



A foot in the door

Experiences of the Homelessness Reduction Act

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Executive Summary



Together
we will end
homelessness

About us

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We are committed to ending homelessness.

Every day we see the devastating impact homelessness has on people's lives. Every year we work side by side with thousands of homeless people, to help them rebuild their lives and leave homelessness behind for good.

Through our pioneering research into the causes and consequences of homelessness and the solutions to it, we know what it will take to end it.

Together with others who share our resolve, we bring our knowledge, experience and determination to campaign for the changes that will solve the homelessness crisis once and for all.

We bring together a unique volunteer effort each Christmas, to bring warmth, companionship and vital services to people at one of the hardest times of the year, and offer a starting point out of homelessness.

We know that homelessness is not inevitable. We know that together we can end it.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants who gave their time to talk to us and share their experiences of using Housing Options and the support they received. The primary survey data collection was conducted by Groundswell and QA research – thank you for your tenacity to get the fieldwork completed for both waves of the research. Special mention to all the staff across the six local authorities who have supported the data collection and access to their services. Finally, thank you to everyone in Crisis for your support with proofing and comments on the draft findings and report.

Foreword

Homelessness has a devastating impact on people and communities. Yet in nearly all cases homelessness is preventable. With the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) as one of the most important changes to homelessness legislation in England in the past 40 years we are in a position to ensure that prevention is at the heart of homelessness support.

This report is the first from a three year study into how the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) is working in practice from the perspective of people facing homelessness. Based on the first two years of the research, it draws on insights of nearly 1000 people.

The research shows positive signs that the Act is making sure that more people are getting access to the help that they need. Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and it is welcoming that 75 per cent of respondents stated that they felt their local housing teams had treated them with respect and handled their situation sensitively.

Ensuring everyone has safe, stable housing creates a stronger society where homelessness has no place. The HRA provides a framework to ensure prevention is at the forefront of ending homelessness across England. The research shows that people seeking help whilst at risk of homelessness are

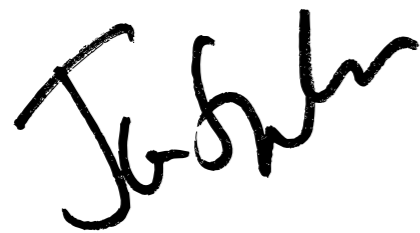
more likely to have a much smoother and more coherent pathway into permanent, stable home than people already experiencing homelessness, such as sofa surfing or rough sleeping. This evidence strengthens the case for why prevention is not only the right thing to do but also a more effective use of resources.

Yet nearly four in 10 people who approached their local authority for help, either remained homeless or became homeless because councils do not have enough housing available that people can afford. The worst affected are people experiencing the most devastating forms of homelessness, with people sleeping on the streets or on friends or family's sofas, most likely to remain trapped in this situation after seeking help. Of these, 45 per cent were single men showing that they are still struggling to access safe and stable housing. The HRA is an integral part of a system that can help to support people out of homelessness but we can't stop here.

A lack of truly affordable housing, high rents, and welfare reform are creating a constant pressure that pushes people into homelessness and restricts local authorities in their options.

Investing in Local Housing Allowance and social housing is a crucial element of fulfilling the Westminster's governments commitment to end rough sleeping in England by 2024 and to help local authorities meet their duties to prevent and relieve homelessness.

Ultimately the most effective way to end homelessness is to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. With the right resources and support the HRA can and should be at the heart of ending homelessness for good.



Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Crisis

Executive summary

In nearly all cases, homelessness can be prevented. The Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) is one of the most important changes to homelessness legislation in England in the past 40 years making homelessness prevention a central part of the statutory framework. It was designed to put prevention at the heart of homelessness assistance in England and remove barriers for people accessing statutory homelessness services.

In April 2018, the HRA introduced two new universal duties: a 'prevention duty' and a 'relief duty'. Under the prevention duty local authorities must take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for anyone at risk within 56 days. Under the relief duty local authorities must take reasonable steps to help secure accommodation for those who are currently homeless and eligible. Both new duties apply to people regardless of priority need and intentionality. Priority need identifies those eligible for housing either because they have dependent children or because they meet set vulnerability tests. Intentionality tests could exclude households on the basis that the council considers they are at fault for their homelessness. The prevention

duty is also local connection blind meaning people are eligible regardless of their long-term connection to an area. The Act has also introduced a new duty on specified public authorities to refer people to a housing authority if they are homeless or likely to become homeless within 56 days. The public authorities with a duty to refer include prisons, probation services, Jobcentres, social service authorities, hospitals and emergency departments.¹ This duty came into force on 1 October 2018.

Based on 984 surveys and 89 in-depth interviews with people approaching for homelessness assistance across two years alongside interviews with six local authorities, this research is the

¹ The full list of public authorities is listed in the Homelessness (Review Procedure etc.) Regulations (2018)

first in-depth analysis of how the HRA is working in practice from the perspective of people experiencing homelessness.

Access to support and assessment

Two years into its implementation, the research has found the change in law has significantly expanded access to homelessness assistance particularly for single people. The research mirrors the picture emerging from the statutory statistics showing that more people are eligible and are accessing support under the HRA. Only nine per cent of respondents stated they were given no support – reasons included no recourse to public funds, lack of local connection, not being able to provide evidence of current situation, and a general lack of eligibility for support. The research findings suggest that this is one of the most substantial changes observed since the introduction of the HRA and that the change in legislation has had a noticeable impact on widening access to single homeless people.

“To be honest with you I didn’t really know what to think or expect when I got there. I had a thought that they would help me because I was in a position where I needed help, but I wasn’t too sure on what help or advice I was going to get.”

“I expected to get no help like I had the previous few times, so it kind of blew me out of the water how much help I actually got this time around.”

Whilst the number of people being offered help has gone up there is still low awareness amongst people

experiencing homelessness that the legislation has changed. Only 16 per cent of respondents reported they were aware of the HRA and only 7 per cent said it encouraged them to attend Housing Options.² The increase in numbers gaining access to homelessness assistance can be attributed mainly to local authorities doing more to assist people rather than increased awareness of the HRA.

Overwhelmingly people reported a more positive experience when first approaching Housing Options for assistance. The research has shown respondents were mainly satisfied with the physical environment and how staff treated them when they first approached for help.

“Everyone else in the council in reception were really useful. The security were lovely because there were no directions, like, no one tells you anything you have to ask when you go in. So yes those initial staff were lovely.”

Seventy-five per cent of people reported they were treated with respect and were able to communicate confidentially with staff. On the whole the initial advice they were given was reported to be relevant, clear and easy to follow. Encouragingly, the majority of people we spoke to felt that their assessment took place in a safe and private environment. In 2014, Crisis conducted a ‘mystery shopping’ exercise³ to examine the treatment of single homeless people who approach their local authority for assistance which found that lack of privacy, interactions with staff, the office environment, and waiting times all had a profound impact and often compounded feelings of anxiety, stigma and shame.

Whilst not yet universal, this shift in culture at the early assessment stage is one of the clear successes of the HRA so far and an area where local authorities can and should continue to develop to deliver and share best practice.

Initial contact and assessment was on the whole dealt with quickly. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents reported that they met with a case worker for their assessment on the same day that they first attended, with a further 39 per cent being asked to return for their appointment on another day. On average follow-up appointments were within seven days of initial contact within the majority seen within three days.

Despite the majority of participants reporting positive experiences there is still clear examples of people having poor assessments. The outcome of a negative experience at this stage can be significant, ranging from increasing the trauma and vulnerability of an individual through to leading them to disengage from support overall.

“I went along to the appointment and the lady I’d seen was not helpful in any way, shape or form. I found her very dismissive of my situation and what she – in the end of the conversation, she was actually – she said to me she didn’t think I was on the Housing List and that I wouldn’t be eligible for housing, which left me in a very distraught state because I had nowhere else to go.”

Personalised Housing Plans (PHP) form the foundation of the support offered under the HRA. A PHP is a plan that sets out the steps to be taken by both the applicant and the local authority to either work towards preventing or ending their homelessness. Except for those not eligible due to immigration restrictions, everyone under the prevention and relief duties should receive a PHP. Only 40 per cent of

participants were able to identify that they a PHP had been created for them. This had increased from 37 per cent to 45 per cent between the first and second wave of the fieldwork. Of those who were aware of their PHP, 83 per cent agreed to their plan and respondents highlighted how helpful their PHP was in terms of helping them manage what they needed to and making them feel less overwhelmed.

“Yeah, that [PHP] did help a lot. I was a lot less forgetful, a lot less scatty, a lot less feeling like there was a lot that I had to do, just seeing it in a few bullet points, and then it was like, actually, I’ve got not much to do. I’ve just got to repeat it.”

However, lack of personalisation within the plans was highlighted and with 25 per cent of respondents disagreeing that their plan was personalised to their needs there is a need for local authorities to explore their own practice here.

“They talked about personalised plans. There was nothing personal about it.”

Following on from the initial assessment and engagement period participants overwhelmingly reported issues with ongoing contact and follow-up. There were reports of a general lack of communication over long periods of time post their assessment which led to people feeling uncertain about their situation and confused.

“But even once every two weeks or something, just to let me what’s what. So I don’t feel alone, because when I say I’m completely lost, I’m completely lost, I’m just going every day not knowing what to expect or what’s going to happen, am I going to be stuck here forever with my son?”

Under the Duty to Refer there are more opportunities for public bodies

² Housing Options is a catchall description that encompasses the ways a local authority can strive to prevent homelessness, and the need for a household to be rehoused under statutory homelessness duties to provide an offer of new settled accommodation.

³ Dobie, S., Sanders, B. and Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away, the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

to work with local authorities to meet their prevention duties. Sixty nine per cent of research participants were engaged with at least one other service at the time they engaged with Housing Options. Out of these respondents, over a third (36%) reported that they had seen their GP before attending Housing Options but since their housing issues had occurred, however only 28 per cent were advised by their GP to seek support through Housing Options. Conversely although subject to the Duty to Refer only 26 per cent of those engaging with the Jobcentre said they were advised to attend Housing Options, despite 34 per cent disclosing their housing need.

The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority however at this stage in its implementation it is not clear that wider public bodies are taking up their responsibilities within the spirit intended. Research participants also reported that they are engaged with a much wider network of services than the current duty specifies. For homelessness prevention to be effective this wider system needs to be engaged to ensure that people are reaching support at the earliest possible stage to increase the chances of a successful prevention outcome.

Cause of homelessness

There was substantial variation between causes of homelessness and reported housing situation at the point of approaching Housing Options. Over half (52%) of those living in the private rented sector reported their homelessness was caused either by affordability issues or through issues related to their tenancy such as dispute with their landlord, eviction or landlord requiring the property back. People who were already rough sleeping when they presented at

Housing Options were most likely to cite wider support needs (38%) as a cause of homelessness and most commonly mental health issues and loss of employment. Sofa surfers were most likely to report that relationship breakdown (49%) was the cause of their homelessness.

Housing outcomes and support

“I hoped there’d be more options, like, places to stay for people that are homeless.”

The intention and ambition of the HRA is being constrained by the housing market, welfare system and funding. Whilst there has been a broadly positive experience of initial contact and engagement with Housing Options staff, the research has shown significant barriers and issues with the support on offer and people’s housing outcomes.

Overall only 39 per cent of respondents agreed when asked whether the local authority had helped them to resolve their housing issue. A further 31 per cent of participants reported that they had either supported themselves or with the help of family or friends, and 30 per cent reported that their issue was still ongoing.

Overall 56 per cent of survey respondents reported a more positive housing situation when asked to compare their current position with the night before they presented at Housing Options. Of these the highest proportion were people who had remained either in social housing or in the PRS (but this may not be in the same property). Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) of respondents reported a negative housing situation, in either going from a housed situation to rough sleeping or sofa surfing, or remaining in that situation. Sixty six per cent of this group were single, with 45 per

cent single males. Whilst the research has shown the HRA has increased access at the initial assessment stage there are clear barriers for single people in accessing stable permanent accommodation.

Temporary accommodation was offered to 31 per cent of households as part of their support from Housing Options. Of these 36 per cent (110) had dependent children, 40 per cent (122) were single males, and 22 per cent (69) were single females. The most commonly reported type of temporary accommodation used were hostels including reception centres and emergency units, followed by Bed & Breakfast. However, there is variation amongst household types with single households most likely to be placed in hostels, and with a much greater proportion of those with children being placed temporarily in the PRS.

Longer term outcomes across both waves of the research show that in general those presenting who are at risk of homelessness (i.e. the prevention stage) are more likely to have their homelessness resolved and not experience other forms of homelessness. More specifically those in permanent accommodation helped at the prevention stage were much more likely to stay in permanent, stable accommodation strengthening the case for why prevention is both the right thing to do and a more effective use of resources.

People who are rough sleeping and sofa surfing were more likely to have negative and more turbulent housing outcomes. Particularly for people rough sleeping, they are more likely to remain homeless after seeking assistance from Housing Options.

The research found the most common form of intervention offered is information on accessing the private rented sector. A number of participants in the research highlighted that this was the only support they were

offered and at its most basic consisted of a list of potential landlords for them to contact, of which a number of participants reported that they were unable to access these properties due to housing benefit no longer covering the cost of the cheapest market rents.

“Basically they just said to look at these websites and this is your like weekly allowance, weekly rent allowance, just went through things like that. But as I say, a lot of the websites that they give are like Zoopla, Prime Location, things like that, and as I say, a lot of the landlords don’t want to know.”

With a scarcity of social housing available in all areas, local resourcing and the accessibility of the PRS have a significant impact on the ability for housing options teams to meet both their prevention and relief duties. There were large concerns raised by staff across all housing markets we conducted the research in on how access to and function of the PRS would help support the HRA.

“The market is totally... as soon as the government cut the LHA to the 30th percentile it was like a tap switching off. It really was. You could see the pre and post difference and what landlords were willing to accept. And landlords are not accepting rents that are set on the 30th percentile.”
– Housing Officer

Lack of affordable housing both social and PRS means that local authorities are increasingly constrained in the realistic outcomes that they can achieve. Both local authorities and people experiencing homelessness talked about the growing pressures leading to a lack of options they had to prevent or alleviate homelessness in their area, citing affordability, lack of supply and access to accommodation as primary drivers.

“And it doesn’t tackle the big elephant in the room, which is that – not that there’s a shortage of housing, it’s that there is a shortage of affordable housing. If property were affordable, then we wouldn’t be here.”

– Team leader

However, there are clear areas where the local authorities could improve practice, such as ensuring rent deposits are paid efficiently, that would stop people losing out on properties they’ve found and ensure a cleaner move through the system for those who have been able to find properties.

Prevention requires a whole council approach as officers need to have workable options available to them to be able to quickly find alternative accommodation or solutions that will keep a household safely accommodated.

Recommendations

Ensuring everyone has safe, stable housing creates a stronger society where homelessness has no place. The HRA provides a framework to ensure prevention is at the forefront of ending homelessness across England. The evidence in this report highlights areas where short and long term changes are needed to ensure this ground-breaking legislation reaches its full potential.

Additional investment is needed to address structural barriers that currently restrict local authorities from fulfilling the duties placed on them by the Homelessness Reduction Act and must include:

1 Investment in LHA rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents (realigning back to the 30th percentile) – The under investment into Local Housing Allowance rates is a barrier to

preventing homelessness and means people cannot be supported out of homelessness and into the private rented sector where suitable.

2 Investment in social housing and a national target of an additional 90,000 social homes each year for the next 15 years – In England, there is no national target for building homes at social rent levels. Government policy since 2012 has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of homes for social rent, making it harder for local authorities to house homeless households.

The HRA should be changed and strengthened in the following ways:

3 Introduce a statutory code of practice to raise the standards of local authority homelessness services across the country – The Secretary of State has the power to produce a statutory code of practice which should provide a clear and enforceable set of standards for local authorities.

4 A duty to prevent homelessness should be placed on all relevant public bodies including the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office and the Department for Education – The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority. However, while this is an important first step the actual requirements it places on public authorities are minimal. The legislation should go further and place stronger requirements on public authorities to work with local housing authorities to prevent homelessness.

5 Strengthening the code of guidance to ensure the HRA works to its full potential. This should include more guidance for local housing authorities on i) amendments to allocations policies that emphasises the need for policies and nomination agreements that support prevention rather than hindering; ii) advice and information for specific groups and expectations around this in light of the strengthened advisory duty; iii) determining “affordability”; iv) on “regular contact” and progression within the 56 days; v) around early interventions for those at risk of homelessness, but not within 56 days.

Further investment and longer term funding is required to provide greater financial stability to support local authorities to prevent and end homelessness:

6 Introduce national provision of private rented access schemes across England including a national rent deposit guarantee scheme to improve access to stable, decent private tenancies for homeless people, reducing the burdens on individual schemes, and help local authorities procure properties more easily as part of their prevention and relief duties.

7 The Government must continue to invest in homelessness services to ensure a sharper focus and investment in prevention measures, and evidenced based, housing-led solutions to meet its target of ending rough sleeping by 2024 and end all forms of homelessness. This should include a national outcomes and performance framework to provide consistency and accountability across policies and service delivery of the HRA at a national and local level.



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