

LGiU Local Government Homelessness commission

The homelessness crisis in the UK is large and growing rapidly.

Government statistics released earlier this year showed that 4,751 people slept rough in 2017, an increase of 15 per cent. Meanwhile, the number of households in temporary accommodation in England rose by 4 per cent during the year to 78,930. Sixty nine per cent of these households are in London and 5,710 households were in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) has been in force since April, part of the Government's stated aim to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027, as well as reducing the financial burden of temporary accommodation. Under the Act, councils now have expanded duties to implement housing plans for anyone at risk of becoming homeless within 56 days.

It is for this reason that LGiU has launched our Homelessness Commission, led by LGiU's local government members. Through a series of investigations into how councils can prevent homelessness, the Commission will provide practical solutions for making good on the goals of the HRA, as well as a robust set of challenges and demands for central government to provide the right resources, powers and tools for councils to tackle this task.

The Commission will be jointly chaired by Cllr Peter Fleming (Leader, Sevenoaks District Council) and Cllr Simon Blackburn (Leader, Blackpool Council). These councils, both LGiU members, have demonstrated innovative and proactive approaches to tackling homelessness and the Co-Chairs will bring their expertise and experience to bear on these crucial discussions.

Through the Commission, we are committed to developing strong, practical recommendations for councils to tackle homelessness, spread best practice and produce expert evidence, as well as firm demands of central government for the resources, powers and infrastructure that will enable them to do so.

While rough sleeping is a visible and immediate problem across the country that needs to be solved, the homelessness crisis goes way beyond it. Hidden homelessness is widespread and persists in many guises and there are increasing numbers of people sofa surfing, in precarious housing, living in poor conditions, or at constant risk of becoming homeless. For vulnerable people, young people and children, this can have serious negative effects.

Furthermore, there are large geographical disparities in terms of the economics and social infrastructure that have a significant impact on the extent of homelessness in individual areas. Housing markets differ, as do rents and Local Housing Allowance rates. The proximity of some areas to London and other big cities has a sizeable impact as well. This means that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to achieve the aims of the HRA.

Themes

In a series of evidence gathering sessions, the Commission will cover four key themes related to preventing homelessness:

1. Temporary accommodation. The HRA was designed in part to reduce the pressure on temporary accommodation. This will be challenging without an increase to the supply and quality of affordable housing more generally as well as new approaches for councils to address issues in the private rented sector. This session will look at ways of increasing supply of temporary accommodation and using it effectively, while taking geographical divergence into account.

2. Data. With a wider range of people with different needs and risks who require preventative support under the HRA, using data to better support housing advice services and predict homelessness has become a more pressing imperative. This session will take evidence on how councils can use data and technology to understand shifts in circumstances, population and demographics to design early, tailored prevention work. It will look at building understanding of changes in areas like the private rented sector, welfare, personal and household debt, and Universal Credit.

3. Supporting young people and other vulnerable groups. Young people, those with mental health problems and substance dependency and vulnerable women are just some of the groups that require specialised, tailored support, enabling homelessness prevention services to join up with other parts of the council and wider public sector. Centrepoint has found that 86,000 young people contacted their local authority in 2016-17 to ask for support, as they were homeless or at risk of homelessness (though just thirteen per cent were accepted as statutorily homeless). Just over half of these people had left their previous home because parents, relatives or friends were no longer able or willing to accommodate them. This session will look at some of the key challenges around working with specific vulnerable groups and supporting them to live independently, including building trust and communication and developing effective and joined up ways of working with commissioned service providers.

4. Economics and finance. The Government has made £72m available for local authorities to implement the HRA, but it is expected that the actual cost will far exceed that. London alone will require £77m, rather than the £22m it has been allocated, according to London Councils. New ways of working, infrastructure, and forms of training are required and will cost money to set up. Meanwhile there are significant geographical differences in how the finances work, depending on wider factors such as the local economy and the housing market. The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is a vital factor here. While the total pool of money in the LHA might be enough, we need to make sure it is available in the right places. This session will investigate the financial impact of implementing the HRA thus far, the links with wider determinants of economic geography on homelessness prevention, and build up case studies demonstrating how councils are using their funding effectively.

Best Practice

This will be a practical commission, based on evidence and best practice. We will hear from councils across the country about the excellent work that is already being done so that we can share and build upon it. There are many standout examples and we would like hear about what you are doing so we can help to share and shout about it.

Next Steps

As LGiU members, we would like you to help us to shape the narrative around preventing homelessness.

1. Register your interest in the evidence session(s) most relevant to you and your area.

The first evidence session for the Commission will be held in the Autumn. Please get in touch to register your interest: andrew.walker@lgiu.org.uk.

2. Take our survey.

We want to hear about the challenges you are facing, as well as what approaches your council is taking to tackle them. Share your experiences in our survey, which we will be launching soon. All data will be kept anonymous and used in the final report for the Commission's work, although we would welcome case studies from across the sector.

For more information, or to get in touch, please contact Andrew Walker:
andrew.walker@lgiu.org.uk.