



Training pack on user experiences

Introduction

To highlight the complexity of individual needs and service interventions, the Commission has developed a series of five user scenarios. While these cannot represent every eventuality, they exemplify the complexities of the problems people face and their varied routes in to and through the system seeking assistance. The cases are based on an amalgamation of real life experiences identified by interviewing users, examining case files of people who have presented at council or advice agencies for help, and research on peoples' experiences of homelessness¹. The cases highlight both the problems and pitfalls in service delivery and the areas of concern for users, which councils may wish to consider in order to provide more customer focussed services.

These case studies can be used by homelessness and housing advice services (possibly with other related services) in staff training to help to identify ideas for service development. Alternatively, services may wish to consider a sample of their own case files to consider any issues arising from user experiences. Each case set out here presents the profile of the household, followed by the user's experience and a summary of the issues raised. The issues raised are addressed in chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the Commission's report, *Homelessness: Responding to the New Agenda*.

Discussion areas

Staff may want to read the individual user stories and then consider the following questions for each user scenario before turning to the issues identified by the Commission. In some cases, the discussion may focus on one area more than others:

Preventing homelessness

- Are services easily accessible to enable the user to get help with his or her housing problems?
- Is the user offered information, advice and advocacy if needed on housing and related issues and is this clear and effective in resolving his or her problems?
- Is the user offered support which would help him/her to stay in his or her own home, if this is a viable option?

¹ Sources include Shelter's website, case files from the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux on homelessness, over 125 case files reviewed in local authorities as well as other research.

Providing a safety net

- Is the user's homelessness application assessed efficiently and thoroughly and is the user informed of the outcome?
- Is the user offered suitable emergency or temporary accommodation where this is needed?
- Are longer term housing options offered to enable the user to move into more settled accommodation, and are his or her preferences taken into account in resettlement?

Minimising homelessness in the longer term

- Is the council's homelessness service working effectively to address the user's needs with other council services (such as housing benefits, social services and so on)?
- Are all other agencies working effectively together to address the user's needs holistically?

Staff may also want to have a broader discussion, using these scenarios or their own case files, about how their local services address the needs of users. They could consider, for example,

- What are the gaps in local services arising out of the case files?
- What are the priorities for improvement?
- How can the council work with its partners to deliver change?



Beth

- **Beth, mother with three children (6 months, 4 and 6 years old) fleeing domestic violence**
- **Beth has left her violent husband several times in the past, returning because of her children. She has previously stayed in different refuges around England**
- **Seeking help from a district council in south east England**

Beth turns up at the council Homeless Persons Unit (HPU) without an appointment saying that she has left her violent husband and needs help as she is scared to return home. Earlier, she went to a Women's Aid refuge but was told that there was no space available and was referred to the council. Beth has been to Women's Aid refuges three times in the past; she learnt about this charity from the police when they were called out to a violent incident involving her husband.

Beth sees a caseworker who helps her to complete both homelessness and housing application forms. Beth provides crime reference numbers for previous incidences of violence. She is also asked for a written statement of the violence she has experienced. She is offered B&B accommodation while her application is considered but decides that she would rather stay with her mother as she needs cooking facilities to prepare milk for her baby.

Three weeks later she receives a letter from the council saying that she has been found in priority need and unintentionally homeless and that the council has a full duty to re-house her and her children. Beth is told that she will be put on top of the council's housing waiting list but that she should try to find alternative housing as there are no free council properties where she wants to live and it could take a year or more for one to become available.

Beth contacts a local letting agent and views one property that she likes. However, all two-bedroom accommodation costs £100 or more per week. On the advice of her caseworker, Beth checks with the area rent officer to see what she can afford. The rent officer confirms that HB can only be paid up to a maximum of £80 a week. Beth cannot meet the shortfall.

Beth remains with her mother but is anxious to move as the house is very overcrowded. Three months later, the council offers her a two-bedroom property in a different area away from her mother, her children's school and her friends. At this point she goes to the CAB; the adviser liaises with the HPU on her behalf to try to get more suitable accommodation. The adviser is told that Beth can either stay in the B&B or she can take the property that she has been offered. The adviser suggests that Beth takes the council property and challenge this on grounds of suitability (due to its location) once she moves in. Beth moves in but is unhappy as her children have to change schools. She is also concerned about damp that she has noticed in the children's bedroom. She applies to the council for a housing transfer soon after.

Beth's story raises the following issues:

Access	The police can play an important role in informing victims of domestic violence about refuges and council services. Waiting lists for women's refuges may exist; procedures for onward referral vary.
Advice and support	People fleeing domestic violence may need advice on a wide range of issues, including finance, accessing shared property and legal advice for divorce, court injunctions and shared access to children. Counselling may also be important.
Decision making	Personal statements are commonly used as evidence. If police have not been involved, it may be more difficult to prove domestic violence.
Housing options	TA is not always suitable for families. Access to cooking facilities and storage for belongings can cause problems. In the longer term, people may have to trade off their preferences concerning location, safety, cost and size of accommodation.
Interagency working	Liaison between education services and the HPU is not always systematic, which can result in problems with school placements for children when families have to move.
Other issues	The rent service may not set rates for HB that reflect real rents.



Jane

- **Jane, 32 year-old single woman**
- **Formerly in local authority care, she has been in insecure housing ever since**
- **Presenting at an English unitary in the south west, Jane is originally from a rural district council**

Jane has come to a direct access nightshelter having met someone who is staying there. She wants to reduce her heroin habit and switch to methadone and thinks a GP in the town could help. She has been sleeping rough. The nightshelter worker is concerned about her mental and physical health – Jane’s friend has told her that Jane was recently in hospital following an attack when she was on the streets – so the worker calls the council to make a homelessness appointment.

Jane has an interview with a caseworker. The caseworker does not know the details of Jane’s health situation and tells her that because she is single she is not likely to be considered as a ‘priority need’; as a result, the council is unlikely to have a long-term duty to provide housing. Jane was in care until the age of 16 when she ran away. She has spent the past 16 years living on the streets, in hostels or other insecure housing. Despite this, her vulnerability is not assessed, nor is she referred on to any other agencies. She says she has nowhere to go and the caseworker refers her to the TA officer, who arranges for her to stay in a hostel until investigations are complete. She also helps Jane to complete an HB application.

Jane stays in the hostel for two weeks but is then asked to leave when she brings a man back to her room. Afterwards, workers find a pile of used needles under her bed. They have to close off her room and the communal areas until a council environmental health officer can come to assess the health risk for staff and other residents.

In the meantime, the caseworker starts investigating Jane’s application; she speaks to the nightshelter staff and then calls the hospital to find out about Jane’s recent attack and her health status. The consultant that dealt with Jane is on leave; the caseworker is told that someone will call back. The officer does not receive a phone call. She writes to Jane telling her that she needs to get in touch. A negative decision is made due to lack of evidence; a letter is held on file but Jane does not come to collect it.

Two months later, a colleague serving an abandonment order on a property notifies Jane’s caseworker that Jane was found squatting there. Jane had taken an overdose of heroin and had to be rushed into hospital.

Jane's story raises the following issues:

Access	Access to services for rough sleepers tends to be through voluntary agencies, which play an important role in linking people to services.
Advice and support	Without outreach, rough sleepers may not be able to access support and advice. Support in TA, as well as in longer-term housing, is critical for those with high level needs. Life expectancy for people who are persistently homeless is considerably shorter than for the general population. Ineffective planning for care leavers can mean that people end up experiencing repeat homelessness.
Decision making	The new <i>Priority Needs Order</i> extends assistance to vulnerable care leavers; however, the time lapse since leaving care here is significant; without a thorough assessment this would be missed.
Housing options	Risk assessment should be carried out before placing people with multiple needs – access to drug agencies/GPs should be considered when a placement is made for substance misusers.
Interagency working	Linking with relevant partners and agencies is an important part of the decision-making process and vital for arranging support. Protocols between social services and homelessness services and joint assessments could improve responses to care leavers, young people and other groups that may seek help from either service. Councils should assess the need for wet and dry hostels for people with drug and alcohol problems; needle disposal and storage of prescribed drugs should be taken into account for drug users.
Other issues	Councils and providers need to consider the implications of the <i>Drug Misuse Act 1971</i> – hostel staff could be vulnerable to prosecution for illegal drug use on their premises.



The Bishops

- **The Bishop family – John, a long distance lorry driver earning £1,200 a month; Sandra, a housewife; two children, Joe and Amy (aged 7 and 12)**
- **The family has fallen into rent arrears in their housing association property and faces eviction**
- **Living in a unitary authority in the Midlands**

In June 2002, the council's court liaison officer (based in the housing advice service) receives notification from a local housing association that the organisation is seeking a warrant for eviction for the Bishops. The officer has had no previous contact with the family. She writes and offers them an appointment in two weeks and outlines what assistance the council may be able to provide. At this point an eviction date is unknown.

The couple fix an appointment and discuss their financial difficulties. It transpires that they first got into arrears in early 2002 following their decision to buy a car and to pay for this through a finance company. When they had difficulty meeting the payments the finance company sent staff to their home to chase payments. As a result, the Bishops decided to prioritise payments on the car loan above their rent.

The case has already been to court earlier in the year, when the housing association sought possession of the Bishop's property. The district judge suspended the possession order on the basis that the couple agreed to pay their current rent (£116.42 a fortnight) plus £30 a month towards their arrears. Unfortunately, not long after this agreement, the couple defaulted on the court order; the finance company had continued to pressurise them for payments on their car loan. The couple explained to the liaison officer that they felt the company's tactics were heavy-handed and they were intimidated into paying more than they could afford.

The liaison officer helps the Bishops to complete an income and expenditure sheet to help them to manage their money. The couple decide that they will be able to pay their current rent plus £13.58 towards the arrears each fortnight. They also agree to bring the court order up to date by paying a lump sum (£150) on the day of the interview, £50 the following week and £150 the week after that. The liaison officer contacts the court and the housing association who informally agree that this is acceptable, on condition that there is a review of progress in three months' time. The case must still go to court for a judge's approval.

The court hearing is on a Tuesday, two days before the eviction date. Sandra Bishop and her youngest child, Joe (who is ill and unable to attend school) come together and meet the liaison officer. The officer has been given the right of authority to represent the client. The hearing takes place in chambers; two representatives from the housing association are also present. The environment is formal and the judge is referred to as 'Sir' by all present. The judge asks to see the couple's income and expenditure form; he comments on the budget set aside for cigarettes. He agrees with the proposed payment plan but does not accept the suggestion of a further review. He points out that it will take four years to clear the arrears. The Bishops have now also incurred court costs of £240 which will be added to their debt; even if the arrears are cleared the order still stands until the court fees have been paid in full.

After leaving chambers, Sandra, her son, the liaison officer and the housing association representatives go to another meeting room. Here, the estate manager warns Sandra that she must make the agreed payments or she will be evicted. Sandra is shaken; she promises that she will make payments without fault.

As they leave, the liaison officer chats to Sandra to check she understands what has been agreed. She knows that Sandra is suffering from depression. Sandra then tells her she is having relationship problems with her husband, whose job is also insecure, and that they may separate. The liaison officer urges Sandra to keep in touch, because the family may then become eligible for benefits.

Later that day, Sandra phones the liaison officer; she wants to know if the bailiffs are still coming on Thursday. Sandra was confused by the process and is unsure of the outcome.

The Bishops' story raises the following issues:

Advice and support Timely advice can be critical to prevent homelessness; court liaison plays a pivotal role but not all councils offer this service or help people to access it elsewhere. Where services are available, high demand can limit access. Family mediation could be offered to people with relationship problems. This family may need help to find out about eligibility for benefits and to access them; follow-up support will also be important, as the issues that have caused the arrears may not have been fully addressed.

Decision making This family does not apply as homeless but the uncertainty of their situation means that this could happen in the future. People with arrears may be found intentionally homeless if they could have taken action to address this; if so they will only receive emergency accommodation and may struggle to access longer-term housing.

Interagency working Work between the council, RSLs and the court is important to ensure that clients are aware of advice services and are proactively contacted to enable timely interventions.

Other issues There is a need to tackle the loan sharks and credit companies that prey on people on low incomes – trading standards services can play an important role in warning people about local operators. It can take years to pay back arrears; court fees add to the debt. Courts can be intimidating – insensitivity among judges and a lack of childcare facilities can cause problems. The case raises questions about the moral judgements that organisations make about people's lifestyles.



Wahid

- **Wahid, 26 year-old Afghani. Formerly an asylum seeker, Wahid has been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK**
- **Wahid recently left NASS accommodation to come to London, hoping to find housing closer to the Afghani community**
- **Staying with a friend in a London borough**

Wahid comes to an inner London borough's homelessness service on the advice of a friend with whom he is staying. He has been in London before, briefly, when he first arrived in the UK, but was sent to a town in the Midlands through the dispersal scheme by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Just over a year after his asylum application, Wahid has received a letter advising him that he has been granted leave to remain in the UK. He has been given two weeks to leave his NASS property so he decides to return to London, as he knows there is a large Afghani community and he has friends there. By the time he arrives at the homelessness service NASS support has been withdrawn. Wahid has no money to support himself.

Wahid's friend, who comes to interpret, has been supporting him and has let him sleep on the sofa in his flat for several weeks, but wants him to leave, because his girlfriend does not want him in the flat. When the pair arrive, they are told by reception that homelessness staff are very busy and they will have to wait. Wahid sits with his friend in the reception area for two hours and finally manages to see an officer briefly before the end of the day. The officer asks him to return the following week for a full interview with a caseworker and to bring a list of information (including documents outlining his mental health and immigration status). The officer also books an interview with the Joint Assessments Team to assess his mental health and potential vulnerability. He is not offered TA at this stage. His friend reluctantly agrees that he can stay until then.

Five days later, Wahid returns with his papers from the Immigration and Nationality Department (IND). He is unable to provide more information on his mental health as he has not kept the full address of the doctor he saw in the Midlands, but is able to show staff the medication he is taking. He has his joint assessment with the help of interpretation via Language Line.

The Joint Assessments Team finds Wahid to be vulnerable. He is given a letter saying that he is 'eligible, unintentionally homeless and in priority need'. The council has a duty to provide accommodation but since Wahid has no local connection in the borough, he is told by the caseworker that it is likely he will again be placed out of London (though not in the area where he was before). Wahid is extremely distressed because he will be separated from the Afghani community where he has found support. Due to language and literacy barriers, he needs help with getting medication. The assessments officer tells Wahid 'having some accommodation is better than none'.

Wahid is placed in a coastal town B&B. He immediately falls into arrears as he has not provided the council's HB service with the necessary evidence to process his claim; he has been unable to obtain a national insurance number. His mental health deteriorates as there are no other Afghanis in the B&B and he has trouble communicating with other residents. He does not know how long he will have to wait for re-housing and needs to find a doctor urgently for more medication.

Wahid's story raises the following issues:

Access	Long waits in reception can put people off seeking help. The way that services are organised, with a screening function followed by appointments for interviews, can create a time lag in accessing help.
Advice and support	Non-English speakers may have little understanding of the British system and the terminology associated with the legislation; they may need additional assistance to understand their rights and to access services. Support needs (such as healthcare) are rarely considered in TA placements.
Decision making	Levels of staff knowledge on NASS and IND procedures can impact on their interpretation of eligibility. Difficulties in obtaining evidence can delay the process. Protocols for referral to social services can improve joint working; using a Joint Assessments Team can help to assess vulnerability but may mean two interviews for the applicant.
Housing options	A lack of local connection may result in people being placed out of area with no community networks; this can hinder resettlement. Needs for emergency accommodation may not be fully addressed immediately; expectations may be placed on friends or family to help in the interim, making the client 'homeless at home'. Long-term housing options are often unclear for people who are placed out of area; long waits for social housing can be frustrating.
Interagency working	Councils need to be aware of the services available from refugee and community groups to make onward referrals for these clients. NASS should also ensure that asylum seekers and those granted leave to remain are linked with advice and support.
Other issues	Where HB is paid in arrears, the client is immediately likely to face difficulties; even if HB covers the full cost of accommodation, it may not cover all service charges.



Maria

- **Maria, 17 year-old girl**
- **Was living at home with her mother and stepfather but left following arguments within the family and threats of violence from her stepfather**
- **Lives in a rural district council in north of England**

Following family arguments, Maria's mother leaves her stepfather and moves in with her own mother in the north east of England. Maria is unhappy about this and does not want to go with her as she is at college studying for a BTEch. A friend suggests that she speak to Shelter; a worker there explains her rights to her and recommends that she apply as homeless at the local council.

Maria arrives at the council but no caseworker is available so she only speaks to a receptionist who arranges an interview for the following week. She is neither given any information on what she might need to bring, nor any leaflets on her housing options. She sees nothing in the reception area that can help her in the meantime.

A week later, Maria nervously returns for her interview. The caseworker goes through a homeless application with her and asks Maria to provide evidence of her current housing situation; a letter from her parents saying that they are no longer able to accommodate her, and a copy of her birth certificate. Maria is frustrated; she knows it will be difficult to get her hands on her birth certificate because her mother has already left their home and Maria feels it is unsafe to go back there. She also thinks it will take her several days to get a letter from her mother.

Maria leaves the interview feeling that she is unlikely to get assistance from the council. She decides not to return with the information requested when a friend tells her she may be able to obtain a housing association flat independently. That afternoon she returns to the Shelter offices and staff help her to apply for a housing association flat. She continues to stay at friends' houses but has to move around frequently because she does not want to inconvenience them. Constant moves have a detrimental effect on her studies. Maria does not hear from the council again.

Nine weeks later Maria is offered an unfurnished flat by the housing association near her college. She does not have any furniture but hears about a used furniture scheme run by a local church and manages to get some basic items including a cooker, chair, table and bed. The housing association helps Maria to apply for benefits but she struggles to pay her bills; she would like to supplement her income by getting a part time job but thinks that she will lose her benefits if she does so.

Maria's story highlights the following issues:

Access	Word of mouth is a key route into the system. Young people often seek help through voluntary agencies; the formal council environment can be intimidating and bureaucratic.
Advice and support	The council may not provide housing advice, rather focusing on the homelessness application as a route to assistance. Advice agencies play an important role in addressing wider options. If people are housed outside the council's remit, they may not be aware of the support services the council could provide – here the council has responsibilities under the <i>Children Act 1989</i> . Charities and churches can help in the transition to a new home.
Decision making	The <i>Homelessness Act 2002</i> sets out new duties for councils for 16/17 year-olds. Councils need to consider whether it is reasonable to expect people to contact family for evidence where relationships have broken down. Procedures for following up on applications or contacting people that are moving around may not be in place.
Housing options	It is important to assess on an individual basis whether living with friends or family as 'homeless at home' is an acceptable option – hidden homelessness can occur when people stay in overcrowded conditions and only seek council assistance as a last resort. Obtaining tenancies may be difficult for this age group, although councils can act as guarantors.
Interagency working	For 16/17 year olds, a joint assessment with social services could be offered and protocols between service providers should set out responsibilities. Cross referral between voluntary and statutory agencies can ensure that young people access the right services.
Other issues	Under-25s have particular difficulties in shortfalls between HB and local rents due to benefits regulations. Eligibility for benefits will also be complicated for those in fulltime education or seeking work and can lead to a poverty trap.