

Housing

Briefing

for service managers

 **audit**  
commission



# Homelessness

Responding to the new agenda

*The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.*

*As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, through inspection, audit, research and other methods, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.*

## What are the challenges?

- 1 Homelessness can be seen as an issue that has its roots in the inadequate supply of affordable accommodation in areas where people want to live. But it often reflects broader issues, where people face complex social and financial problems that make it difficult for them to sustain tenancies or property ownership. Homelessness has moved up the political agenda with the *Homelessness Act 2002*, which sets out new duties and powers for councils that service managers need to respond to:
  - a duty to carry out homelessness reviews and to develop homelessness strategies;
  - a duty to provide accommodation until a settled home is found for homeless households in priority need (repealing the existing two-year time limit);
  - a power to secure housing for households that are not in priority need;
  - a strengthened entitlement for single homeless people to receive advice and assistance from a local authority; and
  - following a new *Priority Needs Order*, a duty to house homeless 16- and 17 year-olds and care leavers aged 18 to 20, and those who are vulnerable due to facing racist or domestic violence, leaving institutionalised care, prison or the armed forces.
- 2 The Government has set out new *Codes of Guidance* for local authorities on both homelessness and allocations and set targets that no families should be accommodated in bed and breakfast (B&B) by the end of March 2004, except in emergencies. From April 2003, under the new Supporting People Programme, housing and social services departments will also be required to work in partnership with other stakeholders to address the support needs of vulnerable people. These changes raise challenges for councils.

## How are councils performing?

- 3 Overall, inspection findings reveal a disappointing picture of current performance by council homelessness and housing advice services in England and Wales. Only about one in five of the 50 services inspected focusing on housing needs have been judged to be good, and only one has been deemed excellent, although almost three-quarters are considered to have promising or excellent prospects for future improvement (**Table 1**).
- 4 There are three key areas that service managers need to consider [**Exhibit 1**].

**Table 1****Inspection results for homelessness and housing advice services – December 2002**

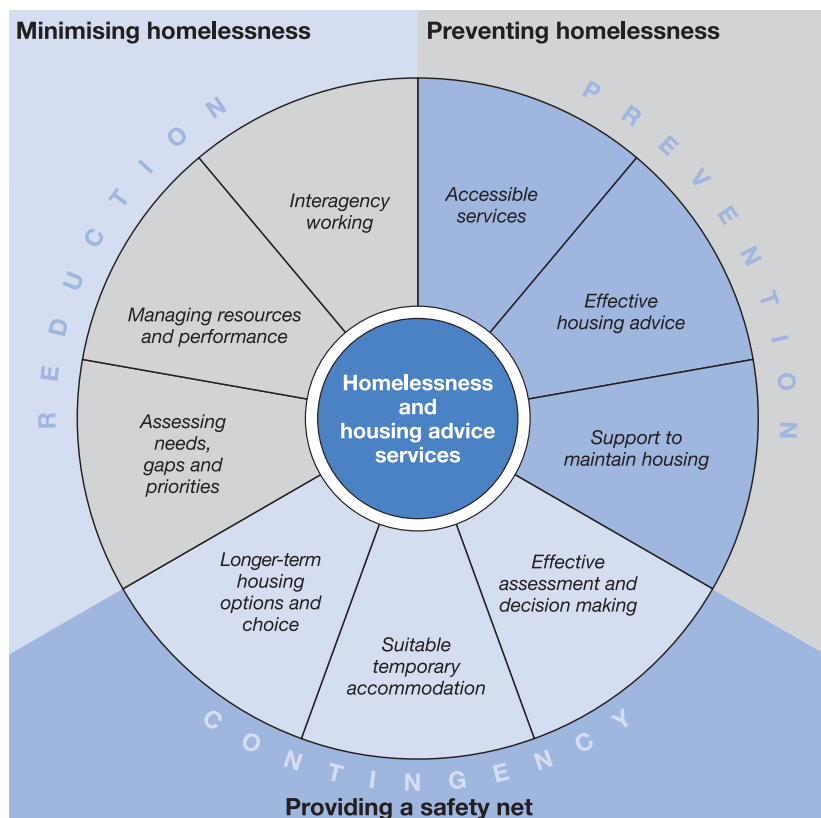
Likelihood of/prospects for improvement	Star rating				Total	Percentage
	Poor No stars	Fair 1 star	Good 2 stars	Excellent 3 stars		
Will improve/excellent	0	8	4	0	12	24%
Probably/promising	1	16	7	1	25	50%
Unlikely/uncertain	0	12	0	0	12	24%
Will not/poor	1	0	0	0	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>50</b>	
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>2%</b>		

**Note:** the table excludes inspection scores for whole housing services where homelessness was covered in less detail.

**Source:** Audit Commission

**Exhibit 1****The key areas for service delivery**

There are three key areas that service managers need to consider



**Source:** Audit Commission

## Preventing homelessness

5 Prevention is at the heart of the new agenda. Councils can help to prevent homelessness by:

- *ensuring that services are accessible to enable people to get help when they have housing problems*; considering how people find out about services, their location, opening hours and staffing;
- *providing clear advice and information on housing and related issues*; considering the structure and role of advice services, resourcing requirements, the quality of advice and its impact on prevention; and
- *offering support to help people to stay in their homes*; implementing the Supporting People Programme and working with other providers, including social services, housing benefit, health services and the criminal justice system in order to deliver flexible, integrated services.

## Providing a safety net

6 Where homelessness cannot be prevented, council services are there to provide a safety net. In order to provide high-quality, cost efficient services councils need to:

- *provide efficient, thorough assessments and decisions for homeless applicants*; considering how they keep case file records, the investigation and consistency of decisions, reviews and appeals procedures and the level of contact maintained with users throughout the process;
- *offer suitable emergency or temporary accommodation (TA) for those accepted*; considering the standards and costs of TA, risk assessment in placements and how easily people can access support services while in TA; and
- *offer longer-term options to enable people to move into more settled housing, taking account of where they want to live*; considering the availability of, and access to, social housing, options in the private rented sector, effective housing management and links to the council's overall housing strategy.

## Minimising homelessness

7 Working in partnership with other providers can help to minimise homelessness in the longer term. Developing homelessness strategies offers councils the opportunity to bring together plans for addressing the issue by:

- *making better use of data on local needs to identify gaps and set priorities for improving services*; making the links between rough sleepers, 'hidden homeless' households, and those accepted by the council;
- *managing resources and performance effectively to deliver better services*; considering, for example, how the council will access new Government funding streams and set challenging targets to meet its priorities; and
- *working with other partners strategically and operationally* to ensure that roles and responsibilities are defined; and that each contributes to delivering the homelessness strategy.

8 Service managers can find more details and full recommendations in the Commission's main report: *Homelessness: Responding to the New Agenda*.

📄 Copies of this report are available at:

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