A New Standards Framework for Homelessness Mediation

Standards checklist for local authorities for providing an effective and safe homelessness mediation service
Relate

Since 2002 Relate has been delivering homelessness prevention services to local authorities.

In 2005 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (OPDM) commissioned Relate to develop a standard model for a service to address relationship breakdown that may lead to homelessness.

As a national provider of counselling and mediation services, Relate has a proven track record in helping individuals, couples and families to improve communication, strengthen their relationships and reconcile differences. Relate practitioners are trained to recognise indicators of abuse and violence, and to respond with a model that prioritises the safety of victims and associated children.

The contribution of Relate to homelessness initiatives is noted by ODPM (now DCLG):

“We want to promote these services where there is no risk of abuse or violence. Our future action will include continuing work with Relate to evaluate approaches which reconcile families and we will continue to fund them as part of an effective homelessness prevention service.”

Sustainable Communities; Settled Homes: Changing Lives. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005
A New Standards Framework for Homelessness Mediation
Background

Estimates are that around two thirds of housing applications result from the breakdown of relationships within families and couples.

A survey carried out for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (OPDM, now Department of Communities and Local Government, DCLG) found that in 2005 over 77% of the authorities that responded were providing a counselling or mediation service with family and friends as part of their homelessness prevention activities and a further 57 stated their intention to have a scheme by 2007.

Little in the way of guidelines or best practice for offering a homelessness mediation service has previously been available. Local authorities have implemented a wide and varied range of initiatives, some schemes have been in-house, some out-sourced to voluntary agencies. The learning from these has enabled us to produce the following framework for operating a high quality, effective and safe homelessness mediation service.

Homelessness Mediation

Since the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 local authorities have been expected to prevent as well as respond to homelessness.

The official homelessness Code of Guidance (DCLG, DoH, DfES, 2006) says that mediation should be routinely used in an attempt to reconcile the parties in parental exclusion cases other than where there is judged to be risk of abuse or violence. As well as parental exclusion cases, counselling and mediation services can also be effective in other family relationship resolution solutions.

A variety of homelessness prevention interventions are currently being employed by local authorities, for example counselling support and home visiting services. Some have used mediation services which are based on a two-party dispute model, but rarely have two parties in attendance. Though much of this work is beneficial, it does not fall within the scope of homelessness mediation as it is currently being developed. This service is increasingly characterised as being delivered by practitioners with specialist training in both therapeutic and mediation practice and theory.
This new framework was developed following extensive feedback from housing authorities, service providers and service users, about the variety, suitability and effectiveness of interventions adopted by local authorities to contribute to their homelessness prevention strategies. It embodies the next steps for homelessness mediation.

**Advantages for local authorities derived from adopting this standards framework**

The costs of homelessness are high. An efficient and effective homelessness prevention strategy that adopts a 'spend to save' principle can deliver substantial savings, for both local and central government.

There are advantages for local authorities and housing applicants in operating an effective homelessness mediation service.

- Reduces homelessness and consequent applications for housing in the short, medium and long terms
- Improves performance against Best Value performance indicator BV213
- Offers housing staff more options to give to applicants
- Contributes to the homelessness assessment
- Offers cost savings on temporary accommodation solutions and infrastructure
- Supports housing applicants: families and social networks are strengthened and resolutions are sustained
- Provides additional safety and child protection mechanisms
- Contributes to Housing Strategy requirements and priorities
- Increases applicant satisfaction

**Advantages in contracting with an external service provider**

- A neutral and impartial service is most consistent with the practices of counselling and mediation
- Homelessness mediation is a specialist service where an outside agency can provide expertise and a network necessary to support the work which can offer cost and quality benefits
- A homelessness mediation service benefits from being perceived by clients as independent of the local authority
- External providers can have access to wide support networks of other help agencies
Principles for Planning a Service

☐ The local authority and service provider agree what the service is aiming to achieve through stated, measurable outcomes

☐ The service is focussed on people's needs and safety, especially that of young people, and not just on reducing housing costs. Targets reflect this and measurements are in place that reflect positive outcomes for householders and applicants

☐ A homelessness mediation service is one element of an overall homelessness prevention strategy and an integrated part of the mix of measures. Clear service standards and performance indicators are common across all elements of the homelessness prevention strategy

☐ The service is neutral and impartial and not tied to the local authority, this being most consistent with the practices of counselling and mediation

X ✓ This is a checklist of standards that builds into a framework that will underpin an effective homelessness mediation service. It is a tool that will help you assess your existing service or set up a new one.
Principles in Selecting a Service Provider

The most effective homelessness mediation services for the long term address both
the emotional and practical issues which cause family breakdown. Services should
employ conciliatory and systemic approaches focussing both on helping families to
explore the communication patterns and emotional contexts which contribute to
family breakdown and the surrounding practical issues. Services should address wide
familial issues aiming to rebuild relationships or reduce conflict.

Criteria for selecting a service provider

☐ There is evidence that the agency has the capacity to deliver the
contract/agreement

☐ The agency is able to demonstrate that its practitioners have specialist
training and hold relevant accredited qualifications

☐ The agency or its practitioners are members of a national standards body

☐ The agency adheres to a recognised ethical framework

☐ The agency works to a recognised theoretical basis

☐ The practitioners have access to professional support and supervision

☐ The agency has clear polices and written procedures for domestic
violence/abuse and child protection

☐ The practitioners are trained to identify and deal with domestic violence,
safety and child protection

☐ The agency has a health and safety policy and written procedures

☐ The agency has an equality and diversity policy and written procedures

☐ The agency is able to provide a culturally and linguistically appropriate
service to the community

☐ The agency has protocols to ensure all staff having direct contact with young
people have enhanced CRB checks

☐ The agency has a developed quality assurance system in place
Principles in Contracting with Homelessness Prevention Service Providers

It is essential with outsourcing that the contractor's functions and the local authority's duties are clearly defined in a legal, enforceable contract.

As well as legal requirements the contract states:

- the aim of the service
- service standards, performance measures and monitoring arrangements and performance targets and review mechanisms
- payment structures and terms. (Cost to the local authority may be determined on a per case basis, a per hour basis, a flat annual fee or a mixture)
- period of the contract
- termination clauses with notice periods which will best serve applicants part way through a service

Service standards may be written in a service level agreement in addition to the contract.

Service Standards

Service standards for both the housing department and the service provider should be agreed and documented.

- Desirable outcomes are documented; examples include:
  - Conflict is eliminated and disputes resolved
  - Relationship transitions are managed with reduced conflict
  - Sustainable family living arrangements are successfully negotiated
  - Clients make a move out of a violent home with proper planning and support

- Confidentiality and disclosure policies and protocols are agreed with the service provider with what details of the case, if any, the service will share with the authority

- Protocols exist for sharing information or concerns about domestic violence/abuse and child protection
Protocols exist for dealing with domestic violence, safety and child protection that fit with the local authority Domestic Violence Strategy.

The service reflects the diversity of the community and homeless population and is able to provide culturally and linguistically sensitive support to ethnic minority homeless households.

Services or referral systems are in place to continue work with families, especially where a young person is involved, should that be required once a housing outcome has been reached.

Procedures for how the feedback from the homelessness mediation service contributes to the homelessness assessment are agreed, documented and understood by all staff.

There are set boundaries for work that reflect competencies.

There are procedures and standardized forms for reporting inputs, outputs and outcomes.

There is an agreed mechanism for review of the service and the procedures.

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**Standards for Effective Joint Working**

The service's practitioners understand the local authority's homelessness process through training in housing policy, procedures, practices and housing options.

Homelessness officers fully understand the homelessness mediation process and the service practitioner's role. Ideally there are joint training events between those delivering the service and housing department staff.

An identified person within the local authority is the liaison with the service provider to manage an effective working relationship.

There is a process for feedback between the service provider and housing department.
Standards for Managing Referrals to the Service

☐ The service is an integral part of local authority procedures for processing housing applications

☐ Referral from the housing department to a homelessness mediation service is routine in housing applications where safe and appropriate. However, if there is reason to believe an applicant is homeless, a formal homelessness assessment is not delayed by the homelessness mediation intervention

☐ There are written criteria, supported by training, to determine who may be appropriately referred to the service. These particularly concentrate on assessment of whether referral to a service is safe (Domestic Violence Strategy)

☐ There is a clear referral system and form understood by housing staff and service providers

☐ The service allows and encourages self referral and referrals from other agencies

Standards for Providing the Best Service for Housing Applicants

☐ The purpose of the service is clear to staff and any contractors

☐ Clear, high quality information is available through appropriate media explaining the service to applicants. Information is available in community languages

☐ There are opportunities for clients to give feedback about the service and a complaint procedure

☐ Venues where homelessness mediation takes place are away from the Housing Department facilities to reinforce the independence and impartiality of the service

☐ Venues are accessible and have a hearing loop
Standards for Monitoring and Measurement

It is good practice to monitor both direct and indirect impact measures. Direct measures focus on the outcomes of homelessness mediation in relation to the caseload of referrals, e.g.

> the proportion of applicants referred to the service and recorded as being reconciled with their host household,
> the proportion who made a planned, positive move,
> the relationship between the young person and the host householder.

Indirect measures can be an impact indicator, such as trends in the numbers of ‘family/friend exclusion’ cases of homelessness.

- Inputs to be monitored could include costs, use of premises, staff resources, staff training, supervision, meetings.
- Outputs to be monitored could include the number of clients referred to the service, client groupings e.g. individuals/family groups, demographic data, volume of work done, case length.
- Outcomes to be monitored should include outcomes relating to personal, family and social circumstances as well as outcomes related directly to the number of housing applications – such outcomes have value in their own right and will help achieve targets for reducing homelessness in the medium and longer term.

• Monitoring systems are designed to collect data on interventions, on service user outcomes and on service quality
• Systems collect the data needed by both the local authority and the service provider which may have its own, different performance indicators
• Included in the system is a process to collect user’s views and consider them in the review process
• The formal written agreement and mechanisms are reviewed every 12 months in line with Best Value Principles
Standards for Community Involvement

Making the homelessness mediation service accessible through self referral or referral from other agencies will help encourage earlier access to the service which gives more likelihood of success.

☐ Other agencies working in homelessness prevention in the community are aware of the local authority’s homelessness mediation service, its competencies and boundaries and how to make a referral

☐ Strong networks are maintained and a multi-agency approach adopted to strengthen the homelessness prevention strategy
An Opportunity to Work with Relate

Relate is currently piloting an innovative new homelessness mediation service that meets the new standards framework. The two year pilot will be externally evaluated. It will offer an independent, impartial and confidential service for housing applicants experiencing conflict or breakdown in family relationships which may lead to homelessness. It aims to address the underlying conflicts and strengthen relationships, enabling clients to negotiate their own workable solutions and avoid homelessness.

The service will include a therapeutic element to support individuals to develop strategies to manage their own situation. It will also offer mediation, where appropriate, between clients and their partners, family members or friends to enable them to negotiate their own workable solutions.

In designing this service Relate has developed a specialist training for practitioners.

Local authorities and agencies interested in piloting the service or being kept informed about the learning and outcomes it produces can email Relate on: mwac@relate.org.uk

Agencies interested in finding out more about the specialist training should email: mwactraining@relate.org.uk

Relate already offers family mediation services and family counselling services through its national network. To find out about these services local to you or explore with us how our services could deliver outcomes for you, email: enquiries@relate.org.uk
I would like more information about Relate’s new homelessness mediation service pilot and opportunities for local authority housing departments

I would like to be kept informed about the learning and outcomes from Relate’s new homelessness mediation service pilot

I would like more information about the new training in homelessness mediation

I would like to find out more about the existing family mediation and family counselling services Relate can provide

Name

Position

Organisation

Address

Email

Telephone

Data supplied by you will be used by Relate and its agents to supply you with information on, or concerning, mediation services and Relate’s services. We will communicate with you by telephone, letter, email or other reasonable means. You have the right to ask for a copy of the information we hold on you and to have any inaccuracies corrected, and to tell us in writing if you do not wish to receive further correspondence from us by mail, telephone, email or other means. For further information please contact us at enquiries@relate.org.uk or on 0845 456 1310

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