Local Authorities' Homelessness Strategies: Evaluation and Good Practice

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Homelessness Research Summary: Number 1, 2004

Local Authorities’ Homelessness Strategies: Evaluation and Good Practice

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

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Introduction

Background

The Homelessness Act 2002 is intended to bring about a step change in the way many local authorities approach the issue of homelessness. The Act requires Local Housing Authorities (LHAs) to take a more comprehensive approach, promoting prevention over traditional and reactive responses, and taking an overview of future needs. The legislation requires them to carry out a Review of homelessness in their area and to formulate and publish a Strategy based on the results of this Review within one year of the Act coming into force, that is, by July 2003.

This summary presents the key findings from an evaluation of LHA Homelessness Strategies developed under the 2002 legislation. It was carried out by Housing Quality Network Services (HQNS) during the first half of 2004, on behalf of the ODPM. The research involved an evaluation of the Strategies and Reviews from all 354 authorities, and also studied self-assessment forms submitted by the authorities to the ODPM. A further group of 14 authorities (covering each region) plus two outside agencies attended a workshop in May 2004 to discuss the process of Strategy development and lessons for the future.

This summary includes good practice from the evaluation and sets out the recommendations produced by the researchers for ODPM, LHAs, and other bodies, including other Government departments, the Housing Corporation, and the National Housing Federation and its member Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).
Key findings

The Process of Developing Homelessness Reviews and Strategies

- Every authority produced a Homelessness Review and Strategy within the timescales set out by the ODPM.
- The exercise was an impressive success in most areas, drawing in as never before the views of service users, other agencies and authorities, and other council departments to focus on tackling homelessness.
- The best authorities have been able to build on already good services by developing their strategic role within their region and sub-region.
- There were some excellent examples of authorities using information from their previous activities to develop strategic approaches to homelessness and consult others.

Homelessness Reviews

- Most authorities worked well at understanding the causes of and current levels of homelessness, but few estimated future levels of homelessness. Data availability, particularly about the scale and causes of homelessness for non-priority groups, was acknowledged as a difficulty.
- The main causes of homelessness were, almost without exception, found to be:
  - Parents/friends/other relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate;
  - Violent relationship breakdown with partner (in some cases authorities didn't distinguish between violent and non-violent relationship breakdown with a partner);
  - Loss of tenancy through the termination of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy.
- All LHAs provided some information about the current services provided. Most had gone further and mapped advice services provided in other sectors, and accommodation provision and support services across all organisations.
- Nine in ten authorities included prevention in their Reviews, though in some cases authorities had not taken a wide enough view of prevention as this was not considered as separate from housing advice or support.
- About four-fifths of authorities considered all forms of homelessness in their Reviews; the remaining one-fifth had focussed on priority need groups. However many missed particular client groups. The most frequently missed groups were: single homeless people and/or rough sleepers, ex-services personnel, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, former asylum seekers and refugees, and Gypsies/Travellers.
- Many LHAs put a great deal of thought into how to get a full picture of homelessness in their areas, consulting widely with other agencies and groups.

The involvement of Social Services at a strategic level was disappointing in many areas however, and other statutory agencies such as Health and Probation were also hard to engage. In general authorities found it difficult to engage with homeless people and service users but there were good examples where authorities had creatively addressed this problem.
Homelessness Strategies

- The great majority of Strategies were clearly based on the findings which came from authorities' Homelessness Reviews, frequently showing that the consultation with service users and/or agencies had resulted in a new emphasis on prevention or new approach being taken in the Strategy.

- Strategies were produced in a wide variety of formats and often in other languages.

- Only two in five authorities managed to address the issue of wider links clearly in their Strategies, and only about half demonstrated any level of corporate and wider commitment in their Strategy documents.

- Most authorities included all forms of homelessness in their Strategies, though non-statutory homelessness was a gap in a significant number, reflecting the lesser focus on this in some of the Reviews.

- Some authorities demonstrated excellent engagement with BME communities and groups but many authorities neglected BME issues.

- The focus on a small, well defined set of Government priorities has produced results in tackling rough sleeping and use of bed and breakfast accommodation (B&B); and almost every Strategy considers prevention and support activities. Innovative ideas included: refocusing the housing register to reflect the main causes of homelessness; improved housing advice services; mediation and reconciliation schemes; work with private landlords; and improved Housing Benefit (HB) systems. Tackling domestic violence was also a priority, as were floating support to reduce repeat homelessness; improved access to settled housing; and attention to needs such as health and education.

- On most issues concerning Homelessness Strategies and their development, the researchers found no difference between single and two-tier districts. But the evaluation indicated that districts, and especially rural areas, are less well developed in partnership working, and unitary and metropolitan councils were significantly more likely to have linked their Strategy in with wider authority strategies.

Action Planning

- Action planning is a weak point in many Strategies, and many authorities have not identified the resources needed to carry through their Strategy.
Detailed results and good practice guidance

Overall Comments on the Process

The exercise has been an impressive undertaking that, at best, drew in the views of service users, other agencies and authorities, and other council departments as never before to focus on tackling homelessness. LHAs and their partners seeking to tackle and reduce homelessness were able to plan for significant changes to their services, as a result of what was learnt during their Review of homelessness. Overall, it has been a very positive process, and the universal view among participants in the workshop was that, although the task had been quite a difficult one, it was highly useful and they felt much had been gained by it, making a difference to the homelessness picture across the country.

Feedback from authorities suggested the guidance from the ODPM was clear and useful. Other guidance that LHAs found most helpful included the Shelter website and booklets, and seminars run locally and nationally.

The strongest authorities have not considered the exercise finished, but have continued the process to fill the gaps in services that were identified, and extend the reach of prevention measures. The researchers commend this approach to all authorities: the benefits of a coordinated approach are already being felt in tackling Government priorities, and should impact upon other forms of homelessness and other user groups over time.

A large number of LHAs worked with others in their area to develop the Strategies. Some good examples of joint action are:

**Good practice in working with others to develop Homelessness Strategies**

**The Lincolnshire Partnership** Strategy has been built on a very good foundation of partnership working within the area, through the Lincolnshire Housing Forum which has involved many key agencies including Social Services. The Homelessness Strategy is only one part of the Forum which has included development of the Supporting People Strategy. The main aims and objectives never deviated whether it was with regard to the overall county action plan or the local action plans for each district/borough, whilst issues key to the individual areas were also catered for, from the City of Lincoln to the seaside towns in East Lindsey.

**Cumbria** districts worked together to produce one document, with separate data pages and Action Plans provided as well as a joint Action Plan. The joint work enabled districts to identify common issues and common and joint solutions, as well as individual features.

**Pendle, Rossendale, and Burnley** councils in Lancashire noticed that they shared several proposed actions in their Strategies, and agreed to pool their resources, so as to appoint a full-time worker for each of the areas. They now employ, through Shelter, a mediation officer working with young people at risk of homelessness; an advice worker for private tenants and landlords; and a worker helping people with substance misuse problems to find good quality accommodation, and to keep accommodation in the private rented sector. Reductions in crime levels were anticipated as one of the outcomes.

The table below shows a summary of the main points made by participants from 14 LHAs at the workshop held as part of the evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What worked well and was helpful</th>
<th>What worked less well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ODPM guidance and Shelter website;</td>
<td>Data collection - problems with continuous collection, P1E changes and reliability,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Local Authorities' Homelessness Strategies: Evaluation and Good Practice

- Making use of Supporting People mapping as a starting point for mapping and reviewing services;
- Sub-regional work - developing better joint work with neighbouring LHAs, and learning from them, acknowledging the need for cultural change, open recognition of problems, sharing information and concerns, agreement to change;
- Being able to work in partnership with other agencies. Social Services helpful on strategy/planning, voluntary sector very helpful in most areas, secondments from other agencies helped the process by bringing in a wide range of experience, contacts and connections;
- Getting the right people involved;
- Identifying unmet need - LHAs learnt a lot through the Review process;
- Service users - getting positive feedback, and using voluntary sector to facilitate feedback;
- Being forced to look at a better use of resources, including frontline staff;
- Homelessness influence on other Strategies;
- Consultation - opened lines of communication (better planning to solve problems), positive where time allowed, and where already established;
- Highlighting the prevention agenda - and moving further to preventing homelessness (a solutions-based approach) rather than just processing homelessness applications;
- Building on good practice and developing new systems and structures;
- Identification of need for performance management information and evidence.

agencies lacked other information to give, agencies had different methods of collecting information, depth of information not always available;
- Identifying future levels of homelessness - information came in a form that did not help to understand the nature or scale of homelessness;
- Deciding on the difference between the Review and Strategy, and whether a combined document was more helpful;
- Guidance - lack of feedback at critical times, not enough guidance on how to measure outcomes;
- Partnership work - Social Services has other priorities, homelessness is seen as a housing problem, limited commitment, structural problems, hierarchies, reluctance to share budgets, risk driven and not need driven, and too target focused; Health restructuring taking priority over strategy preparation; voluntary agencies small and over-stretched and may not see the joint agenda; engaging other parts of the council not always easy;
- Consultation - non-priority and non-accepted users not consulted, forums can be critical as well as positive, cultural change sometimes necessary, agencies deal with crisis response so consultation can take second place, staff not being skilled in consultation work, service users not being convinced that anything would change;
- Resources and time - not being able to dedicate enough time or staff to the task, not being able to persuade other agencies to put resources in, undertaking the task at the same time as stock transfer or CPA preparation, skills of staff undertaking the work, lack of strategy officers in smaller authorities.
Developing Homelessness Reviews

Carrying out the Review

Many authorities produced thorough Reviews that take account of, and analyse, the current situation in terms of understanding the causes and scale of homelessness, and what needs to change in the provision of services, to meet the needs identified. The best authorities have been able to build on already good services by developing their strategic role within their region and sub-region.

Some groups of authorities worked particularly effectively together, setting up several partnerships to undertake Reviews together or to share research.

Using existing information to inform Reviews

There were some excellent examples of authorities using information from their previous activities to develop strategic approaches to homelessness and consult others.

Authorities that had carried out Best Value Reviews of homelessness or housing advice generally built on this, and others had built on work done to develop single homelessness or rough sleeping strategies.

Good practice in undertaking the Review

Stratford-upon-Avon's Review formed the first part of the Strategy document. The Review drew on the district's Single Homelessness Strategy, produced in 2001, a Housing Advice Audit carried out in 2001, focus groups on housing advice carried out for a Best Value Review in 2002, and the Warwickshire Homelessness Conference held in 2002. Making use of these previous pieces of work, the LHA was able to focus on developing targeted objectives of the Homelessness Strategy to make real improvements in services.

Understanding the causes and current and future levels of homelessness

Authorities were required to attempt, as accurately as possible, to gain an understanding of the main causes of homelessness locally. Good quality data, comprehensive coverage and systematic collection are all central to this.

Most authorities carried out this exercise well in relation to current homelessness, with some working hard to expand the information base beyond information about those in priority need groups.

Data availability was acknowledged as a difficulty, particularly in obtaining information from other agencies, such as Social Services, Probation and Youth Offending Teams, and advice and support agencies.

Many authorities' Action Plans identified the need to improve data collection. Assessing future levels of homelessness was difficult and this was a gap in many Reviews. Some authorities said they would welcome more guidance on mapping future needs. Authorities that did tackle the issue used: population trends; indicators of need, demand and aspirations from Housing Needs Surveys; trends in homelessness data; and plans for prevention through, for example, advice to those leaving prison, hospital or care.

Good practice in understanding the nature and causes of homelessness

Southampton used data from its Supported Housing Monitoring System and Newcastle-upon-Tyne from the Newcastle Homeless Liaison Project to provide a great deal of information about people seeking temporary and supported housing, their needs, and what had led to their homelessness. Wigan explored where people went to outside its boundaries if their accommodation need could not be satisfied within the district. East Cambridgeshire plotted applicants across the district's parishes and highlighted variations across the district. Staffordshire Moorlands tracked what had happened to 30 homeless households.
Learning about the main causes of homelessness

The main causes of homelessness were, almost without exception, found to be:

- Parents/friends/other relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate;
- Violent relationship breakdown with partner;
- Loss of tenancy through the termination of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy.

This finding was consistent across the country, though in some cases the order among the three main causes varied, and some authorities identified relationship breakdown in general as one of the top three causes.

Mapping and auditing services

The legislation requires LHAs to base their Strategies on what has been learnt through the Review about the gap between current provision in all sectors and needs for prevention, accommodation, and support. A few authorities went beyond their own and other services specifically aimed at homeless people (for example homeless drop-in centres), and described activities that help to prevent and respond to homelessness, such as RSLs' advice for applicants, Social Services' help on welfare benefits, and Care and Repair services for older and disabled people.

Mapping prevention and support services

Prevention is a core element in the 2002 legislation, and is seen by the Government as the key to better services, reduced cost and avoiding the most damaging effects of homelessness. Some nine in ten authorities included prevention in their Reviews, though in some cases this was not considered as separate from housing advice or support. Some did not examine gaps in provision or did not evaluate the success of existing services.

Good practice in reviewing prevention

The Telford & Wrekin Review included several tasks to audit prevention services:

- A list of the strengths and weaknesses of preventative services;
- A summary of issues raised by service users who are asked what would have made a difference to them becoming homeless;
- Identified unmet needs and gaps from the service audit and consultation work with stakeholders;
- The gaps and unmet needs were listed for each of the risk factors (financial, social, health, behavioural, and the reality of responding to households with multiple needs);
- Two case studies were provided, looking at what would have made a difference for a couple with three children and for a single woman.

Reviewing the needs and issues affecting different client groups

About four-fifths of authorities considered all forms of homelessness in their Reviews, though many missed particular client groups. The most frequently missed groups were: single homeless people and/or rough sleepers, ex-services personnel, BME groups, former asylum seekers and refugees, and Gypsies/Travellers.

Young people, either single or in families, are a key priority in most parts of the country. A second key group is women and their children who are victims of domestic violence; and a third group appearing in many Reviews is people with drug and alcohol problems.
Involving others in Reviews: other agencies (statutory and other) and service users

The Government expects LHAs to take a lead in developing and publishing Reviews, but not in isolation: other agencies, particularly Social Services, are expected to be fully involved. Social Services authorities must take the Strategy into account in their day-to-day work, and are required to provide assistance in the Review and Strategy development process.

Social Services departments were invited to be represented on most Strategy Steering Groups, but in many cases LHAs failed to get over to Social Services managers the benefits that participating in the process could have for them and their service users. As a result, the involvement of Social Services at a strategic level was disappointing in many areas, though staff at other levels contributed to most consultation events informing the Reviews. In two cases, county councils produced Social Services Strategies to tackle homelessness in partnership with districts.

Other statutory agencies such as Health and Probation were also hard to engage in many areas; where they did play a part, they provided helpful input alongside staff from agencies such as Connexions, Youth Offending Teams, drug and alcohol agencies, and prisons. Many LHAs put a great deal of thought into how to get a full picture of homelessness in their areas, and consulted a range of other agencies, for example through:

- Homelessness Forums, postal surveys of agencies, structured interviews, Reference Groups, conferences and roadshows.

Some authorities creatively addressed the problems of engaging with homeless people by going out into the streets, or into hostels and day centres to talk to them, or organising 'speakout' events.

Developing Homelessness Strategies

Making use of Review findings

The great majority of Strategies were clearly based on the authority's Homelessness Review. Some authorities suffered at this stage from their Reviews being incomplete, while others that recognised gaps in their Review, sought to take a more comprehensive approach in their Strategy.

Every council completed a Homelessness Strategy by July 2003, the deadline in the 2002 Homelessness Act. The authorities responded to the legislation by focusing on the new agenda, improving information on homelessness and its causes, looking critically at services and focusing on prevention.

Publishing readable and accessible Strategies

Strategies were produced in a wide variety of formats and often in other languages. Good examples include a folder containing the Strategy, the Review, a service audit and a summary of all three documents; and a Strategy in a ring binder to allow easy updating.

Good practice in producing readable and accessible Strategies

The Bury Strategy is well presented, easy to follow, with use of charts and graphs making it more than just a corporate document. A separate summary document makes it even more accessible. A separate detailed and lengthy action plan helps keep the Strategy itself relatively concise and user-friendly.

Making wider links and demonstrating corporate and multi-agency commitment

The 2002 legislation and guidance emphasise the need for greater corporate commitment from authorities to tackling homelessness than in the past, and the need to make links to other strategic documents and groups, including the work of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) where they exist. Both proved to be areas of difficulty for some authorities, particularly district councils. Those authorities with well-connected forums and groups already working on homelessness and housing
issues were able to use these as a resource and means of widening the scope of activity. The high profile of Homelessness Strategies helped officers to raise the awareness of members and senior staff about this area of work. Workshop participants highlighted the positive aspects of securing corporate and multi-agency commitment.

**Good practice in making wider links and demonstrating corporate commitment**

The **Bedford** Strategic Housing Partnership is the key forum for developing the Housing Strategy and therefore the Homelessness Strategy. It can deliver partnership for new housing asset and stock management and joint commissioning (includes Social Services, Supporting People, and Bedford Primary Care Team). **Rugby** Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was asked to identify agencies, particularly in the private sector, which could help to prevent homelessness.

The **Solihull** Strategy Foreword is written by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Community Safety. The Strategic Service Directorate was involved in preparing the Strategy. Progress on the Strategy is to be reported to a Scrutiny Board, a thematic group within the LSP, and to the LSP.

**Addressing all forms of homelessness**

Most authorities included all forms of homelessness in their Strategies, though non-statutory homelessness was a gap in a significant number. Particular examples of good practice included pre-release work with prisoners; enabling access for single homeless people to a drug and alcohol detoxification project; and an initiative to provide information and access to networks for victims of forced marriage.

**Black and Minority Ethnic issues**

BME issues were neglected by many authorities - though some demonstrated excellent engagement with communities and groups locally. There is a clear need for better data collection, involvement of BME groups in Strategy development, and better services to these communities. Specialist services such as refugee customer services officers, advice for Travellers, surgeries with marginalised groups such as Asian women, and development of a BME Housing Strategy were among the more innovative approaches.

**Good practice in addressing the needs of BME groups**

**Leeds** is currently developing a BME Housing Strategy. The council's recording of BME groups is excellent and clearly identified disproportionate levels of presentations across the city. Its Homeless Guidebook, service standards, and guidance on how to make a complaint, have all been translated into nine community languages and are within the Action Plan; these will also be made available to all agencies in audio tape form. **Bromley** provides advice services for Travellers. **Hounslow** is working with the local Race Equality Council to prevent repeat homelessness by supporting people who have become homeless due to racial violence. **East Staffordshire** is doing research to identify the needs of people from BME groups moving from large conurbations into the area.

**Tackling priority issues on homelessness including prevention**

The focus on a small, well defined set of Government priorities has produced results in tackling rough sleeping and use of bed and breakfast accommodation (B&B); and almost every Strategy considers prevention and support activities. A few Strategies failed to identify plans to address the main causes of homelessness found in their areas.

**Good practice ideas on prevention**

- Refocusing the housing register to reflect the main causes of homelessness, enabling assessment of potential homelessness when people apply for housing;
Improving housing advice services through triage systems that identify the housing problem and see if advice could prevent homelessness, before an appointment is made with homelessness officers;

Mediation schemes to prevent the loss of home from parents, relatives or friends, or family reconciliation work, linking with support services including employment, education and training;

Working with private landlords to develop accreditation schemes;

Work to improve Housing Benefit (HB) systems, for example where court orders are given for rent arrears and an HB claim is outstanding, and to speed up payment of HB;

Tackling domestic violence and trying to prevent repeat homelessness among this group;

Identifying the triggers for repeat homelessness;

Preventing homelessness where people leave prison through prison advice services and liaison, and for vulnerable tenants at risk from crack dealers;

Reviewing rent arrears policies with RSL partners;

Providing floating support as a prevention measure;

Researching why tenancies fail and why clients leave B&B, calculating the public cost and considering how the money could be re-directed into prevention.

Reducing the use of B&B and inappropriate temporary accommodation

The Government target to eliminate use of B&B for families with children, except in emergencies, had been met by March 2004, and for the most part, LHAs that had made significant use of B&B for families with children have included plans in their Strategies to ensure that it is reduced and the reduction sustained.

In a few LHAs, the Review had revealed that B&B use was increasing; in most cases the Strategy and Action Plan contained actions to tackle this increase, and those LHAs were working with ODPM advisers.

Many Strategies also contained proposals to reduce the use of inappropriate temporary accommodation, often through a combination of actions to prevent homelessness and actions to increase the stock of other forms of temporary accommodation.

Good practice in reducing the use of B&B and inappropriate temporary accommodation and increasing the stock of other temporary accommodation

Colchester developed a range of services to help homeless applicants to find good temporary accommodation or to avoid homelessness altogether. These included:

- a Home Finder scheme to help people access or retain privately rented properties;
- a promise of fast-tracking HB payments to help people get into the private sector;
- negotiations and goodwill payments for families willing to continue to house homeless applicants;
- supported lodgings and short stop accommodation for young people;
- family mediation;
- work with Social Services to help resolve accommodation needs of intentionally homeless families as quickly as possible.
Camden works with private developers to develop self-contained temporary accommodation for families, in addition to that provided by RSLs. Wycombe uses council properties, in an estate to be redeveloped, as temporary accommodation in the short term.

**Reducing rough sleeping**

There were strong proposals for reducing the numbers of people needing to sleep rough, many building on work already done to develop Rough Sleeping Strategies or Single Homelessness Strategies.

In some areas, the Review revealed for the first time that there was a rough sleeping problem, often through consultation with homeless people and agencies.

The problem was frequently identified as being to do with 'sofa surfing' as well as sleeping on the streets.

Many Strategies contain plans to carry out counts for the first time, and some LHAs planned to do this with, for example, Parish councils. There were many good ideas for tackling rough sleeping, including:

- Developing ways of identifying what leads to people sleeping rough;
- Identifying people who have additional needs to prevent them losing accommodation, and developing floating support schemes for this group;
- Preventing homelessness amongst people leaving prison and hospital;
- Befriending schemes;
- Fast-tracking access to temporary accommodation for people sleeping rough;
- Developing schemes for helping those with drug or alcohol problems to access accommodation and treatment.

**Access to settled housing**

Access to settled housing, including access to the private rented sector, was also acknowledged as an important aspect of tackling homelessness. Rent deposit schemes are recognised as crucial aids in this. Authorities in high demand/high pressure areas often included actions to support homeless people's access to social housing, and some have developed incentive schemes to free up underoccupied housing. In the same areas, most authorities proposed use of S.106 planning powers to increase the supply of new affordable housing. Actions also included work to maximise the use of existing social housing stock for homeless people, and in particular, increasing the proportion of nominations to these households and lettings made by RSLs.

**Good practice in increasing access to settled accommodation**

Waverley and Tandridge both run incentive schemes to help under-occupying households to move, thereby releasing family accommodation for homeless households. Southampton gives voluntary sector providers a quota of allocations through the Housing Register, so as to free up spaces in homeless projects. Herefordshire employs an advocacy worker to help vulnerable people access housing through the Choice-Based Lettings scheme. Walsall has instituted a review of Housing Association policies to seek to remove barriers to access for homeless applicants.

Aylesbury Vale and Newcastle-under-Lyme each set a target for bringing empty properties back into use. Brighton put touch-screen kiosks in public places to help people search for new homes.
Addressing other priorities

Authorities that addressed other priorities including health, or education, training and employment, worked in partnership with a health promotion team, primary care staff, and neighbourhood managers to develop more inclusive schemes.

Good practice in addressing other priorities

**Wolverhampton** developed its Strategy jointly with the Director of Public Health, and health is one of the key themes of the Strategy. The Strategy also looks at how to help homeless people access education, training, and employment. Proposals include:

- Setting up a nurse-led team for homeless people;
- Looking at training issues for health staff;
- Linking primary care services for drug users to outreach support;
- Developing an electronic directory of health services, to help homeless people to access services;
- Developing strong links between tenancy support and education and employment facilities;
- Identifying employment and education opportunities for homeless people, people at risk of homeless, and residents in temporary accommodation.

**Easington** is working with health staff to develop resource packs for people in temporary accommodation to help them make use of health services. **Croydon** has introduced information packs to help homeless people find out about education, training, and employment facilities.

**South Bedfordshire** set up a referral mechanism to make sure that children living in temporary accommodation were accessing schools in the area.

Differences among types of council and delivery arrangements

On most issues concerning Homelessness Strategies and their development, the researchers found no difference between single and two-tier districts. Social Services were no more likely to be involved where it was situated in the same council. Similarly, each type of council was equally likely to demonstrate corporate commitment and joint action with other bodies.

In general, districts and especially rural areas were less well developed in partnership working - though there are notable exceptions. Unitary and metropolitan councils were significantly more likely to have linked their Strategy in with wider authority strategies such as Community Plans. The issue of resources in smaller districts is likely to play a part, though there are excellent examples of county-wide work in rural areas.

The researchers found no discernible impact of contracting out or transfer in the development of most Strategies. Stock transfer RSLs were active in developing Homelessness Reviews and Strategies in some areas, and less active in others.

Action Planning

Developing Action Plans

Action planning is a weak point in many Strategies. Here, targets and arrangements for monitoring and evaluation need to be sharpened. Many authorities have not identified the resources needed to carry through their Strategy, or have made limited progress in this area. Many authorities would welcome more certainty over Government funding, which would allow them to plan further into the future.
Good practice in this area included a series of Action Plans supporting strategic objectives, which show the baseline position, what action is to be taken, timescales, how success will be measured, who will deliver, why the action was chosen, resources, and other Strategies the action will support. Others include an annual conference to feed back progress, use of performance indicators to monitor progress, and a traffic light monitoring system. Good practices also include reporting on progress to the LSP, a Scrutiny Committee, and to the wider group of housing agencies in the area, and involving homeless people in commenting on what has changed as a result of the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan.

The box below sets out a short checklist of good practice in writing Action Plans.

**Tips for writing Action Plans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential headings</th>
<th>Other useful headings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The action proposed.</td>
<td>Milestones - staged achievements (these may be called interim targets).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is going to lead on this action, and who else is to be involved.</td>
<td>How success will be measured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it is going to be completed.</td>
<td>Why the action is proposed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources needed.</td>
<td>What the situation is now - the baseline position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The outcome intended - what will be achieved (quantified if possible).</td>
<td>A comments column - so that people can see why progress has been slow or why targets were achieved early or outstripped.</td>
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**Reviewing Homelessness Strategies**

The legislation requires LHAs to publish a new Strategy within five years, and to keep their Strategy under Review.

The researchers have recommended that, in the light of the evaluations of the Reviews and Strategies, authorities undertake reviews of the Strategy after one year, and that ODPM guidance is revised to help with this process.
Recommendations

The researchers were asked to identify areas where further guidance or assistance could be helpful in improving the quality of strategies and services to homeless people. The recommendations are divided into three categories: for the ODPM; for local housing authorities; and for other agencies.

Recommendations for the ODPM

Recommendation One: The ODPM should expand its guidance to LHAs to include:

- Reducing the amount of development time being spent by LHAs and Homelessness Forums by a) publicising the Shelter Multi-Agency Monitoring, the Centrepoint model, and any other models for common monitoring of homelessness across all agencies, and b) working with these and other key national agencies to develop systems for recording and monitoring data which would be comparable across the country and could supplement P1E data;
- Collecting appropriate data for predicting future homelessness trends;
- Engaging effectively with BME groups, and identifying the scale and type of BME needs in their area;
- Examining and analysing data with a view to reducing homelessness among BME groups, especially where the data suggests these are over-represented among homeless people;
- Instructions on the minimum requirement for monitoring to ensure best practice on BME issues;
- Good practice in targeting initiatives to reduce homelessness among BME groups;
- Joint guidance with other Government departments, such as the Department of Health, strengthening other agencies' involvement in Homelessness Strategy development. This should include establishing standards for other agencies to collect and pass on data to LHAs, including applications and referrals, on an annual basis;
- More participation and involvement of service users, with specific advice on how to engage with service users effectively. Minimum user involvement standards could be helpful, such as consulting non-priority groups as well as those accepted as in priority need. Guidance on seeking service user views on improvements since the Strategy was implemented would be useful;
- Place extra emphasis on corporate engagement to ensure that the full council supports the Homelessness Strategy and takes a co-ordinated approach to Strategy development;
- Best practice examples covering all aspects of action planning. This would include promotion of joint working to monitor homelessness, developing workable outcome measures, engaging others in both implementing and reviewing progress, and reporting on progress to service users, the wider group of stakeholders (beyond the Homelessness Forum or Strategy Group), to the Housing Strategy Group, and to the LSP.

Recommendation Two: The ODPM should issue guidance to LSPs about Homelessness Strategies and develop targets for LSPs in achieving reductions in homelessness across their area.

Recommendation Three: The ODPM should undertake research to establish the constituent elements of prevention best practice in tackling the main causes of homelessness and should publicise best practice on preventing repeat homelessness beyond the LHAs faced with reducing the use of B&B.

Recommendation Four: Wherever possible, the ODPM should indicate likely or definite availability of resources from all funding streams for homelessness beyond the current financial year.
Recommendations for LHAS

Recommendation Five: Bring forward plans for comprehensive reviews of the Homelessness Strategy to ensure that identified weaknesses are addressed before 2008, and aim to review what is known about the scale and nature of homelessness on an annual basis.

Recommendation Six: Take steps to ensure voluntary agencies are encouraged and enabled to be fully involved in Strategy development, and discuss with them the development of a solutions-based focus.

Recommendation Seven: Consider the benefits of cross-boundary, sub-regional and regional cooperation.

Recommendation Eight: Renew efforts to engage other agencies, particularly Social Services, Health, Probation, Youth Offending Teams, drug and alcohol agencies, and other housing providers.

Recommendation Nine: Work closely with Supporting People Authorities to ensure homelessness is properly addressed within SP strategies.

Recommendation Ten: Identify the implications of the Homelessness Strategy for other corporate and multiagency strategies, and to identify how other strategies could help to achieve the objectives of the Homelessness Strategy and vice-versa.

Recommendations for other Agencies

Recommendation Eleven: The Department for Work and Pensions should set performance targets for authorities that prioritise delivery in cases of homelessness or threatened with homelessness, and encourage authorities to cut delays in the payment of HB. The Government should encourage the Audit Commission to investigate the role of HB services in contributing to reducing homelessness.

Recommendation Twelve: Government departments, such as the Department of Health and the Home Office, should work with the ODPM to produce joint guidance strengthening other agencies’ involvement in Homelessness Strategy development.

Recommendation Thirteen: RSLs should undertake joint monitoring with LHAs of how nomination agreements and tenancy sustainment measures are working in practice, with a view to improving both access to housing and prevention of homelessness.

Recommendation Fourteen: The Housing Corporation should issue guidance to RSLs on tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention. It should, in discussion with the ODPM, consider strengthening its Regulatory Code and Guidance in respect to homelessness, and monitor its implementation.

Recommendation Fifteen: The National Housing Federation should hold discussions with the Housing Corporation and ODPM with a view to strengthening the Corporation's Regulatory Code and Guidance as it refers to homelessness, and ensuring its implementation.

The Evaluation

The project

The evaluation of LHA Homelessness Strategies was carried out by HQNS in the first half of 2004, on behalf of the ODPM. The objectives of the study were to:

- Review the content and coverage of Homelessness Strategies, including how they relate to Homelessness Reviews and other Strategies.

- Evaluate the overall quality of Strategies and draw out elements of best practice.
Review the process of undertaking Reviews and developing Strategies with LHAs, highlighting factors that may have had an impact on the content and quality of the Strategies, and lessons that can be learnt for the future, including lessons about the guidance available from the ODPM and others.

The report of the evaluation is designed to offer LHAs and others a picture of how authorities have tackled their new responsibilities, and in particular to offer good practice to aid future service improvements.
Further information

Further information is contained in the full report, *Local Authorities' Homelessness Strategies - Evaluation and Good Practice*, ISBN 1 85112 751 9, available from:

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