



‘I hoped there’d be more options’

Experiences of the Homelessness Reduction Act
2018-2021

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Together
we will end
homelessness

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

In April 2018 the Homelessness Reduction Act opened up assistance from local authorities to help more people than ever before. It aimed to provide more personalised support and do more to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place. We are proud of the role we played in making the case for this ground-breaking legislation.

Four years on, our research into experiences of this new system shows the HRA has made a huge difference. Through first-hand accounts of more than 1,400 people we know in many cases it has changed the relationship between people facing homelessness and staff to one that's more person-centred and focused on needs to help people have the outcome that's right for them. When this worked well, people who traditionally would have been turned away finally received the help they needed.

Yet our research shows there are still some people not getting this help. Across the second and third waves of the research 17 per cent of respondents got no help at all. The research also shows that services are only as good as the accommodation options they have. Too many people are being left homeless or in insecure and unsuitable accommodation after they reach out for support (over 4 in 10). This continues the devastation of homelessness but also takes its toll on staff working in increasingly pressurised services. It traps councils in a loop of spending more and more on temporary accommodation instead of investing in sustainable and affordable solutions that can genuinely end someone's homelessness, rather than keeping them in limbo.

The majority of survey participants say they felt treated with respect by housing officers and felt positive after receiving a full assessment. But due to staff shortages, high caseloads and a lack of affordable options, many people found this early positivity quickly faded, with a lack of contact, engagement, and meaningful support as they progressed through the homelessness system. Some services have struggled to adapt to new ways of working, and are still focused on making decisions based on who is eligible for services and collecting evidence rather than providing support based on severity of need.

The staff in the local authorities we interviewed felt the HRA worked well for engaging and understanding the needs of people facing homelessness. However, that system is highly dependent on whether there is enough housing for people who need it, and there is nowhere near enough to meet demand. The impact of this is worse as a result of the continued existence of eligibility criteria including priority need and local connection. Their continued use allows services to stop supporting someone when it is too hard to get housing for them.

Restricting the few genuinely suitable options in this way is the product of a long-neglected area of government responsibility that makes it too difficult to find homes for people who need them. Rising rents and cost of living increases is going to make this worse if we do not tackle the chronic undersupply of social housing and make the private rented sector more affordable and accessible.

During the pandemic, under Everyone In, staff described accommodating hundreds of people in a short space of time, including individuals that they had tried to help for years without success. This context showed us what can be achieved when there is strong leadership from the government, and when different sectors join forces to work together – but it also provides a vision of what a future homelessness system might look like when more housing options are created and eligibility criteria are removed.

The HRA has undoubtedly improved people's experiences with asking for support and their housing outcomes. It is a vital first step in creating a homelessness system focused on solutions to homelessness, instead of looking for reasons why someone cannot be supported. We need a better homelessness system in England, one that can halt the devastating impact homelessness has, not just for some, but everyone who experiences it.



Matthew Downie
Chief Executive, Crisis

Executive summary

Background

In 2018 one of the most significant changes in homelessness legislation in England was introduced. The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) was designed to put prevention at the heart of tackling homelessness and since its introduction more than 800,000 families and individuals have received help from their local authority to address their homelessness.¹

Since campaigning for the change, Crisis has tracked the impact of its implementation and this report analyses three years of interviews and surveys with over 1,400 people facing homelessness and over 35 focus groups with staff working across the six local authority case study areas.

The research was conducted over three waves which took place between April-December 2018, April-September 2019 and November 2020-August 2021. The findings throughout the report have been aggregated to give an overview and split out to show differences between the three waves of the research. Unless otherwise specified all quotes are from people we spoke to who were facing homelessness.

Key findings

Accessing help

The HRA has opened up support and assistance for significantly more people facing homelessness. Government data shows over six in ten households (66%) who were owed a prevention or relief duty in the last three years were either single adults or couples without dependent children. This is dramatically different from the experiences reported in Crisis's *Turned Away* research in 2015.²

Yet our research shows there are still some people not getting the help they need. Across the second and third waves of the research 17 per cent of respondents got no help at all. Reasons included not being eligible for assistance due to immigration status, application of local connection and in some cases use of priority need and intentionality at the prevention and relief stage. Another key issue was the significant amounts of evidence required to get access to help and was used as a form of gatekeeping:

"Went for help at [XXX] Council, but they didn't believe that we was homeless, they said you've got no proof. And I said look, no, we haven't got any money at all, we have to sleep in the van, and they just didn't believe us."

"And I got really upset and left my partner in there to talk to the woman because I got too upset and I had to run out. And she just didn't believe us.... She said something about anyone can write a letter, whatever we were saying, she just didn't seem to believe. She just did not believe that we had no friends or anyone to go and stay with that day."

Access to help varied before and during Covid - 26 per cent of respondents reported they got no help at all during wave 2 of the research but this decreased to 10 per cent during the pandemic. There were also striking differences by accommodation situation. Prior to the pandemic, 42 per cent of respondents who approached when they were rough sleeping got no help at all and this dropped to 10 per cent in the final wave of the research. Similarly, 21 per cent of people who approached when they were sofa surfing reported getting no help at all in wave 2 and this decreased to 12 per cent in wave 3.

The research supports wider evidence that when more direction from central government was given to drop eligibility criteria more people were able to access support:

"Everyone In specifically, from a rough sleeper point of view it's been fantastic because at one point we had circa 200 people accommodated in temporary accommodation of some description, which was amazing because those people would otherwise probably be out on the street or maybe sofa surfing." (Frontline)

Across waves 2 and 3 of the research seven per cent of respondents received advice only and 74 per cent of respondents received some form of support from Housing Options. This included helping people to access to accommodation, referral to other

services, mediation and support with budgeting.

The HRA was also designed to promote a supportive and accessible culture in Housing Options services. Across the full study over three quarters (78%) of people felt treated with respect when they made initial contact (78%), and felt staff listened sensitively and with respect during assessments (73%).

"They've all been helpful, to be honest, because I didn't know what to do, and they did point me to a direction what to do, what to apply and things, all that. I didn't know nothing about that."

However, there were many people who reported poor staff behaviour outside of these specific touchpoints. Many participants also described feeling treated like 'a number,' and not receiving sympathy for their difficult circumstances.

"If you treat somebody with respect is to make them feel valued, and make them feel like that service is helping or improving that person's wellbeing or situation and I didn't feel like that with the council at all, I felt like they was more, in a way, just trying to say go away, we can't really do nowt for you, go away, kind of situation."

There were notable differences between waves 1 and 3 on people's experiences of the assessment process. In wave 1, 16 per cent of respondents reported staff did not listen sensitively and with respect to their situation and in wave 3 this had increased to 25 per cent. Some of this can be explained by the more challenging environment the pandemic posed with higher caseloads and more remote working in place.

There were also differences by support needs; only 29 per cent of people

1 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) Live tables on statutory homelessness. DLUHC: Online. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

2 Dobie, S., Sanders, B. & Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away: The treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/housing-models-and-access/turned-away-2014/>

with complex needs felt their needs were being met by Housing options compared to 47 per cent of people with no support needs. There were notable differences at the assessment stage as well – 69 per cent of people with no support needs left the assessment feeling positive compared to 44 per cent of people with complex needs.

Under the HRA local authorities are required to complete an assessment to understand a person's needs and circumstances. Once an assessment has been completed a Personalised Housing Plan (PHP) must be developed which sets out the steps that they and the local authority will take to help to address their housing needs. Staff felt that whilst assessments and PHPs were useful tools introduced by the HRA they lacked the time to use them meaningfully which was particularly challenging when people had multiple or more complex support needs. Just over half of people (57%) who were aware they had a PHP said it was personalised to their needs and 61 per cent said they understood their PHP. People who were aware of their PHP were more likely to have received advice and support to access the PRS or referrals to other agencies.

Is prevention working?

The design of the HRA was to focus more local authority resources on preventing homelessness happening in the first place. Findings from the research show that when more emphasis was placed on prevention, this improved outcomes for people and is reflected in the statutory statistics as well. Between 2018-21 58 per cent of households whose prevention duty ended secured accommodation, (in our research it was 70 per cent) compared to only 40 per cent of households where the relief duty had ended (in our research it was 43 per cent).³ However, there

were lots of missed opportunities to keep people in stable accommodation. In wave 3 of the research out of all participants owed a prevention duty only 77 per cent remained housed after approaching Housing Options. This was driven by staff mainly dealing with 'crisis management' due to the huge numbers of people already facing homelessness and owed a relief duty, as well as under-resourcing, and pressures to move people out of temporary accommodation.

H-CLIC statistics over the last three years show prevention activity accounts for around 50 percent of total cases but in some of the research case study areas, the proportion of households owed a prevention duty falls below 20 per cent.⁴ There is still more to do to shift further emphasis on genuine prevention centred approaches:

“So the opinion of the act I think it's, it feels like it's a large step in the right direction but we're not finished yet in terms of the approach that local authorities should be taking around preventing homelessness. In the spirit of what gets measured, gets done, the fact that [Staff member] talked about the 56 days threatened with homelessness whereas we know the right thing to do is to be as upstream as possible, even before people are threatened with homelessness and do work with them. And for us to be able to do that, apart from finding the funding to do it and we know it's the right thing we need to be able to somehow demonstrate the value of that and we need a mechanism of talking to government about that.”
(Manager)

The HRA introduced a Duty to Refer to widen the responsibility of identifying people at risk of homelessness across other public bodies. Positively, as our study went on, this led to more people approaching for help following advice from another organisation (59% in wave 3 compared to 39% in wave 1). However, staff felt that more could be done to give other organisations a stronger role in preventing homelessness.

“What I think needs to change externally, there needs to be a Duty to Cooperate rather than just a Duty to Refer. It's no good just putting somebody's name on a bit of paper and sending it and washing your hands of it.”
(Manager)

Housing improvement and outcomes

Accommodation outcomes have improved over the course of the study. In the final wave of our research 67 per cent of households experienced a positive housing outcome – defined as either remaining accommodated, or an improvement in living situation up from just 51 per cent in the first wave. The increased provision of accommodation during the pandemic was a critical factor in increasing the positive housing outcomes for people approaching local authorities for assistance.

However, among those whose contact with Housing Options had ended when we conducted the research, nearly half (46%) remained homeless after going to the local authority for support. And for many respondents (including those whose situation had improved) their housing outcome/situation was not a satisfactory one. When asked how they felt about their living situation after using Housing Options, half (50%) did not think it was secure for at least 6 months, more than half (58%) did not think it was suitable for their needs, and less than a third (30%) felt it was both secure and suitable. The reasons

for this included homelessness not being resolved, accommodation being temporary, but also issues with more permanent forms of accommodation, such as affordability, poor quality living conditions, accommodation being inappropriate for support needs, and a lack of follow-up from Housing Options or other services after moving in.

“[I'm] in a temporary accommodation. It's too long to where I work... By bus, it took me about 2 hours 15 minutes, 15 to 20 minutes. Then by train, it's more quicker but it's expensive.... I have to wake up early, like 3.30am, 4.00am, to make my journey because I have to resume 7.00am.”

“The private sector, it's not very helpful as well. The rent is gone high. It's so unfair. Why is the rent gone so high? It's like it's not giving people opportunities to rent anymore... you have to earn three times the rent and I don't earn that much, so I'm stuck.”

People living in rented properties, either within the private, social sector, or in supported housing, were more likely to report their situation being both secure and suitable. Families were more likely to see a positive change in their living situation (64% compared to 47% for single people) but were less likely to feel the accommodation was adequate.

Housing outcomes were worse when respondents reported they did not receive the right help to assist them. Of those experiencing a negative housing outcome, only 19 per cent felt support from Housing Options helped to resolve their homelessness, whereas 51 per cent of those who had a positive housing outcome felt the support had resolved their situation. This still leaves significant numbers of respondents who felt their situation was not resolved.

³ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) Live tables on statutory homelessness. DLUHC: Online. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

⁴ Ibid.

Having a positive housing outcome affected other experiences as well. People who reported improvements in their housing situation were more likely to report positive experiences of the HRA and on most other metrics we measured in the research – they were more likely to have left their initial meeting feeling optimistic, to report being treated with respect and to report being able to access the services in their personalised housing plan.

Recommendations

1. Despite the widening of legal duties under the HRA there are still significant numbers of people that are not getting the help they need to address and end their homelessness. Steps should be taken to build on the intent of the HRA, but the legal protections must go further to provide help to everyone who needs it. This should be based on the following principles:
 - Everyone facing homelessness should be able to access help wherever and whenever they need it
 - Local authorities and other public bodies should have robust duties to prevent homelessness
 - There should be clear regulatory oversight of how they discharge their duties under the legislation
2. The research has highlighted the critical shortage of housing which is stopping the HRA working as effectively as it could do. The Westminster Government should set an annual target of delivering an additional 90,000 social homes each year for the next 15 years and invest in substantial increases in the delivery of social rented housing.
3. Practice varied considerably by area and Housing Officer which affected the quality of support and whether people had their needs addressed. Improving standards of practice should be achieved through introducing a statutory code of practice which provides a clear and enforceable set of standards for local authorities with long term funding to achieve this. The code of practice must be accompanied by training and support for staff to embed and deliver person centred services and commissioning services that are housing-led with tailored support to meet the needs of people facing homelessness.

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