

# **Housing associations and councils working together to end homelessness**

# Forewords

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) is the most important piece of homelessness legislation we've seen in a generation. It brings a shift in the way we provide support, so that it's available to everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness, regardless of priority need.

Along with this important step, the Act is about encouraging collaboration and partnerships. While these have long existed across the housing sector, the Act gives new impetus to strengthening these relationships and identifying new, joint solutions to tackling homelessness.

As the country's housing and homelessness crisis continues, there are key structural changes we need to see before homelessness will end. This includes the need for urgent government investment to enable housing associations and councils to build 145,000 new affordable homes a year – of which 90,000 must be social rent – a fair and effective welfare system and secure, long term funding for support and supported housing.

So, while the Act alone can't solve homelessness, it has helped to develop strong local partnerships and collaboration, like the ones this report explores. With these partnerships and the policy changes described above, we will be so much closer to our goal of ending the housing crisis for good.

**Kate Henderson**

Chief Executive, National Housing Federation

In life, every one of us needs good health, a stable home, a job, and a support network of friends and family; they are fundamental to being fulfilled, happy and productive.

The rise in homelessness is a very visual demonstration of the challenges that society and the economy is facing in helping everyone to achieve those fundamentals.

Homelessness is at the acute end of a long journey into housing crisis, which, at the other end, includes families and individuals experiencing challenges that are causing housing stress for the very first time. In many cases, the first opportunity to address these challenges will lie with councils' partners, rather than with councils themselves.

Prevention of homelessness is therefore everything, it is everyone's business, and it requires collective and coherent action.

The Homelessness Reduction Act has a welcome focus on prevention, and the duty to refer in particular begins to acknowledge the role of councils' partners in tackling homelessness.

Whilst Housing Associations are not bound by the duty to refer, they are critical partners for councils if we are to succeed in reducing homelessness, and – and with support from the National Housing Federation (NHF) – many have made a voluntary commitment to cooperate.

There is more to be done, and we need Government action to tackle the root causes of homelessness. Councils need support to build homes through the reform of Right to Buy, and our welfare system must enable the people most in need to access stable homes.

Nevertheless, there is a role for genuine partnerships to achieve the outcomes we all want to see. In this report, we begin to explore the benefits of strong local collaboration, and we hope that councils and their partners continue the conversation, so that, together, we can address one of the greatest challenges of our times.

**Cllr David Renard**

Chairman, Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, Local Government Association

# Introduction

In November and December 2018, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the National Housing Federation (NHF) hosted five roadshow events across England, under the theme: 'Working Together to tackle Homelessness'.

Held in the months leading up to the Homelessness Reduction Act's first anniversary, these events were a valuable opportunity to reflect on the challenges that councils and housing associations collectively face in tackling homelessness. They were an opportunity to discuss how we can work together to achieve solutions.

In this report we outline: our motivation for the events, what we learned, and how we can continue the conversation.

## About the Homelessness Reduction Act

The HRA, which came into force on 3 April 2018, placed new duties on councils and some public bodies. It is one of the biggest changes to homelessness legislation in 40 years and shifts the focus towards preventing homelessness. It allows anyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness to access meaningful help, regardless of their priority need status.

The Act also encourages local collaboration to enable people to access the right support for them, in recognition of the fact that homelessness is not simply about a lack of housing, but related to poverty and issues associated with employment and income. Although local housing authorities have the primary responsibility to tackle homelessness, they cannot do this alone.

The Act recognises this with a new duty to refer, which came into force on 1 October 2018. This obliges public bodies to refer anyone to a council if they believe they are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Housing associations are not one of the public bodies bound by the duty to refer. However, many are keen to support councils to implement the HRA. In response to this the NHF have developed a housing association offer on the duty to refer called the commitment to refer.<sup>1</sup>

This is a voluntary commitment that a housing association will refer an individual or household to a local housing authority if they are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Signing up to the commitment is an opportunity for housing associations to make a positive, public statement that shows they're serious about helping councils end homelessness.

Over 200 housing associations have signed up for the Commitment to Refer so far, representing over two million homes. **See who has signed up.**

## Why did we hold these events?

Housing associations and councils have a long history of working together to tackle homelessness. The two providers of social housing are inextricably linked through the processes of allocation and nomination agreements. This is underpinned by legal and regulatory duties for housing associations

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.housing.org.uk/topics/welfare-reform/homelessness/commitment-to-refer/>

to assist local housing authorities with homelessness duties. Many councils and housing associations have strong partnerships resulting from historic relationships. Together they deliver innovative collaborations that go beyond what is required.

However, despite this collaboration, homelessness is rising in the UK, driven by increasing challenges in the supply of social housing, welfare, support, and severe restrictions in funding for councils. The NHF and LGA wanted to get a better understanding of the contemporary experience of partnership working to reduce homelessness, and to see what more social housing providers can be doing. The events held last year were a key opportunity to find this out.

## Key facts

- Homelessness acceptances by councils in England increased by **48 per cent** between 2009/10 and 2017/18
- There has been a **250 per cent** rise in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation during this period
- Since 2010, rough sleeping estimates show an increase of **165 per cent**
- The private rented sector has **doubled in size** since 2002, while the social rented sector is now the smallest tenure
- **On average**, households in the private rented sector spend 33 per cent of their income on rent, compared to 28 per cent in the social sector
- Restrictions on the local housing allowance mean that **in 97 per cent** of areas in England, four fifths of the market are now unaffordable within current rates
- Councils' homelessness services face cost pressures of **£104 million** each year due to demand and inflation alone.

## What did we do?

We held five half-day events across England, in the East of England (Cambridge), South East (Brighton), London, North-west (Manchester) and South West (Bristol).

These events were an opportunity for senior leaders from housing associations and councils to discuss the challenges faced by each sector, share best practice, and identify further opportunities for strengthening collaboration.

At each event, housing associations and councils gave their view on how the homelessness crisis had unfolded in each region. All speakers shared the challenges of regional complexities and shared how they had tackled these challenges through collaboration. We heard case studies from each region and finally, we held a workshop to generate new ideas and solutions.

**5** workshops

**10** case studies

**70** attendees

# What we learned

## Case studies

At each event, we heard from one council and one housing association about how they had worked well with their social sector partners to tackle homelessness locally.

These case studies are presented below.

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### East of England

## Hightown Housing St Claire's, St Albans and Homes for Cathy

### Who we are

Hightown housing association manage almost 6000 homes, mostly in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. Hightown largely deliver general needs housing but also have some specialist services. Hightown are also founding members of the Homes for Cathy group of housing associations, who work together to develop solutions to the current homelessness crisis.

### What we did

With homelessness rising and St Albans being one of the least affordable areas in the region, Hightown wanted to be able to support people in urgent housing need in the area. In 2017, with capital and revenue from St Albans Council, Hightown converted what was previously a mental health care home into temporary accommodation.

St Claire's has 10 modern, self-contained and fully furnished apartments for local homeless households. Situated within a few minutes'

walk from the town centre, the location is ideal for people who need easy access to local services or who have no access to a car. Cheaper than using bed and breakfast for temporary accommodation, St Claire's represents a great example of housing associations and councils collaborating to provide practical, economical solutions.

### Homes for Cathy

On top of the local solutions developed in the East of England, Hightown have been instrumental in the development of Homes for Cathy. Homes for Cathy now has 72 members and is working to encourage all housing associations to tackle homelessness through the following nine commitments.

1. To contribute to the development and execution of council homelessness strategies.
2. To operate flexible allocations and eligibility policies which allow individual applicants' unique set of circumstances and housing history to be considered.
3. To offer constructive solutions to applicants who aren't deemed eligible for an offer of a home.
4. To not make any tenant seeking to prevent their homelessness, homeless (as defined by the Crisis plan definition).
5. To commit to meeting the needs of vulnerable tenant groups.
6. To work in partnership to provide a range of affordable housing options which meet the needs of all homeless people in their local communities.
7. To ensure that properties offered to

homeless people should be ready to move into.

8. To contribute to ending migrant homelessness in the areas housing associations operate.
9. To lobby, challenge and inspire others to support ending homelessness.

## South Norfolk Council Early Help Hub

### Who we are

South Norfolk Council is a district council based in South East England. It represents an area with a population of roughly 124,000 people.

### What we did

The Early Help Hub is a partnership between 27 public, community and voluntary sector services, that all sit in one location. It is a multi-agency triage process to allow people to get to the right help early.

Housing associations both support and have representation in the Early Help Hub. This has led to further collaboration, including an improvement in the Discretionary Housing Payment process, improved mutual exchanges, use of the Commitment to Refer, aligning policies to reduce voids, and working together to increase direct lets.

The Hub has strengthened local collaboration and garnered cross-council involvement and support. The collaborative approach means that local services are integrated rather than reinvented, protecting resources and creating better support across partner organisations.

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## South East

## Brighton and Hove City Council Homelessness Reduction Act Trailblazer

### Who we are

Brighton and Hove City Council covers a city with a population of over 270,000. It took part in the Homelessness Reduction Act Trailblazer programme. Twenty-eight councils were awarded Trailblazer funding in 2017 to pilot new approaches to preventing homelessness

### What we did

As part of their trailblazer work, Brighton and Hove Council established an Early Intervention service, based on the premise that housing issues are resolved when people are offered help at an early stage. The council has started home visits to at-risk households, offering them help with current housing problems and showing them how to plan for future housing need amid the challenges of the Brighton & Hove housing market.

The council has encouraged landlords, including its housing association partners, to make referrals into the service, and has carried out engagement work with partners to facilitate this, and to raise the profile of homelessness prevention.

Where people have been eligible and involved with support available, the outcome is successful in 89 per cent of cases (229 households have been prevented from becoming homeless). As opposed to office-based processes, the approach of an officer meeting an applicant at their home can encourage a much more meaningful disclosure as part of the assessment and planning process, leading to positive

engagement, and finding a solution to their current housing need.

## Accent Housing Renting Ready Pilot

### Who we are

Accent housing association has provided homes and services for a diverse range of customers since 1966. They have 20,000 properties, which are spread over the North, East and South of the country, and are home to over 35,000 people.

### What we did

Accent, Crisis and the Surrey Heath Borough Council partnered to embed tenancy training into the homeless allocation pathway, with the aim of using tenancy training to create an allocation offer to those excluded from the housing register.

The partnership used a Crisis tenancy training programme 'Renting Ready', which is designed for homeless people, those at risk of homelessness and those with little experience of independent living. It teaches learners about tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities. The programme teaches tenants how to search for, secure and sustain a tenancy, how to manage money on a low income and how to get along with landlords, neighbours, and flatmates. It can either be delivered as part of pre-tenancy support and preparation for moving on to independent accommodation or to tenants who might need to develop some extra skills that allow them to sustain their tenancies.

Sixty per cent of those who took part in this programme said that their confidence in managing a tenancy had improved a lot. Accent are working with Crisis to feedback their findings from the course and develop it for future participants.

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### South West

## Bristol City Council Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer

### Who we are

Bristol City Council (BCC) covers a region with a population of roughly 449,000 people. The council was a homelessness prevention trailblazer, and received £925,000 to help build evidence on 'what works' in homelessness prevention activities. The council has recently finalised its Bristol's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-24.

### What we did

BCC developed a Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy focused on three key issues to effectively prevent homelessness:

- **Supply of genuinely affordable housing:** build hundreds of thousands more homes per year if we are to genuinely tackle the housing and homelessness crises. Homes for social rent must be prioritised.
- **Welfare reform:** the reduction and freeze of Local Housing Allowance, Universal Credit, the Benefit Cap, the removal of Housing Benefit for under 22s and the Spare Room Subsidy all place major strains both on individuals and on housing providers.
- **Support funding and commissioning:** the removal of the Supporting People ring-fence has been difficult for the support services and for vulnerable people, and short-term commissioning cycles bring additional insecurity into the sector.

Its vision for the strategy is grounded in partnership principles, and to implement the strategy, the council worked closely with its housing association partners, including the Bristol Housing Partnership, and the Bristol Supported Housing Partnership.



The strategy is intended to:

- deliver a strong partnership approach – governance of the strategy will be through the multi-agency Early Intervention and Preventing Homelessness Challenge Group, acting as a Homelessness Reduction Board
- combine homelessness, housing delivery, social care, health, welfare reform, justice and education, to deliver a reduction in homelessness and rough sleeping 2019/24
- be integrated with the One City Plan citywide vision
- provide a strategic fit for funding bids to central government
- deliver an innovative ‘living system’ document.

Within a year of the project running, the amount of rough sleepers in Cornwall has decreased by almost one third. Cornwall's rough sleeper count for 2016/17 reported 99 rough sleepers, the third highest in the country. The Cornwall count for 2017/18 reported 68 rough sleepers, a reduction of 31 per cent, a significant success against a 15 per cent rise nationally. These results have seen Cornwall drop to tenth highest in the country.

## Coastline Housing Nos Da Kernow

### Who we are

The Nos Da Kernow project is a partnership of three organisations, Coastline Housing (registered social landlord), St Petroc's (homelessness charity) and Cornwall Housing (council housing options) who each bring specialist expertise and knowledge in the areas of resettlement, housing options and outreach.

### What we did

The project has a multi-agency steering group with representatives from health, the private rented sector, social housing providers and social care.

The team cover the whole of the Cornwall. The project focuses on working with individuals before they reach the point at which something causes them to sleep rough. This approach enables an appropriate and specific response to people with a variety of needs ranging from those with a basic need for housing, to those who are at risk of rough sleeping as a result of complex social needs.

## West London Housing Partnership Rough Sleeping Prevention Partnership

### Who we are

The partnership is an umbrella organisation for the seven West London local housing authorities: Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. It works to:

- lobby for the interests of the West London boroughs on housing issues
- develop collaborative working across the sub-region
- improve provision of housing services
- develop an excellent understanding of housing demand, needs and conditions across West London.

### What we did

In collaboration with St Mungo's, the Partnership set up a rough sleeping prevention project. Built on **No First Night Out** principles.

The model involves a safe space assessment hub, including emergency accommodation, where people can be assessed for their risk of rough sleeping and given intensive support. People are referred to the hubs by local support agencies, under a set of defined referral criteria. Demand has been high, with 1045 referrals between August 2017 and October 2018. Of these, 718 people were taken on for casework.

The programme exceeded its target ahead of schedule, preventing rough sleeping for 505 people. Interventions used were primarily mediation, floating support, and help to access private rental tenancies. Its success

was underpinned by a strong focus on “what works” in prevention, an effective referrals system which created high-quality referrals, and excellent partnership working with landlords and housing associations.

For the future, the programme will be engaging with other others, such as Jobcentre Plus, to create another referral route, and investigating the provision of employment support. It will seek future funding from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)'s Rapid Rehousing Pathway, as its model bears strong similarities to the Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs announced in the Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy.

## Evolve housing and support CR Zero 2020

### Who we are

Previously part of the South London YMCA, Evolve Housing and Support charity has been operational since 1861. It works across Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Wandsworth, Kingston, Kensington and Chelsea to provide supported housing for around 700 people. Alongside this, it also provides community services including mentoring, health and wellbeing, work and learning, and nurseries.

### What we did

Evolve recognised that rough sleeping is a growing issue in Croydon, which affects the whole community. In response, they launched the CR Zero 2020 campaign in July 2016: part of a European-wide initiative to end rough sleeping across Europe, the aim of the campaign is to eradicate chronic street homelessness in Croydon by 2020.

The campaign is delivered in partnership with Croydon Council, Crisis, Expert Link, Homeless link, and Thames Reach. Its focus,

however, is on involving the entire community in identifying the problem and becoming part of the solution. For example, the first part of the campaign was a 'connections week', where 100 community volunteers were engaged to get to know every rough sleeper in Croydon by name, and identify what they needed to move off the streets.

The partnership then formed a 'solutions group', including citizens, third-sector organisations, council housing and health teams, and faith-based groups, to address the barriers to people moving off the streets. The group has chosen to focus on Housing First, council system changes, policy and influence, health, and supported housing.

Its success is based on harnessing the energy of the community to support the council in its objectives. Through careful timing, it's succeeded in keeping the needs of rough sleepers on the policy agenda, and is looking to influence commissioning priorities, and involve a bigger section of the community, including local businesses, housing developers, and health providers.

The Housing First part of the project is particularly successful, with people now moved into their homes. As the community has always been involved in this project, there is a high level of community support and tenancy sustainment is going well.

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## North West

# Stockport Homes Group Strategy to prevent homelessness

## Who we are

Stockport Homes is an Arms-length Management Organisation (ALMO) formed in 2005. Under a management agreement with Stockport Council, it delivers statutory homelessness duties, including Housing Options services, temporary accommodation, administration of the social housing register, and Homechoice.

## What we did

Stockport has seen a strong commitment across the housing sector to 'designing out' homelessness, supported by strategic buy-in from the Greater Manchester Housing Partnership.

The council convened the Stockport Housing Strategy Group, Housing Partnership, and Homelessness Forum to contribute to its strategy to prevent homelessness. This led to the Stockport Housing Partnership, which is comprised of local registered providers who are committing to the following pledges:

- new ways of working to support complex needs clients
- work collaboratively for tenancy sustainment
- support Greater Manchester initiatives to prevent and relieve
- support employment and health based initiatives
- ensure all frontline teams have up to date knowledge and awareness
- prioritise the building of affordable homes to rent.

As a result, Stockport Homes group has reformed its allocations and lettings policy, and now aim for 50 per cent of all lettings and 20 per cent of accepting nominations to go people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. They have also geared their processes towards preventing homelessness, with an early intervention policy, and a commitment to not evict anyone who is engaged in relieving the threat of homelessness.

## Greater Manchester Homes Partnership Social Impact Bond

### Who we are

The Partnership is a consortium of housing providers across Greater Manchester, formed with the aim of preventing and relieving homelessness in the region. It's been launched and funded by One Manchester and Trafford Housing Trust – two of Greater Manchester's largest housing providers – in partnership with Bridges Fund Management. The programme is delivered by Shelter, Great Places and the Brick, and supported by 17 specialist housing providers, who are commissioned to deliver better outcomes for rough sleepers.

### What we did

The programme has been commissioned on a payment-by-results basis by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, as part of a wider strategy for tackling homelessness in the region. Over a three-year period, providers are working with entrenched rough sleepers to help them off the streets and into a new life. This is done by providing a stable tenancy, alongside the intensive emotional and practical support needed to maintain successful homes and access appropriate health, training and employment services.

The programme has also partnered with Bolton Council to form a complex case

panel, which makes multi-agency decisions on support for individuals, and with Oldham Council to create a coordinated outreach programme.

Seventeen partners have provided 300 homes, with over 200 people successfully housed so far and zero evictions. The success of the programme is based on three key tenets:

- **Trust:** the programme uses staff with lived experience, who take a strengths based approach to support and outreach.
- **Collaboration:** communication, flexible budgets, flexible policy, and a commitment to learning from experience are key.
- **Systems change:** the programme aims to embed positive practice, through the identification of gaps in services, participant consultation, and the integration of local health, homelessness, justice and housing strategies.

Work is ongoing to adapt regional policies to support prevention, promote inclusion and personalised support, improve access to employment training and volunteering opportunities, and share learning from the programme. Already, the project is seeing its reach extend beyond the project itself.

# Moving the conversation on – next steps

It has never been more important for housing associations and councils to collaborate to tackle homelessness. These workshops opened up the conversation, and to help you move them on, we have listed the details of regional networks. We have also included some reference materials for further information.

If you'd like to discuss homelessness, please contact [priya.thethi@local.gov.uk](mailto:priya.thethi@local.gov.uk), or your local NHF representative.<sup>2</sup>

## Regional networks

### Homes for Cathy

Homes for Cathy run a series of regional forums alongside their national campaigning work.

<https://homesforcathy.org.uk/about>

### South East Homelessness Forum

This forum brings together housing associations, councils, and voluntary sector colleagues, to share learning and challenges relating to tackling homelessness, and to hear the latest updates from central government.

Contact:  
[anna.suswillo@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:anna.suswillo@homelesslink.org.uk)

### North East Homelessness Think Tank

This group, comprising academics, researchers, and policy officers from landlords and the voluntary sector, aims to inform and influence policies affecting homeless client groups through research, campaigning and other collaborative activities.

Contact: [info@yhne.org.uk](mailto:info@yhne.org.uk)

### Youth Homelessness Regional Network (South)

This network is for managers and staff of specialist youth homelessness services to discuss current challenges and examples of good practice.

Contact:  
[tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk)

### Youth Homelessness Regional Network (North West)

This network is for managers and staff of specialist youth homelessness services to discuss current challenges and examples of good practice.

Contact:  
[tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:tasmin.maitland@homelesslink.org.uk)

### Homeless Link Manchester Training hub

This is the new centre of Homeless Link's training programme in the North of England, which provides access to a selection of public training courses for its homelessness and supported housing members.

Contact:  
[lane.newby@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:lane.newby@homelesslink.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.housing.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/member-services/member-relations/>

## Further reading

**'Duty to refer: an opportunity to cooperate to tackle homelessness'**

Local Government Association, 2018

**'Homelessness survey: discussion paper'**

National Housing Federation, 2018

**'Commitment to refer'**

National Housing Federation, 2018

**'Tackling homelessness together: the importance of local authorities and housing associations working in partnership'**

Chartered Institute of Housing, 2017

**'The Homelessness Monitor: England 2018'**

Crisis, 2018





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