

Housing

Summary

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.

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The Government's agenda has raised the political priority of homelessness...

- the *Homelessness Act 2002* requires councils to produce homelessness strategies to address the needs of all homeless people, and councils have new duties to re-house additional client groups
- the Supporting People Programme will transfer funds for housing-related social support to councils in April 2003, encouraging authorities to address the needs of vulnerable people more holistically
- councils face new targets to end the use of bed and breakfast (B&B) for temporarily housing families by the end of March 2004, except in emergencies

This agenda raises challenges. The Commission has inspected homelessness and housing advice services in some 50 councils, and found that most councils are delivering only a fair service, although almost three-quarters have promising or excellent prospects for future improvement...

- housing advice services are not yet playing a full part in preventing homelessness; a blurring of advice and statutory assessment may sometimes hinder users from accessing help on their broader housing options
- generally, councils are meeting their legal duties in deciding who is eligible for help, but some could do more to ensure that investigations are thorough and consistent
- the quality of temporary accommodation (TA) varies and there is still a high use of B&B
- access to move-on accommodation can be problematic, particularly in areas of high demand
- the wider support needs of homeless people are not always addressed; though some areas have developed innovative schemes to promote tenancy sustainment

To achieve improvement, councils need to...

- give a higher priority to prevention work, ensuring that housing advice and support services are available and co-ordinated
- review existing advice provision, identifying whether there is a need for independent housing advice services if these are not available
- address repeat homelessness by taking a more holistic approach to people's needs, and offering a one-stop assessment where possible
- improve homelessness assessment and decision-making, ensuring that staff are trained to meet their legal duties and to provide customer care effectively
- drive up standards and drive down costs for TA where this is used, and find alternatives to B&B
- work with their partners to develop strategies that minimise homelessness in the longer term, co-ordinating their efforts with housing associations and the private sector to address local housing needs

The new agenda offers councils opportunities to improve homelessness services. The Government will need to review its impact to ensure that services both enable people to stay in their homes when they have housing problems and to provide an effective safety net where homelessness cannot be prevented.