A smarter approach to homelessness

Prioritising prevention in the 2025 spending review

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About this report

This report looks at trends in spending on homelessness prevention programmes, assesses the barriers to these and makes recommendations for how these can be overcome. It has been produced in partnership by the Institute for Government and Centre for Homelessness Impact.

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Summary

Homelessness is an issue that blights the lives of many people, including families and children. A cost of living crisis, on top of a decades-long housing crisis, has left hundreds of thousands without adequate or safe, settled accommodation. This severely affects their quality of life now and prospects for the future, while resulting in a growing financial burden on the local authorities and public services on whom many of these people rely.

The dedicated efforts of the homelessness sector are commendable, but evidence suggests they alone cannot provide the long-term, systemic solutions required. They should not be expected to. This is where wider government action is required, and Labour's first spending review presents a crucial opportunity to act.

A move away from reactive homelessness policy

In shaping its upcoming homelessness strategy, the government has a vital opportunity to shift away from reactive measures towards a more proactive and preventative model. Many of the current models of homelessness spending are reactive, and incur high and recurring costs while delivering poor value for money and very poor outcomes for individuals. Consider the costs of keeping a family with young children in temporary accommodation for long periods, which could easily reach £30,000 a year or more for a standard family unit. The social costs are potentially even higher: lack of certainty and agency for the family; the high likelihood of negative impacts on the wellbeing, development and future achievement of the children; and the risk of perpetuating intergenerational homelessness.[1] It is far better to prevent that family from becoming homeless in the first place.

The very nature of preventative activity is counterfactual. Weighing up the case for spending on prevention against spending on demand-led activity means comparing something that has not happened with something that has. This can be a hard sell in the Treasury. While the long-term cost-effectiveness of preventative measures is intuitively compelling, robust, causal evidence directly comparing it to reactive spending remains limited. In the absence of sufficiently granular data, valuable insights can be drawn from international examples and smaller-scale research.

There are some pointers, internationally and at home – some of which are outlined in case studies put together for this project and found in the Appendixes at the end of this report. The introduction of a school-based screening questionnaire to identify risks of homelessness among pupils in Geelong in Victoria, Australia, for example, was followed by a 40% reduction in the number of adolescents seeking homelessness

assistance from local services (case study 1 in Appendix A). A research paper from the UK homelessness charity Crisis estimated that the upfront costs of preventing homelessness are 2.5–14 times lower than the cost of providing support over 12 months once they become homeless, depending on the individual's circumstances.[2]

There are encouraging signs of acknowledgement from across government departments of the case for investment in prevention, including on homelessness. Ministers have heralded a broadening of focus to encompass a goal of ending all forms of homelessness, not just rough sleeping. And in the sector, too, there appears to be welcome acknowledgement of a need to pivot away from crisis intervention and towards a deliberate approach towards prevention.

While these encouraging signs are welcome, this paper argues that a more fundamental shift in perspective is required – one recognising that preventing homelessness cannot be solely the responsibility of dedicated homelessness programmes and policies, but a shared duty across all public services, from education and health care to social care and employment support.

A cross-service approach

Sharing responsibility across services means that schools, health services, early years services and other mainstream agencies play an active role in identifying and addressing the factors that contribute to housing instability – and be trained and resourced to do so.

This paper will show that, when enclosed within statutory homelessness services, preventative activity can be often squeezed in times of pressure and sacrificed on the altar of necessity. Cash-strapped local authorities too often retreat to short-term reactive responses in fulfilment of their immediate legal obligations, despite their often exorbitant cost.

We will show that obdurate structural barriers exist that hinder or in some cases block effective activity to prevent homelessness. The most obvious is the acute shortage in the supply of social housing, and of affordable rented housing within reach of people who are on low pay or in receipt of benefits.

But this is not the only barrier to effective homelessness prevention. Some perverse incentives exist that actively encourage inefficiencies and poor outcomes, and disperse risks or costs between different government bodies and agencies in unhelpful ways, frustrating their efforts to work together. For example, some services are only accessible to those already sleeping rough, potentially incentivising those at risk of homelessness to sleep rough so that they qualify for help.

The challenges associated with the quality and completeness of much of the data held by local areas on homelessness trends, and the difficulties in matching or cross-referring this with data held on the same people elsewhere in government, present another formidable barrier. While there is a good body of qualitative evidence illuminating the key drivers and lived experiences of homelessness, we lack a solid

base of rigorous causal evidence regarding the relative impact, and cost effectiveness, of homelessness interventions, particularly for preventative interventions whose impact may not, by their nature, be apparent until a period of years has elapsed.

All of these factors need to be recognised when the government designs its forthcoming homelessness strategy.

The spending review

In June the government will complete its first multi-year spending review. This is an opportunity to set the parameters for the cross-government homelessness strategy to follow: to begin, two foundational pivots are needed.

First, the Treasury should set the expectation that it will prioritise investment in upstream prevention of homelessness and not high-cost reactive spending on crisis responses. This requires a reorientation of how success is measured, moving beyond simply reducing the number of people in temporary accommodation or sleeping on the streets to also include a reduction in the number of people and families approaching, or teetering on the edge of, homelessness in the first place.

Second, the centre of government – No.10, the Treasury and Cabinet Office – should set the expectation that this task does not lie with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and local areas alone but is a responsibility and requirement shared across all arms of the state.

People, and peoples' needs, do not conform neatly to delineations of government departments and agencies. From birth, each of us interacts with a multitude of public services including education, health and social care. But the lottery of birth can mean vastly different levels of risk, with some of us facing a significantly higher likelihood of homelessness due to circumstances beyond our control from the outset. As a result, people can too often fall between the cracks of siloed services and agencies or cycle through different services at great cost to the public purse. Therefore, a truly effective approach to preventing homelessness demands a targeted collaborative effort across all public services, ensuring that support is integrated, tailored to individual needs, and provided early to prevent escalation to crisis situations.

It is time to take a new approach in which public services at community level are designed around the individual and the family rather than requiring them to conform to siloed services. To foster a preventative approach, the spending review should prioritise investment in upstream prevention across all public services. The Treasury should use the spending review to announce a trial of a new version of the Total Place model of combining funding pots for public services in a small number of place-based initiatives as part of its Test, Learn and Grow programme. This should include initiatives that address the broader social determinants of homelessness, such as poverty and access to education and employment.

But the government needs to know where to direct this funding effectively and ensure lasting impact. That's why we're calling on the government to consider a £100million Preventing Homelessness Endowment. Think of it as a strategic investment fund, designed to ultimately pay for itself by driving innovation and scaling proven preventative solutions, while also crucially building the capacity of key local areas and metro mayors to deliver these solutions effectively and embedding robust performance management frameworks to track their success.

This 10-year endowment would allow us to fund, test and scale the most promising preventative interventions – demonstrating their return on investment through reduced reliance on expensive emergency services and temporary accommodation – and to develop and implement new technologies and systems to better target support and prevent homelessness before it occurs, optimising resource allocation and maximising long-term savings.

It would support local leaders through dedicated resources and shared learning to deliver these solutions sustainably, ensuring that the shift towards prevention becomes embedded in local service delivery models, creating a sustainable reduction in spending, all while establishing clear mechanisms to measure progress against preventative goals and ensure accountability.

Homelessness affects hundreds of thousands of people in the country, damaging lives and future prospects while incurring great costs to the state. A new approach is needed.

Box 1: Key recommendations

- **Refocus homelessness prevention from acute responses to upstream prevention and embed this across all mainstream services.**

- **Trial a new version of the Total Place model of combined funding pots in a small number areas as part of the Test, Learn and Grow programme.**

- **Consider a £100m strategic investment fund – the Preventing Homelessness Endowment – to drive innovation, scale prevention, build capacity and ensure effective performance management.**

This report has been informed by a private roundtable with senior representatives from central government, local government and beyond, as well as interviews and extensive desk-based research.

1. Trends in spending on homelessness prevention

In England, local authority spending on homelessness services increased from £1.3billion in 2010/11 to £3.1bn in 2023/24 in real terms (2024/25 prices).* While homelessness spending more than doubled over this 14-year period, the number of households in temporary accommodation reached record levels in England. This suggests that simply increasing spending on homelessness services may not be enough to address the underlying causes of homelessness and prevent it from occurring in the first place. This dynamic has resulted in a concerning squeeze on proactive prevention efforts in favour of costly reactive emergency responses.

Acute homelessness responses are prohibitively expensive. Increasingly, leaders of some local areas report that homelessness spending has become one of the key concerns to their ongoing financial viability, alongside adult and children's social care services. Homelessness spending does not compare to spending on either of these categories in scale, but is similar as a predominantly responsive statutory function facing unsustainably high levels of demand due to many factors beyond councils' control.

Long-term spending trends show how homelessness accounts for a much larger proportion of councils' spending on overall housing services than in 2010/11. In 2010/11, spending on homelessness represented 18% of the median local authority's spending on housing services. By 2023/24, this had tripled to 54% (see Figure 1). Variation across local authorities also grew over the period, reflecting the localised nature of homelessness pressures in areas with highest housing costs.

Figure 1 **Local authority spending on homelessness as a proportion of total spending on housing services, 2009/10–2023/24**
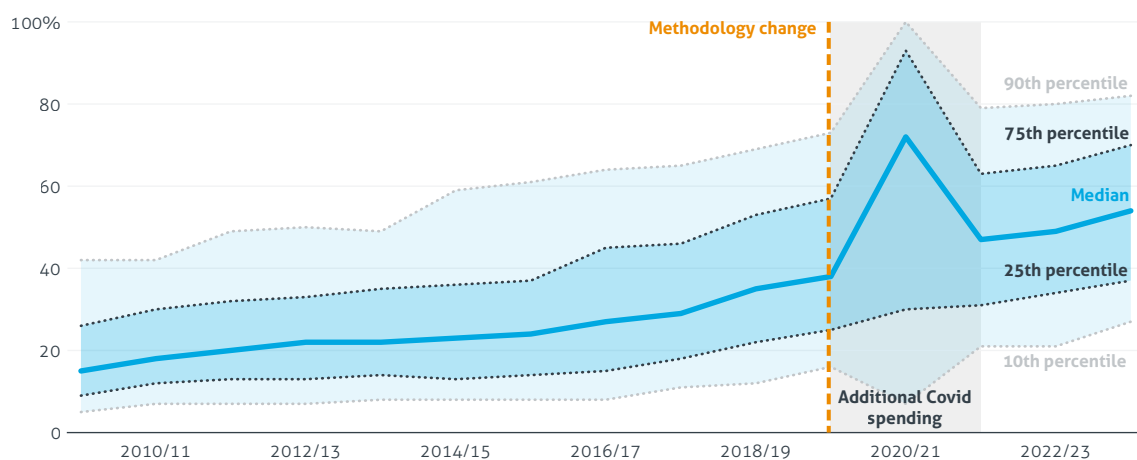
Source: Institute for Government analysis of MHCLG, R04 outturns, 2009/10–2023/24. Notes: Total spending on housing services excludes spending on the Housing Revenue Account. The categorisation of homelessness spending changed after 2019/20 as a result of the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

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* These figures exclude spending from shire counties and other authorities (combined authorities, police, fire and rescue authorities, waste authorities, national park authorities). These excluded authorities do not have statutory duties to prevent or relieve homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

The effect of rising demand for homelessness services has been to concentrate local authorities' spending on more acute services at the expense of 'upstream' preventative interventions. By prevention, we mean activity and spending that reduces the likelihood or severity of homelessness by tackling its causes earlier. It does not include interventions or support available to an individual, couple or family once they experience homelessness.

The most salient example of spending on acute services is spending on temporary accommodation for families, couples and increasingly single people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. There were 126,040 households living in temporary accommodation (TA) in England in September 2024, a rise of 1.7% from the same time the previous year, including 80,530 families with a total of 164,040 children.[1] Its cost represents far and away the largest single item of homelessness spending, at £2.4bn. This figure becomes even more concerning when considering that total local authority spending on homelessness services in 2023/24 was £3.1bn.* This leaves a mere £0.7bn to cover all other aspects of homelessness support, including vital preventative programmes, outreach work, and support for individuals transitioning out of homelessness.

Understanding where this limited funding for non-TA services comes from is crucial. The principal sources of funding for homelessness services in England are general funding through the Local Government Finance Settlement and the Homelessness Prevention Grant. In addition, there are specific grants such as the temporary accommodation subsidy (repaid by the Department for Work and Pensions), the Rough Sleeping Initiative (via bidding), the Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme, the Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme, and the Accommodation for Ex-Offenders scheme.

The proportion of homelessness spending targeted specifically at prevention is not straightforward to identify in England. Many local authority leaders report that they find funding of homelessness services to be fragmented and funded over short-term cycles, which inhibit strategic planning. But some do say they have considerable flexibility to deploy money from different income streams to respond to local circumstances, which may partially account for the shift to funding acute rather than prevention activity.

A key example of a funding stream intended for prevention is the Homelessness Prevention Grant, which was introduced in 2021 to bring together funding streams to support the prevention of homelessness and rough sleeping, early intervention work and other activity. The real-terms value of this grant to local authorities fell for four years, despite some increments for specific populations, before a big rise in the allocation for 2025/26 (see Table 1).

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* Both the figure for spending on temporary accommodation and homelessness are for total spending in 2024/25 prices. They exclude spending by shire counties and other authorities (combined authorities, police, fire and rescue authorities, waste authorities, national park authorities). These excluded authorities do not have statutory duties to prevent or relieve homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Table 1 **Homelessness Prevention Grant, 2021/22 to 2025/26 (in 2024/25 prices)**

Financial year	Homelessness Prevention Grant
2025/26	£616.9m
2024/25	£331.3m
2023/24	£335.1m
2022/23	£347.8m
2021/22	£365.7m

However, the allocation of this grant does not necessarily reflect the actual level of spending on preventative activity, as many councils have used these funds to alleviate the significant costs of temporary accommodation.

Another example is the Rough Sleeping Initiative, one specific aim of which is prevention, along with intervention with people who are sleeping rough, recovery and funding specialist roles to support at-risk groups. A systems-wide evaluation of homelessness and rough sleeping led by the Centre for Homelessness Impact for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)[2] spoke to local leaders in a sample of five councils (Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole, Herefordshire, Manchester, Southend-on-Sea and Westminster) to ask what activities they delivered via the Rough Sleeping Initiative. Prevention activity accounted for just 0.6% of interventions deployed, with the most common interventions being:

- off-the-street accommodation for people in crisis

- supported housing

- street outreach services

- access to private rented accommodation

- health services.

Crucially, formal homelessness spending allocations represent only a portion of the total investment in preventing homelessness. In reality, to truly understand the investment in homelessness prevention, we must consider the contributions of various public services. For instance, spending on the welfare safety net, the NHS and early intervention programmes in schools all contributes to preventing homelessness, even if not explicitly categorised as such.

Evidence suggests that financial insecurity and family and relationship breakdown, especially domestic abuse, are two of the biggest drivers of homelessness and rough sleeping. Some of the prevention activities in this space sit with other arms of government, such as:

• for domestic abuse, which is split between the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and MHCLG

• for legal aid via MoJ

• for DWP's responsibility for discretionary housing payments, the Household Support Fund and local welfare assistance.

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2. Barriers to homelessness prevention

Despite increasing expenditure on homelessness services, effective prevention remains hampered by a range of significant barriers, many of which stem from structural issues, resource constraints and weaknesses in data and evidence available. Chief among these is the constrained supply of housing, especially social housing and affordable housing in the private rented sector. But increasing the stock of housing will not, in isolation, prevent homelessness. Other barriers to effective prevention are:

- perverse incentives

- constraints on investing in preventative measures

- the inability of data systems to effectively identify people at future risk of homelessness

- the limited quality of evidence available to effectively target and optimise preventative interventions

- fragmented and reactive structures.

Adding to these systemic and resource-based barriers is the current lack of a clear objective for homelessness prevention and of a clear sense that this is a political priority and will remain so for the period covered by the 2025 spending review. Furthermore, we have an 'implementation gap' arising from a recurring disconnect between legislative or policy changes and the preparedness or capacity of leaders and staff in local areas or other parts of the homelessness system to enact these changes as intended.

The supply of affordable housing is severely constrained

The limited supply of social housing, and of housing in the private rented sector that is affordable to people on low incomes, makes it much harder for local authorities to take a preventative approach. Long stays in temporary accommodation by households at risk of homelessness further exacerbate these challenges, preventing timely rehousing and creating additional burdens on families.

Local authority leaders, especially those in London boroughs and other areas with high housing costs, say increasingly that people in work whose tenancy has come to an end and who are unable to afford local market rents drive their local homelessness presentations. Of people owed a homelessness prevention or relief duty in 2023/24 across all of England, 23.7% were working, including 13.5% in full-time work.[1]

The private rented sector has changed significantly in a relatively short period of time, with several dynamics at play, including higher interest rates and changes in regulation. Some landlords have raised rents by large amounts. But also, in many towns and cities, local authority leaders report that a number of landlords have exited the traditional rental market, including, as discussed below, in anticipation of the enactment of the Renters' Rights Bill.

Another change that some local authorities have reported is some landlords withdrawing from standard letting and instead offering their properties to councils as nightly-paid temporary accommodation, which is considerably more expensive for local authorities. There are not enough incentives for landlords that align with the needs of councils. These outcomes often deliver very poor value for money as a result. Instances of landlords raising local rents in response to the lifting of Local Housing Allowance rates from April 2024 is another example of misaligned incentives for landlords.

Another challenge that many local authorities face when procuring properties for temporary accommodation for families at risk of homelessness is that they can find themselves outbid by companies acting on behalf of other arms of government, and which can operate at greater scale. The most frequently cited examples are Clearsprings Ready Homes, Mears and Serco, which are contracted to provide accommodation for asylum seekers on behalf of the Home Office. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service also operates in larger regional units than most local authorities and can compete for properties for use as bail hostels and other purposes.

Leaders in local areas say they have raised this competitive behaviour with colleagues in central government departments. But some report there has been a lack of transparency over the rates that the Home Office or its contractors, in particular, are paying. Nor is the state the only actor seeking to procure such properties. The entry of some investment funds into the market for providing supported housing has added another element of competition that can drive up prices, especially when such funds have the ability to invest over a timescale of 20 or 30 years, which is far longer than a single local authority typically does; usually councils will have an ambition to reduce their reliance on temporary accommodation, although holding some core stock is a vital part of their response to homelessness.

Another challenge is the 'implementation gap' arising from the lack of enough strategic planning or investment to support the effective execution of new duties in local areas. Often, the underlying policy intent is sound and informed by evidence, but the necessary investment and support to ensure local areas have the systems and capacity to implement it effectively are significantly underestimated. The commencement of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 illustrates this. This legislation introduced significant changes to homelessness duties, including by extending the prevention duty for people threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days. MHCLG (then under another of its many former names) acknowledged that local authorities would be obliged to spend more on homelessness relief and prevention as a result, but projected that its impact would be cost-neutral after three years.

This proved to be over-optimistic, forcing a further allocation of £63m to local authorities to support its implementation in 2021/22, and an increase in funding thereafter.[2] But it was still regarded as not being enough, and the big increases in many forms of homelessness since suggest widespread unpreparedness at system level.

While the Renters' Rights Bill is a welcome step in strengthening tenant protections in the longer term, it has inadvertently created short-term challenges. There have been many anecdotal reports since the bill's introduction of landlords serving notice to quit on tenants before it becomes law and bans 'no fault' evictions, leading to a short-term spike in homelessness presentations. Its provisions also specify that if a landlord does use one of the permitted grounds for eviction, the property cannot be subsequently re-let in any form within 12 months without incurring a penalty. This has caused some concern in local areas that the effect may be to further restrict supply in the private rented sector if, for example, a landlord decides to sell but changes their mind or is unable to achieve their desired price for their property.

The system has some perverse incentives

Beyond structural barriers such as the shortage of affordable housing, the system also presents challenges in the form of perverse incentives and misaligned priorities. An important example is that for some single people at risk of, but not yet experiencing, homelessness, the fact that rough-sleeping services are mostly only accessible to people seen bedded down creates a perverse incentive to sleep rough to qualify for and access support. The reason is that despite the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 requiring local authorities to work preventatively with people at risk of rough sleeping, resource pressures mean that there are very limited preventative services for people not classed as in 'priority need' (for example, a single person) and rough sleeping may be a route to services that are otherwise not available.

One additional example of an unintended consequence is the reaction to the previous government's decision in the 2023 autumn statement to raise Local Housing Allowance by linking it once more to the 30th percentile of local rents from April 2024, costing £1.3bn a year. Several leaders in local areas reported that some private sector landlords raised their rents in response, making it more expensive for local authorities to engage in tenancy sustainment through rent subsidies, which is a core form of prevention activity.

Regulations also create a complex web of constraints that limit local authorities' ability to provide settled accommodation to households experiencing homelessness, often forcing them to rely on expensive and unsuitable temporary accommodation even when they have access to more appropriate housing. This means that local authorities can only offer settled accommodation if let on secure tenancies with regulated rents and allocated through allocation systems. These are only viable to develop with significant capital grant, and even then cannot be delivered quickly.

The large number of local authorities without a Housing Revenue Account would be required to set one up if they are to own more than 200 properties let as settled accommodation. The Right to Buy policy, which is causing local social housing stock levels to dwindle further, applies to settled accommodation that local authorities own, creating another barrier.

Temporary accommodation, on the other hand, is not included within the 200-property limit, can be let flexibly and is not subject to regulated rents. As a result, local authorities wanting to acquire or lease accommodation to let to households at risk of homelessness can only do so if the accommodation is classified as temporary accommodation, let on non-secure tenancies or licences, even for housing that could be used better for settled purposes. What is more, housing associations are increasingly reluctant to lease properties for temporary accommodation and have shown little interest to date in leasing settled accommodation to let at Local Housing Allowance or affordable rents.

There are constraints on allocating resources for longer-term prevention

Limited long-term funding is currently available for homelessness prevention, even for interventions showing promising evidence of effectiveness across the spectrum. This affects earlier preventative measures aimed at stopping homelessness before it starts (like early intervention for families at risk), as well as housing-led approaches like Housing First for those with complex needs.

In a constrained funding environment, local authorities will inevitably prioritise their statutory duties to crisis-manage for the short-term relief and prevention of homelessness (that is, within the 56 days that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 specifies) rather than invest in prevention. The limited funding that is available therefore gets squeezed into just crisis management. When MHCLG announced a substantial increase in the Homelessness Prevention Grant for 2025/26, rising to £633.2m, it introduced a ring-fence for the first time to require that 49% of money for local authorities from this source must be spent on the prevention and relief of homelessness, and on staff costs. This 49% cannot, therefore, be used for temporary accommodation. While a positive move, this will present challenges for local authorities that have relied heavily on the grant to cross-subsidise temporary accommodation. MHCLG is consulting on lowering this proportion to a maximum of 45% to be spent on temporary accommodation thereafter.[3]

There is a further, intangible, constraint on homelessness spending on prevention, which is that the public more easily understand acute interventions while upstream prevention activity is largely unseen and much less well understood. Prevention is therefore less of a priority to the public and, in turn, less of an obvious political priority for ministers and their advisers and supporters.

Ipsos polling of perceptions of homelessness for the Centre for Homelessness Impact, using representative samples of around 2,200 adults, has consistently shown high levels of public concern about homelessness and an understanding of some of its structural causes, such as poverty and a shortage of affordable housing. But in the

most recent polling – November 2024[4] – when asked to choose from a list of responses that would be most effective at addressing homelessness, actions that could be categorised as acute interventions drew considerably higher support than prevention:

- 84% chose improving refuges and safe houses for people escaping domestic abuse

- 82% chose giving more help to people who have nowhere to live when they leave hospital, prison or the care system

- 82% chose providing emergency shelters and hostels

- 81% chose more employment support and training for people experiencing homelessness.

In contrast, 56% of respondents chose investing more money to prevent people from becoming homeless, rather than in services for people once they experience homelessness. But one reason for optimism was that 79% believed that identifying people who might be at risk of homelessness earlier, such as when they are using public services such as health and education, would make a difference.[5]

Data systems make it difficult to identify people at risk of homelessness and track resources effectively

Current data systems present significant challenges to effectively identifying individuals at risk of homelessness and efficiently allocating resources. While local areas hold substantial datasets, inconsistencies, gaps and a lack of interoperability can hinder a comprehensive understanding and limit their practical application of data to inform policy and practice.

Several local authority leaders acknowledge that they were caught off guard by the speed of the surge in homelessness presentations from around 2021/22 onwards that led to very significant increases in their use of temporary accommodation, highlighting the need for more robust and timely data that directly informs resource allocation and strategic planning. Statutory homelessness data, while valuable, often has a time lag that can affect its immediate usefulness for local and regional co-ordination and understanding evolving needs. While significant improvements have taken place in recent years, there's more work to be done to ensure the government holds more complete data on both trends and money flows. Data infrastructure limitations also weaken the ability to routinely evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

While improvements are ongoing, there is also a lack of sophisticated predictive tools to identify individuals and families at high risk of homelessness before they reach a crisis point. This limits the ability to proactively target prevention efforts. Generally, local authorities have access to extensive data on residents at imminent risk of or who are experiencing homelessness, especially in London, where case-level data is also held on people seen sleeping out in the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN). But the quality of data that councils hold is often poor or incomplete. Some authorities use two or three information technology systems to hold data, and cannot always easily match data held in different systems. Over time local authorities

will have less data on the financial circumstances of their residents on the lowest incomes as most new claimants seeking housing support are required to apply for Universal Credit, which is managed by the Department for Work and Pensions, rather than Housing Benefit, which is managed by councils.

There are also barriers to data sharing. Despite requirements such as the duty on public authorities to refer people to local homelessness teams if they believe them to be at risk, introduced in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, cross-agency data sharing remains limited. Currently it is not usually possible to identify people at future risk of homelessness because relevant data that central government holds is not shared, especially benefits data within DWP and patient information within the NHS. Some local authorities have data-sharing agreements and frameworks with other public bodies, and integrated teams to support this. But such arrangements are ad hoc and made in isolation, rather than in a systematic way to prevent homelessness and other harms. This prevents joined-up commissioning and delivery of services, and is a barrier to effective performance management and the optimisation of systems. Even within specific datasets there are blockages. Universal Credit data that DWP holds, for instance, does not include markers for people leaving prison. This hinders the early identification of at-risk individuals and prevents co-ordinated prevention efforts.

Local areas are increasingly embracing the value of data-driven approaches to address and prevent homelessness. A significant step in this direction was the Centre for Homelessness Impact's collaboration with MHCLG and 51 local authorities in England from 2021 to develop a data-led framework for tracking progress on ending rough sleeping, a framework now rolled out across the country. This initiative, using eight success measures and indicators, provided much more granular and timely insights into local drivers of rough sleeping. MHCLG is further supporting this move towards data-driven solutions through the systems evaluation being carried out by a team led by the Centre for Homelessness Impact, which is developing a set of standardised indicators for all types of homelessness. This wider 'Ending Homelessness' framework, alongside the centre's ongoing work with London and Greater Manchester to create standardised indicators for all forms of homelessness, could be a crucial foundation in establishing national and regional unified data systems.

The services tackling homelessness are fragmented and reactive

Disparate systems and agencies create challenges in co-ordinating housing, mental health, asylum and other services, leading to fragmented and inefficient support. Such fragmentation means that, even if preventative measures are undertaken within one part of one system, they are very unlikely to align with the local and regional structures or ongoing programmes of other publicly funded services, including in their objectives, desired outcomes, timescales and success measures. A complex, multifaceted societal challenge such as homelessness requires co-ordinated systems and interventions that can operate at a scale that is in most cases larger than that of a single local authority, where the statutory duty for homelessness relief and prevention lies.

A reactive focus on crisis management, instead of collaborating to address long-term needs, exacerbates this.[6] One local authority leader privately acknowledged that "our ability to think about prevention is hindered; we think about survival".[7]

Even within local authorities there are silos. For example, local authority housing and homelessness services can hold the financial risk for purchases or longer term leasing of property to use as temporary accommodation, while capital expenditure and income revenue sit in different places. Roles in commissioning services for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness can also sit in different teams or departments, meaning there is often not a coherent leadership system on homelessness.

Current systems are heavily reliant on individuals approaching local authorities for support, often when they are already in crisis. This reactive approach misses crucial opportunities for early intervention and upstream prevention, leading to increased hardship and higher costs in the long run. Local authorities have a legal duty to respond if an individual, couple or family are assessed as homeless and in priority need, meaning that if such a situation arises late on a Friday afternoon, for instance, staff say they have little or no alternative but to discharge that duty by booking them into a hotel or nightly-paid room, whatever the cost.

The intense pressure on individuals working in leadership and client-facing roles in housing and homelessness services since the Covid-19 pandemic means that local leaders often report that they lack the opportunity or capacity to step back and think in a more strategic way about prevention opportunities. Moreover, the absence of robust mechanisms for closer collaboration between local authorities at a regional level further exacerbates these inefficiencies, hindering a more strategic and co-ordinated preventative response.

There are gaps in our understanding of what works and too few robust evaluations to optimise existing systems

While good qualitative evidence exists of the key drivers and consequences of homelessness in the UK and internationally, surprisingly few common interventions, including primary pathways for homelessness prevention in the UK such as local authority housing options and off-the-streets emergency responses, have been subjected to gold-standard evaluations to date.[*]

This lack of sufficiently granular reliable evidence demonstrating the long-term cost-effectiveness of preventative measures not only makes it difficult to justify reallocating resources away from crisis response but also hinders the ability to build a compelling case for investing in the optimisation of their preventative systems. This is a particular challenge for the Treasury, which can be justifiably sceptical of invest-to-save proposals and needs more granular data and causal evidence to make informed spending allocations. It is also critical for MHCLG and other departments when making such a case in submissions to spending reviews.

For example, while the Housing First model has shown promising results,[8] discussions about its future application in the UK are limited by the absence of gold-standard effectiveness evaluations comparable to those available in North America. Comparative effectiveness studies testing Housing First with other supported housing

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[*] See CHI's intervention tool, which highlights how only nine of the most common homelessness interventions have been subject to rigorous evaluation: www.homelessnessimpact.org/intervention-tool; and CHI's Effectiveness Evidence and Gap Map: https://centreforhomelessnessimpact.github.io/egm

models in the UK, such as Clearing House – the long-established model for supporting people with experience of rough sleeping to move into accommodation with support in London – would also be highly beneficial.

Another example is the evaluation that MHCLG commissioned of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer Areas programme. This provided a total of £20m to 30 local authorities in England in 2016/17 to support the development of prevention activities in preparation for the extended duties created in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The evaluation was based on a rapid evidence assessment of literature on the design, effectiveness and success factors of pre-existing approaches to homelessness prevention, a review of the plans of the trailblazer areas and qualitative case study research with a sample of six of the 30 authorities.

The impact assessment found fewer acceptances of homelessness cases in trailblazer areas (a mean of 2.76 per 1,000) than in comparison areas (3.16 per 1,000) and a slight impact on the rate of decisions (a mean of 5.31 per 1,000 in trailblazer areas and 5.48 per 1,000 in comparison areas) but no strong evidence of impact on the number of households in temporary accommodation. In trailblazer areas that engaged in more upstream prevention activities, the evaluation, which was published in 2018, reported that "there was no detectable impact on the statutory homelessness and prevention and relief statistics as yet, and as would be expected given the focus and nature of their activities".[9]

While this evaluation acknowledged that evidence of the impact of upstream prevention activities would not be expected within such a short time span, MHCLG continues to regard the findings of the 2018 study as having concluded that longer term prevention work has not shown detectable impact. This is a pressing example of why more and better evaluation is needed, over longer timeframes.[10]

Investing in a suite of robust evaluations of homelessness prevention pilots would put the government in a much stronger position to make well-evidenced decisions in subsequent spending reviews on the allocation of resources. This would apply both within the homelessness and rough-sleeping system and in other mainstream services that enable prevention activity.

The Test and Learn programme, which the previous Conservative administration announced in 2022, to trial innovative approaches and test what works to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, was the first of its kind globally to invest in evidence of the impact of interventions.[11] But its focus reflects the priority that the previous administration gave to ending rough sleeping, rather than the much broader spectrum of all forms of homelessness, and only one of the eight interventions being evaluated within the programme is focused explicitly on prevention.[12] Critically, it also lacks dedicated resources for the capacity building and systems development needed to create a sustainable evidence infrastructure, including training for practitioners in evaluation methods, data system enhancements, and the development of standardised measurement tools.

3. Recommendations

The government's ambition to get England on track to ending homelessness in all its forms is welcome. The question is how to translate that ambition into action, particularly in the context of the 2025 spending review. As the previous chapters showed, homelessness is an example of how a lack of co-ordination in one area can undermine positive progress in another, such as recent Home Office action to clear the asylum backlog and its drastic impact on homelessness levels. Addressing these challenges requires better co-ordination and systems integration, as well as a shift in focus towards evidence-based and integrated prevention strategies. To achieve this, a whole-government approach is needed.

There is a fundamental need to switch the balance in resource allocation away from acute interventions and towards more upstream prevention efforts that, over time, will deliver better value for money. Some additional strategic and targeted investment may be needed to bridge this transition, while the homelessness system is under pressure from exceptional demand, and to establish proof of concept for new and innovative approaches. Such a change would mean investing in activity that addresses the root causes of homelessness, such as:

- poverty reduction

- financial stability and support

- housing supply

- early intervention programmes

- education and skills development

- employment

- family support services.

It should also entail enhanced support for individuals transitioning from institutions such as local authority care, prison, hospital or asylum accommodation. This will help to prevent homelessness before it occurs by addressing the underlying factors that contribute to housing instability.

Critically, refocusing the system on prevention also means embedding a new approach in mainstream public services rather than making changes solely to the homelessness sector, as failing to do so ultimately leads to false economies. To that end we recommend the following.

The government should develop a unified vision for prevention, with success measures

The forthcoming cross-government homelessness strategy should clearly articulate the goal of ending homelessness in all its forms. This will require a definition of what it would mean to end homelessness, which should put prevention front and foremost. The previous administration adopted the following definition in its strategy for ending rough sleeping in 2022: "Rough sleeping will have ended when every local area ensures that it is prevented wherever possible and, where it cannot be prevented, it is a rare, brief and non-recurring experience."[1] The current government should extend this definition to cover all forms of homelessness. This unified vision must then be underpinned by a shared understanding of prevention, ensuring alignment across all government departments and levels.

Effective governance and oversight will be crucial for ensuring the successful implementation of this strategy. A joined-up approach, with a unified theory of change, involving clear roles and responsibilities at all levels of government – central, regional and local – is essential. This is particularly important given the complex and often cross-boundary nature of homelessness. It is also crucial to recognise that policies in seemingly unrelated areas can have unintended consequences that exacerbate homelessness.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities help to avoid duplication, confusion and gaps in service delivery, while effective communication and accountability channels facilitate information sharing and collaborative problem solving. Strong leadership, at all levels, is essential for driving momentum, ensuring accountability and fostering a shared vision.

A national, data-led framework for homelessness prevention, underpinned by a unified data system, should accompany these measures, based on shared definitions of success and aligning efforts across all levels of government. This should adopt the 'ending homelessness framework', which the Centre for Homelessness Impact developed with partners, and include standardised definitions and metrics to enable consistent data collection and analysis across all regions, establish clear accountability mechanisms and to foster better collaboration and system integration across sectors and localities to address the root causes of homelessness.

Progress towards achieving this goal can be tracked by developing a small number of data indicators for each part of the definition of what ending homelessness means – prevention, rare, brief and non-recurring – and supporting the regular collection of high-quality data to monitor success and collect granular insights into which parts of the system may or may not be working as they should.

These metrics can also be used to compare outcomes between local areas and to identify barriers for improved performance. This is especially important when facing a complex, multifaceted societal challenge such as homelessness and when a system reset is required, such as a shift away from acute homelessness responses to upstream prevention. History suggests that responding effectively to a challenge on this scale requires renewed and clearly communicated ambition and that this must

be tied to strong success measures focused on prevention. It will be crucial to adopt a collaborative and iterative approach to setting targets, involving those responsible for their delivery and regularly reviewing their impacts to avoid unintended consequences.[2]

The government should protect the UK's social safety net as a primary instrument of prevention

We must never lose sight of the importance of the UK's social safety net as a universal prevention model, particularly our welfare system and the NHS. The central role that the UK's well-established system of Housing Benefit plays in primary prevention, by reducing the overall risk of homelessness at the societal level, deserves to be recognised and acknowledged. But shortages in the availability of affordable housing, especially in cities, have increasingly constrained its effectiveness.

It is well evidenced that countries with strong social protections have lower rates of homelessness. The very high rates of homelessness including family homelessness in many cities in the US, which has a relatively weak social protection system, are a salutary reminder of this.

Nevertheless, as noted previously, financial insecurity is a major driver of homelessness in the UK. Specific programmes for additional financial assistance play an important role in supplementing universal protections with additional, targeted and often one-off or transitional support.

While the 2025 spending review has limited room for manoeuvre, owing to the challenging fiscal environment, consideration should be given to increasing the availability and flexibility of short-term emergency financial assistance to help individuals and families to avert crises such as eviction or having their gas or electricity cut off. Likewise, simplifying the process for people to opt in to having the housing elements of their Universal Credit paid directly to their landlord would be a welcome step, with some people in receipt of this benefit reporting that this is currently a complicated process.[*,3]

If funds allow, a priority should be extending discretionary housing payments that councils make to tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit – Ipsos research for DWP found that these payments helped three quarters of recipients to address financial challenges.[4] This could include expanding eligibility criteria, streamlining application processes and increasing grant amounts where possible.

Encouraging and supporting financial resilience among individuals in adversity should, where feasible, also be a priority across government. This may include supporting financial education and debt advice services to enable people to maximise and manage their existing income. Initiatives such as community supermarkets can

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*   There is evidence that the introduction of Universal Credit intensified financial insecurity, with people in receipt of the benefit 90% more likely to experience difficulties in paying their rent than people who receive Housing Benefit. Delayed payments of Universal Credit also contribute to rent arrears and evictions, especially within the private rented sector.

provide people with access to cheaper food. Evidence shows, for instance, that using behavioural insights to design the offer of debt advice, such as personalised text messages and emails, significantly improves uptake of this advice (see Appendix A, case study 3).

There are also aspects of our welfare system that can compound financial instability and raise risks of homelessness for some individuals. Changes and freezes to Local Housing Allowance rates have undoubtedly exacerbated financial insecurity. The average weekly Local Housing Allowance rate for a three-bedroom home is £82.88 lower than the average weekly rent for such a property, severely limiting the options that people on a low income have to find housing in the private rented sector.[5] There is clearly a need to raise the Local Housing Allowance to reflect the true cost of renting, once fiscal conditions allow.

Alternatively, certain exemptions from Local Housing Allowance rates could be considered, such as for accommodation that local authorities use to house people to discharge their duties to prevent or relieve homelessness. Doing so would also reduce local councils' temporary accommodation costs. Although this is less likely to be attractive for ministers in DWP, since DWP's budget would not benefit from these savings, that should not be an impediment to a government taking a truly mission-led approach.

The benefit cap of £18,200 a year also acts as a barrier to accessing the private rented sector and can lead to an increased likelihood of debt, for people who take out high-interest loans, and rent arrears.

While upstream prevention of homelessness, and other harms, should be a responsibility embedded across public services, a critical role remains for skilled staff working within the homelessness sector to design and deliver targeted homelessness prevention work. The homelessness workforce often lacks structure and development pathways, and local authority and other employers in the homelessness sector must navigate deep-seated recruitment and retention challenges. An accredited homelessness workforce programme linked to vocational skills and qualifications would add considerable value. So, too, would a framework for identifying and developing future system leaders.

The government should strengthen legal support for tenants and incentives for landlords

Unless and until there is a very substantial expansion in the stock of social housing in places where demand is highest, the private rented sector will continue to play an important and necessary role in housing people on lower incomes as well as in providing temporary accommodation to local authorities. This means that renters who find themselves in difficulties may need support to sustain their tenancies or prevent their eviction. Landlords, too, may require some incentives to stay in the market and let to tenants on low incomes. Given the tight confines of the 2025 spending review, growing the evidence base for the efficacy of such approaches would be a low-cost but highly worthwhile investment.

Expanding access to legal representation for tenants facing large rent rises or eviction can be a powerful tool to prevent homelessness, particularly in light of the end of the eviction ban introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing challenges in the private rented sector. Ways to strengthen access to legal representation for tenants facing eviction in England and Wales include:

• expanding eligibility for legal aid

• increasing funding for providers

• promoting alternative support services such as tenant advocacy and pro bono (unpaid professional legal services) schemes.

There is a strong evidence base for the impact of legal advice as a preventative measure. A randomised control trial of a legal assistance programme for low-income tenants in New York City's Housing Court showed that providing legal representation produced large differences in outcomes for low-income tenants facing proceedings in the Housing Court, regardless of the strength or otherwise of their case (see Appendix B, case study 2). Only 22% of tenants with legal representation had final judgments against them, compared with 51% of tenants without legal representation. Furthermore, the evaluation showed that there were significantly fewer evictions of tenants with full legal representation than tenants who represented themselves.[6] Investing in similar programmes, with rigorous evaluation 'bolted on' in the context of England's rental market and legal system, would be highly worthwhile.

With a clear trend of some landlords exiting the social rented sector and the strengthening of tenants' protections that the Renters' Rights Bill heralds, there is a case for extending support for good landlords, too. Enhanced mediation in landlord–tenant disputes would be one option. With persistent anecdotal evidence of a reluctance among some landlords to let to tenants on low incomes, people in receipt of benefits and individuals with experiences of homelessness, offering specific tax-break incentives to landlords who accept tenants on lower incomes might improve the availability of housing for people in financial insecurity. Other incentives might be considered for landlords who engage in training to help them to identify tenants experiencing domestic abuse and refer them on to support, and who share domestic abuse helpline information within documentation shared with tenants. These could be evaluated on a pilot basis.

MHCLG should conduct a review of the collective incentives that local authorities and landlords face, which could inform the design of the pilots recommended above. The review should include an assessment of how to minimise unhelpful competition between different agencies for the same properties. The government should also carefully consider the likely impact of new incentives (for example via the Renters' Rights Bill) before implementation.

The 1.5 million new homes target must include much more social and affordable housing

It is welcome that the government's pledge to build 1.5 million new homes by 2029 included a commitment to "the biggest boost in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation".[7]

Our largely developer-led model for delivering housebuilding may make this the hardest part of the pledge to deliver in practice – it is very common for developers of smaller housing schemes to propose an outline plan with a significant proportion of affordable homes, but then for this element to be considerably reduced or removed in later iterations, with the developer arguing that it is no longer commercially viable.

A significant increase in the supply of subsidised social housing is needed to reduce reliance on the private rented sector and temporary accommodation. MHCLG has announced a review of the entitlements within the Right to Buy scheme, which enables tenants to buy council homes at a large discount to the market price. This will consider extending the length of time after which tenants become eligible and exempting newly built social homes from the scheme,[8] and could help local authorities to stabilise their local supply. Also needed is a significant increase in the supply of homes beyond social housing that are affordable to people on low incomes.

The government has made bold strides to accelerate the development of new housing through planning reforms and incentives. It should explore other evidence-based measures to stabilise or reduce rents in high-demand areas.

MHCLG should explore a new tenure model for families needing lengthy homelessness assistance

With local authorities under such pressure to place large numbers of households in temporary accommodation, often for periods of years, a question arises about the suitability of the tenure available to them. In some cases, especially in London, councils have procured property or used units from their own social housing stock to increase their supply of temporary accommodation. Residents in temporary accommodation are given a licence agreement or non-secure tenancy, not an assured or secure tenancy, entitling them to occupy the property for a set period of time. The licence may have a short notice period and will often make clear that residents could be moved elsewhere at short notice and have restrictive rules such as regulating visitors and requiring notice if residents stay overnight elsewhere. This is inherently stressful for the residents.

Recent experience shows that residents, especially families with two or more children, can stay in temporary accommodation for long periods: 48% of households placed in temporary accommodation in the private rented sector in London have been there for at least five years.[9] MHCLG should explore the case for developing a new type of tenure for residents currently placed in housing classed as temporary accommodation, especially property that local authorities own or operate, that is of a good standard and conforms to funding rules but offers greater stability to residents, especially families with children. MHCLG should review such rules to remove perverse incentives.

The government should invest in and scale place-based initiatives to prevent homelessness

Local authorities hold statutory duties for homelessness but often operate at too small a scale to be able to influence drivers of homelessness or to shape an approach to prevention that is truly upstream and integrates prevention into mainstream public services. Conversely, the arms of government that have an impact on the risks of homelessness, both positively and negatively, often operate at a national or regional level. Place-based initiatives where councils work in a collaborative way with combined authorities offer a way to square this circle, in ways that go with the grain of the government's drive towards greater devolution and also match its ambition.

There is another, compelling argument for place-based working. Data clearly shows that there is a cohort of people with very high support needs who engage with multiple public services. Often their support incurs very high costs to public funds but does not always deliver good outcomes to individuals, because of the siloed nature of public service policy development, funding and delivery. Taking a place-based approach can enable services to be redesigned around the person, improving outcomes while also reducing duplication of effort.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority is developing an upstream model for all types of prevention activity, including but encompassing risks far beyond homelessness such as poverty, economic inactivity and poor health and wellbeing. It is doing this by breaking down silos of public services and integrating their delivery at community level, typically population sizes of between 30,000 and 50,000. Effectively it means redesigning public services from the bottom upwards, investing in front-line services and empowering staff to work in a culture of prevention beyond existing professional boundaries.

This means, for instance, that schools and primary health care become central focal points for prevention. A next step would be to bring in Jobcentre Plus services and other DWP activity. Supporting and further encouraging such place-based work to integrate the delivery of public services around the person requires flexibility or a new approach to nationally commissioned services and finance settlements, as the Institute for Government has previously recommended.[10]

Although not designed as homelessness prevention, this approach is especially relevant as in so many cases of individuals with very high support needs, access to stable housing is a recurring theme and the platform necessary to optimise the effectiveness of other interventions. In the 2025 spending review, the Cabinet Office, the Treasury and MHCLG should work together to trial a new version of the Total Place model of combined funding pots in a small number areas as part of its Test, Learn and Grow programme (see the recent Institute for Government paper on the case for Total Place 2.0[11]).

Since the autumn of 2024, the Centre for Homelessness Impact has worked with London boroughs, their representative body London Councils, and the Greater London Authority to develop evidence-led, cross-London strategic approaches to addressing the homelessness crisis that uses resources as efficiently as possible. Its aim is to:

- transform system co-ordination for homelessness service delivery through a focus on joined-up working and capacity building

- introduce innovative new approaches to addressing homelessness in London based on what works from across the globe

- test these approaches robustly through a 'test and learn' initiative to track impact against a clearly defined 'ending homelessness framework' for London.

In early 2025, the Centre for Homelessness Impact began a second programme with Greater Manchester Combined Authority and its 10 constituent local councils to accelerate their collective impact and support the delivery of their Housing First philosophy with system change and effective implementation. Similarly, this initiative will have three strands:

- 'test and learn' experimentation of new approaches and an evaluation of existing programmes that lack empirical evidence of impact

- development of a unified data system for the region

- building capacity for implementation and governance structures to enable project management and accountability.

In both Greater Manchester and London, these 'accelerator' programmes will bring together not just local and combined authorities but other system actors, too, including from across government to develop and implement integrated strategies. There is a strong case for strategic investment in initiatives such as these that seek to deliver on the government's homelessness ambitions with pan-regional collaboration, and by scaling evidence-based practices and building capacity to embed a 'what works' approach and maximise outcomes. The cost of individual investments to support the management and co-ordination of these projects would be very small in the context of government spending. But if these initiatives prove successful, the government would have robust evidence to scale the approach to other areas facing significant homelessness challenges.

The government should invest in improved data sharing and architecture

High-quality, granular data is the foundation on which truly transformational preventative approaches are built. A first step towards this foundational goal is to ensure that the quality and completeness of data that local authorities have at their disposal at local and regional levels and report to MHCLG is of a high standard.

This data should be treated by all as a rich resource that is continually harnessed to drive better decision making and resource allocation in 'real time'.

To facilitate this, the government must play an even more active role in supporting local areas to effectively collect, report and act on data, offering specialist analytical advice and guidance, and implementing robust quality assurance measures to ensure data accuracy.

To facilitate this, the government should consider boosting investment in data infrastructure to enable local authorities to become fully data driven.

As we argued above, systemic barriers, including a siloed working culture and incompatible or, at least, poorly aligned data collection and monitoring systems across government, significantly hinder opportunities to identify people who are at risk of homelessness much earlier.

The Treasury should sanction and invest in a small number of pilots to develop a unified homelessness data system that can effectively speak to and integrate with regional and local data systems. This work should initially be focused on more mature combined authorities where homelessness is concentrated. It will require the active support of the Cabinet Office, and No.10 where necessary, to ensure the effective implementation and to facilitate strategic alignment across and within departments.

Pilots should include investment to support capacity building at local and regional levels, to improve data quality and the analytical skills that people need to use the insights from this richer data. But they should go further and encourage and facilitate the exploration of enhanced capacities and technologies, such as the use of predictive analytics and artificial intelligence to identify those at risk of homelessness.

Denmark created a national homelessness data system in 2009 that collects standardised data from local authorities that can identify people at heightened risk of homelessness, and also analyses trends and evaluates the effectiveness of homelessness interventions (see Appendix D, case study). Its data system has underpinned a shift towards more preventative approaches and enabled stronger co-ordination between national and local government.

In England, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham has developed a local model for using data to prevent homelessness. It uses data it holds on residents, such as council tax and social housing rent arrears, to identify people who might be struggling. Specifically, it targets people with relatively low arrears who have not been behind with their payments before. Council staff get in touch with these residents to offer them a payment plan as a way of avoiding court proceedings.[12] Its impact is being evaluated in a randomised controlled trial involving three additional councils – in Stockport, Test Valley and the London Borough of Newham – as part of the Test and Learn programme.

The government should consider creating a national prevention endowment

The government should consider creating a UK-wide £100m endowment to fund homelessness prevention work over a 10-year period, rather than continuing to do so via short-term and uncertain grants. This model draws inspiration from the successful Education Endowment Foundation, which has been the most high-profile of the What Works Centres to date, producing hundreds of gold-standard studies and becoming deeply embedded in the education system. The foundation's impact stems from its funding model, providing independence and enabling long-term strategic planning.

Applying this model to homelessness prevention offers a powerful mechanism to drive transformative change. A dedicated Preventing Homelessness Endowment would enable a shift from reactive crisis management, characterised by unsustainable spending on temporary accommodation, to proactive, evidence-based prevention. This is crucial because the reality is stark: economic pressures are mounting, homelessness is rising and our current approach is unsustainable.

The endowment would function as a strategic investment fund, designed to generate long-term savings by funding, testing and scaling promising preventative interventions. These would include a range of activities, primarily funding interventions on the ground, such as pilots, trials and scale-up evaluations, to develop a robust evidence base. Crucially, these evaluations would include detailed mapping and codification of models so they can then be tested against one another (because even if something works, there may be better, more efficient ways of doing the same thing). It is important to stress that the great majority of funds spent on interventions would be in the form of innovative or untested prevention and support measures, thus expanding the provision of homelessness services, with only a small percentage funding the evaluation of these measures.

It would also be a priority to establish and expand regional 'accelerator' programmes to facilitate a shift to prevention by building local capacity, improving data infrastructure and fostering collaboration across local authorities. Developing and deploying new technologies and systems to better target support and prevent homelessness before it occurs, optimising resource allocation and maximising long-term savings, would further support implementation. Supporting research and evaluation, including the synthesis of existing evidence and in-depth research on emerging challenges, to inform effective interventions, would be an important strand of work. So, too, would be investing in dissemination and mobilisation efforts to increase awareness and uptake of evidence-based practices among local authorities and other stakeholders.

By generating robust data on cost-effectiveness and driving systemic change, the endowment would provide a clear financial case for long-term investment, showing its potential to deliver savings that far exceed its initial value. This approach recognises that homelessness is a deeply intersectional issue with interconnected factors, requiring interventions that address its complex roots.

Appendices

It is helpful to separate homelessness prevention interventions into different categories. Primary prevention describes upstream programmes that aim to prevent the onset of homelessness. Secondary prevention involves work with individuals or groups who are at imminent risk or have short histories of homelessness. Tertiary prevention encompasses approaches that support people with long histories of homelessness and is principally designed to prevent recurrence.

Appendices A, B and C provide case studies of each of these types of prevention intervention, respectively, while Appendix D presents a case study on other prevention activity.

Appendix A: Primary prevention case studies

Case study 1: Early identification and intervention in schools

Description

Upstream is a schools-based universal screening tool to identify young people at risk of homelessness. It was developed in Geelong in Victoria, Australia. Professor Pete Mackie, director of impact and engagement at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University in Wales, worked with the Welsh youth homelessness charity Llamau to adapt and simplify the model to create the Upstream Cymru screening intervention. This was introduced in some schools in Wales and has been piloted in schools in Scotland by the Rock Trust, and in London and Manchester by Centrepoint. A similar model to Upstream Cymru is widely used in Canada.

Implementation

The standardised survey asks pupils aged 11–16 in participating schools four questions about their home life that may indicate a risk of family homelessness. For instance, it asks whether their family has been unable to pay their rent or mortgage, and whether the child has moved home three or more times in the past year. Other questions ask specifically about risk factors associated with youth homelessness, such as whether the pupil gets into a lot of conflict with their parents or guardians, and if they have slept away from home because they were kicked out, ran away or did not feel safe to stay. Results are analysed to identify pupils who are flagged as at potential risk, which can be further assessed in interviews with homelessness workers. These interviews are used to determine the young person's needs, and a care plan is then developed to connect them to support.

Impact

An evaluation of the original Australian school-based screening model, called the Community of Schools and Services Model, found that after its introduction there was a 40% reduction in the number of adolescents seeking homelessness assistance from local services in Geelong, Victoria. Meanwhile, a pilot evaluation of Upstream Scotland, which was introduced in six secondary schools in Edinburgh, West Lothian, and Perth and Kinross, found that more than one in ten pupils at participating schools were identified as at risk of homelessness. Significantly, these included pupils at risk who were not picked up by observational or data monitoring. About half of those who were offered support accepted the offer. This included emotional and practical support, and referral or signposting to local services.[1]

Potential lessons

The Upstream screening tool shows the value of early intervention within mainstream public services such as schools, and is an example of universal prevention in its purest form. The fact that all pupils in the age cohort complete the screening survey reduces any associated stigma. But the key to its success is in how well and how quickly pupils who are identified as at elevated risk of homelessness are referred to relevant support services. Screening is dependent on the strength and responsiveness of the local homelessness system.

Case study 2: Housing and support for all at-risk young people

Description

The Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) programme in Canada is a rights-based intervention for young people aged 13–24 who are at risk of homelessness. It aims to provide them with immediate access to housing that is safe, affordable and suitable for their needs, as a platform for supporting them with services adapted for their age to support their health, wellbeing, life skills, engagement in education and employment, and engagement with the community.

Implementation

Despite the common name, HF4Y differs from the traditional Housing First model, which gives priority to people with long or recurring experiences of homelessness and with the highest needs. Since it takes a human rights-based approach, HF4Y operates on the principle that it should be open to all young people who are at risk of, or who experience, homelessness. It is based on evidence that if young people experience homelessness for any length of time, they become at high risk of exploitation or other harms that could exacerbate their risk of entrenched homelessness.

Impact

A randomised controlled trial over 24 months in Ottawa and Toronto was used to measure the effectiveness of the HF4Y programme by looking at outcomes including housing stability, health, wellbeing, access to education and employment, support services and social inclusion. This found that HF4Y participants in Ottawa and Toronto showed a significant improvement in their housing stability. Among participants in the intervention group in Ottawa, housing stability increased from 16.7% at baseline to 85.7% at both the 12- and 24-month follow-up surveys, whereas among participants in the control group, housing stability was 13.6% at baseline and rose at a much slower pace to 36.6% at 12 months and 43.1% at 24 months.[2]

Potential lessons

The HF4Y programme illustrates the importance of primary prevention activity that is broader in scope and sits further upstream than traditional and more reactive support that takes place once young people experience or are at imminent risk of homelessness. In addition to reducing the risk of youth homelessness, it also shows promising impact in improving educational and health outcomes.

Case study 3: Behavioural science and service design to improve debt advice uptake

Description

The Money Advice Service (now part of the Money and Pensions Service) in the UK is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by DWP. It provides free and impartial debt advice, money guidance and pension guidance to citizens. Its services often find that people experiencing financial instability are not aware of drop-in advice services or do not attend debt advice appointments, and that the type of financial information and documents that people need to bring to an appointment can be burdensome and potentially off-putting, especially for individuals with low literacy or poor mental health. Missed appointments mean that an opportunity for a person to receive help is foregone and they also have a negative impact on capacity within services.

Two organisations, supported by the Money Advice Service, worked with Ogilvy Change, a specialist behavioural interventions agency, to explore how they could use insights from behavioural science to increase the number of people receiving debt advice. They used randomised controlled trials to test different forms of communication and messages to signpost people to debt advice services and to encourage them to attend scheduled appointments, thereby preventing people from getting into more severe financial difficulties.

Implementation

These experiments drew on previous trials elsewhere that used behavioural insights to improve the effectiveness of communication channels and message framing, such as personalising emails by adding 'you' or 'your' in the subject line – for example, "Your appointment is with…". Other approaches were using the recipient's first name in the opening line of the email and throughout the email, and sending text messages that were personalised to the recipient – adding their first name, saying that a place had been reserved for them and with a message from their case officer saying "good luck".

Impact

One service, a branch of Citizens Advice based within the Central London County Court, had typically relied on word of mouth or publicity posters around the court buildings to encourage people to attend. As part of the trial, it tested versions of a signpost card the size of business cards, which avoided the word 'debt' and used the prompt "When are you coming in for a chat?" Over a four-week period, 130 cards were distributed, of which 80 were handed directly to individuals. Of those given cards, 15% of people sought debt advice while they were in the court building. By applying such insights from behavioural science, including clients being able to book their own appointment slots, the service saw a 30% reduction in no-shows for its legal appointments.[3]

Another service, South West London Law Centres, which provides free debt advice, simplified its appointments system, designed its emails to present individuals with a clear set of steps, including listing fewer financial documents that they would need to bring to an appointment, employed personalised language and used bold fonts and colours to highlight key information. Over the four-week period of the trial, attendance rates at appointments rose from 50% to 67%.[4]

Potential lessons

Applying behavioural insights can significantly improve the uptake of services such as debt advice, which may carry a stigma or create anxiety for individuals, but which is a crucial service for preventing financial hardship and homelessness. These findings highlight the potential of applying behavioural science and service design principles to encourage early help-seeking and improve the effectiveness of homelessness prevention programmes.

Case study 4: Housing choice vouchers

Description

The Family Options Study is a large random assignment experiment in the US to test the impact of housing and services interventions for families experiencing homelessness. A total of 2,282 families with more than 5,000 children were enrolled onto the study from emergency shelters across 12 communities, from 2010 to 2012, nationwide. They were randomly assigned to one of four interventions:

- a housing choice voucher, providing long-term rent subsidies

- temporary rent subsidies for up to 18 months

- priority access to transitional accommodation in a housing project with intense support services, for up to 24 months

- none of the above interventions.

Implementation

Families were surveyed at the start of the trial, and again after 20 and 37 months. Detailed cost data was also collected for each of the interventions. The principal outcome measured was housing stability, and so the analysis looked at whether each intervention prevented families from returning to homelessness. Other outcomes were evaluated for family relationships, wellbeing for both children and adults, and independence.

Impact

Long-term housing vouchers reduced homelessness rates by more than 50% for low-income families, with additional benefits in education, lower parent–child separation, reduced intimate partner violence and psychological distress, and increased food security. But the long-term housing vouchers were expensive and the group given short-term rent subsidies showed comparable positive effects at 9% lower cost. Priority access to transitional housing showed no significant difference in outcomes, while costs were 4% higher.[5]

Potential lessons

This case study highlights the potential of housing vouchers to provide a scalable solution to housing stability. The closest equivalent intervention in the UK is the housing element within Universal Credit (or Housing Benefit for those still eligible), calculated using the Local Housing Allowance. But evidence suggests that ensuring the Local Housing Allowance rates adequately reflect market rents is crucial for its effectiveness.

Appendix B: Secondary prevention case studies

Case study 1: Tailored services to prevent homelessness

Description
Homebase is a service in New York City that links people experiencing housing instability in the community with homeless prevention services. It includes providing support services to individuals and families once they have left one of the city's homeless shelters to move into permanent housing. It is offered to individuals and families deemed to be at imminent risk of entering the New York City shelter system, who are on a low income and who want to remain stably housed in the community.

Implementation
Staff at Homebase assess an individual's or family's needs and offer them support services to strengthen their housing stability. These may include:

- an emergency rent subsidy

- interventions to prevent eviction

- advice and guidance on claiming welfare and other benefits

- short-term financial assistance

- financial advice and support with money management.

Other forms of support are help in finding and applying for a job or a place on an education programme, and help with moving home.

Impact
One study estimated that for every 100 families enrolled on the Homebase programme from 2004 to 2008, the number of entries into New York City's homeless shelter system fell by between 10 and 20.[6]

Potential lessons
The Homebase model highlights the potential of comprehensive, tailored services to prevent homelessness. In the UK, the equivalent is the well-established Housing Options pathway, which exists in each local authority. But robust evaluation is needed to identify best practices and maximise outcomes, particularly in preventing long-term reliance on temporary accommodation.

Case study 2: Legal assistance

Description
A legal assistance programme for low-income tenants facing proceedings in New York City's Housing Court was subject to a randomised controlled trial to capture the impact of legal assistance in preventing homelessness.

Implementation
The overwhelming proportion of landlords (98%) who took tenants to the Housing Court in New York City hired attorneys, whereas only a small minority of low-income tenants (12%) had legal representation, which most could not afford. Some in the legal community argued that the principle of due process of law meant that tenants should have a right to be represented in court proceedings, whereas critics claimed this might incentivise adverse tenant behaviour, such as non-payment of rent.

A randomised trial in 1993/94 therefore compared the outcomes for a group of low-income tenants who were offered legal representation with a control group who were not.

Impact
There were large differences in outcomes for low-income tenants with legal representation in the Housing Court compared with those who did not have it, independent of the merits of the case. Only 22% of tenants with legal representation had final judgments against them, compared with 51% of tenants without an attorney. Tenants with legal representation were also likely to be more successful in actions initiated against landlords; for example, requiring the landlord to provide rent refunds or to undertake repairs.[7]

Similarly large advantages for tenants with an attorney were also found in eviction orders and stipulations requiring the landlord to provide rent abatements or repairs.

Potential lessons
Expanding access to legal representation for tenants facing eviction can be a powerful tool to prevent homelessness, particularly in light of the end of the eviction ban in England and the ongoing challenges in the private rented sector.

Case study 3: Critical time intervention

Description

The Through the Gate programme, introduced in the UK in 2015, provides intensive support to people leaving prison, particularly during the period immediately after their release, according to a principle known as critical time intervention (CTI). Its objective is to support the transition between prison and the community, and so reduce reoffending. Support for people leaving prison may include housing assistance, benefits advice and help with accessing health care and employment.

Implementation

Initially, community rehabilitation companies provided support services but there was considerable criticism of their quality, especially for prisoners who had served sentences fewer than 12 months. In 2018, an additional £22m was provided to enhance the services for the remainder of the companies' contracts, for:

- support such as meeting specific needs within accommodation

- support with employment, training and education

- financial advice on benefits and debt

- support with personal relationships and community links.

Impact

The Ministry of Justice commissioned an evaluation of the Enhanced Through the Gate programme, involving 165 interviews with delivery teams, staff at 20 prisons and probation staff. Many of them reported that the second iteration of the programme had been relatively successful, reducing reoffending rates and improving housing stability for ex-offenders.[8] Ingeus, one of the companies that provided the service, reported that of 30,000 people released from prison, six out of seven had secure housing to go to.[9]

Potential lessons

The relative success of the Through the Gate programme for people leaving prison shows the effectiveness of critical time interventions in preventing homelessness during vulnerable transitions and could inform the wider adoption of such programmes. Examples of other transitions that critical time interventions could be applied to include:

- leaving local authority care

- discharge from hospital, including mental health settings

- leaving asylum accommodation.

Case study 4: Street outreach to prevent rough sleeping

Description
Somewhere Safe to Stay was a model originally piloted in England from 2018 for individuals who had been sleeping rough, to provide emergency space where they could stay away from the street. Rough-sleeping outreach teams often made referrals to the scheme. Somewhere Safe to Stay assessment hubs operated around the clock, and combined private units in which people could sleep with on-hand support and information. These hubs aimed to prevent people from spending a night on the streets and connect them with appropriate services.

Implementation
The hubs were part of the then government's first rough-sleeping strategy, published in 2018, which allocated £17m for work for sites to rapidly assess the needs of people at risk of rough sleeping and give them support.[10] Hubs were established in 11 'early adopter' areas in England. The model was one of four so-called 'rapid rehousing pathways'.

Impact
An evidence review of what works to end street homelessness, published in 2019, noted that there was widespread variation in the way that No Second Night Out principles were practised and said the programme faced multiple challenges arising from a lack of suitable move-on accommodation.[11] Nonetheless, the hubs have been successful in reducing rough sleeping and connecting people with appropriate services and have been widely adopted as a model for providing emergency accommodation and assistance to people who are sleeping rough.

Potential lessons
While No Second Night Out initiatives show promise, little is known about the comparative effectiveness of different street outreach models, such as:

- assertive outreach, which involves multidisciplinary teams proactively engaging with people sleeping out and linking them to support, with the primary objective of ending their homelessness

- conventional outreach by rough-sleeping teams, which includes help with immediate needs.

The use of technology to enhance street outreach – such as mobile apps to connect people with services and real-time data analysis to identify hotspots and target interventions – appears underdeveloped and warrants further exploration.

Appendix C: Tertiary prevention case study

Case study: Housing First

Description

Pathways to Housing, a not-for-profit organisation, was founded in New York City in 1992 to provide housing without preconditions (such as requiring sobriety or employment, as many conditional services do). Pathways to Housing developed the Housing First model to meet the housing and treatment needs of a specific group of individuals who had experienced chronic homelessness, who typically had frequent admissions to psychiatric health care and intermittent engagement with treatment for substance misuse. One of the reasons for its development was a perception that individuals in this category were resistant to treatment and not 'housing ready'. Housing First is based on a belief that housing is a human right and that people respond better to support when given agency to define their own needs and goals.

Implementation

The programme was designed from the perspective of individuals accessing support and how they wish to do so. It describes users of the service as 'consumers' and encourages them to define their own needs and goals, including by providing them with a flat immediately if that is what they want. Consumers are offered treatment and support from a community-based team including social workers, nurses, psychiatrists and counsellors who are available around the clock. A housing specialist was also added to the team. The only conditions were that tenants should pay 30% of their income towards their rent and meet with a member of staff at least twice a month.

Impact

A study published in 2004 evaluated the impact of the model by recruiting 225 people with experience of homelessness and mental illness. They were randomly assigned to two groups. Members of the treatment group were given immediate housing without prerequisites, while members of the control group were eligible for housing on condition that they accessed support and showed sobriety. Participant interviews were conducted at six-month intervals over a two-year period.[12]

Participants who received Housing First remained stably housed and reported higher perceived choice. They also spent twice the amount of time in stable housing than the control group and 80% retained their housing. Although members of the control group showed significantly higher engagement with substance abuse services and support, no differences were found in substance use or psychiatric symptoms.

Potential lessons

Conditionality attached to homelessness support, sometimes known as 'housing ready' or 'staircasing', can delay access to services and is not associated with better outcomes.[13] It should be emphasised that the findings in a US context where welfare provision and access to health care are very different from that in the UK may well not be the same in the UK. Nor is the Housing First model a panacea, as it is often presented. It is expensive and best suited to a small cohort of individuals for whom other support has not worked or has not been sustained.

However, Housing First has been widely adopted in the UK, including in regional pilots in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region, which the government has funded. These have been subject to detailed evaluation but not to the 'gold standard' of evaluation with a control group. This evaluation found high rates of housing stability and satisfaction among a sample of 159 residents, a fall in the proportion feeling lonely and improved feelings of safety, health and wellbeing.[14]

Appendix D: Other prevention activity case study

Case study: Unified data systems to enable early intervention

Description

Denmark established a national homelessness data system in 2009 to track individuals' and families' pathways into and out of homelessness services. This system collects standardised data from local authorities across the country, enabling the analysis of trends, evaluation of interventions and identification of those at highest risk.

Implementation

Homelessness data is collected in a twice-yearly national survey in Denmark. Data collection is via providers of homelessness and wider welfare services, including homeless shelters, street outreach teams, substance misuse treatment centres, psychiatric hospitals, municipal social centres, job centres and day centres.

Each service fills out a two-page questionnaire for every person experiencing homelessness with whom they are in contact or they know about. Service staff themselves can complete the form or they can do so in collaboration with a client in an interview. This means that a much larger group of people experiencing homelessness is captured than by, for example, a traditional point-in-time street count. This can include, for instance, individuals in short-term transitional housing, and people staying with family or friends, provided they are in contact with services.

Impact

The data system has been instrumental in informing policy and practice changes in Denmark, leading to a shift towards Housing First and more preventative approaches. It has also facilitated better co-ordination between national and local government and improved accountability in homelessness efforts. There is growing political awareness in Denmark of the importance of a long-term, national and cross-sectoral strategy based on housing-led approaches to reduce homelessness.

Potential lessons

While the UK benefits from significant data collection at the local level, this information is not yet integrated into a single, unified system. Doing so would enable a more data-driven and proactive approach to preventing recurring homelessness and improving outcomes for those already experiencing housing instability. To maximise its preventative capacity, such a system would need to also incorporate upstream data from schools, primary care and other sources, to identify individuals at risk before they experience a housing crisis.

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