

P R E C *i* S

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Preventing Homelessness: the role of housing management

This report reviews and evaluates current housing management practice in the social rented sector, with a view to revealing tensions and synergies between the efficient and effective delivery of core housing management tasks and the objective of preventing homelessness. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires local authorities to develop a corporate strategy to prevent homelessness. Efforts to meet this strategic objective will need to be articulated through a partnership, involving local housing providers, social care agencies and services working with homelessness people. The report therefore looks beyond the role to be played by local authority housing management and also examines registered social landlords (RSL) housing management practices and the contribution to be made by social economy organisations.

The key findings include:

- A review of the homelessness and housing management literature since 1990 reveals a virtual absence of information about the principles and practicalities of preventing homelessness through housing management practices.
- Strategic consideration of how to prevent homelessness and practical efforts to do so among housing managers appears to have been limited to the efforts of local authorities to meet their statutory obligations under the homeless legislation to take reasonable steps to help prevent loss of accommodation if a priority need applicant is unintentionally threatened with homelessness in the next 28 days.
- Broader discussion about the prevention of homelessness has tended to focus on short term, practical interventions delivered by voluntary sector agencies that might have an immediate impact in preventing homelessness among at risk groups. Support is often recognised as integral to these initiatives.
- Local authorities and RSLs are currently involved in the direct provision of various forms of tenant support. These services are rarely provided with the express intent of preventing homelessness but, by helping people to obtain and sustain a tenancy, are limiting the number of tenants who might otherwise be at risk of losing their tenancy and becoming homelessness.
- Current policy and practice in the delivery of core housing management tasks is, in some instances, contributing to the incidence of homelessness. Tensions between housing management objectives and the principle of preventing homelessness were most apparent in relation to the delivery of local authority homelessness duties, rent arrears management, allocations and lettings procedures and efforts to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour.

The study

The research was commissioned to investigate 'what works', with regard to key housing management tasks, in assisting to prevent homelessness. More specifically, the research sought to assess the priority given to the prevention of homelessness by housing providers when dealing with housing management concerns and to identify key conflicts that exist between the objective of delivering a financially efficient and effective housing management service and the objective of preventing homelessness.

Preventing homelessness

Principles and practicalities of prevention

Practical interventions devised to prevent homelessness are typically provided by voluntary sector agencies and focus on limiting the potential of a series of recognised risk factors to result in certain households becoming homeless. Risk factors and triggers are not causes of homelessness but the targeting of support services at people who are experiencing a combination of factors that increase the risk of homelessness and sleeping rough is recognised as a realistic approach to preventing homelessness. Relevant services include education, advice services, family mediation, support for people leaving care, prison and the armed forces and supporting tenancies at risk.

Specific responsibilities and activities of housing management

The limited role currently played by housing management in supporting efforts to prevent homelessness was illustrated by the difficulties the research team experienced identifying local authority or RSL initiatives in the three case study districts that were expressly designed to prevent homelessness. Housing management's efforts to prevent homelessness have been limited to the duty of local authorities to assist priority need applicants threatened with homelessness in the next 28 days. A lack of consensus exists among local authorities about how best to meet this obligation and provision varies widely from district to district. Currently practice includes: housing advice to tenants with rent arrears; tenancy support to tenants suspected to be involved in anti-social behaviour; housing education with young people; and family mediation.

Preventing homelessness through care and support: a role for housing management

Local authorities and RSLs are currently involved in the direct provision of various forms of tenant support or have negotiated service level agreements with voluntary sector agencies to provide support for tenants. In the case study districts, these support services ranged from practical advice, such as welfare rights and money advice, through to support with developing life skills and living independently. Management objectives, such as limiting rent arrears, were typically the motive for developing support services. However, by helping people to obtain and sustain a tenancy, these services were limiting the number of tenants who might otherwise encounter problems which could lead to homelessness.

Collaboration and partnership working

Preventing homelessness requires a multi-agency response. Exactly where the responsibility of housing management to deliver support and care begins and ends is unclear, but wherever this line is drawn, working to prevent homelessness will involve housing managers collaborating and working in partnership with other the local authority departments, statutory bodies and third sector agencies. In many districts relevant partnership structures already exist, in other areas they will need to be developed.

Delivering core housing management tasks and preventing homelessness

The bulk of the evidence regarding tensions between housing management and the prevention of homelessness relates to four key housing management tasks:

Homelessness duties

Some people are not presenting themselves as homeless because of confusion or uncertainty regarding their rights and opportunities. Respondents in the case study districts also suggested that the treatment of homeless applicants by some housing officers discourages people from pursuing an application. Many applicants who do present as homeless are either not recognised as homeless, deemed to be intentionally homeless or are not considered to be in priority need. Particular concerns remain regarding the determination of vulnerability. Research also suggests that, rather than being skilful

manipulators of the welfare system, many homeless people are uncertain or unaware of how to maximise their chances of a successful application. Homeless applicants who do receive an offer of secure accommodation are often refusing the offer because of the location and condition of the dwelling. Landlords are sometimes failing to undertake repairs and maintenance before letting properties and adequate support is often unavailable for people not practically or emotionally prepared to move into a tenancy of their own.

Rent arrears management

A consequence of the increasing reliance on possession proceedings in pursuit of rent arrears is that increasing numbers of people are being evicted from their homes and put at risk of homelessness. Furthermore, many social landlords are excluding or suspending applications from households with rent arrears. Tenants with rent arrears are therefore hit with the double whammy of losing their home and having future opportunities to (re)access council or RSL provision restricted. However, alongside more draconian responses to rent arrears, landlords are implementing measures designed to prevent or limit rent arrears. Although the prevention of homelessness is not the prime motivation for developing these services, they are helping to prevent homelessness.

Three key links between Housing Benefit and rent arrears emerged from the case study districts: arrears generated by lengthy delays in the processing of Housing Benefit applications cause problems for both landlords and tenants; the policy of only paying Housing Benefit on one tenancy can cause problems during the transition from temporary accommodation to a new tenancy; and misunderstanding among some tenants about the importance of completing and returning the six month Housing Benefit review form can lead to the severance of payments and the accumulation of rent arrears.

Allocations

An increasingly wide range of people are being denied access to housing registers and secure accommodation, regardless of their need. Denied access to a sector that serves to counter the harmful effects of the housing market on financially weaker households, these households are put at increased risk of

homelessness. A further consequence of exclusion policies is that housing registers deny the full extent of housing need and local demand. Following the introduction of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 all applicants over the age of 16 have the right to be registered on the waiting list. However, landlords can still defer or suspend applications.

Crime and anti-social behaviour

The management of crime and anti-social behaviour has increasingly focused on the displacement of offenders through eviction. However, evidence suggests that the more insecure an ex-offender's housing situation the more likely they are to reoffend. It is therefore imperative that the grounds for possession are clearly established and proven and that landlords explore alternative avenues of dispute resolution before seeking possession. Research evidence suggests that this is not always the case. Ex-offenders and people with a record of anti-social behaviour are also a group often singled out by landlords for exclusion. The danger is that ex-offenders are thrown into a vicious circle, whereby a criminal record prevents them accessing secure housing, their insecure housing situation precipitates reoffending, which further restricts their opportunity to access secure housing and increases the likelihood of homelessness. In contrast to draconian responses to criminal and anti-social behaviour, evidence suggests a relative reluctance to develop and action effective responses to racial harassment and a less punitive response to racial harassment when it occurs, compared to other forms of anti-social behaviour. Some minority ethnic households are therefore discouraged from applying to local authorities or RSLs or feel compelled to leave their tenancy.

Key recommendations include:

Co-ordinating preventative activities

- local authorities will need to roll out current service provision to assist all households threatened with homelessness and extend the range of provision in response to the wide variety of risk factors and crisis points that can lead to homelessness
- delivering preventative strategies will involve engaging existing partnership structures (Local Strategic Partnerships, Supporting People arrangements, homeless

service partnerships etc.)

- interagency protocols will need developing to facilitate successful collaborative working
- preventative services should include: tenancy support; family mediation; advice services; life skills training; support upon leaving institutions; and education.

Housing management's role in delivering preventative services

- ensure preventing homelessness is a core objective of housing advice services and that advice is targeted at groups known to be most at risk of homelessness
- ensure housing officers are capable of undertaking needs assessments to establish support needs or able to refer vulnerable tenants to specialist agencies that can
- take the lead in facilitating the provision of support to vulnerable tenants not deemed relevant to receive assistance through the community care route
- ensure a 'best fit' between available stock and the needs of vulnerable tenants
- advise about available housing options during the community care assessment process.

Sensitising core housing management tasks to the prevention of homelessness

- local authorities should extend their interest in homelessness beyond the fulfilment of specific duties to statutory homeless households
- intentionality and priority need should be assessed on a case by case basis and take into account the particular circumstances and situations of individual applicants
- landlords should develop individually tailored support plans for homeless applicants
- RSLs should fulfil their obligation to assist local authorities in tackling homelessness
- landlords should establish whether the increasing reliance on recovery through possession is an economically and socially efficient response to rent arrears
- tenants should not be evicted because of technical arrears, caused by delays in the administration of Housing Benefit claims
- exclusions/suspensions should be regularly reviewed, time-limited and take into account the fact that a persons behaviour might change
- exclusionary policies should not impact on the rehousing opportunities of statutorily homeless households and applicants should not be excluded because of support needs
- interdicts and Short Scottish Secure Tenancies could be used as alternatives to

eviction and exclusion

- landlords should monitor more closely and respond to the reasons why minority ethnic households are refusing offers or leaving tenancies
- new tenants should not be expected to move into a tenancy without basic repairs and maintenance being undertaken.

About the study

The study was commissioned on behalf of the Scottish Executive's Homelessness Task Force by Scottish Homes and carried out by David Robinson (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University) and Murray Hawtin (Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University). The Task Force will make recommendations from this and other studies to the Social Justice Minister early in 2002.

Methods used included:

- review and evaluation of research evidence regarding the actual or potential role to be played by housing management in preventing homelessness
- analysis of practice and performance of housing management in preventing homelessness in three case study local authority districts in Scotland, involving discussions with local authority housing management staff (front-line officers, area managers and senior officers with strategic responsibilities), RSL staff (area managers and senior officers) and staff and managers in a range of social economy organisations explicitly involved in the prevention of homelessness.

Related research

A number of research projects have been commissioned on behalf of the Homelessness Task Force. A full list of these is available at www.scotland.gov.uk/homelessness/research

Further information

For copies of the full report please send your name and address to Pat Cairns by email, cairnsp@communities.scotland.gov.uk or by telephone 0131 479 5263.

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