suggests that a shift to a more pro-active and less reactive working style is welcomed by many homelessness staff. It can be reasonably assumed that helping people tackle their housing problems creatively will be a relatively rewarding activity in contrast to a largely legalistic and process-driven style of operation.

2.22 Another organisational trend common to a number of case study authorities selected for this research was the establishment of strategy and monitoring posts to develop and take forward homelessness strategies. This was partly a recognition of the different skill requirements of operational management and strategic activity. In Telford & Wrekin for example, a Homelessness Strategy Implementation Co-

ordinator post had been set up. Bournemouth Borough Council had split the operational and strategic management of homelessness to create specific managerial posts tasked with these two distinct aspects of homelessness-related activity. Designated policy and monitoring posts were also seen as necessary to properly set up, oversee, and review services outsourced to housing associations and other external agencies.

Homelessness prevention and homelessness assessment

2.23 It is clear from the official evaluation of homelessness strategies (HQNS, 2004) that many prevention initiatives are focused on 'non-priority' homeless households. Some of these initiatives (e.g. those focusing on former rough sleepers) pre-date the renewed activity in this area seen since 2002. It is, however, clear from the strategies evaluation and from our own research that most of the recent expansion of work in this area has been targeted towards preventing homelessness involving 'potentially priority need' households. This latter term refers to families and vulnerable households likely – in the event of being assessed homeless or threatened with homelessness – to be judged legally in 'priority need'. Whilst later chapters of this report refer to schemes catering – at least in part – for homeless households who would potentially fall outside the priority need categories, the following paragraphs are mainly concerned with initiatives for potentially priority need groups.

2.24 As well as describing a range of initiatives designed to prevent households from losing their accommodation, the Harrow guide presented detailed recommendations on homelessness assessment procedures. These were mainly motivated by a commitment to eliminate fraudulent applications and to establish a rigorous, consistent and professionally administered process. The primary aim here was to enable a local authority to minimise the numbers of households accepted as homeless, preserving the legislation's role as a safety net benefiting only those actually requiring such help.

2.25 At the time of the research, however, it appears that some local authority staff perceived central government as seeing the 'effectiveness' of homelessness prevention initiatives as being measured mainly through recorded changes in acceptances (i.e. households found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need). Based on an informal survey of 60 local authorities, Roof, Shelter's housing magazine, reported that two thirds of (homelessness staff) respondents 'felt under pressure to reduce (homeless acceptances)' (Roof, Jan/Feb 2005 p18). Whilst this is no great revelation in itself, it is perhaps significant that 'the majority' of those responding in this way believed that 'this pressure was coming straight from central government'.

2.26 Citing the survey responses, Roof argued that Central Government's influence on local practice here was exerted at least in part through the process of allocating homelessness prevention funding (see para 1.7). Clearly, all would applaud the reduction of acceptances through positive action to prevent and pre-empt homelessness. However, Roof's contention was that central government's use of carrots and sticks in this arena had placed local authorities under unreasonable pressure to squeeze down homelessness acceptances through any means possible – including 'unacceptable gatekeeping' (see paras 2.40-2.41).

2.27 Perceptions of the kind described above are, perhaps, not surprising given Communities and Local Government's need to monitor local authority progress against the official target to 'reduce homelessness against main causes' (i.e. family/friend exclusion, relationship breakdown, loss of Assured Shorthold tenancies). In assessing a local authority's success in this respect (and, in the process, assessing the authority's case for continuing funding), Communities and Local Government acknowledges closely monitoring these trends. However, perhaps partly in recognition of the need to avoid perpetuating any misunderstanding of the central objective of homelessness prevention, the Department has more recently established new official performance indicators which seek to measure more directly the effectiveness of homelessness prevention initiatives (see paras 2.51-2.57).

2.28 While the snapshot provided by Roof does not necessarily present a wholly representative picture of local authority opinion, it would be unwise to deny that such views exist. Roof's contentions illustrate that homelessness prevention is a potentially controversial area because a local authority might be able to 'improve its record' – e.g. as measured by the number of homelessness acceptances in relation to one of the 'main causes' – by (a) imposing 'gatekeeping' barriers to households being formally assessed under the homelessness legislation, rather than preventing homelessness or (b) by implementing a more rigorous interpretation of the law without necessarily assisting un-accepted households to find accommodation.

2.29 Issues around 'gatekeeping' (point (a) above) are discussed in detail in paras 2.36-2.46. As to point (b), analysis of Communities and Local Government P1E statutory homelessness monitoring data suggests that, on the face of it, little of the reduction in acceptances seen since the 2003 peak resulted from more rigorous interpretation of homelessness law. At the national scale, homelessness acceptances continued to account for around 44-46 per cent of all assessment decisions over the period 2002-2006. However, the incidence of 'intentional homelessness' decisions has risen somewhat (from 3.6% of all decisions in 2002-03 to 6.2% in 2005-06), though this seems to be part of a longer term trend.

2.30 The overall picture does not indicate that reduced homelessness acceptances reflect a more rigorous application of the legislation in terms of a lower proportion of recorded decisions resulting in this outcome (but see also para 2.41). In certain individual authorities, however, recent reductions in acceptance numbers have resulted largely from cuts in acceptance rates. In one case study authority, for example, acceptances as a proportion of decisions had been reduced to 32 per cent from 57 per cent a year earlier. A contributory factor here was reportedly a change in procedures involving the establishment of a priority need panel (consisting of homelessness manager, senior housing adviser, homeless policy officer and senior health and housing officer). This was intended to achieve 'more consistent decision-making' in relation to this aspect of homelessness assessment – a perfectly understandable objective for what was a relatively large authority with numerous homelessness staff. The result of the new working arrangements was an increased incidence of non-priority judgements, with these rising from 34 per cent of all assessments in the third quarter of 2003 to almost 50 per cent a year later.

2.31 This type of innovation chimes with the Harrow guide's observation that where the role of deciding on whether to accept a full homelessness duty has been delegated to front-line case officers 'acceptance figures tend to be higher' (Harrow LBC, 2003, p21). In the interests of maintaining consistency the guide also made useful suggestions for quality assuring assessment decision-making through routine audit or random case-checking.

Home visits

2.32 Another important recommendation emanating from the Harrow guide and, as indicated by case study work, widely adopted by local authorities, involves homelessness assessment home visits. The guide advocated a routine home visit procedure for all cases involving people reporting having been asked to leave the homes of parents, friends or relatives ('family/friend exclusions'). As shown by Figure 2.6, these categories have accounted for a significant and growing proportion of total homelessness acceptances in recent years. Home visits are seen as necessary mainly because of the typically ambiguous status of such applicants in terms of whether they are, in fact, legally homeless (or threatened with homelessness). Particularly in the case of young people wishing to leave the parental home, there is a concern that this ambiguity can be exploited through collusion between 'excluder' and 'excluded' because of the perception that this is the young person's only route to obtaining independent accommodation.

2.33 Echoing the 2002 homelessness Code of Guidance (ODPM, DoH, 2002), the Harrow guide strongly advocated the routine use of mediation in an attempt to reconcile excluder and excluded. Other than where there is evidence of possible abuse or violence it was recommended that this approach should be routine in family/friend exclusion cases, ideally to 'prevent homelessness'. A home visit by a

homelessness officer might be seen as a first step in the process. The extent to which mediation is – and should be – offered as a 'free choice' on the part of the applicant (and host household) is, however, controversial. This is one of the issues explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Figure 2.6: Households accepted as homeless by local authorities, 1997-98 – 2005-06: breakdown by immediate reason for homelessness

Source: CLG P1E data
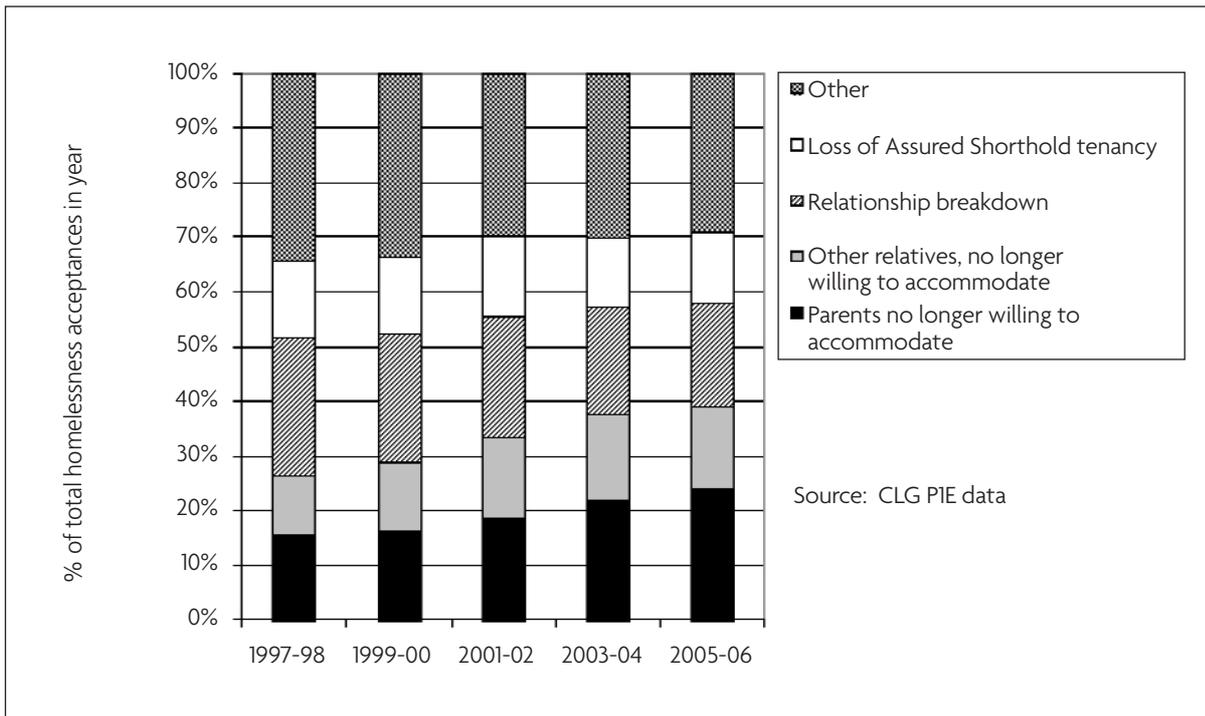
2.34 Whether or not it amounts to 'mediation', home visits by homelessness staff are seen by many councils as an opportunity to negotiate with the host household to allow a young person to remain in the property. Some case study authorities included in this evaluation argued that mainstream allocations policies and practices were of great importance here. In Bradford and Sutton, for example, it was believed that the recent introduction of choice-based lettings systems incorporating waiting time-based prioritisation had greatly improved the prospects of such negotiations leading to agreement. This supports an argument that making allocations systems more transparent and increasing the influence of waiting time on rehousing prioritisation helps to restore a 'queuing ethic' – i.e. making it more realistic for a landlord to predict how long it will take for an applicant to reach 'the head of the queue'.

2.35 Similarly, in Sutton and in Canterbury it was seen as important that needs-related priority in mainstream allocations systems had recently been altered in favour of households occupying insecure housing. Again, this helped to improve the chances that a household at risk of losing their accommodation could be rehoused through the housing register rather than through 'the homeless route'.

Housing options interviews and the 'gatekeeping' debate

2.36 Another significant change in operational practices widely associated with the ethos of homelessness prevention is the use of 'housing options' interviews, where authorities require people presenting as homeless or threatened with homelessness to participate in an interview before undertaking any formal homelessness enquiries. As noted above (see para 1.14) the 'housing options' concept was commended by central government guidance.

2.37 The purpose of a 'housing options' discussion is to explore, in detail, the feasibility of securing the applicant's existing accommodation or, failing that, examining the full range of possible routes to accessing a new tenancy.

2.38 Housing options interviews can be a useful way of focusing initial attention on practical steps to avert homelessness. They can also enable the interviewing officer to form a judgement as to whether there is 'reason to believe' that the household may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. This is crucial because if such reason exists an authority is legally obliged to conduct a formal homelessness assessment (Communities and Local Government, DoH, DfES, 2006). Equally, however, the evidential threshold for having such 'reason to believe' is low, and local authorities therefore have only limited scope to interpret their legal obligations more narrowly here.

2.39 To an extent, recent reductions in total 'homelessness decisions' (see Figure 2.5) recorded nationally probably reflect the success of the renewed emphasis on homelessness prevention, and may in part reflect successful solutions to housing problems as a result of such interventions. However, one factor which may be relevant here is the way that a housing options approach could potentially have the effect of reducing the number of households for whom a formal homelessness assessment is deemed necessary. Some housing options interviews involving households claiming to be homeless or threatened with homelessness will result in an initial judgement that the authority has no reason to believe that the applicant is or may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. Given that households in these circumstances might otherwise have been subject to a formal homelessness assessment it may be that the number of formally recorded 'decisions' under a housing options regime will be lower than would otherwise be the case.

2.40 Whether or not the relevant session is termed a 'housing options' discussion, where an initial interview suggests that a household may be homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days, a local authority is legally obliged to make enquiries to satisfy itself as to whether the applicant is eligible, and if so what duty (if any) is owed to him (Housing Act 1996 S184(1)). The only exception to this would be where an applicant decides not to pursue his/her application and where s/he has been provided with sufficient information for this decision to be credibly described

as an 'informed choice' (but see paras 2.47-2.50). The suggestion that, in the name of homelessness prevention, some local authorities have been overlooking their responsibilities here has led to claims of unacceptable 'gatekeeping' (see below).

2.41 Recent homelessness caselaw has highlighted local authority legal obligations in this area. The Court of Appeal decision in Robinson v Hammersmith & Fulham (July 2006) indicated that, where an applicant meets the 'reason to believe' test (see para 2.38), homelessness prevention measures should operate alongside homelessness assessment rather than in place of this[9]. A local authority may informally refer a household to a 'prevention project' immediately upon the household's initial application, but if the household meets the 'reason to believe' test (see para 2.38) legal compliance requires that this takes place in parallel with – rather than in place of – a formal assessment of the application under the homelessness legislation.

2.42 Case study evidence collected in the course of this research suggested that managerial pressure to restrict recorded numbers of 'Part 7 decisions' (as opposed to homelessness acceptances) had been an experience for homelessness staff in some local authorities. Relating this to the legislation, this may amount to raising the threshold for what is judged sufficient 'reason to believe' that the applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness (though see para 2.38 on the low threshold appropriately employed in making this judgement). Such a tendency has been reported even in authorities where there has been no recent switch to a two stage 'housing options' process. In one case study authority, for example, it was apparent that within the long-established (housing options style) two stage procedure front-of-house staff had recently begun to adopt a markedly more rigorous approach to the referral of applicants for a formal Part 7 assessment. (This is quite distinct from the change to the process of assessing households referred for formal assessments referred to in para 2.30).

2.43 As noted above, some commentators have asserted that, under the guise of 'housing options' procedures, some local authorities may have been operating an unacceptable 'gatekeeping' regime (Roof, May/June 2004). This might apply, for example, in cases where people presenting to a local authority as homeless are referred to a 'homelessness prevention project' (e.g., a rent deposit service), in the absence of a full homelessness assessment. In Roof's terms this could amount to homeless people being 'fobbed off' rather than having their case properly considered. Similarly, Citizens Advice has asserted that 'local authorities may be deliberately pointing homeless applicants towards the housing application route in order to avoid accepting responsibilities under the homelessness legislation' (Citizens Advice, 2004, para 2.2).

[9] Robinson v Hammersmith & Fulham LBC 2006 EWCA Civ 1122 http://www.familylawweek.co.uk/library.asp?i=2311

2.44 Signalling official concerns that this could be occurring in 'a handful of local authorities' a Ministerial circular in 2006 asserted that continued reductions in homelessness numbers should be 'achieved through more effective help, not as a result of a 'gatekeeping' approach that discourages people from applying for housing assistance' (Hilditch, 2006).

2.45 Whether criticisms of the kind voiced by Roof, above, reflect a well-founded concern which relates to large numbers of cases is difficult to determine on the basis of a relatively small-scale research study of the kind undertaken here. We would, nevertheless, see it as important for the Housing Inspectorate's scrutiny of homelessness services to identify and investigate any concerns of this kind as voiced by well-reputed local agencies. The Inspectorate should pay particular attention to an authority's decision-making process determining (a) whether there is reason to believe that a household may be homeless or threatened with homelessness (and therefore qualify for a full assessment of their case), and (b) whether onward referral to a 'homelessness prevention' service is appropriate. More broadly, there is arguably a need for explicit central government guidance to discourage any form of local authority 'gatekeeping' (where people claiming homelessness are discouraged from seeking help with their housing problems on the basis that accommodation is locally in short supply).

2.46 Aside from any possible impact they might have on the numbers of households subject to a formal homelessness assessment, it is of course important to consider whether housing options processes can serve applicants' interests. Here, our research found considerable case study evidence of such interviews helping potentially homeless people to avoid homelessness in many ways. For example, negotiations with landlords – in certain instances involving small cash grants or loans to repay arrears – were sometimes successful in securing extensions to Assured Shorthold Tenancies. In some authorities the main emphasis of housing options intervention was on helping people to access private tenancies through rent deposit or 'Finder's Fee' payments (see Chapter 4). Some family/friend exclusion cases were resolved – at least in the short term – through agreements brokered with host households (sometimes involving formal mediation) (see Chapter 5).

Informality and customer choice

2.47 A slightly separate set of anxieties about 'homelessness prevention practices' concerns the informality of the processes involved where they take place outside the framework of a statutory homelessness assessment. The local Shelter office in one case study area saw a need for clearer guidelines to govern referrals to private tenancies. The Shelter staff concerned saw it as important to ensure that homeless households' rights as guaranteed by legislation are not denied to those households who are offered accommodation through a more informal 'housing options'

package. This might happen, for example, where a household decides not to proceed with their application, opting instead for an 'informal solution' having been advised (e.g. in a housing options interview) that a formal application, if successful, would result in a lengthy period in temporary accommodation and then a highly restricted choice of permanent (social) housing.

2.48 As noted above, some authorities are keen to justify their assertive prevention procedures (e.g. referral to a private landlord) as in tune with the spirit of customer choice. This implies that an applicant accepted as homeless (or threatened with homelessness) and in priority need (or liable to be so accepted) is given the full facts as to the trade-off between wider area choice and faster rehousing on the one hand, and eventually accessing a more secure (and possibly more affordable) social rented tenancy, on the other (see para 2.40). Some local authority staff reported that faced with such an informed choice, a proportion of households otherwise qualifying for full acceptance gladly opt for the private sector option – particularly if the authority had been able to negotiate a tenancy duration exceeding the default six-month minimum[10].

2.49 However, if a household making an 'informed choice' of the kind described in para 2.48 subsequently decided to challenge the council's decision not to undertake a formal assessment the courts may be reluctant to rule that the household's choice was genuinely an 'informed' one, especially where vulnerable persons were involved.

2.50 A particular issue here concerns the suitability of a private tenancy accessed through council (informal) assistance. Because the household has not been accepted as homeless, it is not a formal discharge of duty, so the household has no right of appeal as would be the case if the application had been processed under Part 7 procedures[11]. However, such an approach could be subject to challenge by way of judicial review.

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[10] It should, however, be remembered that local authorities can, in any case, discharge a full rehousing duty through arranging a private tenancy on Assured Shorthold terms provided that the tenancy offer 'is accompanied by a written statement that states the term of the tenancy being offered and explains in ordinary language that there is no obligation on the applicant to accept the offer, but if the offer is accepted the housing authority will have [discharged its full rehousing duty]'. Code of Guidance para 14.19 (DFES, DoH and Communities and Local Government , 2006)

[11] Under section 202 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended) a household has the right to request a review of any housing authority decision as to the suitability of accommodation offered to the applicant in discharging the authority's legal responsibilities under certain homelessness provisions (Communities and Local Government , DoH, DfES, 2006, para 19.4(f)).

Measuring effective homelessness prevention

Homelessness prevention BVPIs

2.51 Many of the issues discussed in this chapter raise questions about appropriate measures of homelessness prevention activity. As noted above, there has been a perception among some local authority staff that central government accords overwhelming importance to changing acceptance numbers (para 2.25). Two concerns stem from this. First, that local authorities may interpret Central Government as interested exclusively in schemes to prevent homelessness involving families or vulnerable people. And, second, that such a focus could incentivise 'gatekeeping' practices which help to reduce acceptances without necessarily helping to resolve individuals' housing problems. In practice, Communities and Local Government's recognition of the need for a more sophisticated approach is demonstrated by the introduction of two Best Value performance indicators (BVPIs) as more direct measures of homelessness prevention effectiveness. The first of these indicators, BV213, seeks to measure the impact of housing advice in averting actual or threatened homelessness. Specifically, the indicator, introduced in 2005-06, counts:

households who considered themselves as homeless, who approached the local authority's housing advice service(s) and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation.

2.52 'Households who considered themselves homeless' are defined to include any applicant, irrespective of their priority need status. This in itself may be seen as confounding any perception that central government's interests are focused exclusively on reducing homelessness acceptances. It is also notable that the indicator does not restrict its scope to those applications where an officer judges that there is a 'reason to believe' that the applicant might be homeless or threatened with homelessness. In this way, the definition lends some official recognition to the concept of 'homelessness' as defined by the applicant. Building on this, we would argue (see paras 2.63-2.66) that comprehensive recording of 'expressed demand' (i.e. *households who considered themselves as homeless, who approached the local authority's housing advice service(s)*) should form a cornerstone of homelessness service monitoring.

2.53 We would also see it as logical to integrate the collection of the 'prevention' measure represented by BV213 within the existing P1E suite (alongside the repeat homelessness measure which has already been incorporated there). This would lend greater official status to the measure and help to promote consistency, thereby improving the credibility of recorded 'scores' on BV213. This is a serious issue, given the difficulties of objective measurement in this area. For example, whilst many

local authorities have welcomed the new indicator as confirming central government's commitment to genuine homelessness prevention, they have also expressed anxieties about the measure's robustness (Local Authority responses to ODPM consultation on proposed 2005-06 BVPIs, 2004).

2.54 A particular area of concern involves the definitional clause stating that an intervention which resolves an applicant's housing problems is one which 'is likely … (to) be sustainable for a period of at least six months'. Hence, assisting someone to make a one-night booking into a direct access hostel would not count as 'resolution' in these terms. Whilst the sentiments underlying this definition are wholly justified, authorities have pointed out that it could prove difficult to operate in practice. Some councils are understandably anxious about the practicalities and costs likely to be involved. The need for authorities to judge whether an intervention 'is likely' to result in a sustainable solution appears to weaken the indicator's credibility. This is particularly the case given that recent guidance (ODPM, 2005b) suggests that this determination should be made (by a third party officer) shortly after the intervention itself and does *not* require that the authority 'go(es) back over the six month period to check that homelessness is still being prevented'. This may well reassure authorities concerned about the possible cost implications of complying with BV213. However, it appears to leave rather open the question of how judgements should be made as to whether it 'is likely' that a housing advice-brokered 'solution' will be sustainable for at least six months.

2.55 The good practice guide drawing on this research (Pawson, Netto and Jones, 2006) includes practical proposals here. It suggests that authorities might carry out checks on a sample of cases six months after advice has been dispensed. The aim would be to determine what proportion of the sample case households remained resident at the placement address at this time (ideally, those having made 'planned moves' would also be included). This proportion could then be applied to the annual housing advice caseload to estimate the total number of 'cases resolved' for the year as a whole.

2.56 The second 'homelessness prevention' measure introduced in 2005-06 relates to repeat homelessness. The establishment of this measure (BV214) stems from government's appreciation that a significant proportion of homeless households have been previously accepted as homeless and rehoused (or placed in temporary accommodation) by the local authority concerned. Hence, recording the incidence of 'repeat homelessness' will be indicative of the effectiveness of rehousing solutions previously found.

2.57 Enumerating repeat homelessness is challenging but not unfeasible, as demonstrated by the Scottish Executive's standard monitoring system which has incorporated a repeat homelessness measure since 2003. It should, however, be

noted that the scope of the Communities and Local Government indicator is much more restricted than that used by local authorities in Scotland. Unlike its Scottish counterpart, the new BVPI focuses solely on 're-presenting' households found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need on successive occasions (rather than enumerating all 'repeat presenters' irrespective of their previous or current 'priority need' status). This might be seen as improving the indicator's specific utility as a yardstick of (social rented sector) tenancy sustainment[12]. In the research team's view, however, a more direct measure of tenancy sustainment (in relation to social landlord lettings) is the proportion of tenancies created in a given time period (e.g. a financial year) and which remain intact for a specified period (say six or 12 months). Recently completed Communities and Local Government research on choice-based lettings has demonstrated that many local authorities are already capable of generating such figures (Pawson et al, 2006).

2.58 It is logical that the new 'repeat homelessness' measure has also been incorporated within the P1E suite, as a subtotal of total homelessness acceptances in each quarter.

Broader monitoring principles

2.59 The definition of BV213 on housing advice stresses the importance of measuring both interventions and their outcomes. It is to be hoped that this will help to embed a stronger monitoring culture within homelessness prevention services by emphasizing the inadequacy of systems focusing exclusively on 'workload' measures – i.e. throughput of 'cases assisted'. The stress on outcome rather than workload indicators also has implications for the way that service provider targets are defined (e.g. in contracts or Service Level Agreements).

2.60 BV213 specifies, as denominator, the total number of households in the local authority area. In our view, however, a better approach to measuring the effectiveness of homelessness prevention for internal local authority purposes should be to express the numbers of 'successful interventions' as a proportion of all interventions. For example, the central measure of family mediation service effectiveness should be the number of applicants referred to family mediation over a given period who, having attended mediation, remained in the family home (say) six months later, expressed as a proportion of all family mediation service referrals.

2.61 It is recognized that minimizing the number of households accepted as homeless for rehousing is an important objective of some homelessness prevention schemes. In this context, it may be appropriate for local authorities to assess the impact of

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[12] Whilst this is related to the focus of BV213 on 'sustainable solutions' it is assumed that most, if not all of those brokered by housing advice (and, therefore, enumerated under BV213) will involve private sector placements and/or young people living with parents, friends or other relatives. There is a quite distinct need to measure overall tenancy sustainment rates for all lettings by social landlords (irrespective of whether the applicants concerned are technically classed as having secured their tenancy through the 'homelessness channel').

their prevention services partly in respect of changes in the numbers of cases where there is a full homelessness assessment and/or acceptance for rehousing. It is, however, essential that such measures are complemented by indicators which measure the direct impact of prevention services in assisting service users as now required by BV213.

2.62 The principles outlined here underlie comments on monitoring specific homelessness prevention services included in Chapters 3-9.

Monitoring homelessness enquiries

2.63 In introducing the new BVPIs discussed above central government has established a national framework which usefully complements the P1E system as a means of monitoring the impact of homelessness prevention activities. Importantly, the definition of BV213 refers to '*households who considered themselves as homeless, who approached the local authority's housing advice service(s)…*' In our view this could be read as suggesting a general need to log and monitor homelessness 'expressed demand' (perhaps termed 'homelessness enquiries') in a way which goes beyond the requirements of the P1E framework (where enumerated 'cases' are restricted to those subject to a formal homelessness assessment).

2.64 Arguably, therefore, a requirement to log 'homelessness enquiries' (defined as in para 2.63) could be enshrined within the P1E BV213 framework. This would be a more comprehensive measure than the 'homelessness assessment decisions' statistic sometimes treated as a proxy for 'applications'. Under the system envisaged here, a household initially claiming homelessness but who finds a solution through a housing options interview (and who, as a result withdraws their application) would be enumerated along with those formally judged 'not homeless'.

2.65 An official obligation to record homelessness enquiries would represent a move back towards the system in operation until 1996 under which local authority quarterly returns included such statistics on 'homelessness enquiries' (Widdowfield, 1998). Under the proposed new approach, however, it would be clear that an 'enquiry' represents a contact from a member of the public with a housing problem rather than an investigation by a homelessness officer into the case of an individual considered as meeting the 'reason to believe' test (see para 2.38).

2.66 In the research team's view, direct monitoring of homelessness enquiries by local authorities would be highly beneficial irrespective of whether it is adopted as an obligatory element of the P1E system. 'Enquiries' statistics could provide a more complete picture of demand (including changes over time), in this way demonstrating the true scale of the task faced by local authorities. They would also providing an appropriate context for assessing the scale of an authority's

homelessness prevention activities – arguably more appropriate than the officially defined denominator for BV213 (see para 2.60). Advising or requiring authorities to enumerate enquiries would also counter claims (see paras 2.40-2.41) that housing options approaches are in part motivated by a wish to 'massage the statistics' such that appreciable numbers of people claiming homelessness but (informally) judged not to be so are simply excluded from the monitoring figures.

Chapter summary

2.67 Local authorities' recent embrace of the homelessness prevention ethos advocated by Communities and Local Government partly reflects a coincidence of interests on the part of central and local government. As implicit within the phrase 'more than a roof', central government rightly sees homelessness prevention as potentially tailoring housing solutions to individual needs which – for some of those concerned – are not limited to the absence of accommodation. Whilst these sentiments are widely shared by homelessness staff, many local authorities also see homelessness prevention as attractive in its potential contributions to financial savings, as well as easing the pressure on shrinking rehousing resources.

2.68 This take-up of 'homelessness prevention' ideas needs to be seen against the backdrop of homelessness trends since the late 1990s, which saw the numbers of acceptances rising by over 30 per cent in the six years to 2003-04. Falling rates of tenancy turnover have compounded the pressures on many local authorities – particularly in London and the South. Since mid-2003 however, acceptances have been declining. Given that this has coincided with a continuing trend of worsening affordability, it is likely that prevention activities have begun to tangibly impact at the national level.

2.69 Adoption of the homelessness prevention ethos has had a considerable impact on the nature and organisation of local authority homelessness work. Homelessness prevention initiatives have re-shaped the roles of many local authority staff. A prevention-centred approach can mean a pro-active rather than reactive style, with an increased stress on networking, negotiation and creativity. This has important staffing implications, for instance, implying a need to look beyond the sector for appropriate recruits.

2.70 At the same time, there has been an impression among some local authority staff that central government sees the 'effectiveness' of homelessness prevention as being largely demonstrable through falling homelessness acceptance numbers. In practice however, it is clear that in many authorities, homelessness prevention activities embrace single people of working age who would be unlikely to fulfil the official 'priority need' criteria. This alone demonstrates that homelessness prevention in practice is about more than simply reducing acceptances.

2.71 A somewhat distinct concern expressed by some critics is that local authority procedures involving an initial 'housing options' interview in some cases amount to 'denying the right' of a homeless person to make a formal application. In fact, local authorities are obliged to undertake a formal assessment in every case where there is 'reason to believe' that the household may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. A housing options interview can be a means of assessing whether such a 'reason to believe' indeed exists.

2.72 Important measures have been taken to complement the established homelessness monitoring framework in gauging the impact of local authorities' homelessness prevention activities.

Chapter 3

Improving housing advice

Background

3.1 Unlike some other initiatives discussed in this report, housing advice services are long established in most areas of England. Many date from the 1970s when the consumer rights ethic began to take shape. Rising homelessness, together with official encouragement for local authorities to 'enable the consumer' in housing led to expansion and re-focusing of housing advice services through the 1980s and 1990s. The Housing Act 1996 created a specific local authority obligation to 'secure free advice about homelessness and its prevention in their area'. Given that housing advice is not a new activity for any local authority, this chapter focuses mainly on the recent improvements to services under this heading, as stimulated by the prevention-oriented agenda of the past few years.

3.2 The roles of housing advice, as identified by earlier research, include: promoting rights of citizenship, improving access to services and enhancing the effectiveness of the housing market (Dean et al, 1996). Hence, housing advice services have traditionally been involved with much more than simply preventing homelessness.

3.3 Some 80 per cent of English local authorities identified the need for improved housing advice as a key element within their 2003 homelessness strategies (HQNS, 2004). Analysis of monitoring returns showed that almost all authorities signing up to achieve 'Positive Outcomes on Homelessness' (see para 1.9) cited enhanced housing advice as one of the areas where they had invested programme resources.

3.4 With respect to homelessness prevention, housing advice can play a crucial role both in terms of helping tenants retain existing accommodation and in helping households find new tenancies. However, given their integral relationship with wider initiatives to facilitate access to private housing, activities concerned with helping tenants to secure private tenancies are discussed in Chapter 4.

The nature of housing advice services

Intervention to preserve private tenancies

3.5 A traditional housing advice role involves resolving conflicts between private tenants and their landlords. Typically, housing advice staff – often designated as

Tenancy Relations Officers – use their specialist legal knowledge to help a tenant defend against attempts to have them evicted. The contemporary interpretation of homelessness prevention stresses the need for such interventions to take place in a pro-active way, so that potential problems are addressed at a sufficiently early stage to improve the chances of their resolution, and, as a result, to avoid homelessness.

3.6 This thinking underpins what are now termed 'landlord mediation' or 'landlord liaison' schemes – arguably an 'interventionist' interpretation of housing advice (for the avoidance of confusion we adopt the term 'landlord liaison' below). In two of our case study authorities, for example, council staff were tasked with developing close communication between the authority and private landlords (and housing associations) so that the council could be notified at an early stage by landlords considering terminating a tenancy.

3.7 Our research evidence suggests that, in terms of their 'referral route', some landlord mediation cases arise from contacts made by tenants with the council's housing advice or homelessness staff. Importantly however, cases also stem from contacts initiated by landlords with whom housing advice staff have developed friendly relations. Such 'landlord notification' is seen as greatly to be encouraged since it may be expected that it will result in the council becoming aware of a problem at an earlier stage than if it relied solely on a tenant making contact. A 'case' having been initiated, housing advice/landlord liaison officers would then either (a) try to resolve problems between landlord and tenant, or (b) help tenants liable to displacement to find alternative accommodation so that homelessness was prevented.

3.8 A significant contrast with traditional tenancy relations activities can probably be drawn in terms of the content of the work involved here. Nowadays most tenancies in the private sector are an Assured Shorthold type where the occupier has little security of tenure beyond the term (usually six months) agreed. Hence, landlord liaison work tends to focus on negotiation and conflict resolution rather than assertion of legal rights to continued occupation.

3.9 Landlord liaison work in two case study authorities chosen for this evaluation – Bournemouth and Harrow – was mainly targeted at cases where the tenant at risk of eviction was a family household likely to qualify as being 'in priority need', should they become homeless. Hence, the scheme could be seen as generating savings by enabling the authority to avoid incurring the substantial expense involved in rehousing a homeless household. Sometimes the problems triggering landlord liaison intervention were reported as involving issues such as anti-social behaviour. The majority, however, concerned non-payment of rent, often resulting from Housing Benefit delays.

3.10 In tackling landlord: tenant disputes, landlord liaison staff in Bournemouth and Harrow had access to 'Fixit Funds' from which they could make small payments to prevent homelessness. In Bournemouth, for example, such expenses often involved payment of rent arrears or compensation for damage caused by the tenant. In resolving landlord: tenant disputes landlord liaison staff in both councils also benefited from being able to refer Housing Benefit problems to dedicated Housing Benefit officers seconded to their own teams.

3.11 The efficacy of landlord liaison work depends not only on the size of the private rented sector in a locality concerned, but also on its structure. In a housing market like Bournemouth's, for example, the concentration of property ownership in the hands of relatively few landlords greatly enhanced the potential impact of a relatively small staff time resource input.

Other recent changes in the nature and scope of housing advice work

3.12 Traditionally, housing advice services have tended to focus on assisting people to secure or retain private tenancies. Whilst this emphasis remains largely intact, there have been some changes connected with recent policy developments. One relates to the introduction of choice-based lettings systems. Acknowledging that such approaches call for a more pro-active role on the applicant's part, some housing advice services – e.g. in Bradford and Sheffield – have begun to move away from an exclusive focus on private sector housing. Others – e.g. Telford & Wrekin – have diversified away from the private sector by becoming involved in debt counselling and court work to defend tenancies against repossession by housing associations.

3.13 More importantly in the current context, however, there have been other changes to the nature and scope of housing advice work connected to the homelessness prevention agenda. Case study evidence suggests that housing advice and homelessness assessment work has become more closely interlinked and/or overlapping. An example here relates to the Bournemouth landlord liaison service described above. This scheme was run by homelessness officers as an activity running alongside more traditional assessment of homelessness applications.

3.14 The tendency towards closer linkage of homelessness and housing advice work is also reflected organisationally; for example, in Leicester where there had been a complete integration of the two previously distinct roles. In other authorities the housing advice/homelessness assessment roles – whilst remaining separate – have become more integrated. Sometimes this has involved co-locating previously remote teams. In Colchester the housing advice and homelessness team leaders did a job swap to promote mutual understanding of their respective roles.

3.15 Many of the initiatives set up to facilitate better access to private tenancies on the part of homeless households have been located within housing advice teams. Hence, housing advice team leaders have – in many instances – taken on responsibility for rent deposit schemes, landlord liaison projects and private sector leasing initiatives. These are discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.16 The central objectives of many housing advice services are probably encapsulated in the service specification for Bournemouth's Housing Advice Service (BHAS). Shelter, the contractor, is required to provide:

- housing advice to empower clients to take action themselves or through referrals to other organisations;
- prevention of homelessness through direct intervention; and
- assistance to clients to secure accommodation.

3.17 What is perhaps less typical of housing advice services more broadly is Shelter's obligation to provide training for a network of voluntary agencies throughout the borough whose role is to refer potential clients to the service. Hence, network member organisations need to have a full understanding of the criteria for appropriate referrals. This reflects the innovative thinking behind the project with BHAS situated at the centre of a constellation of some 50 agencies constituting the Bournemouth Housing Advice Network. The aim is to provide an integrated, co-ordinated service to residents across the borough.

3.18 Positioning BHAS within a formal network in this way is closely in tune with the policy emphasis on homelessness prevention through early intervention. It is designed to tap into the specific knowledge of small agencies (e.g. health visitors or support providers) who may be in close contact with clients, hence giving them a good chance of being able to make a referral to BHAS well before a person's situation reaches crisis point. Hence, the prospects of homelessness prevention should be much enhanced. It is difficult for such a hypothesis to be empirically tested. However, it may be significant that in its first year of operation (2003-04), BHAS logged 961 applicants assisted, of whom 18 per cent involved homelessness being averted through direct intervention. This compares with an original objective of assisting 700 cases, of which 13 per cent were to involve homelessness prevention. On this basis, the service clearly out-performed its initial targets. A full set of 'outcomes' statistics for 2004 is set out in Table 3.2 to provide some context here.

Targeting housing advice services to specific groups at risk of homelessness

3.19 Continuing a trend from the 1990s as noted by Scott et al (2001), some housing advice providers have increasingly targeted their services towards defined groups. This reflects a view that generalist advice services may not adequately cater for the needs of groups such as ethnic minority households or households fleeing domestic violence, and that specific recruitment and training may be necessary to achieve this. Part of the thinking here is that in gaining the confidence of certain service user groups it will be important for advice to be delivered by appropriately selected staff – e.g. female staff in the case of clients who are women fleeing domestic violence.

3.20 In Sheffield, this logic had led to the Council establishing the Homefinders Support Service, an initiative specifically designed to assist ethnic minority households in accessing council tenancies through the city's choice-based lettings system. The main trigger here was the rising number of former asylum-seekers applying for housing in 2002-2003. It was recognised that widespread lack of English as a first language, alongside unfamiliarity with the local area could seriously disadvantage this group in navigating the Choice Based Lettings system.

3.21 Homefinders staff, which included a range of minority language speakers, briefed clients on the system's operation, informed them about likely availability of vacancies in different areas and, where necessary, placed bids for vacancies on clients' behalf. In addition, they promoted resettlement by helping to link clients into local networks – including mainstream tenancy support services, where appropriate. Among other things, the Homefinders scheme is believed to have helped facilitate former asylum-seeker moves into 'non-traditional areas' – i.e. areas previously seen as 'off limits' for ethnic minority households. This was believed to have been successful in that few incidents of racial harassment had been reported to housing staff, and quarterly monitoring of tenancy sustainment had generated no findings to cause concern on this basis.

3.22 Partly connected with an aspiration to target advice towards 'hard to reach' groups, at the time of this research, many authorities had been developing innovative approaches to housing advice service delivery. For some this had involved outreach into rural areas, and for others, it had taken the form of surgery-form provision sited in facilities used by 'high risk' groups. In Bristol, for example, Shelter had been commissioned to run advice surgery sessions at a local health centre serving an area with a relatively large concentration of people affected by substance misuse and related problems. Harrow's advice service planned to stage sessions in Jobcentre Plus offices in an effort to target people at risk of homelessness due to loss of employment. Another important example of the outreach approach – that involving prisoners – is discussed separately in Chapter 7.

3.23 Homelessness prevention-related housing advice is now increasingly made available for social sector tenants at risk of eviction due to rent arrears (Flint, Pawson and Scott, 2005). With repossessions (mainly due to arrears) having risen dramatically in recent years, many social landlords have seen a case for providing professional debt-counselling. As illustrated by recent research for ODPM (Pawson et al, 2005), this sometimes involves contracts with specialist agencies. Approaches of this kind were operated in two of our case study local authorities – Harrow and Telford & Wrekin. The kinds of assistance made available to service users included specialist debt counselling, advocacy with creditors, and representation in court. Monitoring figures illustrating the 'effectiveness' of this service are set out in Table 3.3.

Service procurement

3.24 As noted above, recently expanded housing advice activity has involved a mixture of local authority in-house provision (sometimes delivered by 'homelessness' staff) and services procured from external agencies. Voluntary agency involvement in this area has been seen as beneficial in three respects. Firstly, through an independent agency's ability to provide impartial advice where there is potential conflict between the consumer and the service provider. Secondly, in exploiting the well-developed links between community- or interest-group-specific agencies and their clients. And, thirdly, in complementing or supplementing existing statutory advice services (Goodlad and Rosengard, 1998).

3.25 Authorities operating both in-house and outsourced advice provision models were represented among our case studies. In most instances recent service enhancements had simply built on the existing pattern of provision (e.g. by expanding an in-house team or supplementing the specification of an existing contract). In some places, however, the previously very limited housing advice service had meant that procurement choices had been less constrained. In one borough, for example, the establishment of an entirely new service originated from a university research study commissioned by the local multi-agency Housing Forum in partnership with the council. This had concluded that housing advice provision in the borough was patchy and uncoordinated. Provision by an independent agency was seen as potentially beneficial by the Housing Forum partly because Shelter – the appointed contractor – was able to offer substantial added value thanks to its national network.

3.26. Advice services run in-house by social landlords may be seen as highly effective. Clearly, such an arrangement maximises the control of the commissioning body. However, such arrangements may be compromised by a conflict of interest when it comes to cases involving the organisation's own actions (e.g. homelessness assessment decisions made by a local authority). This is well-appreciated by many

local authorities and was raised in some of the case studies involved in this research. Hence, providing court representation for social sector tenants at risk of eviction (see above) would be untenable for a housing advice service run in-house by a landlord local authority. One case study organisation suggested that such 'conflict of interest' problems could be overcome to some extent by a readiness to refer certain clients to third party advice providers. However, whilst such agencies were present in this particular area, that would certainly not be true in all parts of the country. Hence, such an option would be unavailable. In commenting on this issue, the good practice guide produced as a companion to this research report advises 'local authorities should avoid any conflict of interest brought about by representing clients in actions brought against another part of the same organisation' (p42 in Pawson, Netto and Jones, 2006).

3.27 On the other hand, while contracting out to third parties may facilitate high standard service provision, this model can potentially lead to significant tensions between providers and local authorities. In one of our case study areas the council expressed concerns that 'advocacy' work on the part of the independent service provider too often involved lobbying the council itself. The agency itself felt somewhat hamstrung in honouring its primary duty to represent the interests of its clients in instances where this was deemed to involve challenging a homelessness decision (or - a scenario more commonly experienced by the agency - a decision not to undertake a homelessness assessment).

3.28 From the agency perspective, the problem stems from the fact that the local authority holds the purse strings – hence, potentially constraining the organisation's ability to query council decisions. In the instance described above, the council simply channelled its government grant to a third party agency, logically leading to the suggestion that such grants might, in future, be paid direct from central government to service provider. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged, the current approach (local authority leadership) probably enhances partnership working between councils and voluntary agencies and this could be put at risk by such a change. Furthermore, local authorities have strategic responsibility for addressing local homelessness – with government funding to support them in this. Direct funding of local voluntary sector agencies could be seen as inconsistent with this arrangement. A partial solution to the problem – as observed in one case study authority – could be to 'insulate' the voluntary agency advice provider from undue local authority pressure by establishing a multi-agency board of management to oversee the service.

3.29 The limited scale of the research precluded any definitive conclusions as to the overall effectiveness of in-house versus outsourced housing advice.

Service monitoring practice

3.30 Case study evidence suggested that a monitoring culture is developing in housing advice services though the picture remains somewhat mixed. Perhaps the commonest housing advice 'monitoring measures' were simple throughput statistics recording events such as: new enquiries, appointments, home visits etc. A second category of 'monitoring statistics' identified related to caseloads – e.g. numbers of homelessness assessment 'live cases' (per officer). A variant here involved measures calibrated against service standards such as the number of advice letters due for more than 10 days or the number of homelessness assessment cases outstanding for more than 33 days (Leicester). Some of the case study organisations benchmarked with local counterparts on such figures.

3.31 A slightly different throughput monitoring measure as illustrated by Sutton related to welfare benefits advice. Here, success was calibrated according to the annualised cash value of identified unclaimed benefits for which clients were eligible. Sutton's advice team recorded an impressive £525,000 in identified unclaimed benefits during 2003-04 – an average of over £3,523 across the 149 clients assisted during the year.

3.32 Only in a proportion of case study authorities did housing advice monitoring systems include a numerical breakdown of logged 'cases' (e.g. callers interviewed) according to the case outcome. Harrow's landlord liaison (known locally as 'landlord mediation') service recorded case outcomes for those referred to the service as shown in Table 3.1. In Canterbury the number of people seeking assistance to access a private tenancy was broken down to show the proportion where this had been successful.

Table 3.1: Harrow LBC Landlord Liaison Service: Case Outcomes in 2004-05	
Outcome	*%* *of total*
Applicant remained at the property/eviction cancelled following intervention	26
Applicant moved before becoming homeless using Harrow 'Finders Fee' premium for landlords	25
Self-move into alternative private sector accommodation – no 'Finders Fee'	9
Successful application for permanent tenancy through LOCATA choice-based lettings system	1
Assessed as 'not homeless'	11
Assessed as 'intentionally homeless'	0
Assessed as 'non-priority homeless'	3
Contact with applicant lost	13
Remaining under investigation at end of period	6
Other	2
Accepted as homeless and in priority need	4
Overall total	**100**

3.33 In a number of the case studies statistics of this type were calibrated against periodically reviewed targets. In Canterbury, for example, the advice service aimed to achieve a 'success rate' of at least 50 per cent in helping house-seekers to access a private tenancy. Some authorities – e.g. Bristol, Sutton – placed emphasis on breaking down 'homelessness prevented' throughput figures according to whether the household would have been in priority need, had they in fact become homeless. The purpose of this was to extrapolate potential savings from avoiding Bed & Breakfast placements. Such methods may be criticised as rather crude (e.g. in the assumption that all priority homeless households will experience a Bed & Breakfast placement, especially given the phasing out of this type of temporary accommodation use for homeless households). At the same time, they show a commendable concern for assessing homelessness prevention initiatives in cost-effectiveness terms. Such calculations would have greater credibility if based on a more sophisticated analysis of homelessness costs – e.g. recognising that the likelihood of a prolonged Bed & Breakfast placement varies according to household type and other factors, and that there are a range of other local authority and broader public sector costs associated with homelessness.

3.34 Generally, explicit monitoring of service user outcomes (e.g. the proportion of applicants threatened with homelessness for whom homelessness was prevented) remains patchy. Some local authorities appeared to believe that trends over time in homelessness application and/or acceptance numbers were, in themselves, sufficient evidence of housing advice outcomes. Given that changes in the incidence of homelessness at least in part reflect wider trends in housing and labour market conditions, this is an insufficient approach. Direct measurement of service user outcomes is always more satisfactory as the primary indicator of service effectiveness, though this is not without its complexities.

3.35 Even where it is collected (e.g. as in Table 3.1) direct service user 'outcomes' monitoring data generally raises two important questions. First, how sustainable are the housing 'solutions' facilitated by advice agency intervention? And secondly, what would the outcome have been in the absence of the intervention?

3.36 As a rule, service user outcomes are currently monitored only in relation to the client's situation immediately following contact with the service. Case study and other evidence suggests that, at least until 2005, explicit monitoring of 'longer-term' tenancy sustainment was virtually non-existent. Housing advice staff interviewed in some case studies cited statistics from 'immediate outcome monitoring' systems to evidence assertions that their activities were effective in helping to prevent homelessness. However (somewhat in contrast to those running rent deposit and similar schemes – see Chapter 4), advice staff were often somewhat sceptical as to whether outcomes involving private sector tenancies were likely to be long-lived. In the main, such opinions appeared to be founded purely on anecdotal evidence on the incidence of 'repeat customers' – i.e. households facing a possible recurrence of homelessness due to the impending expiry of a six month Assured Shorthold Tenancy. Thus, the 2005-06 introduction of the new homelessness BVPIs (see Chapter 2) broke new ground.

3.37 The second question unanswered under most existing advice agency monitoring systems is 'For what proportion of 'successful' cases was advice agency intervention decisive?' In other words, how many of those assisted would have achieved the same outcome without such help? Only through a very detailed (and costly) study to establish a counter-factual scenario can such a question be conclusively answered. In the absence of this, it may be that peer review or accreditation (e.g. by the Community Legal Service) can, at least, provide assurance of appropriate and effective referral procedures and casework practices. The reasoning here is that an appropriate referral procedure will be best able to target assistance to those most in need.

3.38 Community Legal Service accreditation provides some assurance of service quality, a concern addressed in other ways in some case study authorities. Leicester's Housing Options team, for example, routinely sought service user views through customer

surveys. Sheffield's Homefinder team had selected clients at random for the same purpose. This confirmed that the service provided was seen as beneficial, whilst also suggesting that problems experienced by ethnic minority households in navigating Choice Based Lettings systems were not unique to this group. In Bradford, monthly one-to-one meetings between manager and staff included reviewing a randomly selected cohort of case files to discuss how cases had been handled and any scope for improvement.

3.39 As noted above, case study authorities tended to see the ultimate measure of success in advice provision to avert homelessness as measurable in terms of trends in homelessness assessment decisions and/or acceptances. For certain sorts of services the overarching benchmark of effectiveness was of this type but more closely related to the activity concerned – e.g. the success of one authority's private tenancy preservation work was seen as being demonstrated through falling numbers of homelessness acceptances where the immediate cause of homelessness was the loss of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy. As also noted earlier, such approaches could be criticised on the grounds that, since homelessness demand is influenced by many factors, observed changes here might be largely unrelated to the effectiveness of a local authority's homelessness prevention measures.

Assessing service effectiveness

3.40 Drawing on local authority routine monitoring data and on service user feedback, this section assesses the effectiveness of housing advice services in preventing homelessness.

Effectiveness monitoring data

3.41 As noted above, assessing the effectiveness of housing advice activity is often problematic, because of the tendency for monitoring systems to focus exclusively on caseload or throughput measures rather than explicitly scrutinising service user outcomes.

3.42 Hence, whilst certain case study authorities confidently asserted that their service was highly effective some were unable to produce monitoring data to evidence this.

3.43 Some good practice was, however, identified among the case studies. Routine monitoring data collated by Bournemouth Housing Advice Service (BHAS), for example, helped to assess the extent to which homelessness was prevented for different categories of applicant. As shown in Table 3.2, in the second, third and fourth quarters of 2004 the service assisted some 544 callers, categorised according to level of risk and whether vulnerable to having to sleep rough. In 106 cases (19.5% of the total), BHAS judged that either homelessness was prevented or settled

accommodation was secured. In another 42 cases temporary accommodation was secured, thereby averting homelessness at least in the short term.

Table 3.2: Potentially Homeless Households Assisted by Bournemouth Housing Advice Service, Q2-Q4 2004						
Outcome known	Street homeless	(Possibly) statutory homeless	(Other) imminently homeless (or potential rough sleeper)	Medium risk of homeless -ness	(Other) not homeless	Total
Advice on housing options	21	82	53	30	80	266
Conditions improved	2	26	12	9	45	94
Homelessness prevented	3	18	28	19	12	80
Income raised	0	3	3	6	6	18
Permanently housed	1	12	10	1	2	26
Referred to to other agency	3	4	4	4	3	18
Temporarily housed	11	16	13	1	1	42
Grand Total	**41**	**161**	**123**	**70**	**149**	**544**
% where homelessness prevented or permanent housing secured	9.8	18.6	30.9	28.6	9.4	19.5

Source: Bournemouth Housing Advice Service (Shelter)

3.44 BHAS figures on the numbers of households helped to avoid homelessness should be seen alongside Bournemouth BC's homelessness caseload statistics. These show that, during the same period of 2004, the Council made formal homelessness assessments in relation to some 372 households, with 184 of these involving acceptances of applicants deemed unintentionally homeless and in priority need. Set in this context, the scale of homelessness prevention achieved by BHAS appears fairly substantial. BHAS has, in any case, out-performed (contractual) caseload handling targets set by Bournemouth BC – as outlined in para 3.18.

3.45 The BHAS monitoring framework is seen as a 'good practice' example in that it involves the collection of a range of key data items in respect of each new case including:

- client household details – household type, ethnic origin, client age;
- existing housing tenure, 'primary (housing) problem' and inward referral route;
- homelessness and housing register status; and
- actions taken, known outcome.

The resulting BHAS database facilitates a wide range of analyses of interest to both service provider from an operational perspective and to the local authority from a strategic perspective.

3.46 Telford & Wrekin BC was another case study authority able to cite some outcomes data in support of its positive assessment of advice provision focused on housing association tenants at risk of eviction. Whilst data was unavailable for a significant number of cases, it is nevertheless clear from Table 3.3 that in a substantial proportion, eviction was averted – at least in the immediate term. In over half of the 197 cases enumerated here, homelessness was prevented through the establishment of an arrears repayment agreement or by securing suspension of an eviction warrant in some other way. In only two cases was possession known to have been granted.

Table 3.3: Telford & Wrekin BC Housing Advice Service for Housing Association Tenants in Rent Arrears: Outcomes Statistics 2003 & 2004		
	2003	2004
Homelessness prevented – arrears repayment agreement struck	41	35
Warrant otherwise suspended	19	15
Not known - no contact	13	16
Possession granted	0	2
Case unresolved or outcome not known	18	38
Total	**91**	**106**

Note: 2003 = quarters 2, 3, 4; 2004 = quarters 1, 2, and 3. Source: Telford & Wrekin BC

3.47 The positive local perception of Telford & Wrekin BC housing advice provision was also backed up by a Housing Inspectorate assessment of homelessness prevention work done through the courts and with landlords as of 'high calibre' (Telford & Wrekin BC Homelessness and Housing Advice Inspection, 2002). Other case study authorities had obtained – or were planning to seek – external accreditation to serve a similar purpose (see above). In Sutton, for example, a Community Legal Services Quality Mark had been awarded to the housing advice service in 2003-04.

3.48 As in respect of other homelessness prevention activities, the findings here suggest that local authorities should be encouraged to:

- directly monitor housing advice service users in relation to their homelessness status at the point of contact (e.g. threatened with homelessness, already homeless, no immediate homelessness risk);

- directly monitor housing advice casework immediate outcomes (e.g. conditions improved, homelessness averted – existing tenancy renewed, new permanent tenancy accessed);

- directly monitor, for a sample of cases where homelessness was prevented, whether the arrangement remained intact six months after the advice work contact;

- seek accreditation from an external agency to validate assessment and referral procedures as well as casework quality; and

- undertake service user feedback monitoring – e.g. through 'exit survey' type questionnaires or periodic service user focus groups or in-depth interviews.

Service user perceptions

3.49 Service user feedback collected for this research generally supports the view that housing advice services can be highly effective in preventing homelessness. In Sheffield, for example, households who had received assistance from an ethnic minority housing advice project established by the Council reported that this had been very helpful. The interviewees, all relatively recent settlers in the UK, felt that they had benefited from being helped to assess and apply for properties through the Council's choice-based lettings system. Advice on the pros and cons of various neighbourhoods and the variation in probable rehousing waiting times were found to be particularly useful. Whilst some focus group participants objected to 'high rents' and anti-social behaviour on the part of neighbours, there were no complaints about the advice service, nor any suggestions for how it might be improved. Similarly (as further detailed in Chapter 4 – paras 4.37), young people assisted by one case study local authority to obtain private tenancies were very positive about the help received.

Cost-effectiveness

Housing advice

3.50 The cost-effectiveness assessment of housing advice services focused solely on the Bournemouth Housing Advice Service (BHAS) provided by Shelter under contract to Bournemouth BC. Unfortunately, other case study authorities were unable to provide the information (i.e. on costs, workloads, service outcomes) required to undertake a cost effectiveness assessment.

3.51 The BHAS contract required the provision of four housing advice training sessions annually, attendance at 24 meetings a year with network agencies and the production of a booklet on the local advice network.

3.52 The service employed two staff and relied on volunteer receptionists. The 2004-05 formal cost was £71,413 with salaries accounting for £58,389. The 'formal cost' referred to here was the amount paid to Shelter to fund the service. This, in turn, was financed by a grant from ODPM (now Communities and Local Government). BHAS did not contribute to salary costs of any administration or management locally or centrally. The true costs are therefore substantially above these recorded costs. For example, maternity cover costs of £15,000 in the financial year 2004-05 were paid by Shelter. The precise costs were also complicated by the fact that a team of 5.5 advisors plus administration support operated from the building housing BHAS staff. The advisor complement also included two staff funded by the Community Legal Service and 1.5 posts funded by Shelter.

3.53 The advice provision service targets set by the Council did not discriminate by tenure but analysis of the housing aid records for nine months revealed that evictions prevented were virtually all from private sector Assured Shorthold tenancies, mostly involving single people. Similarly, all but a very small minority of those threatened with homelessness or at medium term risk were also housed in the private rented sector. Housing outcomes for the service included permanent rehousing, temporary rehousing, improvement in housing conditions, and 'general advice' (see Table 3.2).

3.54 Analysis of nine months' case load statistics provided by Shelter showed that homelessness was prevented for 80 households (grossed to 105 per year for the purpose of analysis). Public sector cost savings here arise from a reduction in the provision of accommodation to households deemed to be homeless and in priority need. It was not clear from Shelter's records what proportion of these households would have been in priority need and entitled to be rehoused by the local authority if assessed under the homelessness legislation. However, as the majority of potential evictions involved single people, it is likely that without the service, relatively few cases would result in a statutory homelessness acceptance. Thus the major benefits of this service are to tenants and landlords in the private sector.

3.55 A small minority of these households are likely to have been families who would be judged by the local authority as in priority need (although the precise numbers falling into this category are unknown). However, for the purposes of this exercise, it was assumed that just under a quarter of all cases seen in the year are prevented from becoming homeless. The average length of stay in temporary accommodation in Bournemouth was 11.6 weeks in 2003-04 for single parent families in priority need. Assuming six weeks in bed and breakfast at a cost of £378 per week for one adult and two children and six weeks in private sector leased accommodation at a net cost to the local authority (management fee of £60 per week) gives a total temporary accommodation cost of £2,600. This net cost is derived from the fact that the alternative accommodation for homeless households is likely to be private rented accommodation. Private sector rents at the time of this research were approximately £600 per month but whether living in rented or leased accommodation the cost for these households was likely to be fully paid by Housing Benefit, so only the net cost (£60 per week) was included in the analysis – see also para A4.27. In summary, therefore, we estimate an average saving of £2,600 per household in the case of Bournemouth Housing Advice Service.

3.56 It was calculated that this resulted in savings of approximately £72,500 (25 x £2,900), which was in excess of the total reported annual cost of £71,413 of the service to the local authority. However, this figure is not the true cost as it ignores Shelter's financial contribution and the service's wider remit.

3.57 Researching the cost effectiveness of housing advice by reference only to the prevention of homelessness can only be a partial analysis because of the service's wider remit as shown by its annual targets. The analysis has been concerned with only 15 per cent of the centre's case load according to the statistics provided by Shelter. At the same time it needs to be recognized that such cases are likely to absorb a disproportionate amount of staff time. If this is accounted for by attributing only 30 per cent of the project's costs to direct homelessness prevention then this expenditure is equivalent to less than eight families being diverted from statutory homelessness. On this basis the figures suggest that the project is very cost effective. As shown in Table 3.4, for example, the saving for each household who would otherwise have been liable for acceptance as statutory homeless is estimated as averaging £2,900.

Table 3.4: Summary of Housing Advice Costs and Savings (£)				
Initiative	Average costs per case	Costs per prevention	Accommodation cost savings per prevention	Average savings
Bournemouth Housing Advice Service	102	*	2,600	*
Harrow landlord liaison	938	1,098	3,120	2,927

* unknown. Note: categories more fully explained in Annex 4 , A4.31

Landlord liaison

3.58 The following assessment relates to Harrow LBC's landlord liaison scheme. The project employs two 'outreach prevention officers' to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants threatened with eviction by private landlords. The cost of this scheme is primarily for staffing, plus nominal sums available for addressing specific problems between landlords and tenants. Including overhead costs, annual expenditure amounts to £90,000.

3.59 The scheme targets families with children who would be likely to qualify as statutory homeless in the event of eviction. Tenants tend to approach the council for help in the last stages of an eviction. Harrow reports that most problems are related to rent arrears, usually as a result of delays in arranging Housing Benefit.

3.60 There were 96 referrals to the scheme in 2004-05. According to the local authority some 80-90 per cent of cases would otherwise be owed a main housing duty under the homelessness legislation[13]. The public saving therefore, is the difference between leasing temporary accommodation and private renting costs, £60 per week (see para 3.55) for the time spent in temporary accommodation arranged by the authority.

3.61 Statutory homeless households in Harrow LBC are likely to spend at least a year in temporary accommodation. The savings per homeless household from this scheme are, therefore, estimated as £3,120, based on temporary housing being provided for a year (£60 x 52 weeks). This gives an average saving of £2,652 after taking into account those who would not have been assessed as statutory homeless (85% of the overall amount to reflect the estimate that 80-90% of cases would be owed a main housing duty – see above). In comparison the average cost of operating the scheme is just under £1,000. Based on the assumption that the tenancy is sustained for the remainder of the year, the scheme is very cost effective.

[13] Legally speaking, if the households concerned had been threatened with homelessness within 28 days they would have been entitled to a statutory assessment

What works?

3.62 Quite unlike some of the other initiatives considered in this research, housing advice is a broad ranging service whose remit stretches well beyond the scope of this report. Hence our fieldwork was far too limited to provide a realistic basis for any comprehensive judgement to be formed as to 'what works' as regards housing advice services. On the basis of our fieldwork and review of the existing literature, however, we would identify the following as being effective housing advice services or essential elements within services specifically aimed at homelessness prevention:

- Early intervention;
- Landlord liaison (or 'mediation') – pro-active engagement with private landlords in an attempt to develop constructive relationships (Harrow LBC, 2003);
- Specific help for groups whose needs might not be adequately addressed through a 'generalist' approach to advice delivery, e.g. ethnic minority households, women fleeing domestic violence (see para 3.19);
- Outreach services (e.g. co-locating housing advice with benefits services, employment advice etc. – see, for example, Bain et al, 1998);
- Effective and appropriate referral procedures – i.e. which enable households needing housing advice to be referred to relevant agencies; and
- Active promotion of housing advice service among a network of other agencies (as in the Bournemouth Housing Advice Service example).

3.63 Readers seeking further good practice messages in relation to housing advice provision will find it useful to consult existing texts such as DoE (1996), Grant (1996) and Homepoint (2000) – see references at the end of this report for full details.

Chapter summary

3.64 Improved or expanded housing advice services feature widely as an aspect of local authorities' recently stepped-up homelessness prevention activities. In many authorities advice has become more closely interlinked with homelessness assessment. In some cases this has involved homelessness staff taking on some advice-type functions. Increasingly, the scope of advice work is shifting towards a greater role for landlord liaison.

3.65 Case study findings appear consistent with previously published evidence indicating that housing advice work is increasingly targeted at identified 'high risk' or 'high priority' groups. This can take the form of outreach sessions staged in selected locations such as community centres or jobcentre plus offices. Whilst securing or accessing private tenancies remains an important function for many housing advice services, there is less of an exclusive focus on the private sector than was once the case.

3.66 Some voluntary organisations are able to add substantial value in providing housing advice services. Whilst the benefits of independence and impartiality may be placed at risk where services are substantially funded by local authorities, such arrangements facilitate partnership working and are consistent with the local authority role as responsible for homelessness strategy.

3.67 Monitoring of housing advice service user outcomes remains fairly patchy. Much monitoring activity continues to be confined to fairly crude caseload or throughput figures. Outcomes data recorded by certain case study authorities appears to demonstrate the potentially significant impact of housing advice intervention in preventing homelessness. The extent to which such interventions remain robust in the medium term is likely to emerge only with data from the 2005-06 homelessness prevention performance indicator, BV213.

3.68 From a cost-effectiveness perspective, it appears that investment in housing advice to prevent homelessness can certainly be fully justified, provided that at least a small proportion of the beneficiaries of the service are households who would otherwise be accepted as statutory homeless and in priority need[14].

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[14] And who, because they are assisted at a very early stage (before they become threatened with homelessness within 28 days) can be assisted in this way without risk of illegality – see paras 2.40-2.41

Chapter 4

Facilitating access to private housing

Background

4.1 Recent years have seen privately owned self-contained housing coming to be used to accommodate homeless households on a substantial scale. In the main, this involves houses and flats being leased by local authorities as temporary accommodation pending the completion of homelessness assessments or for households accepted as homeless and waiting for settled housing. By the end of 2004, such arrangements involved more than 55,000 households – up by 20 per cent on the year earlier. However, given that the focus of the current research is *homelessness prevention*, this activity is not seen as directly relevant within the present context[15].

4.2 It is also possible to make use of private tenancies in discharging a full rehousing duty towards a priority homeless household. Under Housing Act 1996 S193 a council may honour its obligations in this way through arranging an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST). It is however, made clear by the Code of Guidance that such an offer could be freely refused by an applicant without prejudicing their right to receive an acceptable alternative offer (Communities and Local Government, DoH, DfES, 2006, para 14.19).

4.3 In 2004, some 57 per cent of local authorities made use of AST placements to discharge full rehousing duties – either immediately at the point of homeless acceptance, or subsequently where a previously accepted household was being rehoused from temporary accommodation (source: unpublished data from P1E return). In every region, however, at least a third of local authorities (and more than half of London Boroughs) made no use of this option in 2004. This appears to suggest that greater use could possibly be made of ASTs in this respect.

4.4 This chapter is mainly based on case study evidence relating to initiatives observed in Bournemouth, Bristol, Colchester, Harrow and Sutton. It links with Chapter 3 in that securing access to private tenancies has traditionally been seen as a 'housing advice' activity concerned with brokering agreement between house-seeker and landlord. Rent deposit schemes are just one example of such activities. In this chapter, however, we consider such initiatives alongside other approaches aimed at

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[15] Although a scheme involving private leasing to facilitate local authority discharge of duty in respect of statutory homeless households is described in Annex 5

facilitating greater access to privately owned properties for households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, such as the provision of introductory services for landlords, social landlords acquiring private properties on short term leases etc.

4.5 Part of the backdrop here is the relative size of the social and private rented sectors, and the relative flow of vacancies in the two tenures. For example, in the ten years to 2003 the number of social rented dwellings in England contracted by 9 per cent, whilst the private rented sector grew by 3 per cent. Because the rate of turnover in the private sector is much higher than in social rented housing the absolute number of private tenancies let each year is also considerably higher than in social housing – around twice as great in 2002-03 (ODPM Survey of English Housing). In some local authority areas the numbers of private tenancies changing hands annually will be several times the number of social rented properties being let or relet.

4.6 In Bournemouth, for example, the private rented sector accounts for 20 per cent of the housing stock – around twice the size of the social rented sector. Assuming the rate of private rental turnover to be the same as at the national scale, the number of private tenancies let annually in Bournemouth will be some 5-6 times as many as the number of social rented lettings. It is, therefore, quite understandable that Bournemouth's 2003 Homelessness Strategy stressed the need to make better use of the private sector as a means of meeting housing need[16].

Rent deposit and related schemes

4.7 Helping single people to access private tenancies has been a standard local authority 'homelessness prevention' activity over a long period. In many areas, rent deposit schemes targeted mainly at 'non-priority' homeless households are long-established. In the past few years, however, growing numbers of authorities have stepped up their activities in this area – in particular, focusing efforts on facilitating private sector solutions for 'potentially priority homeless' households (i.e. families and vulnerable single people who, if assessed as homeless would probably be classed as 'in priority need'). A survey of local authorities carried out in 2005 identified that 87 per cent were running rent deposit schemes as a means to prevent homelessness (ODPM, 2005c).

4.8 The need for rent deposit schemes arises from that fact that many landlords require new tenants to pay some form of bond as a security against the possibility of damage to the landlord's property or the abandonment of the property with rent unpaid. Where the tenant meets all the conditions laid down in the tenancy agreement the deposit should be repaid in full. Over 80 per cent of tenants taking up Assured Shorthold Tenancies are expected to pay rent deposits (Rugg and Bevan, 2002).

[16] Notwithstanding that private tenancies do not offer security of tenure comparable to social rented housing (let alone a Right to Buy); high tenancy turnover in the private sector can be seen as a cause of homelessness as well as a potential solution

4.9 For many prospective tenants, rent deposit charges – typically equivalent to a month's rent – present a serious barrier to their accessing a tenancy. Rent deposit schemes aim to overcome this obstacle by accepting liability for the payment on a tenant's behalf. In some cases they can also help to persuade a private landlord to house people they might otherwise be reluctant to accommodate (HQNS, 2004).

4.10 Communities and Local Government sees rent deposit schemes as an effective means of reducing the placement of families in Bed & Breakfast accommodation (ODPM, 2003a). Local authorities can help people into a new tenancy in the private rented sector by providing tenants with a rent deposit, avoiding the trauma of homelessness, which might include a lengthy stay in temporary accommodation (especially in London and other areas of high housing stress where there is relatively limited access to the social rented sector).

4.11 Studies of rent deposit schemes (e.g. Rugg, 1996; 2003) have found them to be potentially effective in preventing homelessness. In some areas, however, this potential was compromised by a failure to publicise a rent deposit scheme's existence so that households at risk of homelessness became aware of this before actually losing their accommodation. Rugg also noted barriers to scheme effectiveness such as delays in Housing Benefit administration. Another concern was that some individuals aided to access tenancies were faced with ongoing rental charges in excess of Housing Benefit (HB) limits or otherwise high enough to present a disincentive to take up low paid employment. Benefit-eligible households were, in some areas, assisted through Discretionary Housing Payments (topping up HB entitlement to help bridge the gap between actual rent charged and the standard HB ceiling).

4.12 The Homelessness Code of Guidance sets no specific limits within which rent deposit schemes and guarantees are to be operated. However, it states that 'authorities are obliged to act reasonably and in accordance with their fiduciary duty to local tax and rent payers' (Communities and Local Government, DfES and DoH 2006 para 16.20).

How the schemes worked

Scheme models

4.13 Rent deposit schemes were operated in seven of the ten case study local authorities. In three authorities – Bristol, Bournemouth and Colchester – there were distinct rent deposit-type schemes targeted at single people and at families. Single person schemes tended to be fairly long-established and typically involved relatively modest payments. Schemes for families were very recent and often featured fairly substantial sums.

4.14 Part of the reason for the typically larger unit costs associated with family rent deposit schemes is that family households require larger – and more expensive – properties. Another factor is that recipients may qualify for assistance over and above deposit payments – for example help with rent in advance and letting agent fees. Hence, in one case study authority the 2003-04 average payment per tenancy was £805, of which the rent deposit averaged £621.

4.15 Rent deposit projects on the traditional model are intended to be largely self-financing, in that deposits returned at the end of a tenancy can be recycled. Under Bournemouth's scheme the deposit was treated as a loan to the house-seeker, with the applicant being expected to repay the amount in instalments. The principled argument here was that this constituted a form of enforced saving, since tenants who had repaid the full amount would stand to receive the deposit from the landlord as repaid to the scheme at the end of the tenancy (i.e. as a deposit for the house-seeker's next tenancy).

4.16 In practice, however, the objective of running rent deposit schemes at nil net cost is not necessarily realised. In one case study, for example, funds recovered through deposits repaid in 2003-04 amounted to only 25 per cent of the amount spent (the reasons for this are unclear). Because this fell well short of expectations, it had placed the authority's budget under severe pressure (though rent deposit payments – even where unrecovered – are likely to be relatively modest compared to the Bed & Breakfast costs saved by referring potentially priority homeless households to the scheme).

4.17 A new variant of rent deposit scheme as pioneered by Harrow was the 'Finders Fee' model which did not assume that the payment constituted a bond for eventual repayment (by either landlord or tenant). Here, the fee was simply a non-refundable premium whose value was scaled to the size of the property. Payments on an explicit 'grant' basis were seen as justified by Harrow on the basis that they provided the Council with more leverage with landlords in relation to the terms of the tenancy (see para 4.28).

4.18 Under the Harrow scheme landlords were offered Finders Fee payments of up to £1,500, depending on the size of the property. Alternatively, landlords could opt for a smaller cash payment accompanied by a year's insurance cover against loss of rent, legal expenses and (limited) property contents.

4.19 Two further scheme variants were exemplified in Colchester. One, the Family Bond Scheme (FBS), was set up in 1995 to facilitate access to private tenancies as temporary accommodation for households accepted as homeless and awaiting permanent rehousing. Here, landlords were expected to agree a tenancy of 11-12 months, with the informal understanding that the client would be allowed to remain until receiving a suitable (Council) tenancy offer.

4.20 The second Colchester scheme variant – its Homefinder initiative – was targeted at households already accepted as homeless and where the referral constituted a discharge of the Council's rehousing duty. As noted above, tenancy offers made in this way cannot be enforced – the applicant is free to reject such offers in favour of direct rehousing in the social rented sector (or a 'better' private tenancy offer). In Colchester's experience, however, significant numbers of households tended to see such referrals as attractive compared to the alternative: a probably lengthy stay in temporary accommodation followed by a fairly restricted choice of tenancy in the social rented sector. In 2003-04, 57 households were assisted into private tenancies under the scheme.

Referral routes

4.21 Referrals to single person rent deposit schemes sometimes came from the local authority but were likely to originate from voluntary organisations or from word-of-mouth recommendation. Schemes targeting 'potentially priority homeless' households, as illustrated by the case studies, tended to be restricted to households referred by the local authority's homelessness team. These distinctions were not always hard and fast: in one case study local authority, officers managing referrals to the Council's 'homelessness prevention fund' (effectively a rent deposit-type scheme) had discretion to refer 'borderline non-vulnerable' households to the scheme.

4.22 Harrow's scheme was also mainly targeted at households seen as potentially priority homeless. However, it was also open to households already accepted as statutory homeless and who were living in temporary accommodation awaiting a social rented tenancy, as well as to existing Harrow Council tenants (for example, as a means of relieving overcrowding). There was also an inter-relationship between the Finders Fee scheme and the Council's family mediation service. Some households initially referred to mediation were subsequently helped to find private tenancies with Finders Fee assistance.

4.23 As operated at the time of the fieldwork in 2004, schemes involving 'potentially priority homeless' households tended to involve referrals being made through an essentially informal process. Hence, such households were not, as a rule, subject to a formal assessment of their homelessness status (see also Flood, 2006). As highlighted by more recent homelessness caselaw, such procedures may be legally problematic where they involve persons who are either already homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days (see paras 2.40-2.41). In one authority, for example, the households concerned were counselled in their initial housing options interview and advised about the pros and cons of pursuing a homelessness application as opposed to agreeing to be informally referred to the local rent deposit scheme. This advice will have emphasized that, if successful in leading to formal acceptance, a homelessness application would probably lead to a

prolonged period in temporary accommodation followed by a highly restricted choice of social housing. By contrast, referral to the rent deposit scheme could lead to a private tenancy in short order (and a wider area choice). Hence, effectively, households referred to the rent deposit scheme were those who had made an 'informed choice' not to pursue their homelessness application. However, as discussed in paras 2.48-2.50, it is questionable whether such an approach would be strictly legally compliant.

4.24 Concerns of the kind described above would not arise in the case of family households to whom there is no full rehousing duty outstanding – e.g. those declared 'intentionally homeless' or those already having received a social housing 'discharge of duty' offer. Similarly, it might be argued that where a 'potentially priority need' household has made an 'informed choice' not to proceed with their homelessness application (because of a judgement that an informal offer of a private tenancy is preferable – see para 2.48) this could be legally compliant. However, this could be problematic (see para 2.49).

4.25 Similarly, the legal concerns outlined in paras 2.40 and 2.41 would not apply in cases where access to a private tenancy was facilitated for a household formally assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need in the circumstances outlined in para 4.2. Neither would such anxieties apply to cases involving households facing the prospect of homelessness more than 28 days into the future.

Scheme processes

4.26 The first step in the process under the rent deposit-type schemes examined usually involved the house-seeker making contact with the local authority (or contractor agency) to establish whether they met scheme access criteria. This often involved being assessed as a 'potentially priority homeless' household – probably through a housing options type interview rather than a formal homelessness assessment (but see paras 4.23-4.24 on the legality of such practices). Step two was the identification of a possibly suitable tenancy. Here, the onus was generally on the house-seeker, though it could involve the local authority making a referral to a known landlord. One scheme administration agency argued for the benefits of devolving responsibility of property identification to the applicant on the grounds that this 'maximised consumer choice'.

4.27 Similarly, Rugg (2003) found that some organisations operating rent deposit schemes believed that reliance on service users to find their own tenancies helped to filter out individuals who might be unable to sustain tenancies, once accessed. Generally, however, Rugg questioned such 'laissez faire' approaches on the grounds that the complexity of the rent deposit concept may well make it difficult for an applicant to 'sell' to a landlord or agent.

4.28 Under the schemes run by some case study authorities, the next stages of the process involved pre-tenancy determinations and property inspections by the Council or by a third party agency on its behalf. A pre-tenancy determination provides the house-seeker with an indication of the likely amount of Housing Benefit payable (since there is often a shortfall in HB paid in relation to rent charged). Under the Harrow model the property inspection verified that the dwelling was 'in a safe and lettable condition'. Harrow also required that Finders Fee properties were centrally heated and had a gas safety certificate. In addition, Finders Fee landlords were obliged to agree a 12 month tenancy. Requiring landlords to commit to 1-2 year tenancies was found to be standard practice for the rent deposit schemes operated by seven London Boroughs as investigated in 2004 (Association of London Government, 2005). However, the kinds of checks and conditions operated by Harrow (see above) did not feature as standard under the rent deposit schemes run by some other case study authorities in our own research. Under at least one scheme none of these were typically applied.

4.29 An additional condition imposed on participating landlords by some deposit/fee paying local authorities was to require notification wherever a tenancy was proving problematic and in danger of being terminated. In Colchester, for example, landlords were obliged to inform the council of tenant departures or, circumstances where the landlord wanted the tenant to leave. This early warning system fits in with the landlord liaison (or mediation) approach, as described in Chapter 3.

4.30 To encourage landlords to sign up to the Finders Fee scheme, Harrow offered additional incentives. These included 'fast track' Housing Benefit processing, as well as a ready supply of potential tenants. This links to the wider question of what factors help in maximising the effectiveness of rent deposit schemes. The evidence from our case studies here was consistent with Rugg's (2003) recommendations that schemes need to be:

- well-integrated with other local homelessness services (so that their existence can be made known to potential service users when they first approach a homelessness service provider agency); and
- operated in close consultation with Housing Benefit services so that landlords can be assured of HB payments being speedily processed and, where necessary, Discretionary Housing Payments authorised.

Procurement

4.31 Most of the rent deposit-type schemes examined were run in-house by local authorities. In only one instance – Bournemouth – was the service operated by an external contractor, Bournemouth Churches Housing Association (BCHA). In all cases these arrangements were longstanding – i.e. reflecting decisions taken when single persons rent deposit schemes were established in the 1990s.

Other approaches facilitating access to private housing

Introductory service for landlords

4.32 Closely connected with their landlord liaison (or mediation) work – as described in Chapter 3 – some local authorities had developed more active approaches akin to lettings agency functions. In Bristol, for example, the Council had marketed its introductory service for landlords. Here, a landlord with a property to let would approach the Council seeking a tenant nomination. The property would be inspected and – providing compliant with a number of specified criteria – accredited. The Council would then nominate a suitable tenant, assuming the landlord's willingness to grant a term of at least 12 months.

4.33 Landlords participating in Bristol's introductory service benefited by receiving:

- 12 months free contents insurance;
- 12 months guaranteed rent;
- a deposit payment;
- fast-tracked Housing Benefit processing; and
- professional advice made available to both landlord and tenant.

Intensive help for aspiring private tenants

4.34 Sutton Council's 'Route to Rent' scheme provides an example of a targeted programme of assistance for people facing likely homelessness. The scheme, designed to help non-priority homeless people access private renting, centred on weekly self-help sessions run by the Council. Referral to these 'Route to Rent' sessions was via an initial housing options interview. The scheme was commended by the local Citizen's Advice Bureau as demonstrating an 'impressive' Council commitment to assisting mainly non-priority households.

4.35 Route to Rent participants – mainly young single men – were provided with advice on housing options and recommendations on specific landlords. Whilst the Council's professed aim here was to 'empower' rather than to advocate, clients were provided with direct assistance where necessary – e.g. telephoning landlords to negotiate on a tenant's behalf, including bargaining for a lower rent, or convincing the landlord to accept a paper rent guarantee rather than an up-front payment. Applicants were also coached on their own presentation skills to improve their ability to undertake such negotiations themselves.

4.36 Staff also helped clients by providing pre-tenancy determinations on the likely level of Housing Benefit (HB) payable in respect of a particular tenancy. Clients were, in this way, made aware of likely shortfalls between HB payable and rent to be charged. Additionally, Sutton's housing options staff interacted directly with Housing Benefit service colleagues on applicants' behalf.

4.37 Service users interviewed by the research team were highly complimentary about the help received. They appreciated the scheme's accessibility and the fact that they were helped either on the day of their approach or within a week of this. However, whilst all interviewees saw the combination of practical help and small-scale financial assistance as having been highly beneficial, a number expressed anxieties about the relatively short term nature of the tenancies acquired and/or the 'high rents' involved. For two of the five service user interviewees, for example, this latter issue was potentially problematic because of their aspirations to gain employment and a belief that the rent would prove unaffordable in the context of anticipated earnings.

4.38 It was also acknowledged by the Sutton team that restrictions on Housing Benefit payments were a major constraint on the scheme's potential. In particular, the Single Room Rent rule for claimants under 26 meant that independent accommodation was rarely affordable for these clients.

Assessing service effectiveness

Administrative monitoring systems

4.39 Basic requirements for any system of monitoring schemes to facilitate access to private housing include measurement of:

- caseload throughput – e.g. numbers of 'inward referrals', numbers assisted to access tenancies over a given time period;
- annual (or other periodic) scheme costs – both in total and per household assisted; and
- the extent to which tenancies accessed with assistance are sustained up to and beyond six months.

4.40 Case study evidence suggests that there is considerable room for improvement in relation to monitoring rent deposit schemes. Rent deposit scheme monitoring by the case studies tended to be limited to recording the crude throughput of payments made, households assisted, budget spent etc. Some projects were subject to formal performance targets in these terms. In 2004-05, for example, BCHA was

contracted by Bournemouth to make at least 100 payments to family households and 50 to single persons. Other possible measures of success seen as relevant (though not formally monitored) by BCHA included:

- speed of response (service standard to process rent deposit payment application within 24 hours);
- the size of the network of 'friendly landlords' prepared to offer tenancies to people referred by the associations with rent deposit assistance; and
- landlords prepared to accept successive referrals.

4.41 Whilst the Harrow Finders Fee scheme obliged landlords to agree 12-month tenancies, other authorities were prepared to settle for the six-month legal minimum. Some housing staff interviewees believed that a large proportion of tenancies acquired in this way were, in practice, extended well beyond their initial six month term. In none of the case study authorities, however, had this been formally monitored or researched.

4.42 At a bare minimum, local authorities (and their agents) running rent deposit and similar schemes ought to be recording the number of 'inward referrals' (i.e. households referred for consideration), alongside the numbers of tenancies actually accessed as a result. Such a framework would make it possible to calculate the 'fallout rate' of referrals. A high fallout rate might, for example, reflect inappropriate referrals, insufficient practical assistance made available to referred households or a simple lack of affordable tenancies.

4.43 More ambitiously, as suggested above, it would be good practice to measure the proportion of such tenancies sustained for more than the minimum term of the tenancy (i.e. six months in most cases). We would, in any case, argue that helping a potentially homeless household to access a private tenancy should be routinely treated as a form of 'housing advice' for the purposes of the homelessness Best Value performance indicator (BV213)[17]. Hence, local authorities are – from 2005-06 – obliged to assess the number of such placements likely to be sustained for more than six months.

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[17] Subject to issues of legality – see paras 4.23-4.24.

Cost effectiveness of rent deposit and finders fee schemes

4.44 This section focuses on the Bournemouth rent deposit schemes and Harrow's Finders Fee scheme.

Bournemouth rent deposit schemes

4.45 As noted in para 4.13 Bournemouth operated distinct rent deposit schemes for single people and family households. It is necessary to look at the schemes separately. This is for two reasons. First, the rules for the two schemes differed so that participants in the families scheme could qualify for payments over and above simple rent deposits (see para 4.14). Secondly, the financial implications for the local authority are quite different in cases where the household might, if unassisted in this way, need to be accepted as a statutory homeless case.

4.46 Expenditure on the families scheme was £198,308 in the financial year 2004-05 of which £154,054 was distributed in deposits for 246 households, equivalent to £626 per household, plus an average rent in advance payment of £111. Including administration costs the average cost per household was £806 (see Table 4.1 below).

4.47 Given the low rate of repayment of rent deposits highlighted in para 4.16 above, it has been assumed for the purpose of this analysis, that the authority received no repayment of the rent deposit.

4.48 Households referred to the scheme were people who had approached the local authority for help with housing because of an expectation that they may become homeless in the future. The costs of the scheme (as cited above) are therefore directly comparable with the alternative of these households being accepted as homeless and temporarily rehoused by the council at a cost of £2,600 (see Chapter 3 para 3.55). The saving of £2,600 per household balances favourably against the £806 deposit cost.

4.49 Besides these direct savings there are potential longer term benefits that arise from the provision of housing by the private rented sector. The time horizon for tenancies taken up by the deposit scheme is not clear but all households assisted accessed at least a six month Assured Shorthold Tenancy in the first instance. However, it is also worth noting that households who enter the rent deposit scheme may find that their rent is not fully matched by Housing Benefit, which may pose a potential threat to the tenancy (see para 3.55).

4.50 As noted in para 4.13 a distinct rent deposit scheme was operated in Bournemouth for single people or childless couples. The scheme, run by BCHA on behalf of Bournemouth BC, paid out 228 deposits averaging £232 in the financial year 2004-05. The average rent in advance payment was £19. Expenditure on this scheme

amounted to £54,097 at an average cost of £259 per household assisted. As single people or childless couples, beneficiaries are unlikely to have a statutory right to rehousing by the council as a result of a homelessness assessment. Hence, the easily identifiable local authority savings attributable to the 'families scheme' (see above) do not apply. The single persons scheme is, nevertheless, likely to result in wider savings in public expenditure. For example, a proportion of those assisted in this way may otherwise have become rough sleepers generating potentially substantial demands on health and criminal justice budgets. Granted, such consequences might be expected for only a small fraction of those helped to access tenancies under the scheme. However, bearing in mind the relatively small scale of deposit payments there must be a good chance of the scheme being cost-effective in net terms.

4.51 The rent deposit scheme for families is very cost effective as shown in Table 4.1. Estimated net savings per household assisted average £2,900. This judgement also assumes that the local authority's referral process is accurate in selecting 'nominees' who would otherwise have been likely to become statutory homeless cases. This conclusion also assumes tenancies are sustained for at least a year.

Table 4.1:	Summary of Rent Deposit/Finders Fee Costs and Savings				
	Average costs per case	Costs per prevention	Accommodation cost savings	Savings per prevention	Average savings per household assisted
Bournemouth	806	806	2,600	2,600	2,600
Harrow	1,200	1,411	3,120	3,120	2,652

Note: categories more fully explained in Annex 4 para A4.31

Harrow LBC Finders Fee

4.52 289 Finders Fee payments were made in the financial year 2003-04 and 233 in the first seven months of 2004-05. The average cost of the Finder's Fee per accommodation was £932 for the first seven months of the 2004-05 financial year although the cost was £830 for October 2004. The scheme was administered by three staff comprising a manager earning £30,000 and two staff on £23,000. To this must be added overhead costs. The manager worked 75 per cent on this project. Overheads were assumed to be 50 per cent on labour costs, so annual administration costs were £102,750. Data from the first seven months of the financial year 2004-05 indicated that there were likely to be 400 Finders Fees arranged over the full year, with unit administration costs of £257. The overall average cost per Finders Fee was therefore £1,189, rounded to £1,200 (see Table 4.1).

4.53 At the time of this research, the majority of statutory homelessness acceptances in Harrow LBC were families. If these households had been assessed as statutory homeless, they would have been placed in temporary privately leased accommodation on which there was a weekly management fee of £50-£72 (roughly £60) paid to the landlord for leasing the dwelling, on top of the rent. The average wait in temporary accommodation before permanent rehousing was reported to be two years for 1-bedroom accommodation, rising to seven years for 4-bedroom accommodation. The main point for our purposes is that most temporary accommodation placements will have been for well over a year – relevant because our analysis focuses on costs over 12 months. Part of the savings generated by the scheme therefore equated to the difference between the cost of private rented accommodation accessed via the scheme, and the leased accommodation that would have been used as a temporary rehousing solution for statutory homeless households, taken as the average £60 per week management fee (see para 3.55), i.e. £3,120 per year.

4.54 The scheme was largely targeted households who would otherwise normally qualify as being owed a full homelessness duty under the homelessness legislation – the local authority estimated the proportion of clients who would otherwise become statutory homeless and in priority need as 80-90 per cent. Except where they were directed to Finders Fee through the mediation route, however, they were not subject to a formal homelessness assessment (note the legal considerations outlined in paras 4.23-4.24). Hence the Finders Fee unit cost of £1,200 should be set against the savings arising from obviating the need for temporary housing costs over a 12 month period following a homelessness acceptance, i.e. £3,120 as set out in the previous para.

4.55 We must allow for the likelihood that, in the absence of Finders Fee, a small proportion of those consequently subject to formal homelessness assessment would not be owed a full homelessness duty. It, therefore, seems appropriate to assume that 85 per cent of Finders Fee referrals would otherwise incur temporary accommodation costs. The average annual saving per household (over 400 households) was calculated as approximately £2,652 (85% of £3,120).

4.56 The Finders Fee scheme is very cost effective where there is suitable private rented accommodation that is sustained for one year. Additional public sector savings may also be made by preventing the negative impacts of homelessness and a stay in temporary accommodation (see Annex 4, paras A4.9-A4.12).

What works?

4.57 It is clear that appropriately targeted rent deposit and similar schemes can form a cost-effective means of preventing homelessness. In realising the full potential of such initiatives, scheme-lead organizations (i.e. local authorities or agencies operating rent deposit projects on their behalf) can usefully offer a package of 'add-on services' directed at both tenants and landlords. Prospective tenants may need practical assistance in seeking a suitable property as well as advice on their (likely) Housing Benefit entitlement. Property insurance arranged by a local authority (or its agent) can be an attractive prospect for landlords, as can a reliable new tenant referral service which obviates the landlord's need to market their property.

4.58 Particularly where they are paid as straightforward grants (rather than deposit guarantees), local authority financial contributions can be used to secure acceptable property conditions (e.g. central heating) and tenancy terms beyond the legal minimum (e.g. 12 months).

4.59 By tailoring schemes appropriately, rent deposit-type initiatives can be successfully employed for a range of client groups and purposes. As well as enabling single people and families to avoid homelessness in the first place, the experience of one case study authority suggests that offering assisted access to private tenancies as a means of discharging a local authority's full rehousing duty can engender a significant level of take-up.

4.60 In implementing any initiatives of this sort, it is clearly beneficial for local authorities (or their agents) to develop a detailed picture of private landlordism in their locality, and to use this as a basis for establishing friendly relations with rented property owners. This can pay dividends, not only in facilitating access to accommodation, but also in improving the chances that early warning of tenancies at risk can trigger remedial intervention.

Chapter summary

4.61 Recent years have seen growing efforts to facilitate homeless households' access to private tenancies. Increasingly, initiatives with this objective have focused on 'priority homeless' households as well as on generally 'non-priority' single people and childless couples. Such schemes are partly motivated by a recognition that – unlike social housing – the private rented sector has been expanding, and that it produces twice the volume of lettings made by social landlords (albeit, tenancies with little legal security).

4.62 Rent deposit-type schemes are widely operated and are playing a growing role in rehousing households applying to local authorities for homelessness assistance. As being operated in case study local authorities in 2004, these sometimes involved 'potentially priority homeless' households being informally referred without having been formally assessed under the homelessness legislation, or whilst an assessment is taking place[18]. They can, however, be used to secure rehousing for households accepted as homeless and where this constitutes a council's full discharge of duty.

4.63 In practice, some local authorities have moved away from making payments to landlords ostensibly on a 'returnable deposit' basis. Whilst the overall costs may be greater, it is argued that this provides a stronger incentive for landlords as well as simplifying local authority administration. Rent deposit-type schemes also vary in the extent to which they involve (a) official checks of property quality and affordability, and (b) an obligation on landlords to agree 'preferential terms' – e.g. 12-month minimum terms. Whilst the number of households rehoused in this way are, in some local authorities, substantial, there is much less certainty as to the longer-term sustainability of the tenancies created.

4.64 Other than rent deposit-type schemes, local authorities operate or commission a range of other initiatives aimed at securing access to private tenancies for homeless and potentially homeless households. These include introductory services for landlords and intensive 'housing advice-style' assistance for specific groups of house-seekers. Such initiatives can play significant roles in contributing to a local authority's homelessness prevention efforts.

4.65 Rent deposit and similar schemes targeted at households otherwise likely to be accepted as statutory homeless can be highly cost-effective from the local authority viewpoint. That is, the savings in probable temporary accommodation expenditure outweigh the outlays involved in securing access to private tenancies (whether or not deposits are successfully recovered). Particularly in the light of subsequent homelessness caselaw, however, there are questions about the legality of schemes which involve informal referral of 'potentially priority need' households already homeless or threatened with homelessness.

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[18] Subsequent homelessness case law has emphasized that such procedures may be unlawful – see paras 2.40-2.41 and footnote 1.

Chapter 5

Family Mediation

5.1   People asked to leave the homes of parents, other relatives or friends ('family/friend exclusions') now account for well over a third of all homelessness acceptances (see Figure 2.6). With this in mind, one of the most commonly identified actions envisaged by local authority homelessness strategies was the establishment of mediation services aimed at reconciling young people and their parents or other host householders (HQNS, 2004).

5.2   According to the dictionary definition 'mediation' involves a process of intervention (by an intermediate agency) between parties in a dispute to produce agreement or reconciliation. Similarly, Shelter sees mediation as 'a … process for resolving disagreements in which an impartial third party (the mediator) helps people in dispute to find a mutually acceptable resolution' (Shelter, 2004). It is, however, important to recognise that there are differing views on exactly what is involved in 'family mediation' as a homelessness prevention technique. There is, for example, no consensus on whether this is a 'formal service', or on the connection between mediation activities and homelessness assessment processes (see para 5.10) Similarly in the case studies considered in this chapter, mediation tended to vary accordingly.

5.3   Around 240 homelessness strategy action plans (two thirds of the total) foresaw the establishment of family mediation services, in particular to help reduce youth homelessness (HQNS, 2004). A survey of local authorities in 2005 found that 80 per cent of them were operating mediation services in order to help prevent homelessness (ODPM, 2005c). Family mediation initiatives formed an important element within homelessness prevention work in almost all of the case study local authorities in this study. A number reported having drawn inspiration from guidance issued by Harrow LBC (2003).

5.4   This chapter draws on our review of existing literature, assessment of local authority monitoring returns to Communities and Local Government's Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate (see below), and on case study work focusing on mediation services run by – or on behalf of six of the 10 case study local authorities[19]. It should be noted that not all of these services were focused solely on

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[19] Because of the legal sensitivity of family mediation services to prevent homelessness (see para 5.11) the identities of case study local authorities have been anonymised in this chapter.

preventing homelessness from occurring. In some cases there was recognition that, even if it was impossible to facilitate a return to a client's former home, repairing family relationships could help young people to sustain independent tenancies (see para 5.14 below). It should also be stressed that the fieldwork was undertaken in 2004 and preceded recent homelessness caselaw with important implications for family mediation schemes (see para 5.11).

5.5 Before discussing our own evidence we review the limited existing literature on family mediation practice. We then look at the origins and objectives of the case study schemes before discussing the services themselves in more detail. Funding and procurement issues are specifically examined. We conclude by looking at service monitoring and effectiveness, what works, and barriers and constraints.

Existing research findings and recent caselaw

5.6 Mediation services set up to prevent homelessness are a recent development and there is little existing evaluation evidence as to their effectiveness. A review of the literature revealed only four documents which were concerned with mediation services in this context: a study by Lemos (2001) on mediation services in Scotland, and three good practice guides, one produced by Harrow LBC (2003), one by ODPM (ODPM, 2003c) and one by Shelter (2004).

5.7 Lemos (2001) supported the view that family mediation can be an effective means of repairing family and social networks and facilitating the return home of an estranged family member. Lemos argued that prospects for success were enhanced when 'the issues at odds can be clearly defined and when the parties are co-operative'. He also emphasised a view that mediation should be both voluntary and confidential.

5.8 Shelter's (2004) good practice guide for mediation services for young people highlighted their view that services should be focused on young people, 'rather than being shaped to the needs of local authority housing departments'. Such services should, in other words, be motivated primarily by an aspiration to solve clients' problems rather than to reduce numbers of households qualifying for housing assistance as 'priority homeless'. As in the Lemos study, Shelter identified specific elements of successful mediation:

- those in dispute being willing to take part;
- openness and honesty on the part of all parties;
- commitment to working cooperatively with the other party to find a solution; and
- clients feeling that they are in a safe atmosphere and that confidentiality will be respected.

(Lemos, 2001; Shelter, 2004).

5.9 Mediation services were also considered in a good practice guide produced by Harrow (LBC, 2003) for managers and staff working in local authorities alongside other practical initiatives for tackling homelessness. The guide described Harrow's mediation model – strongly advocated as a means of homelessness prevention – and considered how to set up an effective scheme and monitor outcomes.

5.10 It is evident that there is scope for tension to arise between some of the elements of good practice identified above and the use of mediation as a means of achieving the aim of preventing homelessness due to 'family/friend exclusions'. The key issues subject to controversy at the time of the research were:

- The extent to which engagement with mediation is voluntary;
- The impartiality of mediation and its separateness from the homelessness assessment process;
- The extent to which the service is confidential – e.g. the extent to which an independent mediator may divulge case-specific information to the local authority; and
- The extent to which the service is focused on the needs of the person at risk of homelessness.

5.11 Since the research fieldwork was undertaken the Court of Appeal has restated the statutory duties of a local authority under Section 184 of the Housing Act 1996 in the case of Robinson (see footnote 1). The Court held that where a local authority is obliged to conduct a formal homelessness assessment (and this will be in the majority of cases given the low threshold test of 'reason to believe that the applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness') mediation intervention or other homelessness prevention measures must not delay or postpone this process (see paras 2.40-2.41). According to the judgement '…a local housing authority has … no power to defer making inquiries pursuant to section 184 on the ground that there is a pending mediation'[20]. The ruling also noted that the process of mediation is wholly independent from the statutory homelessness assessment process, though it would be quite permissible for the two processes to run in parallel.

Origins and objectives of case study mediation services

5.12 All six schemes were set up following recognition that one of the main causes of homelessness in the area was inter-generational relationship breakdown. A further concern about homelessness among young people was the need to ensure ongoing family support for young people who do leave home, to help ensure the sustainability of their subsequent tenancy.

[20] Robinson v Hammersmith & Fulham LBC 2006 EWCA Civ 1122 http://www.familylawweek.co.uk/library.asp?i=2311

5.13 As part of their overall goal of reducing homelessness due to 'family/friend exclusions', case study mediation service objectives included:

- Considering solutions to homelessness not involving a statutory assessment (but see paras 2.40-2.41 and 5.11);
- Reducing the potential for collusive collaboration between households and young people ('I'd like my own place, mum, can you put me out'); and
- Reducing the isolation experienced by young homeless people in temporary accommodation, without the support of family and friends.

5.14 In helping to prevent homelessness, some services explicitly aimed to support young people towards independence. For example, one of the motivating factors for the setting up of one authority's mediation service was concern about the isolation experienced by young homeless people in Bed & Breakfast accommodation without the support of family and friends. The thinking here was that, whilst mediation might not always be able to prevent homelessness, restoring relationships between family members could help people to survive the resulting trauma and improve the prospects of subsequent tenancy sustainment.

Nature of services provided

Target groups

5.15 The target client group for the six schemes was mainly young people aged 16-24, threatened with exclusion from the homes of parents, other relatives, or friends. Box 5.1 indicates the targeting of one case study local authority's mediation service, illustrating that the majority of referrals involved 16-17 year olds, though a small proportion were aged 20 or over.

Referral process

5.16 In two case study local authorities, the mediation referral process usually involved an initial home visit by a homelessness/housing options officer. As noted in Chapter 2, home visits have re-emerged as a standard element within the homelessness assessment procedures of a growing number of local authorities in recent years. In a third local authority, for example, home visits had recently been trialled for 'family/friend exclusions'. The purpose of the visits was two-fold: to 'check the facts' of the situation and to provide ' quick fixes', such as requesting that the young person stay for another month in the current accommodation or with a relative. This development was motivated by a perceived need to deter young people from 'taking the easy route' of applying as homeless.

5.17 Although the main source of referrals for all six schemes was the local authority's housing department, referral routes and procedures tended to differ according to the location of the authority's advisory service within the organisational structure. In most of the schemes examined, referrals were made by homelessness officers or housing needs/options officers. At one local authority, referrals were made by the Home Visiting Officer who routinely visited the home of any applicant threatened with eviction in order to explore options available to them. Such discussions, in themselves, were reported as often constituting a form of mediation, as well as sometimes leading to a referral to an independent mediator.

5.18 At another local authority, by contrast, most referrals came from generic Customer Service Advisors at First Point, the council's main point of access to services. These differences in referral routes are significant in that the local authority staff responsible for the referral decision will have contrasting areas of responsibility as well as levels of expertise. This may have implications for the sensitivity of screening procedures and protocols in assessing the potential suitability of mediation as an option. For instance, mediation is likely to be inappropriate if the person is at significant risk of abuse or violence in the home.

Inter-relatedness of mediation and homelessness assessment processes

5.19 Case study local authorities varied in the extent to which mediation services were inter-related with the homelessness assessment process. This had implications in terms of whether the service was offered on an entirely voluntary basis. In two authorities mediation was clearly integral to the local authority assessment of a homelessness application (see below). Here, young people facing possible homelessness due to 'family/friend exclusions' were routinely referred to mediation unless it was judged that a return to the excluder's home could put them at risk of 'abuse or violence'. The 'default expectation' for such cases was that there would be a referral to mediation. We would interpret this as implying an element of obligation in that a homelessness applicant referred to the service, but 'unreasonably' refusing to participate in a mediation interview, faced the *possibility* of being consequently judged 'not homeless'.

5.20 In the light of the Court of Appeal ruling in the *Robinson* case, practices of the kind described above must now be seen as of doubtful legality. Where there is an obligation to conduct a formal homelessness assessment, such an assessment must not be delayed through a referral to mediation. Local authorities might argue that their practices as described above amount to integrating mediation within the assessment process – therefore resulting in no delay to the latter. At the same time, issues may arise from the Court's statement that mediation processes should be 'independent' of the assessment process. In some authorities mediation activity does not involve referral to a third party agency. Rather, it is delivered by

homelessness casework staff in the course of home visits whose primary purpose is statutory homelessness assessment. The implications of the *Robinson* case for such practices are less clear.

5.21 The current research did not include direct observation of interaction between local authority staff and people seen by these staff as potentially benefiting from mediation intervention. It is therefore difficult to comment on the practical implementation of local authority procedures to assess whether an 'excluded' household could be 'at risk' if they returned to their former home (at least pending the initial mediation interview). A local advice agency in one case study authority voiced concerns as to whether a young person at risk of domestic abuse would necessarily feel comfortable about disclosing this to a stranger. A countervailing view might be that claims of 'abuse risk' are all too easy to make in the context of a situation where the individual concerned is aware that this might further their chances of securing a tenancy.

5.22 In two case study local authorities, while mediation was not – strictly speaking – 'compulsory', potentially eligible young people were encouraged to meet the mediator, and informed that their engagement with the service would be 'taken into account' in assessing their homelessness application. At least by implication, therefore, failure to participate could have serious consequences with regard to a young person's homelessness assessment.

5.23 Another aspect of the inter-relatedness of mediation activities and homelessness assessment in two authorities concerned the role of the mediator. In both authorities the independent agency contracted to provide mediation was also expected to make a post-interview report to the authority which would inform the authority's decision as to whether the applicant was legally homeless. Hence, a mediator judgement that there was scope for reconciliation between applicant and host household was likely to lead to a local authority 'not homeless' decision[21].

5.24 Mediation services offered by other case study authorities appeared to be more clearly separate from formal homelessness investigations, and here it was emphasized that engagement with the service on the part of the young person was entirely voluntary. In one authority, for example, if it was felt to be supportive of the young person, he or she could be accompanied to the agency contracted to provide the service by the Council's Housing Options Advisor. Under another council's scheme, mediation sessions could be convened at the homelessness unit, in the parental home, or at a neutral venue such as a café or community hall.

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[21] It should, however, be noted that there is nothing to prevent a householder from insisting that a young person aged over 16 leaves the family home. A judgement on whether this is, in fact, the case may be relevant to intentionality (in that it may suggest collusion) – though its relevance to a decision on whether the person is homeless is less clear.

5.25 In one case study authority it was standard procedure to require that young people facing family/friend exclusions obtain a 28-day written notice from their host householder. For applicants told to leave their home immediately this effectively meant being expected to negotiate a further stay of at least 28 days. The council regarded this as time for the mediator to establish why the young person was being excluded, and to begin to address the problems behind the exclusion. Inflexibly applied, however, such a practice could create a difficult situation for a young person whose relationship with their host householder had already completely disintegrated.

Mediation Interaction and Support

5.26 Generally, mediation involved 60-90 minute sessions. Not all mediators, however, required the presence of both parties. One third party agency, for example, emphasized willingness to work independently with parents or other host householders where young people were unwilling to engage with the service. Similarly, in another authority it was seen as essential to allow mediation sessions to proceed, irrespective of whether the host householder was prepared to participate. In practice, most initial sessions in this authority involved only the young person, though there were sometimes follow-up sessions involving both applicant and excluder.

5.27 In two authorities which referred households to external mediation, at the end of the first session with the young person the mediator drew up a report for the local authority to inform the council's own decision as to whether the young person was homeless in law. Before submission to the local authority, mediator reports were routinely shared with clients to check their accuracy. In this sense, the mediation service provided to both local authorities appeared to be integrated within homelessness investigations (see para 5.11).

5.28 An example of the staged process of mediation provided by some agencies is illustrated through the model detailed in Box 5.1.

Box 5.1: Case Study LA Family Mediation Process (as delivered by a third party agency)

Stage 1

At the initial meeting, the young person and the mediator discuss the purpose and nature of mediation. The process is confidential, apart from when child protection issues arise. The young person signs a mediation agreement. If the circumstances of the young person are fraught, this initial stage may require more than one visit. The history of the situation is discussed and a rough agenda of aims for the mediation agreed. If the young person is staying with friends, the discussion may cover how the young person could be enabled to return to the parental home.

Stage 2

The mediator seeks the young person's agreement to contact the parent or carer, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of this. Where this is agreed, the mediator contacts the parent(s) and invites them to a meeting to gain their perspective. Again, this is confidential between the mediator and the parent.

Stage 3

A meeting is convened involving both the young person and the parent(s). The parties agree on an agenda covering the issues needing to be resolved. If there is agreement for the young person to return home, the ground rules for this are discussed and agreed.

The focus of the meeting is on the future rather than the past; blaming and fault-finding are avoided. This is described as an emotional time for both parties. The role of the mediator is to remain neutral and to facilitate communication between the young person and the parent. There are ground rules for facilitating the discussion, for example, neither party is allowed to interrupt the other person.

Stage 4

Further help may be needed, for example, referral for drugs counselling or coping with issues at home. This may involve several sessions with the parents.

5.29 In contrast, although in another case study local authority there was no limit to the number of mediation sessions that could take place, in practice there was usually only a single session with the young person being excluded from their former home, as parents/excluders typically 'refused to engage' with the process. Only where mediation was unsuccessful in enabling the young person to remain at or return home were other housing options considered (note that this kind of approach appears clearly non-compliant with recent caselaw – see para 5.11). This could potentially lead to the household being accepted as homeless and in priority need. However, other outcomes were also possible – indeed, many people for whom mediation had failed were subsequently assisted to obtain private tenancies.

5.30 Illustrating differences in the role of mediation services, mediation staff in one local authority for example, were expected to provide a specialist conflict resolution service for the Council but were also trained on the range of housing options available in the borough to address housing need other than accessing social housing via the statutory homelessness route. At least two other case study authorities reported departing from the 'pure' mediation model and adopting an 'influencing and educational role'. This included educating young people on the possible consequences of leaving home (e.g. the reality of living in Bed & Breakfast or temporary accommodation, or managing on a low income, or potential difficulties in pursuing educational goals, etc).

5.31 Case study evidence indicates that there is scope for mediation to be offered within a package of services focusing on the needs of young people at risk of homelessness. In all the case study schemes it was reported that where the young person and their family were irreconcilable, other alternatives were explored and the young person supported in making a planned move. This might involve living with friends or relatives either temporarily or permanently. The mediation service was also used to enable young people to re-establish ties with their family at a later date – the general view being that family support was essential in ensuring that the young person manages to sustain his/her own independent tenancy, thus helping to prevent repeat homelessness.

5.32 Four case study authorities reported being prepared to offer the young person further help once immediate housing needs had been resolved. This could involve directing them to other relevant services and meeting with them on a regular basis.

Funding and procurement

5.33 While two of the case study mediation services were provided in-house, four were externally procured by the local authority. Mediation staff were expected to provide a specialist service for housing department clients, underpinned by a code of ethics and expertise.

5.34 Further evidence of the varying nature of the support provided under the 'mediation' heading is provided in the form of significant differences in the terms of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) specifying outsourced mediation services. In one authority, for example, the agreement stipulated that, on average, mediation interviews would be offered to as many as 200 clients annually. Of these, it was assumed that 25 per cent would 'drop out' and that 25 per cent of 'excluding' parents, relatives, or friends would attend a subsequent two-way session with the applicant. Overall, it was assumed that up to 200 hourly mediation sessions would be provided (150 interviews with homeless applicants and 50 interviews with excluder and applicant).

5.35 In contrast, the SLAs of mediation service providers in three other case study local authorities stipulated a much smaller number of clients to be seen. In part, at least, this difference reflects an expectation that mediators would convene a number of sessions with the young person. In one instance, for example, the contractor agency would provide mediation and support for up to 24 young people and their families during a 12-month period. Since the fieldwork was completed one of these three local authorities has altered the terms of its contract with an external contractor so that mediation referrals are operated within a 'pay as you go' arrangement. This was seen as providing a more flexible service in eliminating the need for a contract and fee based on an estimate of the likely caseload projected in advance.

Assessing service effectiveness

Performance monitoring

5.36 The research revealed a wide range of approaches to monitoring mediation service activity and effectiveness. One distinction was between 'direct' or 'indirect' impact measures. 'Direct measures' focused on the outcomes of mediation intervention in relation to the caseload of referrals – e.g. the proportion of applicants referred to the service and recorded as being (at least initially) reconciled with their host household. Some services, on the other hand, focused primarily on trends in the numbers of 'family/friend exclusion' cases accepted as homeless, seeing this as an impact indicator (albeit indirect) of the family mediation service.

5.37 While none of the projects were long-established, some appeared to have defined their objectives more clearly and to have made greater progress in collecting monitoring data. For instance, Table 5.1 shows the performance targets that were set out in one case study authority's Service Level Agreement, illustrating a high expectation that homelessness among young people will be prevented, at least in the short term.

Table 5.1: Family Mediation Service, Case Study LA: Performance Indicators and targets	
Performance Indicator	**Target**
1. Number of young people receiving service	24 young people
2. % of young people where homelessness was prevented, initially	90%
3. % of young people still residing in family home after 6 months	80%
4. Average hours spent on any one case	25 Hours
5. % of young people expressing satisfaction with the service	80%
6. Average time from referral to initial contact with young person	2 working days

Source: Case study LA

5.38 One case study authority had rejected the possibility of performance targets related to reducing homelessness acceptances due to family/friend exclusions. The argument here was that such an approach could unwittingly encourage staff to inappropriately recommend mediation to young people facing abusive situations in their former homes. More broadly, such an approach could be questioned on the basis that 'headline homelessness figures' are the product of many factors including the state of the housing market. Hence, it could be quite misleading to celebrate the 'success' of mediation as evidenced simply by a reduction in acceptances involving family friend exclusions.

5.39 Other case study family mediation projects also monitored the length of time clients had to wait before being seen by mediators, with projects generally reporting that following receipt of a referral, mediators were able to make contact with the client within a matter of days rather than weeks. At least two projects reported that there were seasonal fluctuations in the demand for the service (e.g. with an increase in applications after Christmas) which were related to stressful times for families.

5.40 There was considerable variation in the amount and type of monitoring information collected by mediation projects (quantitative/qualitative and formal/informal). One case study authority, for example, recorded case profiles including anonymised qualitative information, in order to assess the scheme's effectiveness on a case-by-case basis. A third party agency in another local authority recorded the number of mediation sessions undertaken, the length of sessions, and advice provided by telephone.

5.41 The monitoring data held by one agency and provided in Box 5.2 highlights a number of issues of broader relevance to the role of family mediation services in homelessness prevention. For example, this data indicates a high level of contacts, and illustrates the complexity of a number of the cases, including a significant history of abuse in some families and ongoing liaison with a number of other agencies.

Box 5.2:   Third Party Mediation Service Monitoring Reports Specific to one Case Study LA

(a) April 2003 – March 2004

49 referrals were received by the agency for mediation during the period April 2003 - March 2004. A further 3 cases required ongoing work from the previous period. Details of these referrals are given below. The 52 cases were made up as follows:

Gender	Ages	Ethnicity
39 males, 13 females	14 aged 16 years 26 aged 17 years 5 aged 18 years 2 aged 19 years 1 aged 20 years 2 aged 21 years 2 aged 23 years	40 White British 8 Mixed Race 2 Black British 1 White Irish 1 Algerian

Number of contacts
A total of 575 contacts were made with the 52 cases, either by phone or face to face. This represents an average of 11 contacts per case, with a minimum of 2 contacts and a maximum of 41.

(b) July - September 2004

Summary
20 referrals made to Mediation between July and September 2004, including two from one family.

Gender	Ages	Ethnicity
19 females, 1 male	11 Aged 16-17 7 Aged 18-20 2 Aged 21+	15 White British 1 Black British 4 Mixed Race

Contacts
The project worker had between 1- 18 contacts with each young person and their families, giving a total of 111 contacts during this period.
8 families accepted mediation. Other contacts involved 1-1 sessions with the young person and separate contacts with parents.

Outcomes
2 Accepted as homeless
9 Not accepted as homeless (of which 8 remained at home)
9 Not known

Family issues
Family issues included adult mental illness, child protection, domestic violence and bereavement.

Contacts were made with the police, social services and bereavement services.

5.42 Only one case study authority operated formal monitoring of service user ethnicity. However, whilst the other service providers did not keep such records, it was reported that their users were predominantly White British, even in areas where ethnic minority communities constituted a significant presence. This may indicate problems regarding the accessibility and appropriateness of current mediation services for ethnic minority communities, particularly given the generally younger age structure of these communities and their considerable over-representation among homeless households more generally. This connects with the recent Communities and Local Government research finding that local authorities have traditionally made 'little or no effort' at targeting homelessness prevention services towards ethnic minority groups (Gervais and Rehman, 2005, p99).

Table 5.2: Case Study LA Mediation Monitoring Data 2003-04 – 2004-05

	Q1 03-04	Q2 03-04	Q3 03-04	Q4 03-04	Q1 04-05	Q2 04-05	Q3 04-05	**Total**
Acceptances / no duty as a % of total referrals	100%	75%	96%	95%	100%	98%	100%	
(a). Households accepted as homeless despite mediation	0	17	2	3	0	1	0	**23**
(b). Households given advice only following mediation referral – no duty	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
(c). Households who accepted an alternative housing option following mediation – no duty	30	21	18	24	30	17	33	**173**
(d). Households given a not homeless decision following mediation – no duty	10	2	9	15	10	13	8	**67**
(e). Households who did not contact the Homelessness service following mediation referral – no duty	8	5	3	4	8	5	4	**37**
(f). Households still under homelessness assessment following mediation referral	24	17	20	10	24	21	0	**116**
(g). Other	2	5	0	0	2	0	1	**10**
(h). Total number of referrals made	**74**	**67**	**52**	**56**	**74**	**57**	**46**	**426**

Source: Case study LA

5.43 Differences in the design of monitoring systems reflected varying criteria by which service impact was measured. Table 5.2 above shows the outcome of referrals made to one case study authority's mediation service over two financial years. Looking at 2003-04, for example, only 22 (9%) of the 249 households referred to mediation were subsequently accepted as homeless and in priority need (row (a) as a proportion of row (h)). The local authority saw this as indicating a high 'success rate'. This monitoring framework does not, however, explicitly enumerate cases where mediation intervention succeeded in reconciling 'excluded' and 'excluding' parties enabling the former to remain in/return to their former home. It can only be surmised that some of those classed within categories (b)-(g) in Table 5.2 above will have been concluded in this way.

5.44 In another case study local authority, the overarching measure of 'service effectiveness' was the number of homelessness acceptances due to parental/host householder exclusions. Thus, this Council's 28 per cent reduction in the number of acceptances for this reason in 2003-04 as compared with 2002-03 was seen as indicating considerable success (particularly when set against the Council's 10% reduction target).

Table 5.3: Homelessness Applicants Considered for Possible Family Mediation by a Case Study LA, Jul-Sep 2004	
(a). No return home, but relationship improved	9
(b). Remained at home, relationship improved	9
(c). Temporary return home, planned move undertaken	5
(d). Returned home, as relationship improved	4
(e). Negotiated a temporary move to friend/relative	8
(f). Specific advice given/referrals made	16
(g). Refusal of mediation by the evictor	8
(h). Mediation not appropriate (possible abuse)	6
(i). Expressed an interest but failed to attend appointment	7
(j). Initial meeting, client not interested in mediation	53
Total	**125**

Source: Case study LA

5.45 In contrast to mediation services in the two local authorities described above, the monitoring framework developed by a third case study authority focused specifically on the impact of the service on the relationship between the young person and the parent/host householder. Positive outcomes were seen as including those classed as:

- no return home, but relationship improved;
- remained at home, relationship improved; and
- returned home as relationship improved.

This is because improvements in family relationships were regarded here as helping to prevent homelessness in the longer term, even if a return to the family home was not achieved in the short term – see Table 5.3. A temporary return home followed by a planned move (row (c) of Table 5.3) was also viewed as positive since it helped to reduce the need for placements in Bed & Breakfast or other interim accommodation. Finally, negotiated temporary moves to friends and relatives were also viewed as 'mildly positive' since they might help the young person concerned as well as generate temporary accommodation savings for the local authority.

5.46 Similarly, two other mediation services evaluated service effectiveness in terms of the number of cases where mediation facilitated a return to the parental home or the young person finding suitable accommodation and improving the relationship with their parents. One external agency providing mediation services to a case study local authority under contract had assisted a total of 29 young people in nine months (of whom 75% of cases had been successful in these terms) while a contractor housing association's family mediation team had helped 10 young people in 10 months. Of these, nine had returned home.

5.47 Analysis of monitoring returns by authorities signed up to ODPM's (now Communities and Local Government) Positive Outcomes in Homelessness objectives revealed mixed views on the effectiveness of mediation services. For example, Slough reported that homelessness had been averted for 44 (75%) of the 59 cases referred to family mediation in 2003. In common with some of the case study local authorities, Slough saw mediation as potentially beneficial in improving relationships between parents and their adult children, even where homelessness could not be averted. Some authorities, however, reported that family mediation schemes had failed to live up to expectations (an experience also reported by one of the case study authorities). This was often said to result from the reluctance of both the parties to participate. Host households, in particular, were reported as sometimes unwilling to contemplate any outcome short of separate rehousing.

Evaluation of monitoring approaches

5.48 It is clearly appropriate that local authorities take a keen interest in monitoring ongoing changes in the numbers of households accepted as homeless as a result of specific 'immediate reasons' (e.g. family/friend exclusions). In the research team's view, however, it is also vital that specific homelessness prevention activities (such as family mediation) are monitored directly so that positive outcomes can be evidenced unambiguously rather than simply implied from changes in 'headline figures'. Hence, we would commend the kind of performance indicators and targets as shown in Table 5.1 and the breakdown of intervention outcomes set out in Table 5.3. Some approaches also made what we would see as a useful distinction between 'engagement rates' and 'positive outcome' rates. The specific focus on the former enabled the Council to monitor the impact of procedural changes designed to encourage applicants' uptake of mediation assistance.

5.49 The absence of measures assessing longer term sustainability is a common shortcoming among family mediation performance monitoring approaches. It is all very well to record that a mediator-brokered family reconciliation helps to enable a young person to return home in the short term. It might be that few such reconciliations last beyond a matter of days or weeks. Ideally, family mediation intervention should be classed as a form of 'housing advice' for the purposes of BV213 (see Chapter 2 paras 2.51-2.55) so that it becomes standard practice to estimate the number of such interventions which result in a solution durable for at least six months. This should not, however, be read as implying acceptance of mediation as a satisfactory alternative to undertaking out a formal assessment where there is reason to believe that the young person is homeless or threatened with homelessness.

5.50 The current diversity of monitoring frameworks in operation hampers any assessment of the relative effectiveness of different approaches to family mediation. It is to be hoped that progress towards standardisation will facilitate such judgements in any future research on the issue.

Service user perspectives

5.51 Despite the potential value of client feedback in monitoring service effectiveness, systematic evaluation of client views by mediation service providers appeared to be the exception rather than the norm among the case studies. Such monitoring is important to supplement service providers' views of what works and to identify mismatches between services delivered and clients' needs or expectations.

5.52 An evaluation carried out by one case study local authority had found service users to be generally very positive about the mediation service: 25 respondents reported that they had found mediation 'very helpful', with 33 assessing it as 'helpful', two

'not very helpful' and none reporting that it was 'not at all helpful'. Direct quotes from mediation service clients in this same authority illustrated that although some had felt nervous or apprehensive initially, the mediation process had been helpful in enabling them to talk through their difficulties and find a way forward:

'I felt quite relieved'

'I feel like I can sort everything out with my family'

'I feel like I can sort out problems at home a bit better by myself and know that if I can't they can help me with the problem'

5.53 However, not all service users had such positive impressions of mediation. One former homeless applicant interviewed for this research reported having been referred to mediation by the authority whilst, at the same time, being required by them to negotiate 28 days notice from her father (see para 5.25). This advice was repeated by the mediator. However, given the breakdown in the father-daughter relationship which had already occurred, the interviewee saw this stipulation as unreasonable and inappropriate. The respondent understood that failing to negotiate a 28-day notice would mean the termination of her homelessness application, and therefore, saw no point in attending any further mediation sessions, effectively dropping out of the process. She subsequently went on to stay with friends, an arrangement which had continued for six months, up to the point of interview.

5.54 While it would, be unwise to accord undue weight to the opinions and reported experiences of a single individual, the experience of this service user raises some questions as to whether the requirement to negotiate an extension of 28 days (if implemented in an inflexible way) is constructive in helping young people resolve their family relationship problems or successfully prevent homelessness.

5.55 In addition to systematic analysis of clients' views, the development of mediation services would benefit from analysis of the views of those referred for appointments but who fail to engage with the service in order to consider means of encouraging the uptake of mediation services. This should include both young people threatened with homelessness and their host householders.

Cost effectiveness

Authority A

5.56 Costs incurred in running case study authority A's mediation scheme during the financial year 2004-05 totalled £15,500 (paid to an external agency as the service provider). In that year fifty 16-17 year olds were referred to mediation. As shown in Table 5.4 below, mediation was recorded as 'successful' in relation to 24

individuals, almost half the total caseload. The 10 individuals who 'found accommodation with family support' may also have benefited to some extent from mediation. However, as a precaution, these individuals were not included in the calculations since it is not certain that the specific objective of the service – family reconciliation – was achieved.

5.57 Management of the scheme was minimal although service users were usually accompanied to the first mediation session. This represented one hour of housing staff's time per visit. Based on the hourly rate of the member of staff involved this amounted to £1,000 for the year including overheads, giving a total annual cost of £16,500 (in-house staff time plus contractor agency fee). Hence, the average cost of providing mediation was £330 (i.e. £16,500 for 50 interventions - see Table 5.5).

5.58 All the participants were under 18 years of age. In the absence of the scheme, except for those deemed intentionally homeless, these young people would have been owed a full homelessness duty, and would probably have spent an average stay of six weeks in Bed & Breakfast accommodation before moving somewhere settled. At the time of this research, Bed & Breakfast accommodation for a single person in Authority A cost £140-£182 per week[22]. For the purposes of the calculation a mid-point of £160 was used, thus short term accommodation costs were taken as £960 (6 x £160). This represents the very minimum likely public cost if mediation is unsuccessful – for young people who become homeless and move on to independent accommodation, it is reasonable to assume that housing costs for a proportion of them would be met through public expenditure.

Table 5.4: Authority A Family Mediation Service Outcomes, 2004-05	
Returned home	24
Found own accommodation with family support	10
Found not to be homeless	6
Found to be intentionally homeless	5
Required a full housing duty	4
Ongoing	1
Total	**50**

Source: LA Case study 'A'

[22] Here and elsewhere in the report it has been assumed that all the households concerned will have been eligible for full Housing Benefit because this is typically the position. It is, however, though acknowledged that this may not be true in every single case.

5.59 This figure is derived as follows: in the absence of the mediation service it is assumed that each of the 50 cases would result in the Council incurring £960 in temporary accommodation expenditure – an annual total of £48,000. If, thanks to mediation, 34 of these households are helped to avoid homelessness the Council's temporary accommodation bill will be only £15,360 (£960 x 16). The gross saving therefore totals £32,640. Dividing this across the 50 cases results in an average saving per case of £653.

Table 5.5: Summary of Family Mediation Costs and Savings (£)

	Average costs per case	Costs per prevention	Accomm-odation cost savings	Savings per prevention	Average savings
Authority A	330	485	960	960	653
Authority B	146[1]	*	10,400	10,400	*
Authority C	350	438	1,600	1,600	1,255

* unknown

[1] based on excluding those who were referred to Authority B's rent deposit-type scheme

Note: categories more fully explained in Annex 4 para A4.31

5.60 As Table 5.5 notes, with average savings of £653 and average costs of £330, the service is a cost effective means of supporting young people assuming solutions are sustainable over a year.

Authority B

5.61 In 2004-05 Authority B's mediation service cost £20,000 per annum. This excluded in-house staff time because, as noted above (see para 5.19) mediation was effectively part of the homelessness assessment process and therefore did not represent an extra cost to the authority.

5.62 The target client group was young people threatened with exclusion from the homes of family, relatives or friends (although not formally limited to young people). According to the council some 80-90 per cent of the households dealt with by the scheme would have been statutory homeless and in priority need for housing if assessed under the legislation.

5.63 The housing outcomes of the mediation service cannot be seen in isolation – 173 mediation referrals between 1 April 2003 and 31 December 2004 (56%) accepted an 'alternative' housing option to the statutory homeless route (row (c) of Table

5.2). These represent 56 per cent of all 310 referrals during this period where the case had been concluded at the time the figures were compiled (row (h) – row (f)). For most, the option was likely to involve a private tenancy via Authority B's rent deposit-type scheme. The cost effectiveness of that scheme is considered separately (see Chapter 4) and it is important not to double count; hence, the approach followed here.

5.64 Besides the 56 per cent of the 2003-04 to 2004-05 mediation referrals who accepted an 'alternative housing option' (see above), 23 (7%) of households in this cohort were formally accepted as statutory homeless (see Table 5.2). Sixty seven (22%) were deemed not to be homeless while a further 37 (12%) did not contact the homelessness service following mediation.

5.65 In one sense the mediation service as operated in Authority B was a filter for the Council's rent deposit-type scheme (although it was also possible to access tenancies with rent deposit-type assistance in other ways). Households who were directed to the rent deposit-type scheme were discounted in the cost effectiveness calculations although there is an argument that the two should be assessed together. Ignoring mediation referrals who subsequently accessed accommodation via the rent deposit-type scheme the savings due to mediation seem to relate to the 12 per cent of 'decided cases' who lose contact with the local authority following mediation and find their own solution (row (e) in Table 5.2).

5.66 If 85 per cent of these would otherwise have been deemed homeless and in priority need then statutory homelessness will have been prevented for 31 households (i.e. 85% of 37 who 'found their own solution'). The annual rent payable for a one bedroom flat in Authority B was £7,280[23]. The annual saving was calculated as therefore, approximately £225,680 (i.e. £7,280 x 31). Additional savings accrue from avoiding the need to pay management fees for accommodation leased from private sector landlords as discussed in para 4.53 (£60 per week x 52 = £3,120 p.a.). In total, therefore, this particular saving would amount to £96,720 (i.e. £3,120 x 31) Adding this to the saving on rents sums to a gross saving of £322,400 (£225,680 + £96,720).

5.67 However, these calculations assume that the 31 households referred to in the previous para have not moved or are continuing to live in rented accommodation on housing benefit or have returned to their parental home. Thus these households find a sustainable solution for at least 12 months (rather than re-presenting to the authority as homeless). The local authority's records made available to the research team were insufficient to confirm that this was, in fact, so in all these cases.

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[23] The maximum annual market rents for properties for Housing Benefit purposes in Authority B in 2004-05 were of the following order – studio £5,980, 1 bedroom flat £7,280, 2 bedroom flat £8,840 and house £10,400.

5.68 Despite the absence of sufficient statistical evidence on the counterfactual to answer this question, it would require only two young people to return 'permanently' home annually to make the service cost effective. This is because whilst total cost of the service was only £20,000 p.a., the savings from each case of homelessness prevented through mediation for at least 12 months were £10,400 (£7,280 + £3,120). It is acknowledged that a small proportion of 'family/friend exclusion' cases accepted as homeless will not be eligible for full Housing Benefit – see footnote to para 5.58. Nevertheless, the unit savings realisable here balanced against the costs of the service are such that it remains clear that only a very small number of 'successful interventions' are required in order to fully offset the costs of service provision.

Authority C

5.69 The mediation service employed two staff at approximately £19,000 per annum each. Including overhead costs this represents a cost of the order of £57,000 for the front line service. There was also a manager who spends 25 per cent of his/her time on the project. This suggested an indicative annual running cost of £70,000. There were also initial set up costs of £3,650, including training costs.

5.70 People who are offered this scheme have been assessed as potentially homeless and in priority need at their initial reception in the housing department. Households take an average 3.5 weeks to be formally assessed. At the end of this period if the decision is that they are not in priority need or are intentionally homeless then they are accommodated for a limited period – usually four weeks[24]. If it is deemed that the household is owed a full homelessness duty, in the case of single people it was reported that they normally spend a further 5-6 weeks in temporary accommodation before moving into settled accommodation. With the cost of bed and breakfast at £190 per week this represents an average cost of approximately £1,600.

5.71 In the three months, July – September 2004, 125 single people were referred to the service but only 51 engaged with it. The distribution of service user outcomes is shown in Table 5.3 above.

5.72 Of those who engaged with the service there was an 82 per cent success rate. Over this quarter, the team prevented 40 clients from having to use temporary accommodation. Instead, the person stayed either permanently or temporarily with friends or relatives while his/her case was assessed. Over a year this suggests 160 participants who otherwise would have been in temporary accommodation, equivalent to a total saving of £256,000 compared to annual running costs of £70,000. In individual terms the scheme cost £438 per person returning home following mediation compared with a cost of £1,600 for placing them in temporary accommodation. Overall, the average cost was £350 per person relative to an average saving of £1,255 (see Table 5.5).

[24] The courts have made clear that while local authorities can have a policy of accommodating for 28-days, this policy must be flexibly applied

5.73 The scheme was, therefore, highly cost effective over a one year period, assuming that homelessness prevention is sustainable.

What works?

Mediation strengths

5.74 Generally, the strengths of mediation for young people are perceived by many practitioners to be those associated with mediation services more broadly; namely, that it is non-judgemental, impartial and empowering for clients. For instance, one mediation interviewee commented that she saw the service as being informed by a 'visionary approach and the compassionate view'.

5.75 Other strengths identified included mediation's role in 'building bridges' between young people and their parents, where relationships were either fraught or had broken down. Mediation was seen as having the potential to pave the way for a young person to return home without 'losing face' and to ensure that their needs were taken seriously by host householders. Even where a young person is unable to remain or return to the family home, an improvement in their relationship with their family is viewed positively as a means of reducing the vulnerability of the young person to homelessness in the future.

5.76 As noted above, the three case study authorities that adopted an 'influencing and educational role' (as opposed to a 'pure mediation' approach) argued that this was essential (see para 5.30). Against this, it is useful to consider Lemos's cautionary note that mediation should not be viewed as primarily aimed at reducing the demand for social housing from homeless people, but rather as a means of strengthening social networks which can increase resilience against homelessness and enhance well-being, quality of life and social capital (Lemos, 2001).

Referral processes

5.77 The mediation team in one authority believed that service take-up was improved by making the arrangement through face-to-face contact with the young person rather than by phone or letter. Other authorities stressed the importance of making mediation referrals at the earliest opportunity (rather than after, for example, the client has been interviewed by a homelessness officer) to improve the likelihood of the service being taken up.

5.78 A number of authorities signed up to achieve ODPM (now Communities and Local Government) Positive Outcomes on homelessness (see para 1.9) had made changes to existing mediation practice, including more intensive early casework. For

example, one local authority had changed its procedures so that cases potentially suitable for family mediation were assessed by the Housing Advice Centre rather than the Homeless Persons Unit, thus enabling the possibility of mediation being raised in the initial stages of contact. This was found to be effective in countering the tendency for host households to 'build up expectations' once a homelessness application had been made.

Nominee suitability

5.79 One case study local authority stressed that mediation was most effective in cases where the risk of homelessness was due to routine teenage/parent arguments and tensions and with potential exclusions where homelessness has been 'contrived', perhaps due to a lack of perceived housing options. According to this same authority, mediation was least likely to be effective for applicants leading chaotic lives (e.g. involving drug abuse) or people with a history of youth offending and who have only had intermittent contact with their family. It was also argued that the potential effectiveness of mediation where applicants have been staying with relatives and friends for a short time and are seeking to be reconciled with parents, or where relatives and friends are given information on how long the applicant has to wait for an alternative housing option.

'Compulsory' or voluntary engagement?

5.80 As noted above, in at least one case study authority, procedures incorporated a 'default expectation' that young people would be expected to participate in mediation (as opposed to a referral being made only upon request). The Council saw this as likely to improve service uptake. Endorsing the view that young people need encouragement to take part in mediation services, another case study authority reported that the initial low rate of referrals increased when the emphasis was changed from 'asking people if mediation would be helpful' to 'asking people if they would like to meet with the mediation officer'.

5.81 In two other case study local authorities, entirely voluntary engagement with mediation was believed fundamental to service effectiveness. A similar view is expounded by other agencies (e.g. Shelter, 2004). This is consistent with elements of mediation as traditionally practiced (and set out in para 5.8), including the willingness of the parties to engage and a safe atmosphere for discussion.

5.82 The limited scale of the research made it impossible to collect sufficient evidence to support a clear-cut judgement on whether an element of compulsion negates mediation as a concept. What is, however, clear is that such approaches demand sensitive implementation in terms of judging whether pressing an applicant to return to their former home could place them at any risk of violence or abuse. The

other issue at stake is whether exerting pressure on young people and host-householders to attend mediation is productive in preventing homelessness in the short and longer term.

Other issues

5.83 Training for mediation officers to enable them to more fully understand the homelessness process was also identified as crucial by one case study local authority mediation team. Likewise, the team emphasized the importance of homelessness officers fully understanding the mediation process in order to enable greater continuity and experience of a 'seamless service' for clients. One proposal involved a joint training programme to be developed between housing and mediation staff. Networking with mediators working in other areas was also identified as useful in sharing information on good practice.

5.84 It is clear there are a variety of family mediation models, and that what is advocated as 'good practice' by local authorities and mediation service varies. Only through further research – e.g. involving service user surveys and common performance recording frameworks – could any definitive judgement be made as to the relative merits of the different approaches currently in operation. In this context, it is worth noting that the authority whose procedures most clearly embodied the 'default expectation' model acknowledged that its 'mediation' service diverged from some of the 'standard principles' of mediation and recognises that re-naming might, therefore, be appropriate.

Chapter summary

5.85 Family mediation schemes are one of the most commonly identified responses envisaged in local authority homelessness strategies to reduce or prevent youth homelessness by eviction from the parental home. However, there are important distinctions between mediation schemes operated in different authorities in terms of (a) the extent to which engagement with the process is presented as voluntary or compulsory, and (b) whether the service is independent of the homelessness assessment process or integral to it. To this extent, schemes differed in terms of their legal compliance (see para 5.11). In authorities where there is a 'default expectation' that young people claiming 'family/friend exclusion' will participate in mediation there is clearly a need for sensitive implementation in terms of the essentially subjective judgement on whether pressing an applicant to return to their former home could place them at any risk of violence or abuse.

5.86 Monitoring evidence from case study local authorities suggests that family mediation can be highly effective in helping to reconcile young adults with their parents or other host householders. This will certainly have helped authorities reduce homelessness acceptances involving 'family/friend exclusions' in the short term, at least. At the same time, however, few authorities appear to monitor whether mediation-assisted family reconciliations are sustained in the medium or longer term. Questions are also raised by the monitoring practices of some authorities which focus exclusively on whether an 'assisted household' was subsequently accepted as homeless. The absence of a subsequent homelessness application should not be assumed as necessarily demonstrating the effectiveness of mediation in reconciling family members in that instance.

5.87 At least initially, some mediation schemes have fallen short of aspirations – e.g. where a high proportion of mediation referrals 'fail' due to the refusal of one or other party to participate. In certain instances authorities have modified their procedures to counter such problems – e.g. by prioritising early referrals, by dropping requirements for both parties to participate, or making engagement with mediation a 'default expectation' at least for the young person concerned.

5.88 There is scope for further research which closely examines the relationship between access to, and use of, mediation services and reduction in homelessness acceptances among young people. A central component of this research should be the perspectives of young people, including service users as well as those who choose not to engage in the service. This should include young people from ethnic minority communities, who – on the basis of case study evidence – may be currently under-represented among family mediation service users.

5.89 Subject to the usual reservations about the appropriate selection of referrals and the sustainability of 'return home' solutions, all three mediation services examined here in detail appear highly cost-effective. That is, their operating costs are probably well below the consequent savings in relation to temporary accommodation expenditure.

Chapter 6

Domestic Violence Support

Introduction

6.1 Domestic violence is defined by the Housing Act 1996 as:

> *'violence from a person with whom he is associated, or threats of violence from such a person which are likely to be carried out'.*

Domestic violence is not just physical violence or the threat of physical violence, but includes any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between persons who are or have been intimate partners, family members, or members of the same household, regardless of gender or sexuality.

6.2 Although such abuse is perpetrated against men as well as against women, evidence shows that women are more likely to suffer repeat victimisation, to suffer physical injury and emotional harm as a result of domestic violence, and to report domestic violence to external agencies. Women victims are also more likely to have responsibility for dependent children.

6.3 Relationship breakdown was the main reason for loss of last settled home for 20 per cent of households accepted as homeless and in priority need in 2004-05. Of these cases, two thirds (13% of all homelessness acceptances) involved violence.

6.4 It would however, be misleading to see official statistics relating to 'reason for loss of settled home' as an all-encompassing measure of the degree to which domestic violence plays a role in causing homelessness. It is likely that many women losing their homes due to domestic violence do not present immediately to homelessness units, but may seek shelter with relatives and friends in the first instance, only to make homelessness applications later. Victims may also refer themselves directly to refuge provision from where, instead of making a homelessness application, they may apply directly to a council housing register (or 'waiting list').

6.5 Given that domestic violence is a significant 'main cause of homelessness', it is perhaps to be expected that – as shown by the recent evaluation of local authority homelessness strategies – some 220 strategies (62% of the total) contained

proposals on addressing homelessness due to domestic violence (HQNS, 2004). Consistent with this, domestic violence victim support was cited as a grant-assisted service by a large proportion of authorities signed up to achieving 'Positive Outcomes on Homelessness' (see para 1.9 and ODPM (2003a)).

6.6 In many cases, this was through closer work with local domestic violence fora. The important role played by such fora in facilitating a coordinated and strategic approach to addressing domestic violence. Another key homelessness prevention activity relevant to victims of domestic violence is the provision of support and advice to help victims remain in their own homes through the setting up of sanctuary schemes which involve the provision of security measures and adaptations to a victim's home to enable them to remain there safely provided the perpetrator has been excluded. Victims of domestic violence may also be assisted in making planned moves from their homes, where this is more appropriate, and provided with resettlement support to help prevent repeat homelessness.

6.7 This chapter draws on limited existing literature, on two case studies of services provided or commissioned by local authorities to prevent homelessness among victims of domestic violence - a sanctuary scheme and a crisis support service -   and on an analysis of monitoring returns from local authorities signed up to achieve 'Positive Outcomes on Homelessness' (ODPM, 2003a). It was also informed by a focus group discussion involving three women made homeless due to domestic violence in one of the local authorities.

6.8. The research fieldwork also encompassed 'homelessness prevention' activity in a third local authority where the service focused on former victims of domestic violence. In this instance, however, the activities involved tenancy sustainment work with women rehoused following homelessness. Hence they were geared towards helping women retain a 'move-on' tenancy rather than *preventing* homelessness in the first place. For this reason the project concerned is discussed in Chapter 8 as a 'specialist application' of a tenancy sustainment service.

Domestic violence and homelessness

6.9 In addition to summarising the findings of previous research, this section is informed by research team interviews with three women who had previously been homeless due to domestic violence.

6.10 Perhaps partly because of the sensitivities of interviewing the client group involved, the experiences of women made homeless due to domestic violence remains relatively un-researched (Jones, 1998). However, research findings on the lack of awareness of homelessness services among women in general are instructive,

highlighting barriers to accessing services and the difficulty of providing women with support prior to them becoming homeless (Jones, 1998).

6.11 Women experiencing domestic violence may be restricted in their movements, and physically or socially isolated, which can make accessing services difficult. Fear of aggravating a violent partner might be a potent factor discouraging a woman from seeking help. A woman may also be reluctant to leave her home because of the realisation that any subsequent accommodation might need to be located at some distance from her former home to reduce the risk of attack from a former partner, and that this might weaken or sever other social links.

6.12 Often, the need to leave the home may be of an 'emergency' nature, perhaps following a severe incident or threat of violence. This may well mean that homelessness is already a reality before a woman's initial contact with the local authority or any other agency. Clearly, such a scenario presents a challenge for 'homelessness prevention' in relation to this client group. It suggests that it is important for local authorities to ensure that information about housing options for those experiencing domestic violence is widely available and appropriately targeted.

6.13 Research by Levison and Kenny (2002) highlighted that access to available support was not always straightforward for victims of domestic violence. Many of those concerned did not receive appropriate support, or at least did not receive it soon enough. This was confirmed by women who had been made homeless due to domestic violence who were interviewed for this study, who referred to the difficulty of accessing support once they had left their abusive partner and the lack of a 'one stop' service. The pressure that women experienced in the absence of effective coordinated supported was a recurrent theme: '*It was very overwhelming. Where do I go? Who do I see?*' Words used to describe the contact with agencies after leaving their abusive partner were 'demoralising', and 'emotionally draining'. It was felt that there was some stigma associated with having experienced domestic violence and that they had not been taken seriously and treated with respect: '*Your battles are just beginning'; 'You feel penalised for leaving your partner'*. It was not clear whether such comments specifically referred to local authority homelessness staff or applied more generally to contacts with a range of agencies.

6.14 Households who become homeless due to domestic violence typically need access to short term safe accommodation before moving on to settled housing. These households are often in a vulnerable position and, in addition to their housing needs, require emotional support and the support of a range of agencies, including advice agencies, solicitors and the police. Many will require financial support, including assistance with claiming benefits.

6.15 Research evidence demonstrates that outreach and resettlement support can play an important role in preventing recurrent homelessness for this client group (Jones, 1998). This can take the form of financial and legal advice, support with claiming welfare benefits and help with accessing educational courses or entry into employment.

Domestic violence and homelessness prevention

6.16 As indicated above, homelessness prevention in relation to domestic violence presents a challenge due to the context within which victims of domestic violence access advice and support.

6.17 Many homelessness strategies saw support for women escaping domestic violence being achieved through closer work with local domestic violence fora (HQNS, 2004). Such groupings bring together agencies involved in assisting victims of such abuse in the locality. This is consistent with recognised good practice in supporting victims of domestic violence through a coordinated multi-agency approach. Specific proposals detailed in strategies included the use of alarms for increased security for women at risk of violence from outside the home as well as measures to counter repeat homelessness amongst this group (HQNS, 2004).

6.18 Analysis of returns from local authorities signing up to achieve 'Positive Outcomes' on homelessness showed that support provided for victims of domestic violence commonly involved the provision of advice (e.g. on legal rights, welfare benefits etc). In Bury MBC, for example, Women's Aid was funded to provide outreach support to domestic violence victims in an effort to enable them to remain in their own home. Slough BC had followed the example of Harrow and Ealing LBC in developing a 'sanctuary' scheme where a package of security improvements was offered to women facing possible homelessness due to fear of violence from outside the home (see below).

6.19 In 2005-06, a performance indicator BV225 was introduced to measure local authority action to tackle domestic violence more systematically. This identified a number of measures which were relevant to homelessness prevention, including the provision of a directory of local support services, the development of a multi-agency strategy to tackle domestic violence, and the provision of a 'sanctuary' type scheme, where measures are taken to enable the victim to remain safely in the home, with the exclusion of the perpetrator. A survey of local authorities in 2005 about their homelessness prevention activities identified that 36 per cent were operating a sanctuary scheme for households at risk of domestic violence (ODPM, 2005c).

The nature of support provided

6.20. The two schemes examined in this chapter differed in the support they offered to prevent homelessness among women facing domestic violence:

- Sanctuary Project, Harrow LBC; and
- Crisis support, Nextlink, Bristol.

6.21 Harrow's Sanctuary Project originated in 1996 when the Crime Reduction Unit (CRU) from Harrow Police station developed a scheme to assist women threatened with violence from outside the home (typically from a former partner). This involved creating a 'safe room' in the occupiers' home, secure against the perpetrator. Initially, the scheme's limited resources meant that only a minority of people potentially eligible for such help could benefit. In 2002, prompted by monitoring evidence that a significant proportion of women who had suffered from domestic violence wanted to remain in their own home, the Crime Reduction Unit, in partnership with Harrow Council officially launched the Sanctuary project as a joint police/Local Authority venture. The main aim of the project was to enable clients at risk of homelessness due to violence from outside the home to remain safely in their property if this was their preference - either on a settled basis or until a planned move to alternative accommodation could be made – and to start to rebuild their lives.

6.22 Nextlink, an offshoot of an established voluntary agency, Missing Link, had been commissioned by Bristol City Council to offer an intensive crisis support service for women and children experiencing domestic violence who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in Bristol. The service was commissioned and funded by Bristol City Council. Nextlink ran a constellation of complementary services, many of which were directly or indirectly related to homelessness prevention:

- Crisis Support, the service most directly related to the homelessness prevention agenda, and which included possible referral to the police-run sanctuary provision (similar to Harrow's Sanctuary scheme);
- Four Safe Houses (owned by Bristol Churches Housing Association) that accommodated up to 21 families forced to leave their homes due to domestic violence;
- Resettlement and tenancy support for families when rehoused from safe houses, and to those whose tenancy was at risk due to domestic violence.

6.23 Referrals to the two projects came from a variety of related agencies, including the police, women's refuges, social services, housing officers and child protection agencies.

6.24 The main feature of Harrow's Sanctuary project was the creation of secure 'sanctuary rooms' in the homes of women facing homelessness due to violence from a perpetrator not living in the home. Every 'sanctuary' was tailored to accommodate the needs and circumstances of the individuals involved, but generally, security measures fell into the following three categories:

- 'Sanctuary': where a door to a main room was replaced with a solid core door and reversed to open outwards. Two mortise bolts were fitted to the inside of the door and this provided a safe room for 'victims of threatened domestic violence' to call and wait for the arrival of the police;
- 'Sanctuary Plus', which had all the elements of the above plus additional security features such as grilles on the windows; and
- 'Sanctuary Minus', which did not include a 'safe room' but instead included a number of other security options such as locks on windows and/or changing the front door lock.

Rooms in homes made secure under sanctuary schemes may also be fitted with 'panic buttons' or other means of alerting local police to the need for immediate attendance should the occupier face external threat.

6.25 Harrow's Sanctuary Project relied on close working relationships with the Council's partner agencies. A senior Council officer was responsible for liaison with the police and related agencies involved in the scheme, with arrangements operating very much based on trust and knowledge of the partners involved. According to the Police, the main barriers to achieving the scheme's objectives had been (a) the difficulty of convincing relevant agencies to sign up at the outset, and (b) the reluctance of some private landlords to allow extra security measures to be fitted to their properties, although this was at no cost to themselves.

6.26 Take up of the service was reported to have spanned all sections of the community, including women from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Once the sanctuary had been installed, follow-up support was generally provided by one of the women's groups. At the time of the research, none of the sanctuaries had been compromised.

6.27 Under Nextlink's Crisis Response service, all referrals were initially assessed as to whether the woman needed help with a planned move, or a referral to the police-run 'sanctuary' scheme to install better security to protect her from a violent perpetrator living outside the property (a model similar to that operated in Harrow). The range of assistance offered through the service included:

- Referral to police sanctuary scheme;

- Helping women obtain occupancy orders or non-molestation orders from the county court. This entailed working closely with specialist solicitors funded via legal aid. Such orders could be obtained very quickly, though it was reported that they were often breached;

- Helping women needing a move to find accommodation, including provision of travel warrants, benefits and practical assistance;

- Referral to safe house accommodation within Bristol; and

- Fast-track referral to other appropriate services.

6.28 Crisis Response services were provided for up to four weeks following initial referral, after which the family would be considered for possible further referral to Nextlink's resettlement service to ensure ongoing support.

6.29 Placements in safe houses were reported to last an average of three months, though this could extend for up to six months. This was attributed mainly to the reduced availability of social rented housing which was usually the longer-term outcome for Nextlink clients unable to remain in their former homes. Resettlement support was offered to families being rehoused, and was gradually withdrawn over a period of six months.

6.30 Nextlink also provided a specific black women's worker and safe house, and support for children upon resettlement, for example helping them to find hobbies, youth clubs, and to settle into a new school.

6.31 Current drug users were classed as ineligible for Nextlink services because they were seen as requiring more specialist provision.

Legal considerations

6.32 As noted in Chapter 2 (see para 2.41) homelessness caselaw post-dating this research has emphasized a local authority's duty to carry out a homelessness assessment (enquiries) where it has reason to believe that the applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. This is likely to be the case in respect of women being referred to sanctuary schemes and therefore enquiries ought to be carried out. In these circumstances, the sanctuary scheme enabling them to return home would be the discharge of the local authority's duty to an applicant found to be homeless. Or, if such an outcome is arranged before the completion of enquiries, the authority could decide that the applicant is 'not homeless'. This line of argument raises questions about the definition and scope of 'homelessness prevention': outcomes involving a discharge of full rehousing duty, might perhaps be more accurately described as homelessness resolution rather than prevention.

Assessing service effectiveness

Performance management and monitoring

6.33 As Table 6.1 illustrates, Harrow Council monitored the number of sanctuaries that had been installed, the number of homelessness acceptances and the expenditure incurred. This indicated an increasing number of sanctuaries and a decreasing number of homelessness acceptances where domestic violence was recorded as the main immediate reason for the loss of the applicant's home.

6.34 It seems highly likely that a large element of Harrow's reported reduction in homelessness acceptances due to domestic violence stems from sanctuary activity, though other factors (including other forms of homelessness prevention such as Finders Fee payments – see Chapter 4) may have contributed. It is, however, highly notable that, according to the Council, women who had had a sanctuary installed had never been known to make a subsequent homelessness application.

Table 6.1: Sanctuary Activity in Harrow LBC, 2002-03 – 2004-05

Year	Number of sanctuaries installed	Number of homelessness acceptances due to domestic violence	Sanctuary security works expenditure (£)
2002-03 (annualised estimate)*	64	98	25,478
2003-04	66	43	51,221
2004-05 (estimated)**	85	17	98,220

* based on activity in Q3 and Q4 **based on activity in Q1, Q2 and Q3.

Source: Harrow LBC

6.35 Bristol City Council's Crisis Response service specification listed a number of service standards, workload and service output measures. These included the requirement that each outreach worker maintain a rolling caseload of five to ten clients at any one time, with the expectation that this would add up to a total annual throughput of up to 90 clients per year. In practice, the service was reported by Nextlink to have assisted 107 families in 2003-04. The agency was expected to ensure that a client needing extra security to 'stay put' was referred to and interviewed by a Police Domestic Violence officer, with initial security measures being put in place, all within twelve hours of making contact.

6.36 The contract required Nextlink to maintain detailed case records demonstrating:

- Whether clients referred were enabled to remain in their existing accommodation
- Clients' status in relation to the homelessness legislation (meaning that Nextlink was obliged to assess whether the household would potentially be owed the main homelessness duty[25])
- Whether Nextlink intervention prevented the need for the client to make a homelessness application to the Council[26].

6.37 Nextlink's monitoring database showed that during 2003-04, agency intervention prevented the need for Bed & Breakfast placements for 64 per cent of all Crisis Response referrals. In practice, only a relatively small proportion of clients (12%) were referred to the police for the installation of additional security, with most being helped in other ways; for example, 23 per cent took out legal remedies.

Service user perspectives

6.38 Both of the case study organisations had elicited service user views through surveys, though securing participation was sometimes challenging. A Harrow survey of sanctuary service users found that most of the 19 respondents reported high levels of satisfaction, feeling safer in their homes:

> 'I think that having the Sanctuary and panic alarm stopped my ex-husband coming near my home'.

> 'I was very satisfied with the information and service that was provided by both the police and locksmith. I can honestly say that I don't think they could have done anything more to assist me in my situation. The security measures installed have made me feel extremely safe since the incident occurred'.

At the same time, however, one of the 19 participants would have preferred to move to another property and reported that she had felt 'imprisoned'.

6.39 Similarly, a feedback questionnaire issued to all families accommodated in safe houses by Nextlink in 2003-04 (with a response rate of 68%) revealed high satisfaction rates:

- Standard of accommodation – 93%
- Security – 100%
- Support offered at outset – 93%
- Ongoing emotional support – 88%

[25] This was purely to inform Bristol City Council's assessment of project cost-effectiveness rather than having any operational purpose – i.e. in terms of materially affecting a household's entitlement.

[26] Although, as subsequent caselaw has determined (see para 2.41), the statutory assessment process should arguably proceed in tandem with the intervention since it is likely that the individual is at least 'threatened with homelessness' at the point she is initially referred to the Nextlink service.

Assessment of performance monitoring framework

6.40 Service monitoring practice as exemplified by the Bristol and Harrow projects would seem to be fairly well-developed. In the research team's view the strengths of one or other of the frameworks included the monitoring of:

- the flow of referrals to the services over time;
- the breakdown of actions taken on referred cases;
- cases where homelessness was prevented in relation to whether the household might otherwise have been accepted as being owed a main homelessness duty (for cost-effectiveness evaluation purposes);
- the sustainment of solutions (at least in terms of whether women provided with sanctuary facilities made a subsequent homelessness application); and
- service user satisfaction.

Cost-effectiveness assessment

6.41 The following section focuses on the Harrow sanctuary scheme, which involves adaptations to the home to protect the householder from external threat of violence. Harrow Council expenditure on the scheme in the first nine months of 2004-05 was £73,665 for 64 installations – or £1,150 per installation. In addition, police labour costs amounted to approximately £90 including national insurance and overheads, giving a total gross scheme cost of £79,425. Each referral in the first nine months of 2004-05 therefore cost approximately £1,241 in total.

6.42 As noted above, Harrow reported not having received a single homeless application from a household following sanctuary installation. The Council reports that prior to the scheme 80-90 per cent of these cases would have been accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need and consequently rehoused in social housing (but see para 6.32). Assuming the figure to be 85 per cent the number of 2004-05 installations for households otherwise liable to be 'statutory homeless cases' would have been 54 (64 x 0.85). Hence, the 'cost per prevention' (see para A4.31) would be £1,471 (i.e. £79,425/54).

6.43 Households assessed as homeless as a result of domestic violence were normally accommodated immediately in emergency accommodation – typically Bed & Breakfast accommodation - before moving on to longer term temporary accommodation. An average stay in Bed & Breakfast would have been for 6 weeks at a cost of £235 per week, i.e. £1,410. It was assumed that this would have been followed by a stay in private sector leased accommodation for the remaining 46 weeks of the year until settled housing became available. Based on information from case study local authorities, it is assumed that few of these recipients are social housing tenants at the time they apply to the council for assistance. Hence,

the temporary accommodation costs saved from enabling the woman to stay in her own home rather than spend time in a leased property on a temporary basis equate to the management fee associated with private sector leasing, as discussed in para 3.55. This would have amounted to a further £2,760 for the remainder of the year (i.e. 46 weeks x £60 per week).

6.44 Therefore, *total temporary accommodation costs* likely to arise for each household had they become homeless and required to be rehoused in social housing would have amounted to £4,170 (£1,410 + £2,760). Allowing for the rule of thumb that 85 per cent (rather than 100%) of households referred to sanctuary schemes would otherwise have been accepted as homeless and in priority need, actual savings in temporary accommodation costs per household referred are estimated at £3,545 (85% of £4,170). On this basis it can be concluded that the Harrow sanctuary scheme is highly cost-effective.

6.45 It is also worth noting that this calculation is based on figures for 2004-05. This is significant because the Harrow Council cost of sanctuary provision in 2004-05 (£1,150 per installation) represented a considerable increase from £700 per installation in 2003-04. This was attributed to the introduction of temporary lighting as part of the 'sanctuary package'. However, with temporary lighting being replaced in 2005-06 by the provision of torches it was expected that the average Harrow Council cost would fall back to £700 per installation, meaning that total costs per installation would sum to about £790. This suggests that a cost-effectiveness 'costs versus savings' assessment for 2005-06 would have produced an even more favourable outcome.

Table 6.2: Summary of Domestic Violence Victim Support Costs and Savings (£)

	Average costs per case	Costs per prevention	Accomm-odation cost savings	Savings per prevention	Average savings per household assisted
Harrow	1,241	1,471	4,170	4,170	3,545

Note: categories more fully explained in Annex 4, para A4.31.

What works?

6.46 Particularly given the evidence on longer-term sustainability, the creation of sanctuaries on the Harrow model can certainly be seen as an effective means of preventing homelessness. Whilst it is important to recognise that such schemes are relevant only to women facing the threat of violence from outside the home, such schemes are also capable of being highly cost-effective (see above).

6.47 Realising the full potential of sanctuary schemes is dependent on:

- helping to maximise the chances of intervening to prevent homelessness by making known the existence of such schemes to specialist agencies to whom women threatened with having to leave their home due to violence might initially turn;
- effective referral, decision-making and liaison arrangements which enable the rapid installation of security works once a judgement has been made that this is a potentially appropriate action; and
- close liaison arrangements between the local authority (or contractor agency) and the Police.

Chapter summary

6.48 Relationship breakdown was the main reason for loss of last settled home for 20 per cent of households accepted as homeless and in priority need in 2004-05. Of these cases, two thirds (13% of all homelessness acceptances) involved violence. In a proportion of these latter cases the violence will have involved threats from outside the home of a woman consequently seeing no alternative to abandoning her property. Domestic violence victim support is a major strand of homelessness prevention activity as reflected in local authority homelessness strategies.

6.49 The main types of homelessness prevention activities identified in this area include 'sanctuary' schemes to enable women to stay in their own homes, supporting women to make planned moves, crisis intervention services, floating support, and resettlement support.

6.50 While such approaches are relevant only in cases where women face having to leave home due to external threats of violence, there appears to be solid evidence of sanctuary schemes' potential to prevent homelessness. Subject to the usual qualifications about the need to ensure that they are appropriately targeted, such schemes are clearly capable of being highly cost-effective.

Chapter 7

Assisting ex-offenders: prison based housing advice and support initiatives

Introduction

7.1   This chapter focuses on prison-based initiatives established to prevent homelessness involving ex-offenders. The chapter includes an introduction to key messages from the existing research evidence together with an overview of relevant policy and practice developments, demonstrating a broad shift in emphasis towards greater recognition of the importance of accommodation in the reduction of re-offending. This is based on material gathered from a review of existing research and policy documents supplemented by national level key informant interview data (see Annex 3). It then explores three case study initiatives in further detail, to consider the nature of provision and specific issues and lessons emerging from the approaches employed.

7.2   The previous chapters have outlined homelessness prevention initiatives provided or commissioned by local authorities. However, the case study work was extended for this part of the study to include two prison-based homelessness prevention initiatives established by the Prison Service, in addition to one local authority commissioned project. The prison-based case studies were selected in consultation with the Home Office and HM Prison Service together with Communities and Local Government.

Background and context

Messages from existing research

7.3   Although relatively limited, existing research evidence suggests that ex-prisoners face particular housing issues but typically receive only limited support to address these. For example, an early study by Carlisle (1996) found that whilst there was evidence of some good practice within prisons, housing advice to prisoners was generally 'inadequate'. Less than half of prisoners were able to return to their previous home upon release. A number of later studies have provided further evidence of the nature of the housing difficulties experienced by ex-prisoners. These include '*Blocking the Fast Track from Prison to Rough Sleeping*' (Rough Sleepers Unit, 2001), '*Through the Prison Gate*

Joint Thematic Review' (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2001), and Home Office Resettlement Surveys (e.g. Home Office, 2002).

7.4 The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) highlighted strong links between homelessness and offending, citing research that 32 per cent of offenders subject to imprisonment were homeless prior to sentence, in contrast to homelessness in the general population of less than 1 per cent (SEU, 2002: pp 6-7). The report also emphasised the link between employment and accommodation post-release, with evidence suggesting that ex-prisoners with an address on release were three times more likely to have employment than those who were NFA (of no fixed abode), and also pointed to the link between post-release accommodation and access to support services including welfare benefits and GP registration.

7.5 There are a number of key housing difficulties faced by prisoners. Firstly, a period in custody may '*exacerbate the nature of housing difficulties*'. Approximately one third of prisoners lose their home whilst in prison (SEU, 2002), not least due to loss of entitlement to Housing Benefit (i.e. where a tenancy is terminated by the landlord after Housing Benefit payments cease after the statutory 13 weeks – see also para 7.22). There is also evidence that over two-fifths of prisoners lose contact with their family, or experience a breakdown of family relationships when they go into prison (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

7.6 Secondly, ex-prisoners unable to return to a previous home on release often experience difficulties in accessing suitable accommodation – whether in the form of a hostel bed space, or a private or social sector tenancy. Also, even where an initial hostel placement is achieved, obtaining subsequent 'move-on housing' is frequently problematic (Grimshaw, 2002, cited in Home Office 2004c pp 62-63). As shown in the 2002 Home Office Resettlement Survey, only two thirds (67%) of prisoners surveyed had post release accommodation in place three weeks prior to release (Home Office, 2002). Only 18 per cent of survey respondents had received help with arranging accommodation for release. The 2003 Resettlement Survey found that 71 per cent of prisoners were without an address three weeks prior to release (see Home Office 2004c).

7.7 Difficulties in accessing local authority housing that were identified by HM Inspectorates of Prisons (2001) included:

- local authorities assessing homeless ex-prisoners as 'intentionally homeless'; and
- prevention of prisoners from registering on a local authority housing waiting list until post-release on the basis of 'local connection' criteria.

7.8 Specific housing issues are faced by particular sub-groups within the prisoner and ex-prisoner populations. For example, short-term and remand prisoners, who form the majority of prisoners released from prison each year, have been identified as the group which receive the least support but have the greatest need for housing related support (Morgan, 2004). Part of the reason for this is that they have a shorter time period for housing problems to be addressed before release. In addition, the Probation Service is not resourced to work with short-term prisoners who are not subject to compulsory supervision.

7.9 Women prisoners – particularly those with dependent children – are also viewed as having very specific housing requirements. For example, women may face a 'catch 22' situation whereby they must gain appropriate accommodation before they can be considered for regaining parental custody (Carlisle, 1996). Concerns have also been raised regarding the Home Detention Curfew (HDC) scheme. For example, women may give an address which places them in a vulnerable position (e.g. returning to an abusive partner). The potential for homelessness post an HDC period has also been raised, in situations where a householder is only prepared to offer accommodation to the woman for the HDC period (Housing, June 2003).

7.10 Overall, the existing research literature highlights the primary importance of accommodation in resettlement and the reduction of re-offending, and the limited good practice that exists within this field. In particular, the evidence suggests a number of particularly critical periods for prisoners in terms of preventing post-release homelessness, including early action to address housing issues on entering into custody, finding accommodation for release, and post-release support. For example, good practice messages outlined in a recent evaluation of six prison-based projects in Scotland established through the Rough Sleepers Initiative in 2000 highlighted the importance of interviewing prisoners on reception and the provision of ongoing support as required during the period in custody including the pre-release period (Scottish Executive, 2004). The study overall found a clear need for the continued provision of housing advice services within prisons in Scotland, and recommended that these should be provided '*on a consistent basis across Scotland*'.

7.11 Broader *structural barriers* impeding the resettlement of ex-offenders have been identified (HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation, 2001; Rough Sleepers Unit, 2001), with key concerns including:

- lack of consistency of provision or co-ordination of provision at a national level. There is considerable variation across establishments, with limited availability in some prisons;
- limited evaluation resulting in difficulty in assessing the impact of initiatives on prisoners post-release;

- lack of clarity regarding who within the criminal justice system was responsible for housing advice provision, including confusion on the proper role of the probation service; and
- lack of priority attached to addressing housing issues for ex-prisoners.

7.12 Indeed, the good practice found and identified in the SEU report was viewed as being largely '*… the result of individual initiative [rather than]… reflect[ing] a clear or reliable national system. No one would deny that the quality of housing advice [available to prisoners and ex-prisoners] is currently highly variable*' (SEU, 2002).

7.13 Pressures and constraints affecting the Prison Service have also been identified which may impact on the scope and effectiveness of housing advice and support to ex-prisoners. These include the current scale of the prison population (approximately 75,000), together with budgetary pressures which exist. Therefore, '*improving efficiency and value for money*' are key concerns for resettlement work overall (Wrench, 2004).

The policy context

7.14 Since publication of the SEU Reducing Re-offending report in 2002, a number of legislative and policy developments have been put into place or are currently in progress which impact on the broader context of housing advice and support provision for prisoners. One such change was introduced in the Homeless Persons (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002, which extended the 'priority need' categories to include those *vulnerable as a result of having been in custody or on remand*. Other amendments to the Housing Act 1996 made by the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 – SI 2002/2051 impact on ex-prisoners, including provisions which prevent local housing authorities from excluding ex-offenders from applying for social housing and joining the housing waiting list.

7.15 Supporting People, implemented in April 2003, is also of key importance in the provision of housing-related support for ex-offenders. The National Probation Service and local authorities are now engaged in the development of new partnerships for the delivery of housing-related support for ex-offenders in the community (HM Prison Service, 2004b).

7.16 Arising from the SEU report recommendations, the Home Office published its Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan in July 2004 (Home Office 2004a). This took the nine key issues identified in the SEU report and developed corresponding pathways for action. These included an Accommodation Pathway or Strategy, with the recognition that 'appropriate and accessible accommodation is the foundation of successful rehabilitation and management of risk of harm to others' (Home Office, 2004b, p.25).

7.17 The Home Office's Ex-offender Accommodation Strategy proposed actions in the short, medium and longer term in order to improve accommodation outcomes for ex-offenders. The Strategy has two key aims in the longer term, including the establishment of housing advice in all relevant establishments across the prison estate, and the development of a Community Gateway model at the regional level.

7.18 The Community Gateway will develop local arrangements to address housing needs of ex-prisoners and offenders who have received a community sentence. The approach is envisaged as involving the commissioning of services through new regional strategic partnerships tasked with developing Regional Reducing Re-offending Strategies. This represents a change of focus towards regional structures that will have a key role in developing and managing provision for offenders, including post-release accommodation concerns. It is envisaged that, as a result of this approach, the current patchy and inconsistent nature of accommodation provision will become more consistent and structured, based on regionally identified needs and underpinned by the establishment of information sharing protocols.

7.19 In order to support the development of the Accommodation Pathway or Strategy, HM Prison Service developed a range of Key Performance Indicators, Targets and Standards relating to accommodation. This included a Key Performance Target (KPT) for 75 per cent of prisoners to have first night accommodation arranged in time for their release. Another Key Performance Indicator (KPI) introduced in 2005 measures the number of assessments undertaken to determine new prisoners' housing needs when first received into custody. This is accompanied by a Key Performance Standard on the number of tenancies saved or closed, and the number of prisoners referred for further advice.

7.20 Implementation of the Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan will take place within wider structural changes, including the establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which brings prisons and probation together into an integrated offender management system (Dalkin & Padel, 2004).

7.21 Other change to improve the accommodation outcomes for prisoners post release included action by HM Prison Service to flatten the Discharge Grant available to prisoners on release. This change was implemented due to recognition that the previously higher rate Discharge Grant available for prisoners of NFA (no fixed abode) at release created a perverse incentive for prisoners to declare themselves NFA (Dalkin & Padel, 2004). HM Prison Service also established a Prison Service Order for Resettlement (PSO 2300), which requires the accommodation status of prisoners to be recorded during induction.

7.22 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) also introduced a change to Housing Benefit regulations in October 2004. Although the 13 week Housing Benefit rule[27] remains a key barrier to preserving prisoners' tenancies (HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation, 2001), regulations allow Housing Benefit to be paid to prisoners for up to four weeks in order to cover notice periods. This should enable the closure of tenancies without accrual of rent arrears, which otherwise could result not only in the loss of current accommodation but also have the potential to result in an applicant's subsequent exclusion from some social landlords' housing waiting lists. This addressed one particular concern raised in the Joint Thematic Review by HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation (2001).

7.23 A new initiative reported at the time of writing is to involve a 'standardised' 'in-depth housing needs assessment' for all prisoners. The project, to be jointly run by the Probation Service, the Prison Service, Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association, is due to be piloted in South West England in 2006.

Overview of existing provision and emerging good practice

7.24 Associated with the policy developments outlined above, there are a number of practice initiatives supporting the drive towards improving post-release accommodation outcomes for prisoners. This includes a housing assessment tool to assess the housing needs of remand and short-sentence (under one year) prisoners on induction. It is intended that the tool will be introduced across the prison estate, linking to the broader OASys (Offender Assessment System) introduced with NOMS.

7.25 A resource pack, developed by NACRO for the Custody to Work Unit containing guidance on setting up a housing advice centre and providing housing advice services within prison establishments, has been circulated across the prison estate (HM Prison Service, 2004a, 2004b). NACRO has also developed a range of accommodation-related materials aimed at both those working with prisoners and at prisoners themselves, including a video on housing options.

7.26 In addition, NACRO is funded by the Custody to Work Unit to deliver training for staff as well as a small number of prisoners. The housing and employment advice training is accredited with City and Guilds leading to the Resettlement Advisers award, in recognition of the need for a dedicated housing advice qualification and for '… a more focused qualification that is appropriate and achievable with the aim of professionalising the advice and support services delivered in establishments' (HM Prison Services, 2004b). Shelter is another key training provider regarding housing related advice for both staff and prisoners.

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[27] Under DWP rules remand prisoners may receive Housing Benefit for up to 52 weeks, but payments to sentenced prisoners are restricted to a 13 week period in total.

7.27 One key development is the provision of guidance to prison establishments in the form of the Custody to Work Practice Framework and Accommodation Practice Framework (HM Prison Service, 2004a, 2004b). This followed a 2004 mapping exercise of existing housing advice and support provision within prisons which showed that approximately 80 of 140 prison establishments were offering some form of housing advice provision. However, the mapping study also highlighted the considerable diversity both in terms of quality and range of housing advice provision across the prison estate.

7.28. There is significant national voluntary sector engagement in housing advice provision for ex-offenders, including Shelter and NACRO. Shelter currently works with prisons in Kent, Surrey and Sussex on housing advice, and has been contracted to provide an accommodation service for ex-prisoners across Yorkshire & Humberside. NACRO also provides housing advice through contracts with individual establishments, runs a national Resettlement Helpline and national database on resettlement support agencies for prisoners on release.

7.29 A number of other voluntary agencies have also become engaged in service provision on a more localised basis. For example, as part of the UK Government's drive to reduce the number of rough sleepers by two thirds by 2002, four charitable trusts received funding of £250k each in July 2000 to establish a number of initiatives in seven institutions aimed at reducing the numbers of prisoners released with No Fixed Abode (NFA). Initiatives were established by St Giles Trust (Wandsworth), St Mungos Trust (Pentonville), Depaul Trust (Feltham, Brinsford), and Women's Link (Holloway, Highpoint, Bullwood Hall) (HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation, 2001).

7.30 Good practice recommendations highlighted in the Custody to Work Practice Framework and Accommodation Practice Framework include a range of actions required at induction, for securing accommodation at release and for post-release support. For example, at induction, action is required:

- to prevent the loss of accommodation where appropriate (e.g. through liaison with landlords);
- to assist with Housing Benefit claims;
- to address debt issues including rent arrears; and
- to secure unoccupied properties.

7.31 Good practice messages emphasise the importance of developing links with external agencies and of partnership working for the Prison Service and a range of other agencies in pursuit of the KPI on accommodation. Specific schemes are also highlighted, including prisoner-led and prisoner involving projects, rent deposit/bond, and rent arrears schemes.

7.32 Good practice in post-release support is also highlighted. For example, the Custody to Work Practice Framework suggests that local authority Supporting People managers should receive 'early notification' of those prisoners unable to live independently immediately on release, or who may require additional housing support through Supporting People.

7.33 These good practice issues are now explored through the case studies included in this research, and in *Homelessness Prevention: a guide to good practice* (Communities and Local Government, 2006), which was based on this research.

Local authority developments

7.34 A growing number of local authorities are engaging in commissioning specific provision or developing their own initiatives in order to address the housing needs of ex-offenders. As well as the scheme commissioned by Bristol City Council described below, several other case study local authorities among the 10 examined in this study had developed or were in the process of developing some form of specific provision. For example, Sheffield and Leicester City Councils had both established specific initiatives targeted at homelessness prevention for ex-prisoners.

The case study initiatives

Overview

7.35 The case studies were selected in order to explore models of housing advice and support provision aimed at homelessness prevention among ex-prisoners. Although the case studies are not representative of provision across England, the good practice messages and issues arising are of broader relevance to post-release homelessness prevention initiatives elsewhere.

7.36 The case studies included two initiatives based in local male closed establishments, and one in an open female establishment. There was no specific focus on arrangements for ex-prisoners whose offences raise specific public protection issues (MAPPA), the role of Probation with regard to Approved Premises, or specific accommodation for Young Offenders. Whilst one of the case study initiatives was based in an establishment providing for adult women and young offenders, in practice the initiative was almost entirely focused on adult women due to the small number of young offenders housed in that institution. Similarly, initiatives specifically established to address diversity issues were not included, although a number of such schemes had been developed. For example, Foundation Housing has established HABAP (Housing Advice for Black and Asian Prisoners), a specific initiative for ethnic minority prisoners based in Leeds, which aims to provide 'culturally sensitive housing advice to black and Asian prisoners' (Housing, 2000 pp 26-27; Home Office, 2004b).

The nature of 'homelessness prevention' provision

7.37 The three case study initiatives were:

- **Bristol Prison Homelessness Prevention Service**, a service commissioned by Bristol City Council, and provided by English Churches Housing Group (ECHG). This service was provided by the Prison Homelessness Prevention Co-ordinator (PHPC), an ECHG staff member. It focused on former rough sleepers from the Bristol area admitted to Bristol Prison (i.e. those of No Fixed Abode prior to custody), and aimed to prevent cyclical homelessness;

- **BETA (Benefits, Employment, Training and Accommodation), HMP Winchester.** HMP Winchester is a local male closed establishment including remand and sentenced prisoners, with a capacity of 568 in the main prison and 87 for the Resettlement Unit (Westhill). BETA's main aim was to address the accommodation needs of prisoners, but also to address the needs of prisoners holistically, including training and benefits. The initiative was provided as part of overall resettlement provision at the prison; and

- **The VISION Project, HMP/YOI East Sutton Park.** HMP/YOI East Sutton Park is an open female establishment in Kent with a capacity of approximately 100. A working farm and gardens provide work and training opportunities for prisoners. Women in the last year of their sentence are also eligible to work in the community. There are very few short-sentence prisoners at East Sutton Park. Most of the women are towards the end of their sentence period, with the majority leaving either on Parole or Home Detention Curfew (HDC). The VISION Project was a prisoner-led peer support project offering support and guidance on a range of resettlement issues including housing, benefits and employment. It formed part of the overall resettlement provision within the establishment.

Origins of services

7.38 The origins of the three initiatives were very different. Bristol Prison Homelessness Prevention Service (PHPS) developed from outreach work to reduce rough sleeping. As ECHG specialises in rough sleeper resettlement in general, as well as running a range of prison outreach services in other regions, it was considered a logical next step. The VISION Project was established in 2002 through a recognised need for housing support. The BETA Unit was established in 2002 as a Custody to Work Initiative pilot, and developed a focus on accommodation issues in recognition of its importance within resettlement.

Procurement, funding and staffing

7.39 The initiatives incorporated a range of procurement and funding mechanisms. Only Bristol Prison Homelessness Prevention Service had been procured by an agency outside the Prison Service, and commissioned from a non-statutory agency, whilst the VISION Project at HMP/YOI East Sutton Park, and BETA at HMP Winchester were procured and provided from within the Prison Service.

7.40 Two of the projects – Bristol PHPS and BETA – had received substantial central funding grants. The Bristol service was contracted to maintain a caseload of 12-14 individuals, and was funded entirely by ODPM (now Communities and Local Government) Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate (HHSD) grant (via Bristol City Council) at an annual cost of £33,000. As a Custody to Work Initiative pilot the BETA Unit had substantial ring-fenced funding for its initial two-year period. Subsequently, funding had been mainstreamed within the overall HMP Winchester budget. Additional funding had been introduced in 2004 through an HHSD grant of £74,000 for a specific two-year pilot partnership.

7.41 In contrast, the VISION Project was initially established as a result of fundraising effort by HMP/YOI East Sutton Park, and subsequently provided through existing prison resources on a largely self-funded basis. This approach was not associated with any particular constraints, although it was noted that the scheme would benefit from some specific funding for peer support worker training.

7.42 Staffing of the projects also varied considerably. Bristol Prison Homelessness Prevention Service had only one paid staff member. The VISION Project was staffed entirely by four prisoners (two full time and two part time), recruited to the role of Prisoner Peer Support Workers. They in turn were supported by the Deputy Governor, who managed the project overall, and a Senior Officer. The BETA service was managed by a local authority housing department secondee (Community Resettlement Manager), and staffed by a team including six Prison Officers (the Resettlement Officers) and seven civilians, including a Housing Officer employed by the Probation Service. In addition to the BETA team working within the Unit, there was a team of five support workers (funded by Supporting People) based in the community and offering floating support. Additional support workers and a Housing Officer were due to be appointed.

Nature of support, targeting and referral arrangements

7.43 All three case study schemes shared the following broad aims:

- Saving existing tenancies;
- Helping prisoners access new accommodation upon release; and
- Providing post-release support (partly to promote tenancy sustainment).

Saving existing tenancies

7.44 Bristol's Prison Homelessness Prevention Service provided support from the prison's own Resettlement Team to short-term prisoners identified as rough sleepers on entry into prison.

7.45 The VISION Project provided support to all women at HMP/YOI East Sutton Park, initially through their involvement in the induction process and thereafter as required throughout an individual's sentence, and specifically for securing post-release accommodation. In addition, the VISION Team worked closely with Prison and Probation staff based at East Sutton Park, with complex cases referred either to Probation or to other agencies as appropriate.

7.46 The BETA Unit provided a range of housing related support for all prisoners at HMP Winchester. This included addressing housing needs on reception via action focused on saving accommodation, and by finding sustainable and appropriate accommodation for prisoners on release. Resettlement Reps were recruited from the prisoner population to assist the BETA service. Their role included liaison with prisoners, supporting prisoners to complete application forms, and providing low-level advice. BETA aimed to see all prisoners at induction and at a pre-discharge board six weeks prior to release. In addition, appointments with housing staff were held as required. These were arranged by a variety of means, including referral from prison staff, self-referral, or referral via Resettlement Reps. The service was promoted through prison staff, Resettlement Reps, posters on wings, and a Touch Screen information box (audio for those with low literacy levels, and in languages other than English) detailing available support.

7.47 Whilst the Bristol PHPS project was targeted at a specific sub-group of the prison population, both the VISION Project and BETA were tasked with working with all prisoners at their respective establishments.

7.48 All three projects worked with prisoners throughout their time in custody. This included action with those assessed as in need of housing advice or support at inception, during the custodial period, and pre-release in order to find accommodation. Both Prison Service-led projects provided elements of the induction process, which included an assessment of individual housing problems. The Bristol project, in contrast, received referrals from the prison's own Resettlement Team, which aimed to identify all new arrivals who were former rough sleepers in the Bristol area.

7.49 The VISION Project Prisoner Peer Support Workers were tasked with meeting all new prisoners at HMP/YOI East Sutton Park during induction, which included an assessment of housing, benefits, training and employment needs. Prisoners signed

a 'Statement of Disclosure' form at this stage, to enable members of the VISION Team to liaise and share relevant information about a case with internal and external agencies. Induction was viewed by Prisoner Peer Support Workers as the most critical point for them to see women, and reported that housing was often a prime concern. With women often arriving at East Sutton Park late into their sentence period, it was perceived to be particularly important to address any housing issues as soon as possible. A more detailed housing-focused assessment was then held with women identified as requiring housing assistance, during which needs were assessed and reported on a Housing Referral Form. This formed the basis for a subsequent support plan detailing appropriate action, such as referral to other agencies.

7.50 Prison Resettlement Officers in BETA met with new prisoners on their first morning in custody, assisted by two Induction Officers. Following this initial needs assessment, those identified as requiring housing assistance had a detailed housing assessment with a Resettlement Officer. This then formed the basis of an individualised Housing Retention Action Plan.

7.51 Action to address housing issues identified early on reception into custody was a common aim across all initiatives. A key element of this involved working to maintain or save any existing accommodation. However, despite a contractual requirement for the Bristol PHPS to liaise with social landlords to preserve clients' existing tenancies, this was rarely necessary because most of the target group were literally roofless immediately prior to custody.

7.52 For the VISION project, saving tenancies was described as a key focus of their work. The team reported that women arriving at East Sutton Park often lacked an awareness of the potential options that exist to save tenancies (e.g. paying rent whilst in prison, arranging a caretaker). Their perspective was that this lack of knowledge and awareness of the options for saving a tenancy results in many instances where women lose their accommodation unnecessarily.

7.53 BETA action at the post-reception stage included addressing any immediate needs (e.g. arranging to secure a property, or disposal or storage of belongings), liaison with Housing Benefit departments, and action to maintain accommodation through liaison with mortgage lenders, housing associations, local authorities, private landlords or family members. This involved staff either making telephone calls on behalf of a prisoner, or providing access to a telephone. One Prison Resettlement Officer had a specific remit with regard to saving accommodation (see box 7.1 below). Referral to other agencies was also part of both the BETA and VISION projects' role. For example, outreach clinics were held by a local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) on a weekly basis within BETA, involving support on a range of issues such as housing and budgeting. Prisoners could also be referred by BETA to money management courses run by the Prison Education Department.

Box 7.1 – Actions to save accommodation early in a custodial period – BETA Suspension of possession action
• Production orders to attend heaarings
• Suspension of rent or mortgage payments
• Arranging lodgers or renting out of property
• Budgeting
• Rent arrears Repayment Scheme
• Housing Benefit claims and backdates
• Discretionary housing payments

7.54 During sentence, the initiatives gave support to prisoners as required. For example, the role of Resettlement Reps at HMP Winchester included encouraging prisoners to seek help from BETA instead of ignoring correspondence such as eviction letters. Supporting prisoners to renew or maintain family relationships was another focus area. For example, courses were provided through BETA at HMP Winchester including '*Prison to Partner*', a one-day workshop run by Relate. Funding for a pilot to run a more intensive course, '*We've Come Undone*', aimed at renewing contact between prisoners and carers, had also been secured.

7.55 Case studies demonstrated a number of specific developments designed to address housing-related problems faced by prisoners, including:

- Addressing lack of ID: one of the key barriers to addressing issues such as Housing Benefit for prisoners relates to the lack of suitable ID which is a problem for many prisoners when they enter prison. BETA had developed a procedure to develop ID Proofs which were acceptable to Housing Benefit Offices to enable Housing Benefit applications to be made;

- The need to pay a rent deposit in order to secure a private tenancy: a rent deposit scheme was being developed by BETA, based on a model developed by Brent LBC, also subsequently established at Doncaster Prison. As well as funding rent deposits or guarantees, the scheme was aimed at enabling prisoners to maintain existing accommodation for a short period of time (a maximum of eight weekly rent payments per prisoner). Payments through the scheme constituted a loan repayable over a two year period, thus the scheme was designed to be financially self-sustainable over time; and

- Rent arrears scheme: addressing rent arrears was a feature of both BETA and the VISION Project. The Disbursement of Cash for Prisoners Compact established at HMP/YOI East Sutton Park to address rent arrears enabled the prison to draw up

a repayment agreement between a prisoner and a previous housing provider with which rent arrears had accrued. Money from a prisoner's wages were paid from their Prisoner Account held at the prison directly to the housing provider. It was acknowledged that payments from prison wages would have a limited impact on significant levels of rent arrears. However, negotiating and establishing a mechanism to start addressing arrears was viewed as having the potential to build trust with the landlord and, thus, help to save the prisoner's tenancy. The scheme was also described as useful for women with former tenancy rent arrears (i.e. those who had already lost a tenancy), in enabling them to be considered favourably for housing post release. The Rent Arrears Repayment scheme established at HMP Winchester showed that between November 2003 and January 2005, sixty four prisoners requested specific help with arrears.

Helping prisoners access new accommodation post-release

7.56 All three initiatives had a key focus on finding post-release accommodation. The VISION Team's approach was based on considering the different accommodation options available, with an emphasis on preventing homelessness. The critical time period was considered to be six months prior to release date, with options including local authority, housing association or hostel provision depending on an individual's needs. Local authority housing options included housing waiting list registration, described normally as the first option (particularly for prisoners serving more than six months).

7.57 BETA had developed a 'housing options' approach. A Housing Officer post had been established by the Probation Service to work on finding accommodation for short-term (under a year) prisoners who would otherwise be NFA (no fixed abode) upon release. The post-holder was involved in searching for appropriate post release accommodation (see box 7.2 below).

7.58 One key mechanism created through BETA (and viewed by the project as a particular strength of the housing options approach) was an agreement with a number of local authorities that, for tenancies terminated when a prisoner was received into custody, this would establish the basis for an agreement for the local authority to house the individual upon release, provided there had been no major previous tenancy problems. In addition, BETA suggested that a focus on cross tenure and cross boundary working was required. For example, encouragement of movement across areas via initiatives such as Fresh Start should be considered.

Box 7.2 Pre-release action to find accommodation – BETA
• Referrals to hostels and interviews
• Arranging private rented accommodation
• Rent Deposit Scheme (access to local authority schemes, with specific BETA Rent Deposit Scheme under establishment)
• Shared ownership
• Local authority housing waiting lists
• Transfer/exchanges
A key role for the Housing Officer included making referrals to hostels, and arranging for housing providers to come into the Unit to interview prisoners.

7.59 Bristol PHPS was contracted to facilitate clients' access to private tenancies via deposit bonds. In practice, however, the deposit bond scheme was perceived by the service as of limited relevance given the nature of the client group. Most clients were perceived as requiring – at least initially – a package of accommodation with intensive support of a kind that could not be provided in the private sector. Indeed, this was a key issue highlighted across all three case studies, suggesting that an important element of preventing homelessness for ex-prisoners was in securing appropriate accommodation to meet the needs of the individual rather than finding accommodation per se. As several case study interviewees noted, having the 'keys to a flat' was not sufficient to prevent subsequent homelessness for many ex-prisoners.

Post release support

7.60 Several of the schemes provided services targeted at support at the point of release and post-release support. BETA provision was in place to offer post release, floating support by a team of five support workers funded by Supporting People, and to refer on to CARATS[28] Workers and other support services and providers (e.g. Community Mental Health Teams, Social Services). An expansion of floating support provision was imminent, through a pilot project by BETA in partnership with two external agencies for the provision of housing-related support to prisoners in the last six weeks of custody and after release. This service was being established to focus on prisoners who would reside in Hampshire post release to '*maintain their accommodation by helping them develop the necessary skills and confidence*'. The extended provision would offer support from the prison gate, including a support plan providing input for up to one year. A valuable extension of support via this scheme included the facility to escort ex-prisoners from the prison gate to previously arranged accommodation.

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[28] Councelling Assessment Referral Advice Throughcare – service targeted at substance abusers.

7.61 Similarly, point of release and post-release provision by Bristol PHPS included escorting released prisoners to pre-arranged post-release accommodation, and was perceived by the service as one of the most vital tasks performed within the contract. Crucially, it addressed a concern that released offenders would resume drug abuse immediately on release. The VISION Project ensured all women leaving East Sutton Park received an information leaflet detailing sources of support, including offering ongoing liaison with the VISION Team for support or information after release.

Developments in partnership working

7.62 A particular development in the BETA case study initiative highlighted the development of a partnership working approach. A two year pilot had been established in 2004 at HMP Winchester funded by ODPM (now Communities and Local Government), and involving collaboration between BETA, housing and police authorities in Portsmouth, Southampton and Havant. The pilot included a service for any prisoner who came from or planned to settle post-release in the partnership area, and who was either at risk of losing their accommodation or of homelessness post-release.

7.63 The Service Level Agreement described the aims of the pilot as providing 'housing advice and support to prisoners whilst in custody and [to] endeavour to prevent homelessness on release from prison. In addition, the service [aimed] to sustain accommodation to prevent repeat homelessness by linking the prisoner into local support services'. The service was designed to 'facilitate movement across local authority boundaries, enabling prisoners to relocate' through the provision of four elements:

- Prison Housing Adviser seconded to work in BETA from a local authority from April 2005, tasked with working with prisoners from the partnership area wishing to settle locally on release;
- Rent Deposit Scheme (as described above); and
- Establishment of a Resettlement Account (fund) to be managed by BETA for purposes such as paying off small amounts of arrears in order to prevent homelessness, as a retainer to secure accommodation prior to release, for travel warrants or for small household items.

7.64 Given the wishes of many ex-prisoners to find housing away from where they lived previously, BETA (Benefits, Employment, Training and Accommodation, HMP Winchester), had developed a reciprocal agreement with local authorities within the region to assist ex-prisoners requiring relocation to be given cross boundary access within a 'Partnership area'.

7.65 As part of the Partnership agreement, each participating local authority nominated a prison liaison officer from within their homelessness section to deal with reciprocal scheme moves. The officer was tasked with co-ordinating the resettlement process for ex-prisoners. It was anticipated that in time the partnership would be extended to other local authorities and prisons outside the region.

Equality and diversity

7.66 The VISION Prison Peer Support Worker Team reflected the diverse ethnic minority groups within the prison population at HMP/YOI East Sutton Park. BETA had translated leaflets into several languages, and commissioned the services of an interpretation agency when appropriate. Prisoners with English as a second language were referred from BETA to HMP Winchester Education Department for help to improve their English if requested.

Performance management and monitoring practice

7.67 Different performance measurement and monitoring regimes were employed by the case study initiatives. Of prime importance for both BETA and the VISION Project was the Prison Service key performance target (KPT) on accommodation (to ensure that 75% of prisoners have accommodation on their first night of release). For Bristol PHPS, contracted to maintain a caseload of 12–14 clients, the main performance target was to secure post-release accommodation – temporary or permanent (including residential treatment) – for 80 per cent of the caseload.

7.68 The VISION Project did not record outcomes on housing cases, although HMP East Sutton kept appropriate records as required regarding accommodation on release. The VISION Project did, however, record activities undertaken such as housing related appointments, and engagement with external agencies. In contrast, a range of statistics regarding housing related provision was recorded by BETA. Records of individual cases were compiled including main needs of each case, actions, intended area of release, and the outcomes of action taken. Outcomes data was collated annually for the purpose of demonstrating performance with respect to the KPT on accommodation, both in terms of BETA's own performance and to demonstrate this against overall HMP Winchester performance on this target. BETA recorded all discharges to the region (Hampshire) so that information could be provided to each authority in the region on the number of ex-prisoners seeking housing in that area.

7.69 Stakeholder evaluation had been considered by BETA and VISION through the involvement of prisoner peer supporters/workers. At BETA, the Prisoner Resettlement Reps provided internal customer feedback. The VISION Project was considering conducting a quality survey through circulating a questionnaire to prisoners at the time of the case study visit.

Sustainable outcome measurement

7.70 Other than recording data on numbers released with an address to go to, at the time of this research none of the case studies had mechanisms in place for measuring sustainable outcomes in relation to accommodation solutions. However, the need to measure the impact of service provision on longer-term outcomes for ex-prisoners was an issue under discussion. For example, it was envisaged that the monitoring requirements of Bristol PHPS were to be amended in order to measure repeat homelessness. The VISION Project had also held internal discussions on the need to develop processes to monitor outcomes, reflecting a broader concern about the need for appropriate long-term accommodation solutions for ex-prisoners.

7.71 BETA had engaged external research support to analyse the service it offered, including monitoring prisoners after release in partnership with the Floating Support Team. Funding was also being sought for a further monitoring initiative based on resettlement floating support in the community, involving health improvement and housing.

7.72 The complexity of the task of measuring longer-term outcomes was also raised. As indicated by BETA, there was a need to consider positive accommodation moves and other progress towards independence rather than only whether accommodation had been sustained. This recognition had led to a focus not only on addressing housing but also work focusing on goal setting and motivation.

Assessment of service effectiveness

7.73 The three case study initiatives demonstrated different approaches to demonstrating service effectiveness. They also varied considerably in terms of both scale and scope of activity.

7.74 HMP/YOI East Sutton Park reported that from January to December 2004, 96 women left the establishment, including deportees. 11 women were transferred to other establishments and the remainder all left with an address to go to. The majority of the women were required to have accommodation in place prior to their release due to the conditions of their licence (Parole or Home Detention Curfew).

7.75 Between November 2003 and January 2005, BETA found or saved accommodation for 506 prisoners, made 309 Housing Benefit claims, and arranged local authority 'undertakings to house post release' for seven individuals. Overall statistics detailing outcomes since establishment of the initiative in 2002 are detailed in Table 7.1, with further exemplar outcome data summarized in Box 7.4 below. Statistical data for 2004-05 demonstrated that the KPT on achieving accommodation for 75 per cent of ex-prisoners for the first night of release was out-performed during the period April-December 2004.

Table 7.1 BETA: Outcomes May 2002 – January 2005	
Period	**Accommodation Found/Saved**
May 02 - Dec 02	**91**
Jan 03 - Dec 03	**262**
Jan 04 - Dec 04	**412**
Jan 05	**57**

Box 7.4 – BETA: Key Discharge Local Authority Areas Outcome Monitoring Data
From December 2003 – December 2004, out of 93 housing applications in one local authority area, accommodation was found for 33, with a homelessness application made for only seven. Twenty seven received advice only, one was registered on the Housing Waiting List, a list of accommodation was issued to nine, fifteen were referred to a hostel, and one was referred to a third party.

7.76 During 2003-04, the Bristol PHPS Co-ordinator worked with a total 144 clients, with accommodation being obtained for 79 per cent, with a target of 80 per cent.

Cost-effectiveness

7.77 The following section assesses the cost-effectiveness of Bristol Prison Homelessness Prevention Service (PHPS). As noted above (see para 7.37), the service works with former rough sleepers recorded as 'no fixed abode' when entering prison. Given that most of those concerned are single childless people of working age, few are likely to be assessed under the homelessness legislation as being 'in priority need'. For most, therefore, homelessness prevention cannot be assumed to generate savings in local authority temporary accommodation expenditure. Hence, cost-effectiveness calculations in relation to this service are not straightforward.

7.78 During 2003-04 the project worked with 144 clients and found accommodation upon discharge for 102 (79%) of them. In the first quarter of 2004-05 the project dealt with 33 clients and secured accommodation for 29 (87%). In the final quarter of 2004, 27 out of 30 prisoners worked with were found accommodation, although some subsequently left. Most of the prisoners referred to the scheme tended to have mental health and class A drug problems, and needed medical support. Bristol PHPS strategy was to minimize the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation, and to escort released prisoners to supported housing or a hostel. Analysis of brief case studies of 23 prisoners revealed the following initial housing outcomes:

Private rented accommodation	1
Temporary accommodation	5
Permanent Housing Association accommodation	1
Tenancy maintained	2
(Supported) Hostel	7
Bed & Breakfast	1
Lost contact	6

7.79 The estimated cost of the service to Bristol City Council for 2004-05 was £33,000. The benefits were a potential reduction in the numbers sleeping rough in the city. However, given the high levels of support needs of many of these individuals it is impossible to be definitive on the counterfactual. Many have a long history of sleeping rough and there can be no certainty that they do not return to this post-release. If they present themselves to the local authority as homeless few are deemed to be in priority need (see above). Two were able to maintain tenancies they had prior to going in to prison but still required support on leaving. It is assumed therefore that, in the absence of help, most would return to a transient life on leaving prison.

7.80 For the purposes of the analysis, it was assumed that a rough sleeper who presented her/himself as homeless and was deemed in priority need (on vulnerability grounds) would be rehoused in bed and breakfast. The subsequent stay on average would be six weeks at a cost of £948 (£158 per week). Assessment by a housing officer takes an average of 21 hours because of the complexity of such cases and costs £346 (excluding overheads). Thus the total cost per case (including overheads) is likely to be £1,467. However, there is a high chance of repeat rough sleeping followed by prison in a repetitive cycle.

7.81 The project works with an estimated 80 ex-prisoners each year although some of these will return to sleeping rough. This cost (£33,000) is therefore equivalent to £413 per person. The statutory homelessness costs are approximately £1,467 per person per year allowing for a period in prison, but only a small proportion of former rough sleepers will present themselves as homeless and be assessed as in priority need. If, in absence of the scheme, a quarter of these individuals had been judged statutory homeless by the council it would have cost the council broadly the equivalent to the cost of the scheme (20 x £1,467 = 29,340). However, this number is almost certainly too high.

7.82 The cost-effectiveness of the scheme cannot adequately be assessed via savings on local authority housing costs but more through the benefits to the ex-offenders' lives and life expectancy and the consequent reduction in re-offending, and also social and medical interventions. These latter costs are undoubtedly substantial but would require more detailed research and await a full appraisal of the individual project. However, a key issue is that these potential benefits are long term outcomes that have yet to be realized and may not materialise.

What works? Good practice and key lessons from case study approaches

Peer-led and peer-involving models

7.83 The case studies suggested a range of benefits associated with peer-led and peer-involving models of housing support within prisons. The importance of selecting an appropriate model for a particular establishment emerged as a key message. For example, the decision taken at HMP Winchester to recruit BETA Resettlement Reps who provided a range of supportive functions is very different from the peer-led model developed by the VISION Project at HMP/YOI East Sutton Park. In BETA, the Resettlement Reps focused on forming a link between prisoners and staff, whilst at VISION, peers were the project. Key strengths of the peer-led approach (as at the VISION Project) include:

- capacity building for those directly concerned, likely to contribute to future employability;
- peer workers' empathy for – and understanding of – the problems of fellow prisoners;
- prisoners' preference for discussing issues of concern with their fellows rather than people seen as representatives of officialdom; and
- value for money.

7.84 Provision of appropriate training is clearly essential in equipping prisoners for a peer support role. For example, VISION Prisoner Peer Support Workers had enrolled in NVQ Level 3 courses in Advice and Guidance. Appropriate recruitment decisions are also of key importance. This needs to include risk assessment as well as an assessment of individual interest and motivation on the part of applicants.

Support at key phases in the custodial period

7.85 The research also demonstrated the importance of support at key phases in the custodial period, including support on entry, pre-release, at point of release, and post-release, as well as availability of support as required during custodial period.

7.86 In terms of post-release support, whilst it may not be possible or appropriate for the same agency to provide such support, the research suggested the importance of developing appropriate links with support providers where they exist. Establishing service level agreements for a certain quantity and quality of provision may be one such solution as exemplified by BETA's pilot project in partnership with local agencies, which included a tenancy support service to provide 'through the prison gate' support. This also highlighted the importance of linking ex-prisoners into community-based support provision, although it was recognised that provision of this nature remains a key gap.

Developing tailored approaches

7.87 Ensuring the development of approaches tailored to the needs of an individual, and which demonstrate innovation and imagination with a commitment to 'finding a solution even in the most challenging of cases' were suggested as important elements in preventing homelessness for ex-prisoners.

Family relationships

7.88 Supporting prisoners to renew or maintain family relationships, as exemplified by courses run for prisoners through BETA at HMP Winchester including the Relate course 'Prison to Partner', was a further important aspect of provision emerging from the research, reflecting the importance that supportive personal relationships can play in preventing homelessness.

Addressing specific barriers faced by prisoners

7.89 The case study evidence suggested the need for a range of services to address barriers related to being in custody in order to develop potential housing options, such as a lack of ID documentation upon entry into prison, and rent arrears. ID schemes, rent arrears schemes and rent deposit schemes had been developed by the case studies as a way of addressing such barriers and in seeking to resolve housing issues such as Housing Benefit and rent arrears.

Links and liaison with external agencies

7.90 The research highlighted the importance of developing liaison mechanisms between prison-based housing advice providers and external agencies such as housing providers. This may be achieved by including via 'inreach'[29] surgery provision to facilitate direct contact between prisoners and housing providers. For example, BETA had negotiated an agreement to authorise housing providers to interview potential tenants within the prison, thus addressing barriers to negotiating temporary release (ROTL) to enable prisoners to have an interview with a housing provider.

Appropriate post-release accommodation and support

7.91 There is a need to ensure appropriate post-release accommodation for this client group. For example, private tenancies may be unsuitable for those with higher support needs, as highlighted by Bristol PHPS, which works primarily with prisoners with a history of rough sleeping. At BETA, however, the Housing Officer responsible for finding accommodation for prisoners had developed contacts with a number of

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[29] Provision of services by an external agency within the prison on a surgery basis.

local landlords to ensure private rented accommodation was an option open to prisoners with low support needs. Temporary floating support was also described as a possible option for ex-prisoners in private rented accommodation.

Constraints on effectiveness

7.92 Projects also reported a number of constraints experienced in helping to arrange suitable post-release housing for their clients. The most overwhelming issues were the general lack of appropriate supported accommodation, and a typical reluctance on the part of local authorities to rehouse ex-prisoners. Case study interviewees highlighted the need to expand availability of supported provision for the post-release period which can 'bridge the gap' to independent living.

7.93 The lack of appropriate provision for women leaving HMP/YOI East Sutton Park was also an issue, reflecting research evidence suggesting this is a key difficulty facing women leaving prison. A specific constraint highlighted was the difficulty for women with dependents accessing appropriate accommodation for their children as well as themselves.

7.94 As a result, VISION Team members reported how their work required considerable negotiation and liaison with local authorities on behalf of individuals. The VISION Project described the need for further work to raise awareness of the housing needs of women ex-prisoners, and of building greater understanding amongst providers, particularly local authorities, of the issues women prisoners/ex-prisoners have with regard to housing. They also reflected a need to establish a more productive engagement with providers, including encouraging local authorities to visit the prison.

7.95 Another constraint reported where ex-prisoners do face homelessness, was the 'vulnerability test' which forms part of the statutory homelessness assessment. Ex-prisoners without accommodation will be deemed in 'priority need' under the homelessness legislation (and, consequently, entitled to local authority re-housing), only when they are deemed vulnerable due to having served a custodial sentence. At the time of this research, the 2002 Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities suggested that the vulnerability test would be met by only a minority of ex-prisoners, a judgement strongly borne out in the experience of case study interviewees[30].

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[30] ODPM and DoH (2002). The Code of Guidance for Local Authorities has subsequently been revised. It no longer states that only a minority of ex-offenders are likely to be vulnerable as a result of a period in custody, but rather suggests that local authorities consider a range of factors likely to result in vulnerability, including length of time in custody, whether accommodation was maintained during time in custody, and support available to the to the individual upon release (Communities and Local Government, DoH, DfES (2006), paras 10.25-10.27

7.96 The difficulty of matching offender release dates and accommodation availability was also viewed as an obstacle to achieving effective outcomes. This was highlighted both by Bristol PHPS and BETA.

7.97 Shifting populations within the prison system, for example, in Bristol, meant that in practice 70–80 per cent of prisoners, including many of those eligible for support from the PHPS, were transferred from Bristol Prison to serve in prisons outside the local area. Although the PHPS Co-ordinator could travel to other institutions if deemed essential, this was time-consuming and an inefficient use of staff resources. Such factors were identified as seriously complicating the service's work with local prisoners. Turnover of prisoners was also an issue impacting on service delivery in terms of peer involvement. This had a greater impact on VISION due to its peer-led nature, but turnover also affected aspects of BETA provision undertaken by Resettlement Reps.

7.98 The level of access within the prison afforded to the PHPS service co-ordinator emerged as an important influence on operational effectiveness, with the granting of access to Bristol Prison internal keys in 2003 representing a major step forward.

Summary and conclusions

7.99 As acknowledged by Prison Service good practice recommendations, intervention to identify and address prisoners' housing problems is crucial both at reception into, and at release from, prison. The general lack of suitable post-release supported and mainstream accommodation remains a major challenge. However, it appears that prison-based housing advice has the potential to significantly improve ex-offenders' chances of avoiding post-release homelessness. By saving existing tenancies, by assisting prisoners to find new post-release accommodation and by providing post-release support, such projects can help to stem re-offending and the public and private sector costs which result.

7.100 Other key messages emerging from the case studies included the crucial importance of developing links and liaison mechanisms between prison-based housing advice schemes and a range of relevant agencies including training providers, outreach providers, other advice agencies and housing providers. The development of schemes appropriate to addressing specific barriers to housing, and ensuring quality of advice through ongoing staff training was also highlighted.

7.101 Whilst very different peer support models had been initiated in the two Prison Service-based case studies, a key message was the potentially positive contribution of such models. The benefits of such approaches are evident not only for housing advice recipients but also for prisoners involved in dispensing the service. This latter

group benefit in terms of increased confidence, and the experience gained may boost their future employability. As suggested in the literature (e.g. Rough Sleepers Unit, 2001), there is undoubtedly a need for further evaluation of peer-led and peer-involving initiatives to explore the success factors and emerging lessons associated with different models, with different groups of prisoners, and in different prison environments.

7.102 Sustainability of post-release accommodation has been highlighted as an issue of concern given the focus of some schemes on finding accommodation for the first night of release only rather than on achieving sustainable housing outcomes (Galbraith, 2004). The development of performance monitoring and evaluation regimes that include a focus on the measurement of sustained outcomes is clearly an associated requirement.

Chapter 8

Tenancy sustainment

Background

8.1   Tenancy sustainment services provide support to help people with support needs retain their tenancies. They can play an important role in reducing repeat homelessness among recently rehoused social renters (ODPM, 2003a). Such services can also support people living in the private sector who are at risk of homelessness.

8.2   The ODPM (now Communities and Local Government) recent evaluation of local authority homelessness strategies reported that many authorities envisaged the deployment of floating support to help vulnerable people retain tenancies, and an ODPM survey of local authorities identified that, by 2005, 78 per cent were operating a tenancy support service in order to prevent homelessness (ODPM, 2005c). However, there have been few evaluations of tenancy support services, and little hard evidence of its effectiveness in preventing homelessness.

8.3   An analysis of monitoring returns submitted by local authorities who had signed up to the ODPM Positive Outcome on Homelessness programme showed 68 per cent operating tenancy sustainment services of some kind. This usually referred to activities designed to assist households newly rehoused into social housing in an effort to prevent repeat homelessness. However, some authorities interpreted 'tenancy sustainment' as referring to activities aimed at supporting potentially homeless applicants to retain private sector tenancies and, in this way, prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place.

8.4   This chapter draws on a review of existing research including an evaluation of Tenancy Sustainment Teams (TSTs) for former rough sleepers, and on fieldwork covering eight local authority initiatives targeted at a variety of client groups:

- About Turn in Bradford West Housing Trust area;
- East Kent Cyrenians (EKC) outreach and resettlement in Canterbury;
- SCRINE Foundation in Canterbury;
- Floating Support Service (FSS) in Harrow;
- RISE Resettlement and Tenancy Support in Leicester;
- STAR Supporting Tenants and Residents in Leicester;

- Substance Misuse Housing Support Service in Leicester; and
- Domestic Abuse Floating Support Service (DAFSS) in Sheffield.

Evaluations of tenancy sustainment services

8.5 Existing evaluations of tenancy sustainment services have been largely positive about their benefits for a number of client groups.

8.6 An evaluation of one tenancy sustainment service (Torr, 2002) provides some insights about the possible effectiveness of such interventions by comparing a group of vulnerable tenants who received the service with those who did not. The comparison spanned a 15-month period. Issues addressed by the service included establishing the tenancy, addressing rent arrears and budgeting, acquiring practical living skills, service brokerage issues and developing social and leisure activities.

8.7 Comparing the level of rent arrears between the start and end of the project in the supported group and the control group, Torr found that the position was more favourable for the tenants who had received the service, with much smaller increases in rent arrears in the intervention compared to the non-intervention group. The rental income saved by employing a Tenancy Support Officer covered approximately half of the cost of the post. There were also lower rates of evictions and abandonments in the intervention group.

8.8 Other studies have evaluated projects for people at risk of eviction for anti-social behaviour (Dillane et al, 2001; Jones et al, 2004), former rough sleepers (Randall and Brown, 2002a; Dane, 1998; Lomax and Netto, 2007; Busch-Geertsema, 2002), homeless families (Jones et al, 2001; Shelter, 2002a and b) and low income families (Mulroy and Lauber, 2002), illustrating that tenancy sustainment services can be very effective in supporting a range of client groups, including those with very high levels of need. There may be a need for such services to provide specialist support, for example to women who have lost their homes due to domestic violence (Jones, 1998; Levison and Kenny, 2002).

8.9 Among the reported positive outcomes of these services were:

- Reduced evictions and abandonments (Dillane et al, 2001; Jones et al, 2004; Lomax and Netto, 2007; Busch-Geertsema, 2002; Mulroy and Lauber, 2002)
- Reduced numbers of children taken into care (Dillane et al, 2001);
- Reduced incidence of neighbourhood disputes (Dillane et al, 2001; Jones et al, 2004, Busch-Geertsema, 2002);
- Savings in terms of legal bills and costs of taking children into care (Dillane et al, 2001); and

- Increased client participation in the workforce, educational/job training programmes and volunteering (Mulroy and Lauber, 2002).

Origins of the services

8.10 Most of the eight case study projects had originated since 2000, with the most recent being a pilot initiative set up in 2004. Several of the projects had been established to cut down the use of Bed & Breakfast accommodation as well as to respond to more specific problems, such as high numbers of rough sleepers, high tenancy turnover and failure, and the need to support clients with complex needs.

8.11 For instance, Bradford's About Turn scheme was set up partly as a response to research findings commissioned by Bradford West City Housing Trust identifying failures in the management of problematic tenancies and in working with client groups with a poor record in sustaining tenancies.

8.12 Tenancy support was also provided within the context of longer-established projects. For example, Canterbury's Outreach and Resettlement was originally set up as part of the initial Rough Sleepers Initiative in 1996.

Target group and referral procedures

8.13 All the case study projects supported people who were homeless or threatened with homelessness and who had a history of failed tenancies – or whose circumstances suggested that they might be 'at risk' in this respect. The projects varied in terms of their specific target client group. Some provided a generic service to families and single people (e.g. STAR and SCRINE Foundation). Others focused on particular client groups, including single homeless, rough sleepers and people with complex needs (e.g. Canterbury Outreach and Resettlement and About Turn), people with substance misuse problems (e.g. Leicester's Substance Misuse Housing Support Service) and women who had faced domestic violence (Domestic Abuse Floating Support Service in Sheffield). The four clients of Harrow Floating Support Services interviewed for this research approached the service with a wide range of problems, including marital breakdown, mental ill health and indebtedness.

8.14 Clients were referred to tenancy sustainment services from a wide range of sources, including homelessness officers, estate managers, social services departments, housing associations, probation officers, Youth Offending Teams, the police, advice centres and drug and alcohol agencies, women's refuges and child protection agencies. Clients of the Harrow Floating Support service confirmed that access was facilitated by agencies they had contacted, such as drop-in centres, social work services, and RSLs. Making contact with the officer concerned was reported to be easy.

8.15 Some projects accepted internal referrals through other elements of service provision. For example, the SCRINE Foundation identified potential clients through its Outreach and Resettlement team (which worked with single homeless people and rough sleepers), its work with Canterbury Prison, and its work in supporting people recently discharged from local hospitals. Other projects (e.g. STAR) also accepted self-referrals.

8.16 Some agencies had found it necessary to ration their services by restricting their caseload. For example, due to overwhelming demand from rough sleepers from other parts of the country (and in line with local authority policy) East Kent Cyrenians had recently begun to apply more rigorous 'local connection' criteria.

8.17 Some projects required clients to agree to certain conditions prior to accessing services. For instance, About Turn required clients to sign up to an Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC) or Parental Control Agreement (PCA). Clients with drug problems were obliged to attend a recognised drugs counselling service as part of such agreements. Referrals involving clients with children were accepted only where parents agreed to ensure their children's school attendance.

Nature of support provided

8.18 Services were typically provided to follow-on either from a client's move into new accommodation – temporary or permanent, in either the social or private rented sector – or, in the case of those at risk of homelessness, in their current accommodation.

8.19 Services were typically client-centred, involving individual needs assessment and the drawing up of a support plan between a dedicated support worker and the client, based on relevant information gathered from other agencies and the landlord. Such plans generally include support with:

- claiming benefits;
- budgeting and debt management;
- accessing community resources and services;
- furnishing accommodation;
- finding voluntary work and other meaningful occupation activities; and
- resolving neighbour disputes.

8.20 Developing clients' understanding of how to manage their personal finances was widely seen as a crucial element of tenancy support.

8.21 In some cases tenancy support also involved assisting the client to address presenting problems by linking them with specialist services, such as drug and alcohol advice, support centres and mental health support services.

8.22 Interviews with four users of Harrow's Floating Support Service confirmed that the service encompassed practical as well as psychological and emotional support. Practical support included help with money management, bills, debt counselling, accessing benefits, and literacy support. One service user had been helped to obtain a higher 're-housing priority banding', paving the way for him to move into larger accommodation with his daughter. Emotional and psychological support included mediating between one participant and his family after the relationship had broken down, and providing respite care for another participant whose wife suffered from severe depression. In the words of one service user:

'*When I am down in a rut and I feel a bit depressed and I don't want to see anyone – at least he helps me out, comes round, helps sort me out, he's like a friend, someone to trust*'

8.23 The About Turn project and the Sheffield Domestic Abuse Floating Support services provided support to children as well as to parents. The About Turn project aimed to create stability in family life through developing positive routines, and following an 'early intervention approach' for children. The overall objective was to break longer-term cycles of children growing up in homes where there are issues of crime, drug misuse, and anti-social behaviour.

Duration of support

8.24 The duration for which support was provided varied considerably across the schemes. For example, the Harrow project offered support ranging from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, depending on the young person's assessed needs. In contrast, Leicester's RISE scheme was funded to work with clients for up to two years, and ideally engaged with clients for 6-12 months.

8.25 Some projects (e.g. tenancy support services for former rough sleepers) monitor their clients' progress through home visits and reviews – e.g. every three, four or six months. This allowed support to be flexibly tailored to the needs of the client.

Project staffing

8.26 The scale and nature of staffing resources varied considerably across the case studies. For instance, Bradford's pilot About Turn initiative was staffed by only one full-time officer while at the other end of the spectrum, the STAR project in Leicester had a team of nearly 50 FTE staff, across six community-based teams.

Procurement and funding

8.27 Some of the local authority projects were managed externally by voluntary organisations or housing associations while others were located within local authority housing departments.

8.28 Four of the eight projects were wholly funded by local authorities through their Supporting People programmes while two were partly financed through local authority Supporting People budgets. Other funders of tenancy support included the ODPM (now Communities and Local Government), the Community Fund, local authorities (other than through the Supporting People programme), grant-making trusts and Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAATs).

Performance monitoring

8.29 The extent to which agencies monitored performance on preventing homelessness varied considerably. Some agencies monitored activity levels in terms of number of clients supported in maintaining their tenancies and supported in making moves to permanent accommodation. For example, in 2002-03, East Kent Cyrenians (EKC) Outreach and Resettlement reported that the Tenancy Sustainment Worker helped 15 ex-street homeless people with very complex needs successfully maintain their tenancies. In the same period, EKC reported that they had helped 59 people move from their properties into settled accommodation. It also provided floating support to 124 vulnerable people, but there was little data available on the extent to which the support provided might have prevented homelessness.

8.30 Many projects had evolved monitoring systems based on funder-specific service level agreements (SLAs). For instance, projects mainly or wholly funded by Supporting People – FSTS, RISE and STAR – were subject to review under the Supporting People review programme. This included the Quality Assessment Framework (QAF) process to assess service delivery standards. Specifications also stipulated the number of service users that agencies were expected to assist each year. For example, RISE was contracted to work with 128 service users annually.

8.31 The measure of outcomes required by Supporting People for projects supporting women escaping domestic violence includes the number of women who have either 'completed a programme of support' or with whom the project has lost contact. Support workers at DAFSS also recorded an account of the type of work they had undertaken with service users.

Table 8.1 Sheffield Domestic Abuse Floating Support Service:
Housing Situation at End of Support 2004-05

Housing situation at end of support 04-05	Q1	Q2	Q3	Total
Sustained tenancy/accommodation	6	7	7	20
Planned move to accommodation	3	6	6	15
Homeless/interim accommodation	0	1	4	5
Unknown	3	1	2	6
Total 12	**15**	**19**	**46**	

(Source: Sheffield Domestic Abuse Floating Support Service (DAFSS))

8.32 By monitoring the housing circumstances of its clients at the end of a support programme, DAFSS monitored the extent to which the service had helped clients to sustain their tenancy or make a planned move to other accommodation. Table 8.1 indicates service effectiveness in preventing homelessness.

8.33 Other targets adopted by agencies included making initial appointments and completing needs assessments within a specified time period. In the case of RISE, for example, this was five days for the former and 28 days for the latter.

8.34 Data collected on individual cases was, in some agencies, very detailed, and included:

- date engaged;
- age, gender, ethnicity;
- presenting problems;
- previous tenancies and rent payment record;
- agencies involved;
- neighbour complaints history; and
- level of agency support.

8.35 Reasons for changes in circumstance (e.g. accommodation change) or positive outcomes, such as achieving meaningful occupation, was also sometimes recorded, along with the agency's own activities in relation to the case (e.g. visits, telephone calls, case conferences and reviews). Some agencies provided details of current caseloads and recent actions in quarterly and annual monitoring regimes such as:

- Referrals received (by gender, household type, ethnicity, first language, considered disabled, referral outcome, issues presenting at referral, referral agency/individual);

- Ongoing cases (by gender, household type, ethnicity, first language, contact targets and assessment targets);

- Closed cases (by type of accommodation – at assessment and at closure, type of tenancy – at assessment and at closure, rent situation – at assessment and at closure, employment situation – at assessment and at closure, outcomes, and other agencies involved at closure);

- the nature of the client group supported (e.g. older people with mental health needs);

- the type of support provided (e.g. furniture and budgeting skills); and

- the range of agencies service users are referred to (e.g. benefits advice).

8.36 A few agencies monitored the extent to which their service enabled clients to sustain their tenancies. For example, RISE monitored the number of clients who had sustained tenancies for more than three months and more than six months. From September 2002 to April 2003, the agency reported that:

- 99 per cent of clients had sustained tenancies for more than three months (75 clients of whom one had failed to sustain a tenancy); and

- Twelve out of thirteen clients had sustained tenancies for more than six months.

8.37 BV214 on 'repeat homelessness' (see chapter 2) will help to indicate the impact of tenancy sustainment schemes in that authorities recording lower rates of repeat homelessness may be able to attribute this partly to the effectiveness of such services. However, this is a less direct approach than that operated by RISE (see above) where monitoring includes the proportion of (supported) tenancies remaining intact after a given period. Whether or not required to do so as part of a statutory performance indicator, other authorities would be well-advised to follow such an approach.

8.38 In addition to monitoring reductions in evictions and abandonments, the findings reported here suggest that there is further scope for improved routine statistical monitoring to demonstrate service effectiveness in terms of numbers of tenants:

- Engaging with the service (at initial stages, after 6 months and 12 months);

- Making planned moves and who either continue to receive the service or do not require the service any further;

- Engaging with meaningful occupation (e.g. pursuing educational courses or job-related training, volunteering and entry into the workforce); and

- For a sample of cases where tenancy was sustained until completion of a programme of support, either whether the arrangement remained intact six months after completion of support or whether planned moves had been made.

8.39 Improved qualitative data collection could include the development of indicators on:

- Ability to manage individual finances and extent of support needed;
- Ability to access essential support services;
- Commitment to addressing drug and alcohol abuse, where relevant;
- Quality of life, including interest in meaningful occupation;
- Health improvements;
- Levels of self-esteem; and
- Formation of social networks.

Assessing service effectiveness

Measures of success – Agency monitoring indicators

8.40 Given agencies' varying approaches to performance monitoring, it is not surprising that the positive outcomes they report also differ considerably. Some agencies, for example, assessed their effectiveness in terms of the level of service user engagement with support programmes. For instance, at STAR, outcome measures for 2003-04 revealed that 78 per cent of clients (681 in total) had completed a planned programme of support, 15 per cent had failed to engage with the service, while 46 service users had been transferred to another service. Less than one per cent was reported as having been evicted, placed in hospital or moved to long-term supported housing.

8.41 For projects working with tenants with alcohol and drug abuse problems – e.g. Leicester Substance Misuse Support Service – entry into treatment programmes was also viewed as likely to contribute to homelessness prevention.

8.42 As discussed above, assessments under Supporting People reviews provide some indication of the effectiveness of tenancy sustainment. STAR and the Substance Misuse Housing Support Service had received Bs and Cs for the Quality Assessment Framework element of the SP review.

8.43 Assessment of the longer-term impact of the service on tenancy sustainment after the service has ceased to engage with tenants against set targets (for example, 98 per cent of clients to be still in accommodation or to have made a 'positive move' six months after termination of support) as carried out by RISE (discussed above) appears to be a relatively new area.

8.44 A few projects had identified areas for further service development. For instance, based on analysis of its referral outcomes and in consultation with agencies and

residents, STAR had secured funding for two posts relating to Welfare Rights and Policy, indicating the need for focused attention in these areas. The Substance Misuse Housing Support Team was considering the development of an early evening service and extending provision of surgeries across the city, including with supported housing projects and other voluntary agencies.

8.45 The general view among service providers was that tenancy sustainment played a valuable role in enabling vulnerable people and those with support needs to maintain their accommodation and plan a successful move into settled housing.

Service user perspectives

8.46 Generally, mechanisms for obtaining service user feedback were rather weak, given the importance now accorded to customer opinions in informing service development. The value of such perspectives is illustrated by service users' comments on the impact of the About Turn project as noted in the agency's internal evaluation. This indicates the complexity of clients' needs and the impact of the intensive and wide-ranging support provided by the project to families:

'*About Turn helped me to get accommodation, helped to get children back to school and Michael's [name changed] attendance at school improved*'

'*I wouldn't have managed without About Turn. I haven't had to commit a crime to get deposit for a property. It has helped me stay off drugs even when I was tempted by others*'

8.47 Similarly, the four service users of the Harrow FSTS scheme interviewed by the research team were unanimous in their view that both the practical and emotional support provided had been appropriate and useful in enabling them to sustain their tenancy. In the words of one service user:

'*He just comes round and asks if you have any letters to sort out…he is very good…at the moment he has helped me sort out problems with my parents – I am pretty in debt with my parents, and the support worker speaks to my mum*'

Generally, service user interviewees spoke highly of the agency, citing, in particular, the experience and understanding of their Support Worker.

8.48 Barriers to increasing user involvement as identified by some agencies included the reluctance of some clients to engage in this due to stigma, the complexity of their own needs in sustaining their tenancy, and the desire to move on once they had completed a support programme.

8.49 Agencies attempting to encourage increased user involvement had met with varying degrees of success. For example, one tenancy sustainment team supporting former rough sleepers had successfully obtained client feedback through customer

satisfaction surveys but reported limited participation in focus group discussions (Lomax and Netto, 2007). Another tenancy sustainment team in the same study reported that obtaining feedback from clients on services outside of formal settings (e.g. planned trips or excursions or when engaged in activities such as gardening) had proved effective in planning future activities.

8.50 An external evaluation commissioned by Beaumont Leys Independent Support Service (BLISS), STAR's predecessor organisation, provided some indication of the effectiveness of the service from the service user perspective. It found a high level of client satisfaction among the twenty parents interviewed, who appreciated the service's holistic approach and ability to respond to diverse needs. Users appreciated the way the service enabled them to sustain their tenancies in various ways, including debt management and liaison with a range of other agencies.

8.51 Given that service users are likely to have diverse needs and preferences in terms of how they engage with services, it is recommended that service providers consider a number of approaches in seeking their views. These may include:

- customer surveys;
- open days;
- focus group discussions; and
- one to one meetings in both formal and informal settings.

8.52 Service providers should also critically consider the extent to which service users may be involved in delivering services. This may include:

- providing feedback on ongoing activities or support services;
- inclusion in the planning of future activities; and
- representation in decision-making mechanisms, such as management committees.

8.53 It is also important for service providers to consider the extent to which clients need to be supported in participating in service development. For instance, the Substance Misuse Support service in Leicester had planned for a dedicated officer to address user involvement issues and allocated some funds for this purpose.

Cost-effectiveness assessment

8.54 The following section relates to Leicester City Council's STAR project. The service was provided by six area teams, each comprising eight staff. Total annual costs were £1,363,875 including overheads. The teams worked to support vulnerable families in council housing, with the overall aim of helping them to maintain tenancies.

Households were supported from a period of three months up to two years, but usually support did not extend beyond 12 months. Reasons for referral included risk of homelessness (21%) but also mental ill health, older people with support needs, physical disability, domestic violence, and young people at risk.

8.55 Tenancy support workers drew up a planned programme of support with clients. This included setting up and maintaining a home or tenancy, developing domestic skills, developing social skills, managing finance and benefit claims, gaining access to other services, finding other accommodation, advice, advocacy, liaison, counselling and support. It is likely that the service resulted in benefits beyond housing outcomes such as lower evictions, rent arrears, and homelessness, for example savings in social care, residential care, and reduced hospital admissions for people with mental health problems.

8.56 Given the diverse goals and activities undertaken by this project, it was difficult to assess how tenancy sustainment contributed to homelessness prevention alone. It was not possible to follow the standard approach adopted for other services because of the absence of a clearly defined counterfactual scenario and the lack of data on housing outcomes. In order to give some indication of cost effectiveness therefore, the analysis therefore took an aggregate perspective by comparing numbers of evictions from council housing before and after the scheme was introduced (though it must, of course, be acknowledged that we cannot be entirely certain that observed changes in eviction numbers result entirely from changes in tenancy support activity).

8.57 In 2000-01 the number of annual evictions from council house tenancies in the city was 325 but it fell by 45 per cent to 180 in 2004-05. This occurred despite a more concerted effort by the council to be firmer with tenants about rent arrears which might, all other things being equal, have been expected result in increased evictions. The reduction in the number of evictions was believed by the Council to be a direct consequence of the project and the analysis estimated the savings incurred based on the assumption that all 'prevented evictions' would have involved families.

8.58 The cost of keeping a homeless family in temporary housing in Leicester at the time of this research was £2,829, which included the cost of providing two bedroom self contained temporary accommodation for an average of five weeks, plus the provision of support. If the total reduction of 145 evictions could be attributed to the STAR project then this could have resulted in a total £410,205 of savings in temporary accommodation costs (i.e. 145 x £2,829). In addition there would have been savings from preventing an eviction, circa £4,000 per household (see Annex 4 para A4.18), and £300 'processing costs' per homelessness application prevented. Across 145 'prevented evictions' these savings totalled £623,500 (145 x (£300 +

£4,000)) contributing to an overall saving to the Council of £1,033,705 (£410,205 + £623,500) This figure is crucially based on the sum saved by an eviction. This is arguably on the high side because it assumes all 'prevented evictions' would have involved families and, furthermore, as noted above, there is no certainty that the recorded fall in evictions is entirely attributable to the introduction of tenancy sustainment support. In any case, the identified 'potential savings' as calculated here are still lower than the total cost of the project (£1.0M compared with £1.3M).

8.59 Given the scheme's relatively large revenue cost, its activities cannot be economically justified solely in terms of the resulting potential 'direct savings' due to homelessness prevention. On the other hand the analysis did not assess the project's multiple objectives - and the other potential public sector cost savings are likely to be substantial. Examples would include potential savings to services for which tenancy sustainment intervention may substitute or prevent the need for crisis intervention, such as Social Services or Mental Health support. Beyond this, it may well be that STAR's relatively large scale (and, consequently, high costs) means that it is not representative of most tenancy sustainment projects currently operated by local authorities.

What works?

8.60 Two factors were identified by all agencies as key to enabling tenants to sustain their tenancies:

- Flexible and client-centred service provision;
- Close liaison between key agencies and commitment to building in support from other agencies; and

An example of the former was provided by RISE which sought to address client non-engagement through increased flexibility; for example, meeting clients at their homes instead of at office premises. In relation to the latter, About Turn, for example, adopted a highly collaborative approach at the stage of considering whether to accept a referral, typically holding a case conference with partner agencies to inform this decision.

8.61 Timely intervention has also been identified as critical for supporting tenants to maintain their tenancies (Lomax and Netto, 2007). The following measures were identified as facilitating this:

- Active promotion of the service to other agencies and groups such as Tenants Associations and service providers;
- Early contact with the client on referral; and
- Prompt access to crisis intervention support.

8.62 The commitment and experience of tenancy sustainment workers was identified as an essential element of the service in responding flexibly to clients' needs. (Lomax and Netto, 2007). Factors identified as contributing to staff development in this area include:

- Pro-active sourcing and engagement with training; and
- Sharing of good practice within the team, with other tenancy support teams and to other local authorities.

8.63 STAR was highlighted as an example of good practice in a briefing on preventing repeat homelessness (ODPM, 2003b). In addition to the factors identified above, STAR reported that key factors contributing to the effectiveness of its service included the agency's:

- community-based ethos which facilitates access by clients in their local area and which encourages a sense of ownership within the local community;
- integration into community projects helping support tenancy sustainment, e.g. Sure Start; and
- generic provision enabling clients to be supported with other problems as they arise.

8.64 The ability of individual projects to facilitate access to social housing for a client group otherwise potentially excluded, was also identified as important in preventing homelessness. For example, Canterbury City Council had agreed to East Kent Cyrenians having direct referral rights (up to 30 per year) to local authority vacancies. Support workers identifying an existing client believed able to manage an independent tenancy – even where this entailed the provision of ongoing support – could nominate such individuals directly. This arrangement facilitated the creation of vacancies in East Kent Cyrenians' stock for people with higher-level support needs whilst, at the same time, regulating the flow of vulnerable tenants into council properties.

8.65 The physical location of the service can also contribute to its accessibility and increase scope for joint working. For example, the resettlement and tenancy sustainment work carried out by the SCRINE Foundation was facilitated by its location within the Open Centre, incorporating a night drop-in shelter as well as a day centre.

8.66 One independent advice agency perspective was that the effectiveness of tenancy sustainment services depended on their being viewed by clients as independent and playing a befriending and advocacy role as opposed to a housing management/landlord role.

Barriers and constraints

8.67 The short-term nature of funding regimes was reported by agencies such as About Turn and the SCRINE Foundation as a problem. For instance, About Turn had received ODPM (now Communities and Local Government) funding for an initial 9 month period (March – December 2004), and three months additional funding (January to March) was to be provided by Bradford West Community Housing Trust. According to the agency, funding constraints limited the number of clients that services could engage with at any one time – a particular issue for agencies working intensively with clients with complex needs. They also restricted the extent to which agencies could plan and develop services to respond more flexibly to clients' needs.

8.68 Weaknesses in inter-agency working and associated difficulties in accessing particular services were also cited as undermining the effectiveness of some projects. For example, both STAR and the SCRINE Foundation identified a lack of accessibility to mental health services for their clients.

8.69 Other common barriers and constraints identified by case study projects included:

- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining appropriate staff, related to a lack of appropriate training; and
- The challenge involved in bench-marking a new kind of service, related to the need for a mechanism for exchange and sharing of good practice with other projects established across the country.

8.70 The Substance Misuse service in Leicester identified a shortfall in the provision of befriending support for clients who no longer required intensive support. This is indicative of a more general need for potentially vulnerable tenants to be able to access either low-level, ongoing support, as well as intensive support.

8.71 Concerns about the accessibility and appropriateness of tenancy sustainment services for ethnic minority communities emerged even in areas where they constituted a significant presence. STAR in Leicester reported that it had a multi-ethnic team with the resources to communicate in thirteen languages, and that it publicised its services through promotional leaflets in community languages. The agency reported that it nevertheless faced problems in making its services accessible to ethnic minority communities. This was a problem also shared by the Substance Misuse Team in Leicester. Whilst other projects did not raise this issue, ethnic monitoring of agency service users was not widely evident.

Chapter summary and conclusions

8.72 Many local authorities offer some form of support for newly rehoused, formerly homeless households, to help them retain their tenancies. Whilst such services play a potentially important role in preventing homelessness, they are highly diverse in character in relation to, for example, their intensity and duration of support provision, the clients they target, and how they are funded.

8.73 Tenancy support typically includes help with claiming benefits, budgeting and debt management, accessing community resources and services, furnishing accommodation, and helping individuals find meaningful occupation. Support is typically client-centred and based on the regular monitoring and reviewing of clients' needs.

8.74 The Supporting People programme is a major source of funding for tenancy sustainment work. Performance management and monitoring is strongly influenced by this and other funding sources.

8.75 Tenancy sustainment services are argued by service providers to be essential in enabling vulnerable people and those with complex support needs to maintain tenancies or to plan successful moves to settled accommodation. However, due to inadequate monitoring, there is relatively little hard evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of such approaches. Case study evidence suggests that only rarely do services record, for example, the proportion of supported tenancies remaining intact after a given period.

8.76 The findings reported here suggest therefore that there is further scope for improved routine statistical monitoring to demonstrate service effectiveness.

8.77 Lack of service user participation in service development was identified as a common weakness of tenancy sustainment projects. It is recommended that service providers develop a range of approaches to monitoring client satisfaction and facilitating participation in service development.

8.78 Assessing the cost-effectiveness of tenancy sustainment is problematic, mainly because the counter-factual scenario is not easy to identify. Nevertheless, the sample scheme subject to our financial assessment appeared to be highly cost-effective due to its assumed role in helping to reduce council evictions.

8.79 Key elements of 'what works' include flexible and client-centred provision, and close working with other agencies. The need for timely intervention was also highlighted, including the need for active promotion of the service and early contact with clients on referral.

8.80 Common barriers and constraints experienced by projects included the 'short term' nature of funding, weaknesses in inter-agency working, difficulties in recruiting or retaining appropriate staff and the challenges involved in bench-marking and target-setting for a new kind of service.

Chapter 9

Conclusions and recommendations

Chapter scope

9.1   This chapter returns to the four objectives of the research, namely to:

- evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to preventing homelessness;
- provide evidence on value for money of homelessness prevention work;
- make recommendations on the future monitoring of homelessness prevention work by both local authorities and central government; and
- produce a good practice guide on homelessness prevention.

The good practice guide based on this research has been published as *Homelessness Prevention: a guide to good practice* (Communities and Local Government, 2006). This chapter draws conclusions on the other three research objectives.

The effectiveness of homelessness prevention initiatives

9.2   By definition, assessing the effectiveness of action to prevent a hypothetical outcome is difficult. There is always a degree of uncertainty about the counterfactual scenario – what would have happened in the absence of the intervention. Nevertheless, at least with respect to certain forms of intervention the evidence appears sufficient to confirm that a significant proportion of such actions succeed in preventing homelessness. For example:

- Harrow LBC reported that more than a quarter of its landlord mediation interventions resulted in the preservation of private tenancies under threat (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1);
- A fifth of households assisted by Shelter's Bournemouth Housing Advice Service are helped to avoid homelessness or secure a permanent tenancy (see Chapter 3, Table 3.2);
- Rent arrears repayment agreements (preventing eviction from social rented tenancies) are made by over a third of households assisted by Telford & Wrekin BC's housing advice team (see Chapter 3, Table 3.3); and

● Family mediation in one local authority succeeded in enabling nearly 50 per cent of young people referred to the service to return to or remain in the family home (see Chapter 5, Table 5.4).

Figure 9.1 – Trends in Home Ownership Affordability and Homelessness in England, 1998-2006

Sources: Council of Mortgage Lenders Statistics Pack and CLG
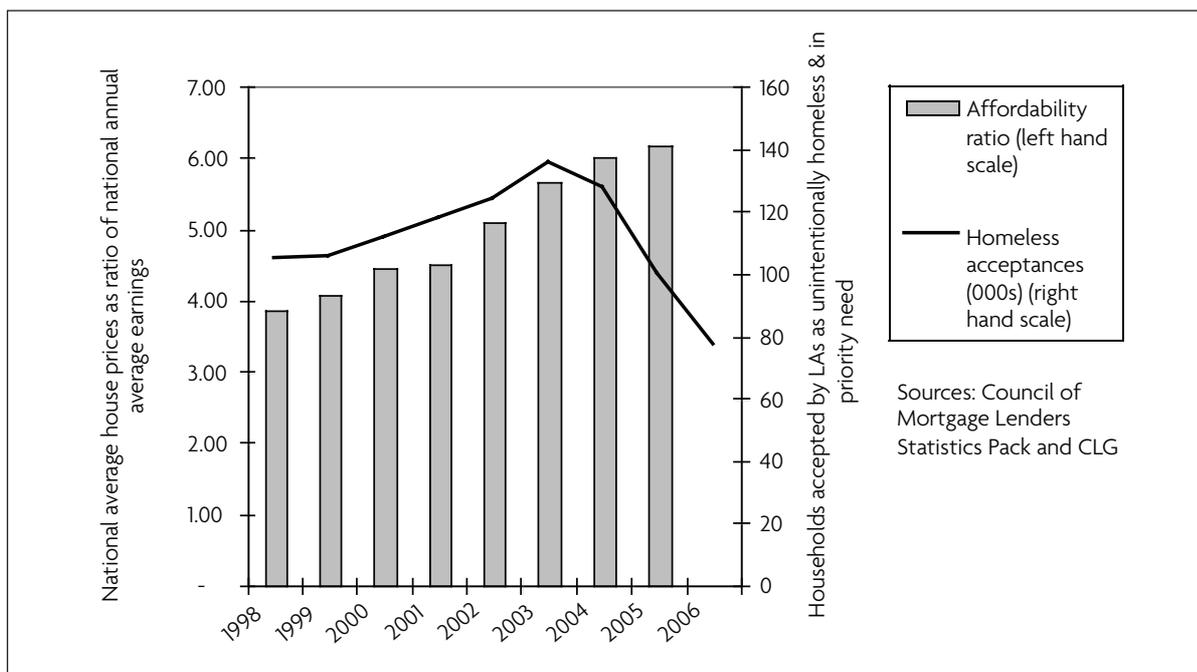
9.3 The evidence recounted in para 9.2 is consistent with the national downward trend in homelessness acceptances since 2003 with the introduction of homelessness strategies, and somewhat ahead of any peak in the housing market cycle (see Figure 9.1). As shown in Figure 9.1, private sector housing continued to become less affordable in both 2004 and 2005, whilst homelessness acceptances were already falling. Statutory homelessness trends have been closely related to changing patterns of affordability over the past 20 years. And, given that there have been no major changes in other socio-economic drivers of homelessness (e.g. unemployment rates) in recent years it seems reasonable to assume that a continuing rise in homelessness acceptances from 2003 could have been expected.

9.4 The scale of the post-2003 reduction in official homelessness numbers is also dramatic (see Figure 9.1). By the end of 2006 households accepted as eligible, homeless and in priority need ('acceptances') had fallen by over 50 per cent from the peak figure of Q2 2003. This is by far the sharpest reduction in the figures on record. Similarly, the number of recorded assessment decisions has also fallen sharply (see Figure 2.5).

9.5 It therefore appears that, at least in part, dwindling acceptance numbers in recent years reflect the growing impact of homelessness prevention practices in constructively helping people avoid being without accommodation. The post-2003 trend shown in Figure 9.1 might also be influenced by the expanding private rented sector which may be affording low income households improved access to accommodation and thus reducing the pressures underlying homelessness applications.

9.6 Recently declining acceptances are also likely to result from changed local authority practices in handling approaches from people claiming homelessness. This might, for example, reflect authorities developing a better understanding of their duties under the homelessness legislation thanks to help from a team of Central Government specialist advisers. At the same time however, while the direct evidence from this research is limited, it seems highly likely that falling homelessness numbers have to some extent resulted from changed LA procedures of two kinds. Firstly, where prevention efforts precede formal homelessness assessment and, secondly where authorities have adopted a stricter interpretation of having a 'reason to believe' that a household 'may be homeless' (thereby triggering a statutory duty to conduct a formal assessment). As explained in detail in paras 2.38 and 2.40-2.41 the first of these approaches could amount to unacceptable gate-keeping whilst the second approach fails to recognise that the threshold for triggering the statutory duty is very low.

9.7 A related point is that 'success statistics' of the kind set out in para 9.2 reflect only the immediate outcome of an intervention and say nothing about the longer-term sustainability of 'solutions' achieved. The research evidence suggests that – at least until recently – few local authorities have made any attempt to measure longer term impacts of their homelessness prevention activities. Where this has been monitored (as, for example, in Harrow) there tends to have been an exclusive focus on whether the person assisted made a subsequent homelessness application within a given time period (e.g. 12 months).

9.8 It is to be hoped that the establishment of Best Value Performance Indicator 213, with its requirement to enumerate sustained housing advice-brokered 'solutions', will encourage local authorities to focus greater attention on this area. The indicator is certainly a useful signal from Central Government that homelessness prevention practice needs to be about more than simply addressing short term problems.

9.9 Nevertheless, in spite of considerable efforts to tightly specify BV213, the research team believes that inconsistent approaches are likely to render inter-authority comparisons as hazardous at best. It is anyway questionable whether local authority 'scores' on BV213 will – in themselves – provide sufficient evidence to underpin any definitive judgements about the effectiveness of homelessness prevention.

Nevertheless, the indicator's requirements may be expected to stimulate many authorities to improve their homelessness prevention monitoring systems. This could lay the groundwork for subsequent research which would stand a much better chance of being able to judge more definitively the effectiveness of homelessness prevention.

9.10 As noted above, another serious problem in assessing service effectiveness is the difficulty of defining the counterfactual scenario. Particularly in the case of services such as tenancy sustainment support, this hampers evaluation. Part of the reason that such difficulties arise is that authorities generally have such a weakly defined sense of the need for the collation of baseline (i.e. pre-intervention) data. At the same time, it could be that in making available earmarked resources (e.g. Homelessness Grant funding) Central Government could lay down clearer guidelines for the collection of such data.

9.11 Whilst it is currently difficult to reach any definitive conclusions about homelessness prevention effectiveness, the changing approaches to homelessness work stimulated by Central Government's lead on this issue must be seen as beneficial. There is clearly great merit in the 'housing options' concept as integral to a customer-focused (as opposed to a purely legalistic) approach to housing need and homelessness. Similarly, the priority typically now attached to developing a more pro-active style of operation is to be welcomed. Specific manifestations of such approaches include:

- the presumption in favour of home visits in cases involving 'family/friend exclusions';
- local authority efforts to develop good working relations with private landlords to facilitate 'early warning' of problems which pose a potential threat to a household's tenancy;
- the development of local networks encompassing agencies in direct contact with people potentially at risk of homelessness able to provide local authorities with early warning of where this may be in prospect for a member of an agency's client group; and
- a social landlord presumption in favour of early intervention in cases where rising rent arrears place tenants at potential risk of eviction.

9.12 Implemented as intended (see Pawson, Netto and Jones, 2006), homelessness prevention is in tune with the Government's wider objectives of empowering and enfranchising disadvantaged people. It is, at the same time, clear that some authorities have interpreted the concept rather narrowly and this is evident – for example – in councils where interventions are largely or entirely targeted on family households and others believed likely to qualify as 'priority cases' if assessed under

the homelessness legislation. Such schemes will, of course, be easier to justify on cost-effectiveness grounds. As stressed in the accompanying good practice guide however, it is important that homelessness prevention activities also cater for single people and childless couples seen as unlikely to meet the test of priority need. Similarly – as emphasized at various points throughout this report – local authorities need to ensure that their prevention practices are consistent with their responsibility to conduct formal assessments of all households initially judged as giving reason to believe that they may be homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Evaluating homelessness prevention cost-effectiveness

9.13 Assessing the cost effectiveness of homelessness prevention brought about a number of challenges in terms of the variety of schemes, data availability, theoretical difficulties, and the blurred line dividing temporary and permanent housing solutions. Some 'prevention initiatives' also had multiple objectives, and these have not been formally accounted for in the evaluation of costs and benefits.

9.14 This exercise by its very nature necessarily involved approximations and assumptions. In the absence of local data estimates such as the cost of carrying out a homelessness assessment and the cost of leasing management, costs have been applied across the sample of case studies. These have been drawn from data provided by individual authorities or agencies. This is not entirely satisfactory as these costs do depend in part on local management practices and circumstances.

9.15 A particular problem is that the stay of homeless people in temporary housing varies with local circumstances. This analysis took a maximum time frame of a year although some homeless households can be in temporary accommodation for considerably longer – for example in London and other areas of high housing demand.

9.16 With the exception of the Leicester STAR project the cost savings were calculated entirely based on direct temporary housing expenditure and ignored any social support costs as discussed in Annex 4 (paras A4.5-A4.13). In fact, social support costs for certain types of 'vulnerable' households may continue after permanent rehousing has been achieved. For example, young people aged 16-17 may need continuing support once rehoused whereas if they had returned or remained at home their family would have fulfilled this role. In Telford & Wrekin, support costs for a single parent family in temporary accommodation represented £2,756 per year. On the other hand, these support costs may be necessary for some households in temporary or permanent accommodation.

9.17 This analysis focused entirely on the cost effectiveness to the public sector. However, there are also many benefits to people and private landlords brought about by homelessness prevention measures that are not formally assessed within our framework. For example, many of the initiatives provide an avenue to semi-permanent housing in the private sector that for at least some households is preferable to the housing available to them in the social housing sector. Preventing homelessness also avoids substantial social disruption and resettlement costs.

9.18 Notwithstanding caveats about data limitations, the message of the analysis is that homelessness prevention can be cost-effective, a conclusion that would be even more amplified if all social support cost savings could have been included. Even where such costs are omitted, our analysis suggests, for example, that net savings 'per household assisted' average:

- £2,900 for the rent deposit/Finder's Fee schemes run by Bournemouth and Harrow;
- £653 and £1,255 respectively for the family mediation schemes run by Authority A and Authority C; and
- £3,500 for the sanctuary (domestic violence victim support) scheme run by Harrow.

9.19 Direct comparison of cost-effectiveness between different forms of homelessness prevention is inappropriate, as local circumstances not only determine costs but also affect policy priorities and imperatives. Initiatives targeted towards helping applicants retain existing accommodation are relatively cheap to implement. Family mediation programmes, credit union schemes and domestic violence sanctuaries are not only cost-effective but do not depend on private sector provision of housing. In other cases initiatives depend on the private sector for a solution. Thus, there is a caveat to the overall conclusion. It may not be possible to translate such initiatives to other locations where private sector lettings are in shorter supply.

9.20 Our cost-effectiveness conclusions also depend on:

- The sustainability of 'solutions'. There is little or no information available to judge whether people assisted through schemes such as mediation or rent deposit referrals are able to remain in the relevant property for the medium term. Similarly, where the 'solution' involves facilitating access to a private tenancy, a private landlord's decision not to grant an extension beyond an initial six-month term could still mean a deferred statutory obligation to rehouse displaced tenants; and
- The appropriate identification of households to refer to homelessness prevention services. For initiatives targeted at priority homeless households this requires that assessment staff are able to make accurate judgements about whether

households reporting homelessness or the threat of homelessness are both (a) likely (without assistance) to lose their accommodation and (b) likely to meet 'priority need' criteria. In these circumstances prevention and assessment should, in any case, proceed in tandem (see para 2.41).

9.21 The most important saving from cost-effective initiatives is derived from the length of time in temporary housing that would have arisen if the household had become homeless. This varies substantially with locality and is, in turn, a function of the availability of social housing. The benefits to the public purse of homelessness prevention are therefore partly driven by the paucity of social housing.

9.22 Some of the homelessness prevention initiatives that harness and thereby promote the private sector arguably have potential crossover benefits to social housing by diverting demand away from that sector. In doing so it may facilitate a shorter queue for transfer or waiting list applicants seeking to access social housing. However, such a conclusion is partly dependent on the expanded provision of family housing by the private sector. In addition, if households are prevented from becoming homeless then there are consequences for the queue for temporary housing and this could reduce the cost of such housing. For example it could mean the faster transfer of homeless households from expensive Bed and Breakfast accommodation to leased accommodation.

9.23 Homelessness prevention measures such as housing advice and tenancy sustainment schemes address potential homelessness problems early in the process. These have been the most difficult to assess in terms of cost effectiveness because of their diversity of activities, and outputs that are not easily measured against any counter-factual scenario. Such schemes nevertheless offer potentially the greatest benefits by early resolution of problems, especially for social housing tenants, and without the dependency of additional private sector resources.

Future monitoring of homelessness prevention

Best value and other performance indicators

9.24 As noted above, the new BVPIs on homelessness prevented through housing advice and repeat homelessness are much to be welcomed. It is implicit that, in this context, 'housing advice' should be broadly defined to encompass many of the homelessness prevention interventions discussed in this report, assuming that these involve – at some point – housing advice casework. This is irrespective of whether the staff member most directly involved has the title of 'housing advice officer' – or even works directly for the authority concerned[31]. Provided that they stemmed from 'housing advice referrals, actions such as family reconciliation through

[31] The PI definition allows for the possibility that the 'advice provider' will be an agency funded to deliver this service by the council.

mediation, or referral to a private tenancy facilitated by a council-funded rent deposit payment should certainly be recorded as 'advice' in this respect. Given the tendency for local authorities to think in 'departmental' terms it is important for Communities and Local Government to emphasise that 'housing advice activity' in this context could extend well beyond the activities of council-employed Housing Advice Section staff. The denominator for cases of 'homelessness prevented through housing advice' should be 'homelessness enquiries', defined as the number of cases involving households seeking help with housing on the grounds of (actual or anticipated) homelessness.

9.25 BV214 (repeat homelessness) also sends out a useful signal to local authorities about the need to find sustainable solutions to households accepted as homeless. In addition, we would argue that social landlords (Housing Associations as well as local authorities) should be required to monitor overall *tenancy sustainment rates* more directly. This would involve reporting on the proportion of (permanent and introductory) tenancies created in a given time period (say, a financial year) remaining intact for a given time period (say six or 12 months). There is reason to believe that many landlords would find this a relatively straightforward task (see para 2.57).

9.26 Like many other 'performance indicators' tenancy sustainment rates as defined here would act as 'can openers' – pointers to the possible need for more in-depth investigation and/or intervention (e.g. in relation to a local authority reporting tenancy sustainment rates well below those of similar local authorities). More importantly, trend over time data on tenancy sustainment rates could help to evaluate the impact of changes to services specifically aimed at helping tenants retain accommodation.

Broader monitoring principles

9.27 In their contacts with local authorities relating to grant funding, Communities and Local Government's specialist homelessness advisors should make it clear that, whilst reduced homelessness applications and acceptances are always welcome, the success of homelessness prevention initiatives should be judged mainly according to more direct measures of whether they have met their specific objectives. Thus, the effectiveness of – say – family mediation should be measured primarily according to the proportion of referrals where the outcome was the reconciliation of previously estranged family members, rather than according to the proportion of referred applicants subsequently *not accepted* as homeless.

9.28 As noted in Chapter 2, we believe it important that 'expressed demand' from households claiming homelessness is fully recorded to properly underpin the new BVPI on housing advice. In assessing the scale and effectiveness of an authority's actions in countering homelessness it is vital that 'activity statistics' (e.g. numbers of referrals, households provided with advice or rehoused) can be viewed in the context of the full extent of the problem.

Monitoring service quality

9.29 Any overall judgement about the effectiveness of homelessness prevention initiatives needs to address service quality, as well as statistical measures of service outcomes. In part, such an assessment ought to be informed by the views and reported experiences of households 'assisted' through such initiatives. It is recommended in the companion Communities and Local Government good practice guide (Pawson, Netto and Jones, 2006), that local authorities should (whether routinely or periodically) collect data on service user satisfaction. This is consistent with the principles of Best Value. Whilst the current research attempted to elicit service user views on homelessness prevention practices, this was necessarily on a scale too small to generate any conclusive assessment. In the context of any future Central Government research on homelessness services there could be a case for investigating customer perspectives on a larger scale (see Pawson, Davidson & Netto, 2007).

9.30 More generally, the current research was not set up as an in-depth investigation of homelessness prevention service quality. Activities such as case file checking and mystery shopping were beyond the scope of the project. Such activities are more the province of the Housing Inspectorate and we would recommend that, in its scrutiny of homelessness services, the HI devotes more attention to this area.

9.31 The Inspectorate already takes an interest in local authority homelessness prevention activities. However, a reading of recently published reports suggests that this could be pursued in greater depth. Mystery shopping involving housing options interviews, for example, could help to shed light on (a) how a local authority satisfies itself that there is any potential for a family reconciliation where a young person reports being ejected by parents, and (b) whether requiring the young person to 'return home' in the short term places them at any risk of violence or abuse.

9.32 Another recommendation relating to the Housing Inspectorate involves the Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) criteria set out by the Inspectorate for each aspect of housing services. The 'KLOEs' form a key element of the HI's inspection framework and are consequently influential in shaping local authority housing services. The existing homelessness KLOE (Audit Commission, 2004) could benefit from revision to provide a stronger and more specific focus on prevention issues.

9.33 In the context of homelessness service inspections, the Housing Inspectorate should also (if it does not already) routinely take soundings from local advice agencies on their assessment of local authority homelessness services and follow up any assertions of malpractice. The Inspectorate could also usefully collate a 'lessons from inspections' report in relation to homelessness services in general, and prevention activities, in particular (see for example, Communities Scotland, 2005).

Annex 1

Case study methodology

Case study local authority selection

In selecting case study authorities the aim was to identify a diverse set of areas in relation to authority size, type and local housing market context. However, rather than being strictly representative, case study authorities were selected to include those believed to be relatively active in relation to homelessness prevention. This assessment took account of the following:

- an analysis of local authority monitoring returns to ODPM (now Communities and Local Government) made by authorities in receipt of at least £100,000 in ODPM Homelessness Directorate funding in 2003-04;
- authorities accredited with 'beacon status' for their homelessness services; and
- ODPM Homelessness Directorate recommendations based on staff contacts with local authorities.

Based on this, a shortlist of authorities was drawn up (see Table A1.1).

Case study work - overview

  (i) in-depth interviews with local authority staff etc;

 (ii) focus group work with homelessness service users (five focus groups across the ten case study authorities); and

(iii) collection of data.

Selecting case study schemes

Having selected local authorities, we drew on data held by ODPM to:

- identify the homelessness prevention initiatives under way in each authority and, of these, decide which were to be examined in detail in the course of the case study work ('case study schemes'); and
- identify which of the 'case study schemes' proposed as the subject of service user focus groups (see Annex 2).

In making these selections, the aim was to ensure that, across all 10 case studies, adequate representation of each type of initiative was achieved.

In-depth interviews

Within each local authority case study we undertook an initial face-to-face interview with the manager responsible for homelessness. The purpose of this meeting was to develop an understanding of:

- the local context for homelessness policy – e.g. how the function is organised, specific priorities, challenges and constraints;
- the authority's range of homelessness prevention activities; and
- other key planks of the local homelessness strategy.

In each case study authority we also undertook an interview with an independent advice agency manager. The aim here was to gain an external perspective on the local authority homelessness strategy and practices.

In addition to these meetings the researcher also conducted interviews specific to each selected homelessness prevention initiative. In some (e.g. smaller) authorities, these involved extended discussions with homelessness managers. In other cases, the relevant interviewee(s) were other local authority staff and/or staff of independent agencies providing a specific service (e.g. family mediation) under contract. These interviews aimed to establish:

- the nature of the initiative – details of:
  - o the service provided
  - o target client group
  - o referral arrangements
- how the initiative came to be established and how it is planned to develop in future;
- procurement and funding arrangements; and
- performance management and monitoring systems and outputs.

Table A1.1 – Case Study Local Authorities and the Homelessness Prevention Initiatives Run or Commissioned by Each

Local Authority	Family mediation	Enhanced housing advice	Rent deposit scheme	DV victim support	Tenancy sustain-ment	Landlord mediation	Private sector leasing	Ex-offender outreach	Other 1	Other 2	Other 3
Bournemouth	x	x*	x*		x	x*	x*				
Bradford	x	x*		x	x*						
Bristol	x	x*	x	x*				x*	Education, training & employment project		
Canterbury	x		x*	x	x*	x	x	x	Education, training & employment project		
Colchester	x		x*	x*					Debt counselling	Supported lodgings for single homeless	Creation of emergency accom
Harrow	x	x	x*	x*	x*	x*					
Leicester		x		x					Support for substance abusers		
Sheffield	x		x	x*				x	BME advice project*		
Sutton	x	x*	x*			x					
Telford & Wrekin		x*			x				Credit union*	Advice/support for non-priority homeless*	
No of projects	7	7	7	7	5	4	2	3	6	2	1
No of case study main foci	5	5	5	4	3	2	1	1	2	-	-

Key: x = scheme operational; *case study centre of attention

Annex 2

Homelessness prevention initiatives: researching service user views

Across the ten case study authorities we planned to convene five focus groups bringing together homeless and formerly homeless households who had made use of homelessness prevention services. These groups were to be stratified to reflect users of different types of service (e.g. tenancy support/advice services vs. family mediation). The services targeted for focus groups were:

- family mediation (2);
- domestic violence victim support;
- tenancy sustainment; and
- housing advice specifically targeted at ethnic minority households.

It was hoped that these groups would encompass around 30-40 individuals (6-8 participants per group).

In practice, it proved very difficult to arrange focus group meetings. Whilst case study local authorities (and partner agencies) were very co-operative in helping to facilitate such events, the response from potential participants was rather poor. A number of planned focus group meetings had to be substituted by individual interviews so as to fit in with participants' availability.

In the end, four focus group meetings were held as follows:

- floating support (4 participants)
- landlord mediation (2 participants)
- domestic violence victim support (3 participants)
- housing advice for ethnic minority households (5 participants)

In addition, eight individual interviews were carried out involving clients of the following services:

- family mediation (2 interviews)
- advice on accessing private tenancies (5 interviews)

- supported lodgings (1 interview).

In total, the service user focus groups and interviews involved 22 individuals.
A topic guide derived from the key actor topic guide was developed for these meetings and interviews. Issues examined with service users were:

- Understanding of and views about the homelessness prevention service
- Contact with the service
- Nature of the support provided
- Satisfaction with the service
- Contact with other agencies
- Suggestions for further improvement of the service

Annex 3

Prison service case study work

The case study work reported on in Chapter 7 (Assisting Ex-offenders: Prison Based Housing Advice and Support Initiatives) was extended for this part of the study from the original project brief in order to include two prison-based homelessness prevention initiatives established by the Prison Service in England in addition to one local authority commissioned project (the Prison Homelessness Prevention Service, Bristol).

In preparation for this extension to the study, consultations and discussions were held with representatives from the Home Office, HM Prison Service, ODPM and NACRO[32] in order to explore the current policy, research and practice context to housing advice and support provision in prisons, to gather relevant documentation, and to discuss potential case study selection. Case studies were selected in order to explore models of housing advice and support provision aimed at post-release homelessness prevention among ex-prisoners.

As a result of this process, HM Prison Service negotiated permission with Prison Governors for a member of the Heriot-Watt University research team to undertake case study visits to:

- The Housing Department, BETA (Benefits, Employment, Training and Employment, HMP Winchester

- The VISION Project, HMP/YOI East Sutton Park.

For both case studies, interviews were held with a range of Prison Service and project staff, including interviews with three of the prisoner peer support workers involved the VISION Project. In addition, relevant documentation related to service aims, procedures and monitoring were gathered.

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[32] The crime reduction charity (www.nacro.org.uk)

Annex 4

Assessing the cost-effectiveness of homelessness prevention

Introduction

A4.1   The cost-effectiveness analysis undertaken for this research focused on 14 homelessness prevention projects or services in seven of the case study authorities.

A4.2   With the exception of housing aid/advice these projects were relatively new projects. This meant that the analysis was based on data gathered over a short time scale, often no more than two years, and usually only one. The essential approach was to compare the costs of providing these services with the benefits in terms of housing outcomes. A key issue for the analysis was what would have occurred if the preventative measures had not been in place. This is referred to as the counterfactual.

A4.3   Beneath the apparent simplicity of the approach are a series of difficult issues partly due to the variety of schemes and outcomes involved. In some cases, the approach was straightforward, for example mediation with young people to see if they were able to return to their original family home. The task became more complex – for example in the case of initiatives which provide accommodation in the private sector. The analysis in this instance was very different from the mediation example because the outcome also incorporated a new settled solution.

A4.4   A further issue was whose benefits and costs should be included. Naturally, local authorities see costs and savings in terms of their own balance sheets. In fact, these initiatives may only shift expenditure off their balance sheets whilst the relevant costs continue to exist. A crucial case in point involves households assisted to obtain private tenancies supported by central government funded Housing Benefit. Where homelessness costs are borne by other sectors of the state these are treated here as having a neutral effect (for example, costs incurred by local authorities but ultimately met by central government – e.g. through Housing Benefit subsidy – are not included in our calculations). On the other hand if costs previously met by the state were, under the 'prevention regime', borne by private landlords or private individuals (e.g. parents or relatives) then this was taken as a saving.

Homelessness costs

A4.5 Before the task of calculating the cost of homelessness can be undertaken, the question must be asked to whom? First, there is the household who becomes homeless. For the household members there are the financial costs and the psychological upsets of moving home forcibly. There is also the possibility of a move away from the current neighbourhood, with the potential disruptions to family life, friends, schooling and medical and other support.

A4.6 Some of the financial costs may be covered by insurance in the case of victims of flooding, fires, etc but these households tend to be a very small minority of homeless cases (less than 1% in Q1 2004, for example). The psychological costs may be even more severe for households forced to leave their home because of domestic violence. However, the single most common cause of statutory homelessness is where households are required to leave where they are staying by friends or family. For all households the threat or reality of not having a settled place to live is a common experience, and a cost difficult to evaluate.

A4.7 To the local authority there are expenses involved with conducting homelessness assessments and securing rehousing (including temporary accommodation) under their statutory obligations for those households deemed to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need. The costs of temporary accommodation will depend on local circumstances and the length of stay determined by the availability of suitable long term housing.

A4.8 Where homeless households are temporarily rehoused local authorities may also incur costs of providing additional services to these households and support on permanent resettlement. These costs encompass changing/ 'bussing' children to schools, changing general practitioners and health care providers, and the involvement of social services and the police. While funding for education and health services is on a per capita basis the transfer to another provider or even the act of homelessness itself (when there is no transfer) is likely to lead to additional cost implications through its disruptive impact. Social services are often involved when evictions include children or homelessness is associated with domestic violence.

A4.9 The trauma and dislocation of homelessness can bring stress related problems. Children can suffer from bed wetting, truancy, impeded progress at school, and arrested development of communication skills. Adults, similarly, are prone to absent themselves from work and lose their employment, suffer mental ill-health, substance abuse, and in some cases they turn to criminality.

A4.10 Temporary housing, especially bed and breakfast accommodation, is often not conducive to satisfactory family life. Dampness and overcrowding in long term 'temporary' housing has led to poor health such as eczema, asthma, bronchial problems, and gastro-enteritis especially amongst children. Constrained cooking facilities in temporary accommodation can contribute to poor diet. There are often limited opportunities to play for children.

A4.11 Living in (a series of) temporary housing placements, perhaps brought about by repeat homelessness, can also contribute to unplanned pregnancies, and the break up of traditional friendship networks and relationships. Children can stand out at school and be prone to bullying and exhibit behavioural problems such as clinginess and social withdrawal symptoms.

A4.12 The experience of homelessness can therefore have long term consequences not only for the health (in its widest sense) of homeless households, but also for their future economic prospects not least through the impaired educational achievement of children.

A4.13 There are inevitable public cost implications stemming from the pressures of homelessness and living in temporary accommodation. These range from day centres aimed at homeless people to a spectrum of community support services, including the health service, specialist educational support and social services.

A4.14 The question for this project was which of the homeless costs beyond statutory obligations should be included in our calculations. The research problem is that many of the wider costs are very difficult to quantify and some will have been incurred irrespective of homelessness, for example those linked to anti-social behaviour and those that have contributed to the occurrence of homelessness in the first place.

A4.15 Homelessness resulting from social landlord evictions can also generate considerable public costs. Some homelessness prevention schemes are specifically targeted at averting such evictions (see, for example, Chapter 3 – paras 3.12 and 3.46). Evictions are most commonly associated with rent arrears (though they occasionally result from anti-social behaviour), and bring an associated set of expenditures irrespective of any subsequent rehousing responsibilities. Legal evictions are usually the result of a protracted process often involving a series of court appearances and significant sums of money in legal fees. When the household is eventually evicted for rent arrears a considerable amount may have built up as a result of the length of the process, and these become virtually irrecoverable afterwards. Where anti-social behaviour is the reason for the eviction the legal process may have been even more complex. The state of the housing following an eviction may be very poor and the accommodation at the very least will require redecoration.

A4.16 The narrow costs of the eviction can include legal expenses, the cost of changing locks, redecoration and repair, lost rent and the cost of reletting. Preventative measures to reduce evictions in their broadest sense can also incorporate policies aimed at reducing the build up of rent arrears and so arguably the amount of rent arrears should be included in the savings with regard to these policies.

A4.17 A study in 2003 by Leicester City council of evictions brought about by anti-social behaviour in social housing produced the cost profiles in Tables A4.1(a) and (b). The costs in these tables exclude those associated with anti-social behaviour - which may be substantial and include theft and vandalism to surrounding properties, loss of revenue on other properties, police call outs and presence at court, fire service call outs, victim support, relocation of schooling and health services and social services involvement.

Table 8.1 Sheffield Domestic Abuse Floating Support Service:
Housing situation at end of support 2004-05

	(£)
Investigation and processing by housing officers	1,733
Repairs of damage to property	3,267
Reallocation costs for property	63
Loss of rent arrears	0
Loss of rent on vacant property	463
Court Hearings	1,836
Cost of Warrants	82
Total	**7,444**

(b) Profile 2

	(£)
Investigation and processing by housing officers	2,115
Repairs of damage to property	439
Reallocation costs for property	57
Loss of rent arrears	2,718
Loss of rent on vacant property	474
Court Hearings	1,317
Cost of Warrants	160
Total	**7,280**

Source: Leicester CC

A4.18 The Leicester examples are not scientifically selected but give an indication of the components of eviction costs and the costs to a social landlord of tenants moving. These costs will vary to some extent by location with variations in rents and wage rates. The length of a vacancy after a loss of a tenancy will also depend on housing type and neighbourhood. These figures suggest that the minimum costs of an eviction, ignoring rent arrears and repairs, are £1,700. Adding repairs will bring the minimum figure up to around £3,000, and an average figure of £4,000 seems plausible for an eviction from social housing. The largest potential variable costs are repairs and arrears.

A4.19 In contrast to the above scenario, most of the prevention initiatives considered in this report were directed at homelessness originating in the private rented sector or from the homes of parents, friends or relatives, rather than due to the loss of social rented tenancies. This reflects the statistical incidence of 'main causes' of homelessness amongst those accepted as being eligible and in priority need. Homelessness emanating from the private rented sector is frequently the consequence of the ending of a short assured tenancy lease without recourse to a court order. Assuming the landlord chooses to relet, losses to the landlord are incurred including rent voids, redecorating and re-advertising. It is questionable whether these costs to the private landlord should be included in this study as to a degree they may be regarded as a voluntary expenditure. They are not quantified here but form part of the negotiation in landlord/tenant mediation schemes, and are an underlying incentive to resolve disputes.

A4.20 In some instances there are also resettlement costs supported by public funding for example to furnish and equip the new home.

A4.21 The preceding paras illustrate that the costs of homelessness are neither uniform nor easily calculated, and clearly depend on the nature of the cause and the type of household involved. In this report no attempt is made to estimate the 'non pecuniary' costs to homeless households real as they are. Instead the perspective is to assess the benefits to the public purse of homelessness preventative measures encapsulated by the phrase 'spend to save'. As such the report ignores unpredictable homelessness caused by 'natural' disaster and focuses on policies aimed at preventing homelessness that occurs as a result of domestic or personal circumstances. On the other hand it does include the cost of eviction whether by local authority or housing association where appropriate.

Cost-effectiveness analysis methodology

A4.22 The principal research task here was to examine the costs of individual schemes and to consider what would have been the public sector costs if these policies had not been in place. To assess the latter the basic approach was to consider what would have happened to the (different types of) households concerned by focusing on individual housing outcomes. This involved considering what would have happened to the households concerned if they had not taken up the opportunity provided by the relevant initiative. In a few cases where the initiatives tend to lack a specific focus this was not possible and an aggregate assessment was undertaken.

A4.23 Temporary short term and permanent long term solutions blur in some instances especially where the private sector is harnessed as a means of preventing homeless. As the focus of this research was short term the study assumed a cut off point of one year even though in some instances in this study some homeless households could spend longer in temporary accommodation. Where households generally spent less time in temporary accommodation, authorities provided an estimated length of stay.

A4.24 A further issue arose from the essence of the research method, namely to assess the alternative to applying a homeless prevention measure is *what would have happened* in local circumstances. It was presumed that local practice followed national guidance on homelessness. Therefore the research assumed families spent a maximum of six weeks in bed and breakfast followed by self-contained private sector leased accommodation (the period in temporary accommodation varied with authority, and in some cases was less than six weeks).

A4.25 The data for the study was provided by the local authorities and agencies involved in delivering the schemes included in the evaluation. This encompassed not just costs but also information on the alternative housing outcomes for households. Where not all households targeted by a specific initiative were homeless and in priority need, and thus entitled to temporary housing, the local authority was asked to estimate the proportion who would have been so entitled, had an assessment been undertaken. Where such information was unavailable the analysis calculated what proportions of households would need to be otherwise found to be statutory homeless and in priority need in order to make the service cost effective, and then discusses the implications.

A4.26 The estimation of costs where households were temporarily rehoused in rented accommodation leased from the private sector for a relatively long period is not straight forward. Where many homeless households are on Housing Benefit and their alternative is living in the private rented sector it is necessary to compare the

cost of living in privately rented accommodation and the cost to local authorities of rented accommodation leased from the private sector.

A4.27 The estimation of this difference proved problematic. With such data not easily available the resolution was to assume that the difference between the costs of the household renting directly from private sector landlords, and the cost of using private sector leased accommodation, is the public sector management fee. Information from Harrow suggested the fee as between £50 and £72 per week. £60 was used as a general figure. It must be recognized that this approach has drawbacks because there are variations between local authorities in the way they lease properties. It is not clear how representative the Harrow figure is and it could be an over-estimate of the true cost for some authorities. Note that the assumption that households would otherwise be temporarily housed in Private Sector Leased (PSL) accommodation (rather than Local Authority/Housing Association leased accommodation) was made because PSL is the most commonly used form of temporary accommodation, and because local authorities advised that longer term placements would usually involve PSL.

A4.28 Where other local cost data are not available, comparative figures are similarly drawn from other local authorities, for example the cost of a homelessness assessment, a public sector eviction, etc. In the absence of data on local overheads costs the study presumed a general figure of 50 per cent.

A4.29 Given the short term perspective of the research, the analysis did not assess the relative costs within a discounted cash flow framework, although where set up costs were identified, these are noted in the text.

A4.30 Homelessness prevention measures, by their very nature, often help people who would not be entitled to statutory rehousing if they had become homeless. To estimate the cost-effectiveness of individual schemes it is therefore important to take this into account. In all the case studies an estimate was made of the proportion of households supported by the scheme for whom there would have been a statutory rehousing responsibility. The cost savings linked to homelessness prevention apply only to this group. The cost-effectiveness equation balanced the total savings from this group with the total costs of the initiative.

A4.31 For ease of presentation, the results from the cost-effectiveness assessment are generally presented not as a comparison of total costs and total savings but as the relationship between average costs and average savings. This was calculated by dividing each total by the number of households supported. It also enables comparison with the cost savings per individual household prevented from homelessness and aids the transparency of the calculations. For each initiative a table is presented summarising the arithmetic steps:

Statistic	Definition
Average costs per case	Total costs divided by the number of households supported by the scheme.
Costs per prevention	Total costs divided by the number of household who would otherwise have been statutory homeless.
Accommodation cost savings	Cost of temporary housing for a statutory homeless household.
Savings per prevention	Total savings from preventing one homeless household including temporary accommodation costs and other costs avoided such as resulting from an eviction.
Average Savings	Total savings from preventing homelessness under the scheme divided by the number of households supported.

A4.32 For each homelessness prevention scheme the analysis, where possible, estimated cost-effectiveness based on a comparison of the average costs per case compared to the average savings. In a minority of cases as noted above, the results are presented in aggregate form, usually in terms of how many homeless households would need to be prevented to cover the total costs.

A4.33 This research method took no account of the fact that rehousing in the private sector (where applicable) may also be seen as a more attractive offer, with wider geographical choice compared to the distinct possibility of placement in a difficult to let stigmatized area. On the other hand, it is analogous to temporary housing provided by local authority leased accommodation, as in some instances such an arrangement can stretch into years.

A4.34 A further limitation to this approach is that the analysis, by looking at averages, does not distinguish between fixed and variable costs. It may be where staff are already in post undertaking other duties that some of the costs of a particular scheme treated as variable here are fixed, and so the real cost of additional work by these staff should be zero. This logic also applies to overheads such as office space. Thus in some instances the costs have been overestimated.

Annex 5

Other case study initiatives

A5.1 Chapters 3-8 discuss the six forms of homelessness prevention most commonly operated by local authorities. Most of these were being run in several of the ten case study areas. This annex describes a range of less common homelessness prevention measures being run by one or more of the case study authorities. Some of these schemes were in their formative stages. In such instances there tended to be relatively little hard evidence on service performance. In all cases, however, the relevant authorities were confident that the schemes made a significant contribution to their overall homelessness prevention efforts. Specifically, the chapter examines:

- Supported Lodgings;
- Creation of emergency accommodation;
- Credit Union to facilitate eligibility for social housing; and
- Access to education and employment initiatives.

Supported lodgings

A5.2 Through its First Step scheme Colchester BC provided housing, advice and support to 16-17 year olds lacking the skills and experience to live independently, as an alternative to the isolation of a Bed & Breakfast or other temporary accommodation placement. Placements in supported lodgings – the home of a carer or guardian – could be for short or longer periods. The carer's role extended well beyond that of a landlord in encouraging and motivating the young person, as well as providing advice, support and help in developing independent living. Carers could be anyone with a spare room – whether tenant or owner-occupier. Applications from potential carers were assessed and personal details were checked by Social Services and the Criminal Records Bureau.

A5.3 Carers were provided with training covering issues such as child protection, equal opportunities, confidentiality, communication skills, dealing with difficult situations and where appropriate, welfare benefits, mental health and dealing with substance abuse. Ongoing support was also provided, with weekly contact from the council's Private Sector Lettings Team.

A5.4 Carers were paid £90 per week, to cover provision of accommodation, breakfast and an evening meal, and a personal contribution of £6 per week from the young person. The Council also provided a deposit guarantee of £500 to help cover costs for repairs or replacements to damaged property or possessions.

A5.5 No evaluative evidence of the project was available. However, an interview with a young male aged 18 years who had been living in Supported Lodgings for several months conveyed a positive impression of the service in terms of its role in providing stability and security in making the transition to independence.

Creation of emergency accommodation

A5.6 Bristol's Nightstop service provided emergency temporary accommodation for young people in volunteer hosts' houses whilst longer term solutions to resolving homelessness were explored. This was facilitated by National Children's Home (NCH) under contract. It was reported to have resulted in 'positive outcomes', including a return to the family home or moves to supported or independent accommodation (other than social housing) for 78 per cent of 2003-04 clients, with the support of mediation services.

A5.7 Colchester BC was planning to develop 10-15 emergency 'crash pads' as an alternative to Bed & Breakfast accommodation (upon which the council relied for emergencies at nights and weekends). This was to include 'responsible overprovision', accepting that such accommodation would need to run with voids in order to facilitate immediate access. Individuals accommodated would be expected to move to more secure temporary accommodation within four weeks.

Credit union scheme

Overview

A5.8 In a number of case study local authorities concerns were expressed that some social landlords were more reluctant to rehouse certain types of homeless households. One problem group involved vulnerable households in need of tenancy support, a scenario identified in earlier research (Pawson and Mullins, 2003). Such issues were typically of greater concern in areas where stock transfer had taken place because of the absence of the 'direct rehousing' option for the local authorities concerned.

A5.9 Another group sometimes 'frozen out' by landlords was households who were former tenants of the landlord concerned and who had surrendered a tenancy leaving unpaid rent arrears. Again, earlier research showed that a large proportion of social landlords had adopted formal 'exclusion' rules in relation to this group

(Pawson et al, 2001; Pawson and Mullins, 2003). It should be noted that a recent Housing Corporation circular advocated that housing associations should encourage such applicants to agree to arrears repayment plans and that, should such plans be honoured for 'a reasonable period', a house-seeker's application should be re-activated (Housing Corporation, 2004).

A5.10 Telford & Wrekin's 'Third, A Third, A Third' scheme was an attempt to prevent homelessness among individuals owing rent arrears to a social landlord. The project was a partnership venture between the Council, the Fairshare Credit Union, and local housing associations. It was intended to assist statutory homeless families unable to access permanent social housing due to 'former tenancy' rent arrears. The scheme aimed to prevent repeat homelessness, to enable permanent re-housing in a social housing tenancy and to reduce pressure on interim accommodation.

A5.11 As part of the agreement made with the house-seeker, the housing association wrote off one third of the value of the rent arrears, with another third being repaid by the local authority. Thus, the client was left responsible for a third of the rent arrears. This was repaid to the landlord by Fairshare as a loan to the tenant involving an agreed repayment programme (sometimes extending over a lengthy period). With Fairshare repaying the client's share of the rent arrears after receiving only four consecutive client repayments, the applicant could return very quickly to the Housing Register enabling them to access a permanent tenancy.

Process adopted by 'third, a third, a third' scheme

Stage 1: After a decision to accept a client as statutory homeless, the Council identified applicants eligible to join the scheme – i.e. those owed a full rehousing duty but unable to access social housing due to rent arrears. Such applicants were interviewed with the aim of completing the Credit Union (CU) referral form, and to establish an agreement with the creditor Housing Association and the applicant to clear the debt.

Stage 2: A meeting was arranged between the Council, the applicant and Fairshare CU to complete the application. This involved a written agreement, signed by all parties. Once accepted onto the scheme, the client took out a loan from the Fairshare CU for one third of the value of the arrears.

Stage 3: The applicant's income and outgoings were taken into account to ensure that the agreed time limit and payment amounts for the loan were realistic and affordable for the applicant. This formed part of the agreement, subsequently signed by the applicant and the CU. Fairshare also discussed savings options with the client, as well as providing budgeting and money management support and advice.

Stage 4: The applicant made weekly repayments to CU for at least four weeks.

Stage 5: Once four payments had been received by Fairshare, the CU paid the full loan amount to the creditor housing association. The association then wrote off their third of the debt, and a note was entered on the client's record indicating their participation in the scheme and, consequently, their eligibility to (re)join the Housing Register. The association would then actively consider rehousing the applicant. Having rehoused the applicant, the creditor association was repaid the Council's outstanding third of the debt.

Stage 6: The Council maintained contact with the client, and also had regular contact with the CU. Therefore, if problems arose, such as the cessation of client repayments, the Council could contact the client to seek to resolve the issue. Such contacts continued even after clients had been re-housed.

Origins and procurement

A5.12 The scheme was devised by Telford & Wrekin BC and introduced in 2003 in recognition of the need to assist homeless families with rent arrears to access permanent housing through housing associations, and as a means of empowering clients to 'save and take responsibility'. The principles of the scheme are perceived as simple but valuable. When the pilot was established, it was necessary for the authority to follow a robust process including legal clearance together with internal and external audit regarding the risk to public funding. This resulted in approval to run the scheme initially on a 12-month pilot basis.

Staffing and funding

A5.13 As part of their duties, one Telford & Wrekin homelessness officer was responsible for the CU Scheme, working in partnership with the Manager of Fairshare CU. Telford & Wrekin BC had made revenue funding available on the basis of 'invest to save'.

Performance and outcome monitoring

A5.14 No performance targets had been set. However, there was a commitment to case monitoring. It was anticipated that implementation of local performance measures would be a key recommendation of the report-back on outcomes from this pilot initiative. At the time of the research a total of 12 clients had participated in the scheme:

- All except one client were families, including eight lone parent families;
- Only one adult male (lone parent) has participated in the scheme to date; and
- All eligible households had successfully applied to be assisted under the scheme.

A5.15 Outcomes cited in the CU scheme review report included:

- 4 families successfully rehoused with assistance from the scheme;
- 2 families housed without aid of the scheme;
- 1 family removed from the scheme after defaulting on repayments;
- 4 families awaiting rehousing; and
- 1 family awaiting a Fairshare appointment.

Service effectiveness

A5.16 Notwithstanding its relatively small scale, the scheme was perceived by Telford and Wrekin BC to have been effective in meeting its objectives. At the time of the research, only one household had defaulted. In addition, the scheme sought to prevent financial difficulties occurring in the future by supporting the development of budget management skills.

A5.17 The main benefits of the service were seen as its ability to:

- facilitate fairly rapid re-housing for ex-housing association tenants. Once an individual had been accepted onto the scheme, only a short period of time (4- 6 weeks) needed to elapse before a household could regain their rehousing eligibility;
- Address debt in the form of rent arrears as the amount the client is liable for is reduced to one third of the total amount of the debt; and

- Address rent arrears by individuals making payments to the CU for their loan. As well as addressing current debt, individuals were supported in developing budgeting skills. The scheme demonstrated flexibility, with payments to the CU based on affordability for the individual.

A5.18 Since only one client had previous knowledge of the CU, the scheme was therefore also a way of introducing clients to CUs and the services offered, thus improving knowledge and awareness of financial services available to the client.

A5.19 Identified weaknesses were seen as including:

- Lack of any specific funding during the pilot period and beyond;
- Different levels of engagement with the scheme among local housing associations. For example, one association appeared to be accepting arrears repayment through the scheme but was failing to be proactive in seeking to rehouse the house-seeker concerned (despite the understanding that the association receiving repayment would take responsibility for rehousing); and
- Its perceived unsuitability for certain groups – e.g. young people.

A5.20 An independent agency staff member interviewed by the research team described the scheme as 'excellent', demonstrating 'a very good example of collaborative working' and a sound means of spreading the financial impact of rent arrears. The potential for application of the scheme to the private rented sector is worthy of further investigation.

Educational initiatives

A5.21 Educational initiatives included the development of housing advice and preventative homelessness advice to young people deemed to be at high risk of homelessness. Telford & Wrekin BC was in the process of developing preventative housing advice for secondary school pupils. The intention here was to develop a package of information, advice and support targeted at excluded young people, an identified high-risk group for homelessness, and taken forward in partnership with relevant voluntary and statutory agencies, including Connexions, Education and Social Services. There were also discussions about extending the approach into an initiative for young people leaving care.

A5.22 Another example of a 'housing education' project aimed at helping to equip young people to avoid homelessness was identified as one element of a range of homelessness prevention activities commissioned by Bristol City Council from

Shelter. The project was delivered via a range of institutions including: schools, colleges, community groups and day centres. As the contractor, Shelter was required to:

- Raise awareness of housing issues in terms of housing options, expectations, common problems and availability of accommodation;
- Raise awareness of legal rights, responsibilities and procedures such as possession action as well as the availability of advice and support services; and
- Improve people's skills base in terms of dealing with legal documentation, Housing Benefit applications, debt advice and budgeting.

A5.23 The target group were young people whose risk of becoming homeless could be reduced by educational work. The strategy was expected to build on Shelter's existing Housemate education package and other examples of good practice.

Employment initiatives

A5.24 Working with Bristol Chamber of Commerce, Bristol City Council had funded a post to liaise with employers to provide training and employment opportunities to former rough sleepers. This involved agreements to provide mentoring and work placements. Bristol City Council reported that the initiative had been very effective in terms of helping previously unemployed people into permanent work, though it did not make available any specific data to substantiate this.

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