

Homelessness Reduction Act - One Year On inquiry

About the inquiry

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee held a one-off evidence session on Tuesday 23 April 2019, on the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, when they took evidence from charities, local authorities and the Government.

The Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced to the House of Commons by HCLG Committee member, Bob Blackman MP. It became law in 2017 and was implemented by the Government and local authorities in 2018.

It places new duties on local authorities in England to prevent and relieve homelessness through improved intervention at an earlier stage. The aim of the new legislation is to reduce the number of household owed a homelessness duty, and lessen the use of temporary accommodation. The Government has pledged to review the effectiveness of the new measures and will publish a final report in March 2020.

The session investigated what impact the Act has had in the time it has been in operation. It examined how local authorities have adapted the services they provide and the additional costs this has placed on them. It looked at how outcomes have changed for people at risk of becoming homeless or who are in need of accommodation. The Committee considered whether reforms could be made to improve the legislation, both from the perspective of local authorities and their service users.

There were 134 questions and answers in all. This note gives a quick summary. The links at the end of this note lead you to the transcript as well as written evidence submitted to the inquiry.

The note is colour coded, so:

- Green text or shading represents the evidence given by Shelter and Crisis charities.
- Pink denotes the local government view provided by the Local Government Association and London Councils.
- Blue represents the Government view.

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THE THREE PANELS

1. Charities

Jon Sparkes, Chief Executive, Crisis. Response based on Crisis survey of six local authorities including 545 people using housing offices since the Act and 51 in-depth interviews.

Deborah Garvie, Policy Manager, Shelter. Response based on a survey of Shelter advisers; an analysis of a number of client journeys to see the outcomes; and assessment of personal housing plans.

2. Local Authorities

Councillor Adele Morris, Deputy Chair of Environment, Economy, Housing & Transport Board, LGA

Councillor Farah Khanum Hussain, London Councils

3 Government

Heather Wheeler MP, Minister for Housing & Homelessness, MHCLG

Jeremy Swain, Deputy Director, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Division, MHCLG

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Clive Betts (Chair)
- Bob Blackman
- Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi
- Helen Hayes (a vice-president of the Local Government Association)
- Kevin Hollinrake
- Andrew Lewer (a vice-president of the LGA)
- Mark Prisk: (served on a panel for Crisis looking at homelessness in an honorary capacity)
- Mary Robinson
- Liz Twist
- Matt Western.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACT: SOME POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE HEADLINES

- + Enables councils to deliver more person-centred services.
- + Reduction in number of people being turned away without support or advice
- + Overall, the way people are treated has improved. More people feel listened to, respected and can make themselves understood. People feel listened to and things are being explained to them.
- + Local authorities have recruited staff, changed systems and trained staff.
- + Access is improving. More people who are street homeless are receiving help. People are being seen who previously were not seen and people are being assessed and given a plan.
- + People have more time with an adviser and the time council officers spend with each client has doubled from one or two hours, to three or four hours.
- + Single people are now able to access assistance that they were not previously able to access.
- + The first quarter's (experimental) statistics have come out - showing promising signs: 10,800 households have been helped to secure accommodation through the new prevention and relief duties. The next important point, then, is what we do. We are refreshing our how-to guides on how to let, how to buy and how to rent. Parts of those will show up issues on the Housing Act, and how they can find out more and better particulars from their local councils and their housing associations.
- Overall awareness of the Act is low and is not, in itself, encouraging more people to come forward. Some local authorities are simply layering the Act on top of existing services. It's not relieving homelessness in itself.
- This does not necessarily mean a successful client journey but it's early on to review the full impact of the legislation. There has been a lack of awareness of the new duties we have and of people's rights.

THE DUTY TO REFER

The people Crisis surveyed were using 11 different other sorts of agencies: Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice bureaux, their GP, the hospital and so on. Of all those, the most common other service they were using was their GP. However a GP has no duty to refer under the Act and, therefore, the proportion being referred from GPs ranked about second lowest.

A very simple and straight-line answer to the question would be to apply the duty to refer to GPs. That would instantly increase awareness of people who had that need, right there and then.

Jon Sparkes, Crisis

The LGA has been quite clear that we think it should be a duty to co-operate and not a duty to refer. Working together will achieve a much better outcome.

I do not think councils have a particular view on whether GPs are in or not, but our view is that it should be much more about co-operating and not just sending more people through the council system.

Q: Would it be better as a duty to co-operate and when reviewing the Act, might this be considered?

A: We want to see how the duty to refer is working. It came in, in October. It should create momentum for referrals to come from all sources. I understand the issue about GPs making referrals, but we still need to do more to encourage those institutions, those services, to make referrals. Will be part of the HRA review and consultation; March 2020 is when we make the announcement.

THE NEW “PREVENTION” DUTY

There is a real culture shift in some cases. It is very easy to point at a local authority and say, “You have staff who are gatekeeping”. On the other hand, if that member of staff is faced with an endless stream of people at risk of homelessness and an absolute shortage of truly affordable places for them to go, you can see why that encourages a culture of gatekeeping. The HRA is pushing in one direction, but the reality of the world outside is pushing in the other direction. You are getting a mixed outcome as a result of that.

The problem is that there is no alternative accommodation, apart from temporary accommodation. We do not have the supply of new, affordable accommodation for people to move into when they present as homeless. That means that, as local authorities, we are reliant on the private rented sector and temporary accommodation to fulfil our housing duty. There is no other option for people. It just does not exist.

SHELTER ON HRA IMPLEMENTATION

In terms of outcomes, you cannot relieve homelessness unless you have a home to offer somebody or to help them into. In the areas where homelessness is most prevalent, there are no suitable, affordable homes for people to go into, as a result of a chronic shortage of social rented housing, which is really the only suitable, affordable option for a lot of families, and as a result of the freeze in local housing allowance, which means that the vast majority of areas in England are not affordable to people who have to claim local housing allowance, a third of whom do not work.

We have no evidence that there is any increased awareness of people's changes in rights, because there was no effort from Government put into making sure that people were aware of their additional rights. There is also a big variation in the way other public authorities are making referrals and honouring the duty to refer.

Deborah Garvie, Shelter



QUALITY OF ADVICE: VIEWS FROM SHELTER AND CRISIS

On the quality of the experience, Crisis' survey showed positive perceptions of face-to-face interactions e.g. "We felt listened to"; "We felt respected"; "We felt able to make ourselves understood". But when it comes to impact, we are not seeing the sort of change we would need to see.

It is positive in that people are being seen earlier, as the legislation requires: it is 56 days before being threatened with homelessness rather than 28, which means pretty soon after a landlord notice has been received people are entitled to assistance.

However there is an issue of long periods between that initial experience, which was seen as positive, and then receiving ongoing communication or ongoing feedback. Any delay in communication will make people feel anxious, isolated and put them into a more difficult situation.

So there are some positives, but it feels like a case of, "Here is the entirety of the system. We have made this bit better and we might have made this bit better".

Until we link it together, we will not see the improvements we would all like to see.

"People already feel a huge sense of shame going to the local authority; shame compounded by the way they were being spoken to and treated, as if they had brought their homelessness upon themselves. It's akin to going to a health service and being treated very nicely by the person on the desk, but then being told you cannot have the operation you need because there are no operating theatres."

A lot of prevention is linked to debt. It is about getting people specialist debt advice, sifting priority debts, working out how you can make a repayment plan. That level of detail is not being gone into. The main reason people are being threatened with homelessness is rent arrears. In some cases, people are not always having their notice checked when the notice may not be correct and so on.

We could see more emphasis on keeping people in their current home, as opposed to helping them find an alternative that does not exist.

What is really needed is national good practice guidance. It should be part of the role of Government to make sure the best examples are being shared in a formal way... Equally, where a local authority has come up with something innovative that should definitely be shared with other authorities.

Deborah Garvie, Shelter

SHARING GOOD PRACTICE

It would help if the Government were aware of where the good practice was and help support and spread it. This is part of the role of MHCLG's advisers under the rough sleeping strategy and some evidence of them doing that. There is no good practice guide from Government. The new duties are very woolly e.g. the local authority must take reasonable steps to ensure that accommodation is available".

The LGA does not yet have a list of best practice authorities from around the country, but we are... trying to get information on what works and what does not. Across the country, circumstances (including funding) are different for all sorts of reasons... Although there will be a certain level of best practice, it will still not be something you can roll out automatically across every single authority.

AREAS OF THE HRA NEEDING ADJUSTMENT: SHELTER AND CRISIS

- Managing caseload of people coming in: good, professional, personal, face-to-face triage at the front door, backed up by specialist workers with cases that are broadly in their specialism, whether that is rough sleepers, families or whatever their specialism is.
- Personalised housing plans: should enable someone not only to get out of their current situation but to move out of the risk of homelessness; should include housing and support, and not just the very short-term housing question.
- Extend the duty to refer to GPs. They see more people who are at risk of homelessness than any other agency, yet they do not have a duty to refer. Until we have a duty to prevent homelessness on the widest range of public bodies, people will either not have a duty to refer and therefore do nothing, or have the narrowest referral route possible.

It is all very well expecting the local authority to manage demand, but we manage demand best where we invest in preventing homelessness and in prevention services, things like pathway teams in hospitals, the use of critical time interventions for people coming out of prison or people who have experienced domestic abuse, and having homelessness experts in Jobcentre Pluses. Those investments are about reducing and preventing homelessness in the first place.

Jon Sparkes, Crisis

- At the point that somebody is presenting to their local authority, the system has already failed them. Nobody wants to have to go to their local council and say that they cannot accommodate their own children. Nobody wants to be in that position and that should not be happening. The demand needs to be kept away from the local authority housing options desk in the first place by much, much earlier access to advice and assistance, whether it is with debt, escaping domestic violence or whatever.
- In terms of the systems that need to change, again, we are seeing personalised housing plans that are anything but personalised, e.g. use of standard templates and then just filling them in. Most are impenetrable, even to specialist housing lawyers and policy staff. For the average person, they will be pretty difficult to understand. Some are slightly better than others but none are user-friendly. (Improving them) takes additional resource: very detailed casework based on individual circumstances and needs of that household; time; specialist training etc.
- We said that we would wait until the Act had time to bed down, but if it was not addressing the issue of families being left to wait (too long) we would be pushing for changes to regulation. Government assured us that the Act would change this, and it is not happening. People are being told to wait until they have a court order against them, when it is clear that the landlord cannot be persuaded to let them stay.



THE HRA REVIEW: GOVERNMENT NOTES

In the run-up to the HRA coming in we put money aside for Shelter and for CABs to help councils get ready for the Act. This is ongoing work now. If people have a problem and they can get to their CAB or do it by phone, whatever it is, they will be much better served.

The best practice local authorities have the right kind of websites that are easy to access. In Sevenoaks in Kent, they have an officer who goes out to meet vulnerable people in the community who may be at risk and, in doing so, is promulgating how the Act can work.

We will be asking consultants to be involved in the HRA review, particularly interviewing people who are the beneficiaries, or not, of the HRA, who are using the services provided through the HRA via local authorities. It is a really important part of what we need to do, and to hear those issues directly is important. We can push on from there and make sure the Act and what it can do for people is further understood, so it is an essential element of the HRA review.

HAS THE HRA INCENTIVISED INNOVATION?

LGA and London Councils:

There is some good practice of innovation in London, but the short-term nature of the funding that goes alongside the Act means there cannot really be that long-term strategic innovative thinking that I think councils would really like to carry out.

On a pan-London basis, there are a lot of new things happening, but they are not directly related to the Act. Some London local authorities have joined together to create a company called Capital Letters, to procure temporary accommodation. We have also joined together to procure modular housing to use for temporary accommodation. They are not exactly HRA specific, but they show we are willing and ready to innovate if we know we have the funding to go forward. We cannot start innovating now if we are only guaranteed funding for another year.

Government:

Not all local authorities are abiding by the spirit and the letter of the law. They are either being put off or being told they do not qualify. Are you seeing that evidence across the country?

Frankly, it is inevitable that, when a major policy change comes into force, some local authorities will be slower to embrace the letter of the law than others. We are very keen that they share good practice. One of the points of the Act is the housing support teams. The HAS teams visited over 200 local authorities and have had contact with every single one, as well as face-to-face visits. We want those contacts to tease out where these issues may be.

We want to follow up on any initial assessments and to make sure that what is anecdotally said is stripped out and the spirit of the law is followed.

The short-term nature of the funding that goes alongside the Act means there cannot really be that long-term strategic innovative thinking that I think councils would really like to carry out. (LGA)

LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE

Crisis and Shelter both stated different but consistent numbers about the level of social housebuilding that would be required to deal with the backlog. They talked to landlords and investors, who value the reliability of a market-linked local housing allowance and the reliability of rent payments, both in terms of return for investors and in terms of letting to reliable tenants.

Housing benefit is the main way to prevent homelessness. Homelessness usually occurs because people cannot afford their current home and they cannot find a suitable alternative that is affordable for them.

Our analysis shows 9 out of 10 areas in England are unaffordable. If you are in need of a two-bedroom home... you will not be able to find home that in nine out

I guess we all work out that this comes back down to supply, does it not? How are you encouraging your council to build new council houses?

Heather Wheeler

of 10 areas in England if you are claiming LHA. You are going to have a shortfall between the LHA and the rent .

In around a quarter of areas, that shortfall is more than £100 a month. For people claiming LHA, there is not much left to cut back on... It's over £100 month after month after month. In the areas with the highest levels of homelessness, those shortfalls are the largest.

if the Government are serious about reducing homelessness, they have to look at the levels of LHA. People have to be able to afford the bottom third of the private rental market, which is Government policy. If Government policy is now that claimants should only be able to afford the bottom 5% or 4%, they need to state that.

In my constituency, we are close to the point where there will be no private sector homes that are affordable entirely within the LHA cap, not a single one. We are well over 90% now. We will soon reach the point where there are none available .

That's causing people who previously would have looked after their own housing needs in the private sector, with some support from the welfare system, to have to seek help from councils because they are being made homeless because they cannot cover that gap with their earnings and their benefits.

Q: Has the decision by the Government to reduce spending on housing benefit and to implement that cap (on LHA) exacerbated the problem of homelessness? Do you recognise that problem, because it certainly is the case in my constituency?

A: Interestingly in the technical review welfare changes did not show up as being part of a major contributor to ongoing homelessness, so from that point of view the answer was no.

Equally, we have had the conversation before where there is the top-up arrangement available by the council to assist, which goes above the LHA rate (meaning DHP). I guess we all work out that this comes back down to supply, does it not? How are you encouraging your council to build new council houses?

The other part of the problem caused by the LHA issue is what we were hearing about from local authorities that councils, faced with people who are being made homeless because they cannot cover their rent, are having to put those tenants into temporary accommodation at a very high cost. Are you (the govt) having conversations with DWP about the impact this policy is having, which is essentially causing more cost to your Department and far worse outcomes for many residents?

Government policy was that the local housing allowance should allow you to afford the bottom third of private rentals. That is not the case now in the vast majority of the country.

Deborah Garvie, Shelter

We have 'kicked on' with the Capital Letters project for 13 London boroughs to help make sure that there is a much more streamlined and cost-effective way of finding this in the private rented sector, so boroughs are not competing against each other.

LHA comes back quite often as a major issue. There is a freeze on LHAs until 2020. It will be looked into during the spending review. In the meantime, we are trying to mitigate any impact there might be, including through the private rented sector access fund we have set up, which local authorities have applied for.

LHAs continued...

This is a way in which local authorities can open up more of the PRS to help more people through... (for example) landlords' incentives, ways (to make) it financially viable to access that part of the sector. We are doing all we can to make sure we have a vibrant PRS. It is something we will be looking at as part of the spending review.

DWP and MHCLG are in regular conversation about issues such as local housing allowance and many other welfare issues. In terms of what we have achieved with the rough sleeping strategy, £30m has gone in for health-related support through the NHS five-year plan (a mental health budget for rough sleepers). We will need to make sure it is spent in the most effective way in terms of helping people sleeping rough.

This year, £2m will be released to help people access services more effectively. We are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and DWP. There are strong links, in terms of the need to make sure Jobcentre Plus is much more geared up to help rough sleepers and other homeless people. We will be having homelessness leads in all the Jobcentre Plus buildings. A lot is going on in terms of cross-government support for what we are doing. The inter-ministerial taskforce leads on that.

USE OF PRIVATE RENTED HOUSING

Major cause of homelessness in England is the ending of a tenancy in the private rented sector. The Government have launched a consultation on proposals to remove the ability of landlords to use no-fault evictions under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. Do you think this is going to lead to a reduction in homelessness?

It is absolutely a good thing to consult on scrapping no-fault evictions because it starts to deal with the symptom or the trigger. The biggest trigger for homelessness is the ending of a private rented sector tenancy— (it's not) than the biggest cause—(but it is) the thing that triggers it.

(However) if you do not have sufficient social housing being built, you rely on the market to take the strain of tackling homelessness, and you detach the amount of money you are spending from that market, there is a clear problem there. Since 2011, that break has been made between LHAs and the market. Whether it is the Shelter analysis or the Crisis and CIH analysis, it leads to the same conclusions as to what is affordable and what is not, and to the answer being at about the 30th percentile of the market.

EFFECT OF ENDING S21 NOTICES: GOVERNMENT PLANS

(The government is) going to consult on the details of the proposals for the new tenancy framework. As part of that consultation... will collaborate and listen to landlords, tenants and others in the private rented sector to develop this new deal for renting. We will introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Now, the average tenancy is 3.9 years, I do not think this have an effect on good landlords and good tenants (Heather Wheeler). It is more along the lines of making sure section 8 works properly, making sure the courts and justice system works properly, digitising that, making sure it is as quick and as clear as it can be. It takes away the fear of a tenant, particularly now so many more tenants are families and older people. We want to make sure it is a fairer place for tenants to be and that good landlords get good tenants.

Q: You do not think landlords will become more selective or less likely to take tenants who might be on lower incomes or in more difficult circumstances, because of the risk that, for example, if rent arrears occurred, they would be in a situation where they could not get the property back very easily?

A: I want to make sure that section 8 works fairly for both sides. Equally, we have made changes on universal credit, where the landlord can ask for the money to be paid direct, from the benefit arrangements direct to the landlord. We expect that to deal with that problem.

FLEXIBLE HOMELESS SUPPORT GRANT: COUNCIL VIEW

The flexible homelessness support grant was implemented. That was introduced in April 2017. It will last until March 2020. It is the same with the new burdens funding that was introduced alongside the Homeless Reduction Act. The Government expect the policies to be cost-neutral in the third year, so there is no funding after 2020. Prior to the implementation London Councils estimated that the new duties would cost local authorities in London £77 million per year and the funding the Government allocated across the country was less than that, £72.7 million. London got £10 million of that per year. In Redbridge, we estimated that new burdens would cost us £4 million per year, and last year we were allocated £285,000. There will be even less next year.

Ahead of the spending review this autumn, London Councils has commissioned the LSE to carry out a review of the Act and its implementation across London.

This is due to report back in May and we can share that with the Committee to let you know, but the initial findings back up our predictions about what would happen.

Housing directors are pessimistic across London about the policy being cost neutral in the third year. We just do not see that happening with the number of people coming to us in housing need, in need of temporary accommodation, and the administrative changes we have had to make to comply with the new regulations.

“LGA analysis shows that the councils’ homelessness services are facing a funding gap of £110 million by 2019-20, £421 million by 2024-25. This is just the homelessness services.”

Adele Morris, LGA

From the LGA’s point of view, the funding has enabled some councils across the country to do really good work. Some have developed new homelessness strategies or reviewed the provision they already have. The average funding gap was reported as £155,180, to be specific, or 93% of the current HRA funding. In terms of staffing, it is the equivalent of four full-time staff members.

It is not just about the staff; it is about the new IT systems they need to have. They also do not have the additional tools to deal with this, such as the affordable housing. Councils across the country are undergoing reductions in their budgets all the time.

LGA analysis shows that the councils’ homelessness services are facing a funding gap of £110 million by 2019-20, £421 million by 2024-25. This is just the homelessness services. That is obviously going to put huge pressure on them.

The affordability for people to pay the rent is causing problems; the lack of affordable homes is also contributing to the issue. Councils are having to put people into temporary accommodation, and then there is nowhere that they can afford to move on to.

SETTING THE FUNDS UP

Funding levels were based on Government predictions that the Act would lead to a 7% increase in applications for homelessness assistance, a 15% fall in households that qualify for temporary accommodation and a 36% increase in cases of homelessness prevention or relief.

However that balance has not proved to be accurate in London. London Councils was clear at the beginning that it did not believe the Government’s assumptions and methodology. Some payments that local authorities make to keep people in their homes or incentivise landlords to take people on are not included in the calculations.

The housing crisis in London is still raging. (In Redbridge) we have not seen the reduction that the Government predicted at all.

QUESTIONING THE GOVERNMENT ON NEW BURDENS FUNDING

TOTAL FUNDS

The Government has calculated the new burdens funding at £72.7 million, which has gone out to local authorities to implement the Act. There is no point doing this without the councils being given the tools to do the job. We all want this to work.

This is part of the £1.2 billion package to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

In total there is a £617 million flexible housing grant. All of these figures help councils introduce the Act in an effective way.

Q: You mentioned earlier the £72.7 million in new burdens funding the Government have allocated for the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act. Local authorities warned that that would not be sufficient, and that was back in 2017. What has the reality been since the Act has been implemented?

A: You will know that there were changes in the law up in Scotland a while ago and there were changes in the law in Wales a short while ago. The difference in the figures in Wales is absolutely dramatic, in that the issues have reduced by 67%. We feel the new burdens funding, at £70 million-odd, will run well enough. If our figures come down on homelessness anywhere near the amount that Wales's have done, that figure will be adequate for councils.

We were working on the basis that maybe the figures would reduce in the short run by 10%, and a little bit longer by 20%, and then maybe 30%. Wales's figure is over 60%, so we feel, at the moment, the new burdens fund is okay. Maybe councils need to look and see what has happened in Wales.

I would emphasise that the required level of new burdens funding would be looked at under the HRA review, and, more importantly, as part of the spending review. We must not forget that the flexible homelessness support grant is £617 million. It is a significant amount. We need to make sure that we are clear about how the money is spent, and that, when local authorities are talking about the impact of the HRA, it is clear that the impact is due to the HRA, when we are talking about new burdens funding, rather than something else that may have been

an impact anyway. That is part of making sure that we are seeing a very clear picture, but it is part of a wider settlement with local authorities that needs to be part of the spending review, which we will certainly take very seriously.

Q: Do the Government intend to provide additional funding beyond 2020? If not, why not?

(Later in the inquiry it became clear the future "new burdens" funding decision is not dependent on the review of the HRA).

A: We are coming to the end of the spending review. As I have said this is the No. 1 domestic priority for our Government and for me as Housing and Homelessness Minister. We will be battling hard in the spending review to make sure our local councils get the money they need to deal with the homelessness issue.

Between times, in London we have put £50 million aside for Mayor Khan to move on accommodation. Equally, outside London we have asked Homes England to do that sort of thing. We want that to start right now so that, for people who are talking about issues of temporary accommodation, we get these new builds going.

Q: In terms of the total pressures of homelessness, including the new burdens from the Act, these will all be considered as part of the spending review.

A: Yes

THE 2019 COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW

Q: What are your key asks, as the Minister responsible for homelessness, of the Chancellor in relation to other Government Departments, so we can move away from these kinds of one-off, short-term injections of a little bit of funding?

The £30 million is a welcome commitment, but it is really a drop in the ocean when it is spread across the whole country and there is no guarantee of it going forward. What are the key asks you are making to ensure sustainable cross-departmental solutions to the causes of homelessness?



“We are working very closely with those (other) Government departments around the spending review and will continue to do so”

Jeremy Swain, MHCLG

A: We are trying to do even more innovative things than you might expect...

Examples include:

- working up a joint bid with the Ministry of Justice about all prisoner releases and homelessness across the whole country
- on the NHS side about issues over nobody leaving hospital without that care plan and without somewhere to go. That would be working on a joint bid with health.
- there will be a joint bid with DWP, with the job centre particularly. We are trying to put to the Treasury these very long-term, innovative ways of working where all these different sections come into play, so the whole of the jigsaw can come together.

Part of it is building on what we were already doing. For example, we are working with the Ministry of Justice. We have a prison pilot—in three prisons, Leeds, Bristol and Pentonville—where we want to make sure people coming on to the street from prison do not come on to the street but are assisted in other ways.

Quite a lot of what we are doing under the rough sleeping initiative and under the rough sleeping strategy are pilots, because we need to be measure what we do, and then replicate that and expand those pilots into ongoing long-term initiatives of the type you are talking about. It is a very crucial time, but there is no doubt at all that we are working very closely with those Government Departments around the spending review and will continue to do so.



H-CLIC AND DATA ISSUES



Council view:

The H-CLIC system has costs involved in setting up computer systems. It is not just about staffing costs; there are all sorts of associated costs in setting up some additional elements, to meet the duty.

The biggest concern (about implementing HCLIC) is around the lack of time that

councils had to get the systems up and running and the cost of getting people able to use them. The introduction was very quick and that probably caused the most problems.

H-CLIC is generally very unpopular in London. We are not sure it is the most significant financial challenge (in comparison to) temporary accommodation... but it is a major administrative challenge for staff. We have staff who are meant to be working to prevent homelessness (who are) just carrying out administrative tasks and inputting data into an online system. Many do not understand why it has to be so burdensome and complicated. It takes staff time away from other duties. (It) takes people away from doing the one-to-one, face-to-face work they should be doing, but also maybe some strategic thinking that could have happened instead.

Government view:

H-CLIC is the new system where local authorities get to find out why the person is homeless, what their circumstances are, who they really are. It is the first time we have done that. The detail in it is so much better than we have ever had before. It's an enormous change to the H-CLIC system, which we recognise has been a burden for local authorities. We are going to have a much stronger statistical base. As H-CLIC improves, they (the stats) will have... much stronger status.

Similarly, with the rough sleeping figures... rough sleeping is very difficult to measure. We are clear that we are using a measure of counting and estimating rough sleeping that goes back to 2010, so we are measuring like with like. It is a transparent system, because it is done involving Homeless Link to verify the figures and make sure they are robust.

UKSA (the UK statistics authority) want to make sure the figure we are putting out (the statistical information we have from the count of a 19% fall in rough sleeping in the rough sleeping initiative areas) is confirmed or not, through a full evaluation over the next few months. That evaluation of the RSI will be of both the impact of the rough sleeping initiative and the processes. That would really help us to understand those figures further.

All they are asking is that that is done. They are not rubbishing the figures, far from it. They just want to make sure they fully understand it. As that evaluation is done it will enable use to build our understanding of the figures. We are confident that the way of building the statistics for rough sleeping is robust and we are confident in them.

Nobody seemed to object to the figures when, year on year, the increases were 16%, but now we have had a reduction of 2% and 19% in the 83 RSI areas. There is nothing more transparent than doing a street count. Local authorities have many different local charities out with them and they have a verifier to make sure the numbers coming back are correct, so we are confident. We are also doing a data pilot.

What we had before, in terms of homelessness data, was not good enough. I know H-CLIC is a journey. The last thing we want is for local authorities to be spending time on bureaucracy, but it is important to get that information. The data pilots will be looking at what information we can collect about homelessness and rough sleeping. As we know, snapshot street counts do not tell us about all the people sleeping rough in a year. We need to measure how we can achieve more outcomes, so the data pilots will go beyond pure statistics, to see how else we can work with local authorities, providers, homelessness charities to improve our understanding of the issues and to make further inroads into reducing homelessness and rough sleeping.

What we had before, in terms of homelessness data, was not good enough. I know H-CLIC is a journey. The last thing we want is for local authorities to be spending time on bureaucracy, but it is important to get that information.

USEFUL LINKS

Oral evidence

- <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/homelessness-reduction-act-one-year-on/oral/100895.html>

Written evidence

- [Crisis written evidence](#) (published 15 May 2019)

Correspondence

- [Letter to Chair from the Local Government Association regarding the Homelessness Reduction Act – One Year On, dated 20 May 2019](#) (published 21 May 2019)
- [Letter to Chair from the Secretary of State, regarding the Homelessness Reduction Act Review, dated 2 April 2019](#) (published 24 April 2019)
- [Submission from the Local Government Association on the Homeless Reduction Act](#) (2019)

THE HOUSING BOARD

This note was produced for the Housing Board covering Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and West Suffolk.

The Housing Board is a group of senior local authority and partner agency officers, which meets regularly to work collaboratively on strategic housing issues across seven districts.

The Board works with its partners to share learning and experience across the local housing market area on four priorities:

1. New homes & communities
2. Homes for wellbeing
3. Existing homes
4. Housing need and homelessness

You can find more here

<https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/housingboard/>

Any questions? Ask

sue.beecroft@cambridge.gov.uk



Cambridgeshire | Peterborough | West Suffolk

GOVERNMENT POSITION ON A NEW CODE

(A new code of guidance) is certainly something we will look at when we do the overall review. I would emphasise that the code of guidance had not been updated for a long time, so it was a very comprehensive rewrite. We would be the first to say it may not be perfect, but we will be looking at it under the HRA review. For example, in terms of the rewriting, around the personal support plans, there is clear guidance about what is expected through those personal support plans. I would hope that local authorities are following that.

I have seen good-quality personal support housing plans and personal housing plans of the type you are talking about. The homelessness advice and support team is not a team that is occasionally visiting local authorities. This is their job. They are out there the whole time. As part of that, they are challenging local authorities to raise their game. They are making sure that best practice is shared and they are coming down hard when they can see evidence of local authorities not following.

We can see variations between local authorities, but their role is to make sure we achieve the very highest standards. These are issues, again, that can be looked at under the HRA review.

Heather Wheeler

...COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

There is an appeals process. It needs to be drawn to the local authority's attention. If there are systematic examples where particular local authorities are not fulfilling the requirements, we need to hear about that and we need to address it. That can come straight through to me (Jeremy) or it can go to Minister Wheeler.

Jeremy Swain), MHCLG