

Opening Doors

**The implementation of the
Homelessness Reduction Act 2017**



**A report by the Citizens Advice Nottingham and
Nottinghamshire research and campaigns group**

Executive summary

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) came into force in April 2018. The Act places new legal duties on English councils so that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness will have access to meaningful help, irrespective of their priority need status, as long as they are eligible for assistance. The new Act changes the definition of being 'threatened with homelessness' to include those who are likely to become homeless within **56** days rather than the 28 days that previously applied.

The Act comes after welfare reform and a decade of austerity. Many welfare changes, such as the reduction in housing benefit for those with spare bedrooms - the so-called 'bedroom tax'; the cap on local housing allowance for those in private rented accommodation; the restrictions on housing for the under-35s to just one bedroom; the overall benefit cap; and the move towards universal credit (paid monthly in arrears) have all had an impact on people's ability to pay their rent, putting them at risk of homelessness.

A decade of austerity has meant that wages have remained stagnant and there has been an explosion in temporary employment, zero-hours contracts and insecure self-employment – the 'gig economy'. Again, insecurity in employment and therefore income places people at risk of homelessness. In addition, local authorities' funding from central government has been greatly reduced with a subsequent reduction in the services they are able to provide.

It is in this policy context that local authorities have been tasked with implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This report details the findings of our research into how this implementation is being managed by the following local authority areas:

Ashfield
Bassetlaw
Broxtowe
Gedling
Mansfield
Newark and Sherwood
Nottingham City
Rushcliffe

Using quantitative and qualitative research, including telephone interviews, desk research and document analysis, the findings presented show the positive and negative outcomes of implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The number of people who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness, continues to grow and the pressure on local authorities mounts. The 'new burdens funding' given to local authorities has had some impact, enabling councils to recruit staff, upgrade IT equipment and build temporary housing stock. Despite this, local authorities are struggling to meet demand and do not have the resources needed to provide the level of service that they would wish. Two of the local authorities who took part in our research, Mansfield and

Nottingham City, have significantly higher levels of homeless than most of the East Midlands.

Some common themes have emerged within the local authorities' plans for implementing the Act and the comments of participants in the research, such as:

- A recognition of the strength and benefits of joint working, drawing on the knowledge of other agencies to prevent or minimise homelessness
- Viewing Personal Housing Plans (PHP) as a positive step, albeit one that is time consuming, while acknowledging that clients are often unaware of their existence
- The recognition of the myriad and complex reasons for homelessness such as physical and mental health problems, substance misuse and addiction, family breakdown, a history of living rough or 'sofa surfing' and domestic violence
- A recognition that signposting to websites, while common practice, excludes those with limited IT skills and no internet access
- Acknowledgement that the goal of preventing homelessness is hampered by a lack of housing stock. This is particularly acute when one bedroom accommodation is required

Recommendations for ways forward include:

- Continuing monitoring of the implementation of the Act and ongoing research into the causes of homelessness
- The promotion of inter-agency work
- Monitoring the effectiveness of PHPs and the use of a client's 'refusal to cooperate' as a means of discontinued support
- Campaigning for additional resources to tackle homelessness
- Supporting local authorities in identifying additional resources

The wider consequences of the Act are beyond the scope of this report, however we will endeavour to carry forward our recommendations and monitor the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act going forward.

Postscript

The Covid-19 pandemic has required a radical political response. 'Social distancing' measures have been put in place, the official advice being to 'stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives' The rapid spread of the virus, particularly when social distancing is not adhered to, places homeless people at risk. Living rough or sleeping in homeless hostels are both dangerous and likely to increase the spread of the virus. Government response has been to prevent landlords from issuing eviction notices and to house – albeit temporarily – those who are currently street homeless.

A worrying development has been the reported increase in calls to domestic violence helplines. Due to social distancing, moving those at risk to refuges is not an option. The actions taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 may lead to controlling and coercive behaviour by perpetrators of domestic violence.

If the political will is there and the need to get people off the streets and out of homeless hostels becomes a social necessity, then the previously impossible becomes possible. However, as one group benefits from the measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19- those experiencing street homelessness - another – those experiencing domestic

violence - is left at increased risk. It remains to be seen how events will unfold and whether some of the changes that have occurred as a response to Covid-19 will lead to more permanent societal and policy changes.

1) Aims and objectives

This research seeks to understand how local authorities are discharging their Homelessness Reduction Act duties. We have not examined the impact of the HRA on local authorities, although it may be possible to do this at a later date.

2) Methodology

Citizens Advice in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire has collated data over the last 12 months carrying out both qualitative and quantitative research, including:

- desk research and document analysis, including reading published documents from local authorities, central government information, codes of practice, best practice in homelessness reduction, in addition to secondary data from other research projects;
- semi-structured telephone interviews with local authority housing officers;
- semi-structured interviews with people who have sought advice from Citizens Advice; and
- attendance at Nottinghamshire Inter-agency Homelessness Forum, run by Nottinghamshire County Council.

3) Research questions

During interviews with representatives from local authority housing departments, we asked the following questions:

- What changes have been put in place by local authorities to meet their new legal requirements?
- How are individual assessments, personalised housing plans (PHPs) and 'meaningful assistance' being provided in practice?
- How is additional money from central government being used to implement the new legislation?
- What systems, criteria or other mechanisms are being used to assess a person's vulnerability?
- What are the experiences of people who are homeless, or being threatened with homelessness, who seek help from their local authority?

4) What is the Homelessness Reduction Act?

The Homelessness Reduction Bill became an Act of Parliament - the Homelessness Reduction Act - on the 27th April 2017 and came into force in April 2018. It amends Part VII of the Housing Act (1996), changing the definition of being 'threatened with homelessness'. Whereas previously a person would only be considered 'threatened with homelessness' if they were likely to become homeless within 28 days, the new Act extends this time period to 56 days. Additionally, anyone with a valid Section 21 notice - the form a landlord must give to a tenant to begin the process of ending an assured shorthold tenancy - with an expiry date of less than 56 days will be treated as being 'threatened with homelessness'.

According to the Chartered Institute of Housing¹, the Act places new legal duties on local authorities within England to assist anyone who is homeless, or at risk of homelessness, to ensure they have access to meaningful help, irrespective of priority need status, if they are eligible for assistance.

Practically, local authorities must provide the following assistance to people who are homeless or being threatened with homelessness:

- Provision of free services to give people in their area information and advice on preventing homelessness, securing accommodation if homeless, the rights of people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and any help that is available for people who are homeless or likely to become homeless as well as how to access that help.
- Provide more meaningful assistance to all people who are eligible and homeless or threatened with homelessness, irrespective of their priority need status.
- Carry out an assessment of an applicant's case and devise a personalised housing plan (PHP), to be agreed by both parties, which is reviewed regularly.
- Take 'reasonable steps' to help avoid homelessness, including helping applicants to secure accommodation for at least six months unless the applicant is referred to another local authority due to having no local connection to the authority to which they have applied.
- Continue to provide interim accommodation duties owed to people under the existing provisions (Section 188) – the duty to provide accommodation to people who the local authority has reason to believe may be homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need - pending a decision on whether the council is obliged to provide some form of longer term settled accommodation.

5) Homelessness is on the rise

The Homelessness Monitor 2019², one of a series of annual reports produced by Crisis, found that temporary accommodation placements are now 71 per cent higher than in 2011 and that 71 per cent of local authorities participating in the survey reported that homelessness had been recently increasing – in a quarter of cases to a 'significant' extent.

According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (*Statutory Homelessness, April to June (Q2) 2019: England³*), the number of households assessed by local authorities as either homeless or threatened with homelessness increased by 11.4 per cent between April and June 2018, reaching 68,170 (p. 1). Furthermore, by 30th June 2019, the total number of households in temporary accommodation was 86,130, an increase of 4.5 per cent since the previous year (p. 2).

¹<http://www.cih.org/resources/PDF/Policy%20free%20download%20pdfs/What%20you%20need%20to%20know%20Homelessness%20Reduction%20Act%202017.pdf>

²<https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/england/the-homelessness-monitor-england-2019/>

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/852953/Statutory_Homelessness_Statistical_Release_Apr-Jun_2019.pdf

Table 1 Local authority homelessness statistics – 2017-2018

Number accepted as homeless per 1,000 households⁴

Ashfield	2.28
Bassetlaw	1.56
Broxtowe	0.31
Gedling	1.93
Mansfield	4.06
Newark and Sherwood	1.70
Nottingham City	4.20
Rushcliffe	0.57

Table 1 (above) shows the extent of homelessness in our local authorities between 2017 and 2018. Overall, the East Midlands average is 2.32 per 100,000, thus both Mansfield and Nottingham City have a significantly higher proportion of homeless people than most of the East Midlands.

With the evidence suggesting that homelessness is continuing to rise, even more pressure will be placed on local authorities and the advice services that support local people.

6) Local authorities' implementation of new duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act

All local authorities were given 'new burdens funding'⁵ from central government, totalling £72 million, to implement the HRA. Table 2 below shows the amounts allocated to local authorities within our area. Nottingham City was allocated significantly more than the other authorities reflecting not only its incidence of homelessness but also its higher population.

Table 2 New burdens funding allocations to Local Authorities

Ashfield	£114,546
Bassetlaw	£94,507
Broxtowe	£58,357
Gedling	£64,415
Mansfield	£107,992
Newark and Sherwood	£81,190
Nottingham City	£434,879

While the 'new burdens funding' was welcomed, the New Local Government Network found that two-thirds of councils said they could not afford to comply with the Act⁶. Centrepnt added to this concern saying '57 per cent of local authorities do not have sufficient funding to cover the first year of the HRA'⁷ (p. 21).

⁴<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7586#fullreport>

⁵https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/652195/New_burdens_allocation.pdf

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/10/homeless-reduction-act-one-year-on>

⁷<https://centrepnt.org.uk/media/2511/the-homelessness-reduction-act-will-it-work-for-young-people.pdf>

7) Money and resources

Representatives from local authorities told us that the additional money was used in a variety of different ways, for example:

- increasing staffing and providing staff training
- developing prevention projects locally, i.e. prevention of eviction projects within the private rented sector
- updating IT to prepare for increased demand in services
- building new temporary housing units

Most representatives said workloads were increasing and additional support was needed, with one housing officer saying they were 'drowning in paperwork'. This feeling is supported by data from the Local Government Association's report *Homelessness Reduction Act Survey 2018*⁸ which states 'Our data suggests we have experienced a near doubling in our caseload (1,166 cases April to September 2018 compared with 645 in the same period in 2017). The increase is almost completely attributable to the new duty to extend casework to single people considered at risk of homelessness where they have no or low support needs (p. 5)'.

8) Local authority commitments to homelessness prevention

Ashfield's District Council's *Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2019-2024*⁹ states that the council has successfully implemented the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 requirements, to include doubling the size of the team available to assist residents. It also confirms that together with Mansfield and Newark and Sherwood District Councils a progress review by Homeless Link will be conducted in 2019 in order to more fully assess the impact of the Act.

Bassetlaw District Council's *Homeless Prevention Strategy*¹⁰ was produced in 2017 and therefore does not fully reflect on how the HRA has been implemented, but says 'there is likely to be a significant increase in the demand for homelessness services and this must be reflected throughout the prevention strategy. The increase in demand will have financial implications for the Housing Needs Service, particularly in the provision of temporary accommodation. Every case will require the creation of a Personalised Housing Plan which will pose a huge drain on Officer time (p. 6).'

Housing Portfolio Holders for Broxtowe, Gedling and Rushcliffe Councils have produced a joint *South Nottinghamshire Homelessness Strategy 2017-2021*¹¹. The Strategy, which was refreshed in December 2019, has several recommendations for the implementation of the HRA:

- Examine ways in which support needs can be addressed within personalised action plans
- Ensure that staff are fully prepared for the new requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act

⁸<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Homelessness%20Reduction%20Act%20Survey%20Report%202018%20-%20Supplementary%20Report%20WEB.pdf>

⁹<https://www.ashfield.gov.uk/media/6029/ashfield-district-council-homelessness-strategy-2019-2024-final.pdf>

¹⁰<https://www.bassetlaw.gov.uk/media/2883/homeless-prevention-strategy-delivery-plan.pdf>

¹¹<http://www.gedling.gov.uk/media/gedlingboroughcouncil/documents/housing/Homelessness%20and%20Rough%20Sleeping%20Strategy%202019.pdf>

- Ensure that partner agencies are fully briefed and prepared for the new requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act
- Ensure that the Civica software system is fully operational and compliant with the workflow and reporting requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act
- Work towards having a consistent approach with regard the requirements of the Act to provide meaningful advice and assistance
- Explore ways to better prevent homelessness by earlier intervention on cases of loss of assured shorthold tenancies in the private rented sector

Nottingham City Council's *Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2019-2024*¹² explains how the Council has implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act so far:

- Developed and delivered a programme of training on the new legislation to over 300 local stakeholders
- Reviewed operating systems at Housing Aid to maximise resources towards prevention and relief
- Amended the Allocations Policy to ensure that it complements principles of prevention and relief
- Built upon the existing Homelessness Prevention Overview to develop a comprehensive needs assessment to be used for each presenting household and inform the Personalised Housing Plans
- Redesigned housing related Independent Living Support Services to enable key workers to take responsibility for the provision of the Personalised Housing Plans
- Purchased and installed the appropriate IT software to allow for the recording, monitoring and reporting required under H-CLIC and for wider service improvement
- Liaised with local authorities in the districts and boroughs of Nottinghamshire to all obtain the same IT software package (ALERT) to enable public sector partners to fulfil the Duty to Refer in a consistent way throughout the county
- Established multi agency workgroups to discuss and identify areas of risk and co-ordinated responses to mitigate risk and forward planning

And what the council will do to further embed the Homelessness Reduction Act:

- Deliver further training to public sector stakeholders outlining the detail of the Duty to Refer and how it will be applied locally. Ensure that we have a list of partners who need to participate and we track engagement and escalate issues of non-engagement.
- Work with the surrounding boroughs and districts in Nottinghamshire to produce a guidance document for public sector bodies that have responsibilities under the Duty to Refer. The guidance will support public bodies to give appropriate advice to the household at risk of homelessness, it will outline their responsibilities and show the referral mechanisms they should use and it will highlight the consequences of not adhering to the duty. The aim is to develop the guidance in partnership so there is a consistent approach for all public authorities that work across the county footprint.
- Request that public sector bodies produce and publish communication plans outlining how they intend to embed the Duty to Refer within their organisations.
- Encourage public bodies to engage in a process that goes beyond their statutory obligations but also outlines the role they will undertake in completing the holistic assessment of need for the household and their participation in delivery of the support plan.

¹²<https://committee.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/documents/s79572/Appendix%201a%20-%20Homelessness%20Prevention%20Strategy%202019%20to%202024%20-%20Full%20version.pdf>

- Encourage non-specified public sector bodies (such as Home Office, NASS, GPs and the Police) and other partners including private sector landlords and community based support organisations to utilise the systems set up under the Duty to Refer as best practice
- Develop and deliver a communications plan outlining how citizens and service providers can access further information on processes as well as self-help advice
- Assess whether advice provision is sufficiently equipped to support provision of accessible earlier preventative information
- Assess whether there is sufficient resource to effectively manage the increase in footfall and caseload

Newark and Sherwood District Council's *Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2019-2024*¹³ states only that it has 'Effectively implemented the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 requirements, including the creation of new posts to ensure tenancy support and sustainment (p. 9).'

Finally, Mansfield District council's *Homelessness Prevention strategy 2019-2024*¹⁴ states that the Council has 'Successfully implemented the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 requirements, by employing additional Early Intervention Officers to assist in preventing homelessness and meeting with parents to enable the Duty to Refer (p. 8)' and goes on to state its 'intended outcomes' as part of the strategy:

- Provision of personalised advice in plain English (or other languages if required)
- Increased positive engagement with clients, ensuring sustainable PHPs
- Increased awareness of and positive engagement with PHPs
- Development of integrated, multi-agency support plans
- Increased provision of sustainable housing options, together with reductions in the use of B&B use and unsuitable temporary accommodation. Increased provision of support to those seeking and taking up social and private rented sector tenancies. Improved multi agency arrangements around 'Duty to Refer'
- Ensure all agencies report relevant data to a central point
- Initiate discussion around formation of a Homelessness Reduction Board which would have the potential to host coordinated data collection and analysis

9) Priority need and vulnerability

The *HRA code of guidance*¹⁵ says that when determining who is in priority need councils must consider 'a combination of factors which taken alone may not necessarily lead to a decision that they are vulnerable (e.g. drug and alcohol problems, common mental health problems, a history of sleeping rough, no previous experience of managing a tenancy)' (Section 8.39).

The assessment of vulnerability was discussed during interviews with housing officers and led to mixed responses. Although most responses referred to the legislative code for assessing priority need and vulnerability, i.e. asking for evidence, others said they were now providing more in-depth and detailed assessments. Some representatives said they were actively developing closer links with outside agencies within the statutory and voluntary sectors to support vulnerable groups and recruiting complex needs workers to provide

¹³<https://www.newark-sherwooddc.gov.uk/media/NewarkandSherwoodHomelessnessStrategy2019.pdf>

¹⁴<https://www.mansfield.gov.uk/downloads/file/738/homelessness-prevention-strategy-2019-2024>

¹⁵<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/chapter-8-priority-need>

further assistance. One representative described these developing relationships as very positive, while recognising it was an 'evolving process'. Most housing officers felt that, although some details had been added, their processes used in this area had altered little since the introduction of the HRA.

Housing officers appeared to recognise the complexities of assessing vulnerability and priority need. Disappointingly, the language around vulnerability was disheartening, with the use of phrases such as 'suffering from a mental illness'. However, when providing written documentation, language suggested individuals may be accepted as vulnerable and therefore 'in priority need', adding however that 'this will be determined by personal circumstances'.

*The Mid-Notts Homelessness Review*¹⁶ commissioned by Newark and Sherwood, Mansfield and Ashfield District Councils appears to recognise the challenges of vulnerable groups in the prevention and reduction of homelessness. The Review suggests 'the presumptions that the root cause of their situation is lack of accommodation is often flawed and this is increasingly recognised with rough sleepers and those experiencing multiple incidences of homelessness/threatened homelessness being recognised as having multiple and complex needs, including mental health, substance misuse and/or experienced previous trauma such as PTSD or abuse' (p. 9).

Citizens Advice clients who had used the services felt mostly satisfied with the process of assessing and identifying vulnerability, and priority need for housing, often saying their local authority had accepted their wish to be considered as in priority need and did not require evidence of vulnerability. However, experiences in local authority areas differ greatly. For example, in Nottingham city, it is increasingly difficult to be accepted as in 'priority need'. It would follow that areas with higher demand for housing naturally have higher levels of homelessness, and therefore the local authority is under greater pressure.

10) Personal housing plans (PHPs)

Most local authorities spoke positively about PHPs, confirming that all clients now had a plan in place and the service could offer more in-depth support.

We have seen a template copy of a personalised housing plan which identifies the key actions and information required. Details of the bond guarantee scheme, discretionary housing payments and links to websites to source private rented sector accommodation are included. Websites for budgeting and money management are also given. Anecdotal evidence suggests that PHPs often request that the individual look for private rented sector (PRS) accommodation and that this is a key action, however, we know that accessing PRS accommodation is notoriously challenging.

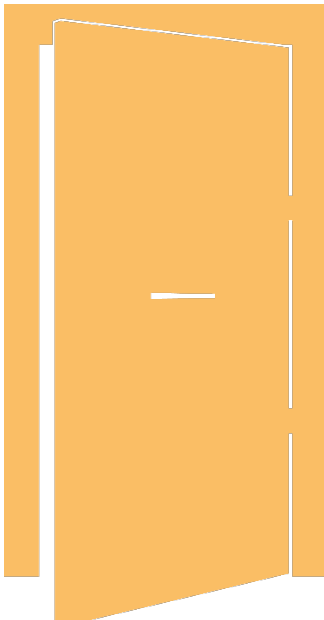
People seeking support from the local authority seemed unsure about PHPs, not knowing exactly what they are, or if they had been given a copy. One housing officer said PHPs were always issued and suggested that people 'perhaps threw them away'.

The HRA sets out steps a local housing authority can take if a person deliberately and unreasonably refuses to cooperate with their PHP, including ending its duty. There is a risk that local authorities will set unattainable actions and then end their duties as the actions

¹⁶<https://www.ashfield.gov.uk/media/5719/mid-notts-homelessness-review-2018-final.pdf>

cannot be completed. For example, a PHP may require an individual to source private rented sector accommodation when no such accommodation is available. Anecdotal evidence suggests actions such as this are being written into plans, though whether local authorities are using this non-action to end their duties is not known. However, housing officers cautioned that clients do not always have the 'capacity and willingness to engage' regardless.

*The Mid-Notts Homelessness Review*¹⁷ commissioned by Newark and Sherwood, Mansfield and Ashfield District Councils conducted a survey into PHPs and said 'out of 25 respondents, 6 said they had a Personal Housing Plan. 4 said they didn't know and 7 did not respond. It is possible more of these service users did in fact have a PHP – but if this is the case, they did not report it' (p. 39). The report suggests a 'cultural change' is needed to increase the positive use of PHPs.



¹⁷<https://www.ashfield.gov.uk/media/5719/mid-notts-homelessness-review-2018-final.pdf>

Case studies

The following case studies reflect some typical experiences of our clients.

Case study: John

John first went to the local authority in November 2018. He had received a Section 21 notice after filing a complaint to Environment Health about disrepair in his privately rented property. The council served an improvement notice which meant John's landlord was unable to issue a Section 21 for 12 months.

The works were completed early, and the notice was revoked after six months, due to satisfactory works. At this point, the landlord immediately issued a Section 21 notice.

Initially, the council referred John to the Homelessness Prevention Service, run by a housing association as the validity of his Section 21 notice needed to be proved. A response to this request was not received until December 2018 and John's Section 21 notice was due to end at the same time. It was unlikely John would be evicted in December, but as soon as Christmas was over, John would need to move out.

No PHP was ever seen by Citizens Advice staff and the client did not mention receiving one. John and his two dependent children should be considered in priority need, not intentionally homeless; however even at that late stage this could not be confirmed.

Citizens Advice staff said the housing service staff were not friendly, did not return calls, or supply information, and needed to be 'chased up repeatedly'.

Case study: Susie

Susie sought help from Citizens Advice after receiving a Section 21 notice following a complaint about her landlord. The landlord often visited the property and gave keys to workmen who were carrying out work without prior notice.

She was not in rent arrears and the eviction appeared to be retaliatory, a 'no-fault' eviction. Following the notice, she visited the local authority in September 2019.

The local authority attempted to prevent the eviction by calling the landlord to discuss the eviction. The landlord said Susie had refused a rent increase and this is what led to the Section 21 notice being issued. Because of this, the local authority did not log a homelessness application immediately.

A 'homelessness person's application' was finally logged in early November 2019. This late start risked the tenant being evicted or remaining in the property and risking court costs. The local authority did then accept responsibility and Susie was accepted as being 'in priority need'. Susie was re-housed, however her experience of the local authority process was very stressful.

Case study: Vicky

Vicky is a single mum with four children, living in private rented accommodation. It is already a difficult time for Vicky and her family as one of the children has been diagnosed with cancer and is undergoing chemotherapy.

Vicky's landlord is seeking to evict the family from their property, and therefore Vicky sought assistance from her local authority. She was assessed as not being in priority need and was not given a PHP. She was asked to search for housing via the 'Homesearch' website and to speak to lettings agents about private rented accommodation.

Case study: Clair

Clair was given an eviction notice by her landlord. She then presented herself as homeless to her local authority, who responded immediately. They quickly added Clair to the housing register, offered immediate temporary accommodation, and assistance to find permanent housing within the private rented sector. They also offered help to get a deposit if housing was found.

Case Study: Sammy

Sammy requested help from the local authority as she wanted to find accommodation for herself and her daughter. Sammy is a foreign national and does not speak English. Her 16 year old daughter speaks English well and can translate on occasion however she is at school most of the time. Sammy has multiple jobs and is able and happy to pay for private rented accommodation, however she needs help to find a property. Currently, Sammy is living with a friend and not paying any rent. She and her daughter share a bedroom.

As Sammy could not speak English, she needed a translator to attend appointments, but no translators were made available, so Sammy took a friend along. It was difficult to translate via a friend as Sammy wished to talk privately about her situation.

The local authority needed to establish whether Sammy and her daughter were in priority need and so asked about Sammy's situation. She explained that she and her daughter are living with a friend, not paying rent and sharing a bedroom.

The local authority then called the friend she lived with and asked him if he had asked Sammy to leave, and whether she was in fact homeless. The friend said no, Sammy was fine to stay. The local authority said Sammy was not homeless as her friend was happy for her to stay. If she did leave, she would make herself intentionally homeless and they could not assist her in any case. Sammy and her daughter are still in the property.

Clients also commented on issues they had experienced when seeking support from local authorities, including:

- being unable to proceed with an application for assistance because they do not have a phone number or email address
- housing staff being unfriendly and unhelpful
- delays in making assessments and getting decisions
- no translation service or information in other languages
- telephone lines busy and emails rarely answered
- an insufficient depth of assessment, resulting in incorrect decisions



Conclusions and recommendations

The Homelessness Reduction Act offers a significant shift towards a preventative approach to homelessness and seeks to improve the assistance available to people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. It aims to ensure that local authorities take reasonable steps to support someone experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, on the condition that they cooperate with the local authority.

Our research has highlighted several issues with the implementation of HRA and although there are variances in how individual councils are using additional funding and implementing new duties, there are some common themes.

Local authority resources and a lack of housing stock are clearly an ongoing barrier to dealing with homelessness. A policy manager from Shelter recently summed up the HRA saying:

'It's a little like waiting in hospital, being treated very nicely, but finding there are no operating theatres.'

In general, the HRA has been welcomed by local authorities in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. Housing Officers are keen to use the new PHPs and the system for providing support is positive. It appears essential that agencies work together locally to achieve the best outcomes for people, and many local authorities are already working towards developing systems and networks with other agencies in their area. This is clearly an ongoing process, and one that has some way to go, but the data suggests that councils do appear to be headed in the right direction.

There are positive signs that a greater understanding and assessment of the needs of people with complex physical, mental health, and drug and alcohol issues are being developed across the region. However, there remain concerns about the timeliness of these assessments and the use of PHPs.

Evidence suggests that much of the 'meaningful advice and assistance' offered at present, appears to be through websites, which clearly presents barriers to people with limited internet access and IT skills. It is essential that additional PHP training is provided to housing teams to ensure that PHPs are meaningful and useful.

This point is echoed by Bob Blackman MP who spearheaded the Act, and who recently expressed concerns that PHPs were becoming 'cut and paste exercises' and appeared not to be individual or personalised plans in practice.

The impact of local authorities withdrawing support for people they believe are not cooperating is a cause for concern, especially for people with more complex needs, although, there is no evidence of this being the case currently.

While the HRA brings welcome change and a greater appreciation to the complex subject of homelessness, it remains to be seen whether other significant external factors will hinder its intent. Local authority funding, the housing market and ongoing changes to the welfare system may prove to be insurmountable barriers to achieving the vision of the HRA.

We echo the words of Bob Blackman MP who concluded:

'One of the key lessons that has to be learned by local authorities is that we're changing the whole culture and the way people behave towards homeless people. Every housing authority, if they're honest, adopted the approach of, 'It's nothing to do with us, go and sleep on a park bench' even if they wouldn't admit it upfront.

6) Recommendations

- The impact of the HRA must be monitored over the next few years, to identify its effectiveness
- Further research is necessary to develop greater insight into the root causes of homelessness beyond common assumptions
- It is essential to promote the greater use of inter-agency work, drawing on the expertise of the public and voluntary sectors, to help provide additional skills and knowledge for housing department employees, as well as strategic policy makers
- Close monitoring of the use of PHPs is required, alongside campaigning for their extended use by trained and skilled staff using a person-centred, holistic, multi-agency approach
- It is necessary to monitor and periodically review the appropriate use of the 'refusal to cooperate' clause of the HRA
- Campaigning for additional resources to be allocated by local authorities to consistently and effectively support the most vulnerable people in our communities, and their journey through the housing assessment process, is vital
- Local authorities must provide language services for clients who need them
- Local authorities require support in lobbying for additional resources to be secured for front-line housing departments to cope with increased workload

Postscript

The Covid-19 pandemic has required a radical political response. 'Social distancing' measures have been put in place, the official advice being to 'stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives'. Non-essential businesses have been closed with many people who are unable to work from home furloughed from their employment or losing their jobs. Restaurants, pubs, schools, nurseries, universities, clubs, gyms etc. have been closed and sporting fixtures and festivals cancelled in an effort to prevent people from congregating in groups. The police have been given powers to break up social groups. We are all encouraged to leave our homes only for essential shopping or brief exercise (alone). Those who are able to are encouraged to work from home and the government has agreed to underwrite 80 per cent of employees' incomes if their employers furlough them rather than let them go. Despite this promise there has been an unprecedented increase in people claiming unemployment support.

The rapid spread of the virus, particularly when social distancing is not adhered to, places homeless people at risk. Living rough or sleeping in homeless hostels are both dangerous and likely to increase the spread of the virus. Government response has been

to prevent landlords from issuing eviction notices and to house – albeit temporarily – those who are currently street homeless. Shelter reports that during the Covid-19 pandemic the definition of priority need will include those aged 70 or over or who have at least one of the pre-existing conditions identified as contributing to worse outcomes in Covid-19¹⁸. Media reports as early as March 21st, before the official lockdown began on the 23rd, stated that hotels, student accommodation and potentially offices or other spaces were to be used to house the homeless to prevent the spread of the new Coronavirus¹⁹.

A worrying development has been the reported increase in calls to domestic violence helplines. Due to social distancing, moving those at risk to refuges is not an option. The furloughing of employees, loss of jobs and working at home mean families are forced together for extended periods of time with none of the usual 'escape routes' available to those at risk of domestic violence. Women's Aid believes that actions taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 such as these may lead to controlling and coercive behaviour by perpetrators of domestic violence²⁰. Refuge, the UK's largest domestic abuse charity has reported a 700 per cent increase in calls to its helpline in a single day²¹.

If the political will is there and the need to get people off the streets and out of homeless hostels becomes a social necessity, then the previously impossible becomes possible. However, as one group benefits from the measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19- those experiencing street homelessness - another – those experiencing domestic violence - is left at increased risk. It remains to be seen how events will unfold and whether some of the changes that have occurred as a response to Covid-19 will lead to more permanent societal and policy changes.

¹⁸ https://england.shelter.org.uk/legal/housing_options/covid-19_emergency_measures/homelessness

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/uk-hotels-homeless-shelters-coronavirus>

²⁰ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-and-children-experiencing-domestic-abuse-and-the-life-saving-services-that-support-them/>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/12/domestic-violence-surges-seven-hundred-per-cent-uk-coronavirus>