



# A foot in the door

## Experiences of the Homelessness Reduction Act

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March 2020



Together  
we will end  
homelessness

## About us

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We are committed to ending homelessness.

Every day we see the devastating impact homelessness has on people's lives. Every year we work side by side with thousands of homeless people, to help them rebuild their lives and leave homelessness behind for good.

Through our pioneering research into the causes and consequences of homelessness and the solutions to it, we know what it will take to end it.

Together with others who share our resolve, we bring our knowledge, experience and determination to campaign for the changes that will solve the homelessness crisis once and for all.

We bring together a unique volunteer effort each Christmas, to bring warmth, companionship and vital services to people at one of the hardest times of the year, and offer a starting point out of homelessness.

We know that homelessness is not inevitable. We know that together we can end it.

## Acknowledgements

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# Contents

<b>About us &amp; Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Figures and tables</b>	<b>4</b>	
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>5</b>	
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>	
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>14</b>	
1.1 Policy context	14	
1.2 Existing evidence	15	
1.3 The research	20	
1.4 Methodology	20	
<b>Chapter 2: The journey through Housing Options</b>	<b>21</b>	
2.1 Causes of homelessness	21	
2.2 Duty to Refer	22	
2.3 Awareness of the HRA	23	
2.4 Initial engagement	24	
2.5. Accessing support	26	
2.6 Assessment	28	
2.7 Personalised Housing Plans	33	
2.8 Ongoing engagement	37	
2.9 Overall reflections	40	
<b>Chapter 3: Support provided</b>	<b>41</b>	
3.1 Support provided by Housing Options	41	
3.2 Prevention activity	42	
<b>Chapter 4: Housing outcomes</b>	<b>46</b>	
4.1 Housing need at presentation	46	
4.2 Temporary accommodation	46	
4.3 What are people's housing outcomes?	51	
4.4 How are housing outcomes achieved?	54	
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion</b>	<b>58</b>	
<b>Chapter 6: Recommendations</b>	<b>60</b>	
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>64</b>	
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>65</b>	

## Figures and Tables

### Chapter 1

Figure 1.1	Homelessness Reduction Act: Flow chart of decisions	16
Table 1.2	Support needs of households owed a prevention or relief duty	18

### Chapter 2

Figure 2.1	Primary cause of homelessness	21
Figure 2.2	Percentage of respondents engaged with wider services	23
Figure 2.3	Perceptions of initial contact with Housing Options	25
Figure 2.4	Standard of advice at initial assessment	29
Table 2.1	Experience of assessment process.	32
Figure 2.5	Understanding and use of PHPs	34
Figure 2.6	Did your overall experience with housing options meet your expectations?	40

### Chapter 3

Table 3.1	Support provided under the HRA	43
Figure 3.1	Support offered through PHPs	44

### Chapter 4

Table 4.1	Housing situation the night before attending Housing Options	47
Figure 4.1	Temporary accommodation use for all households in England, 2009-2019	47
Figure 4.2	Temporary accommodation use by household type, 2009-2019	48
Table 4.2	Housing situation at point of accessing Housing Options for those offered temporary accommodation	49
Figure 4.3	Temporary accommodation by household type	49
Figure 4.4	Length of time in temporary accommodation by household type	50
Table 4.3	Housing outcome compared to night before approaching housing options	51
Figure 4.5	Housing outcomes for households presenting from private rented accommodation	52
Figure 4.6	Housing outcomes for households presenting from social rented accommodation	53
Figure 4.7	Housing outcomes for households presenting whilst sofa surfing	53
Figure 4.8	Housing outcomes for households presenting whilst rough sleeping	54

# Foreword

Homelessness has a devastating impact on people and communities. Yet in nearly all cases homelessness is preventable. With the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) as one of the most important changes to homelessness legislation in England in the past 40 years we are in a position to ensure that prevention is at the heart of homelessness support.

This report is the first from a three year study into how the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) is working in practice from the perspective of people facing homelessness. Based on the first two years of the research, it draws on insights of nearly 1000 people.

The research shows positive signs that the Act is making sure that more people are getting access to the help that they need. Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and it is welcoming that 75 per cent of respondents stated that they felt their local housing teams had treated them with respect and handled their situation sensitively.

Ensuring everyone has safe, stable housing creates a stronger society where homelessness has no place. The HRA provides a framework to ensure prevention is at the forefront of ending homelessness across England. The research shows that people seeking help whilst at risk of homelessness are

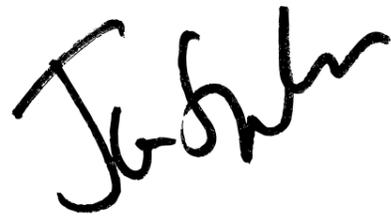
more likely to have a much smoother and more coherent pathway into permanent, stable home than people already experiencing homelessness, such as sofa surfing or rough sleeping. This evidence strengthens the case for why prevention is not only the right thing to do but also a more effective use of resources.

Yet nearly four in 10 people who approached their local authority for help, either remained homeless or became homeless because councils do not have enough housing available that people can afford. The worst affected are people experiencing the most devastating forms of homelessness, with people sleeping on the streets or on friends or family's sofas, most likely to remain trapped in this situation after seeking help. Of these, 45 per cent were single men showing that they are still struggling to access safe and stable housing. The HRA is an integral part of a system that can help to support people out of homelessness but we can't stop here.

A lack of truly affordable housing, high rents, and welfare reform are creating a constant pressure that pushes people into homelessness and restricts local authorities in their options.

Investing in Local Housing Allowance and social housing is a crucial element of fulfilling the Westminster's governments commitment to end rough sleeping in England by 2024 and to help local authorities meet their duties to prevent and relieve homelessness.

Ultimately the most effective way to end homelessness is to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. With the right resources and support the HRA can and should be at the heart of ending homelessness for good.



Jon Sparkes  
**Chief Executive, Crisis**

# Executive summary

In nearly all cases, homelessness can be prevented. The Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) is one of the most important changes to homelessness legislation in England in the past 40 years making homelessness prevention a central part of the statutory framework. It was designed to put prevention at the heart of homelessness assistance in England and remove barriers for people accessing statutory homelessness services.

In April 2018, the HRA introduced two new universal duties: a 'prevention duty' and a 'relief duty'. Under the prevention duty local authorities must take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for anyone at risk within 56 days. Under the relief duty local authorities must take reasonable steps to help secure accommodation for those who are currently homeless and eligible. Both new duties apply to people regardless of priority need and intentionality. Priority need identifies those eligible for housing either because they have dependent children or because they meet set vulnerability tests. Intentionality tests could exclude households on the basis that the council considers they are at fault for their homelessness. The prevention

duty is also local connection blind meaning people are eligible regardless of their long-term connection to an area. The Act has also introduced a new duty on specified public authorities to refer people to a housing authority if they are homeless or likely to become homeless within 56 days. The public authorities with a duty to refer include prisons, probation services, Jobcentres, social service authorities, hospitals and emergency departments.<sup>1</sup> This duty came into force on 1 October 2018.

Based on 984 surveys and 89 in-depth interviews with people approaching for homelessness assistance across two years alongside interviews with six local authorities, this research is the

<sup>1</sup> The full list of public authorities is listed in the Homelessness (Review Procedure etc.) Regulations (2018)

first in-depth analysis of how the HRA is working in practice from the perspective of people experiencing homelessness.

### Access to support and assessment

Two years into its implementation, the research has found the change in law has significantly expanded access to homelessness assistance particularly for single people. The research mirrors the picture emerging from the statutory statistics showing that more people are eligible and are accessing support under the HRA. Only nine per cent of respondents stated they were given no support – reasons included no recourse to public funds, lack of local connection, not being able to provide evidence of current situation, and a general lack of eligibility for support. The research findings suggest that this is one of the most substantial changes observed since the introduction of the HRA and that the change in legislation has had a noticeable impact on widening access to single homeless people.

**“To be honest with you I didn’t really know what to think or expect when I got there. I had a thought that they would help me because I was in a position where I needed help, but I wasn’t too sure on what help or advice I was going to get.”**

**“I expected to get no help like I had the previous few times, so it kind of blew me out of the water how much help I actually got this time around.”**

Whilst the number of people being offered help has gone up there is still low awareness amongst people

experiencing homelessness that the legislation has changed. Only 16 per cent of respondents reported they were aware of the HRA and only 7 per cent said it encouraged them to attend Housing Options.<sup>2</sup> The increase in numbers gaining access to homelessness assistance can be attributed mainly to local authorities doing more to assist people rather than increased awareness of the HRA.

Overwhelmingly people reported a more positive experience when first approaching Housing Options for assistance. The research has shown respondents were mainly satisfied with the physical environment and how staff treated them when they first approached for help.

**“Everyone else in the council in reception were really useful. The security were lovely because there were no directions, like, no one tells you anything you have to ask when you go in. So yes those initial staff were lovely.”**

Seventy-five per cent of people reported they were treated with respect and were able to communicate confidentially with staff. On the whole the initial advice they were given was reported to be relevant, clear and easy to follow. Encouragingly, the majority of people we spoke to felt that their assessment took place in a safe and private environment. In 2014, Crisis conducted a ‘mystery shopping’ exercise<sup>3</sup> to examine the treatment of single homeless people who approach their local authority for assistance which found that lack of privacy, interactions with staff, the office environment, and waiting times all had a profound impact and often compounded feelings of anxiety, stigma and shame.

Whilst not yet universal, this shift in culture at the early assessment stage is one of the clear successes of the HRA so far and an area where local authorities can and should continue to develop to deliver and share best practice.

Initial contact and assessment was on the whole dealt with quickly. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents reported that they met with a case worker for their assessment on the same day that they first attended, with a further 39 per cent being asked to return for their appointment on another day. On average follow-up appointments were within seven days of initial contact within the majority seen within three days.

Despite the majority of participants reporting positive experiences there is still clear examples of people having poor assessments. The outcome of a negative experience at this stage can be significant, ranging from increasing the trauma and vulnerability of an individual through to leading them to disengage from support overall.

**“I went along to the appointment and the lady I’d seen was not helpful in any way, shape or form. I found her very dismissive of my situation and what she – in the end of the conversation, she was actually – she said to me she didn’t think I was on the Housing List and that I wouldn’t be eligible for housing, which left me in a very distraught state because I had nowhere else to go.”**

Personalised Housing Plans (PHP) form the foundation of the support offered under the HRA. A PHP is a plan that sets out the steps to be taken by both the applicant and the local authority to either work towards preventing or ending their homelessness. Except for those not eligible due to immigration restrictions, everyone under the prevention and relief duties should receive a PHP. Only 40 per cent of

participants were able to identify that they a PHP had been created for them. This had increased from 37 per cent to 45 per cent between the first and second wave of the fieldwork. Of those who were aware of their PHP, 83 per cent agreed to their plan and respondents highlighted how helpful their PHP was in terms of helping them manage what they needed to and making them feel less overwhelmed.

**“Yeah, that [PHP] did help a lot. I was a lot less forgetful, a lot less scatty, a lot less feeling like there was a lot that I had to do, just seeing it in a few bullet points, and then it was like, actually, I’ve got not much to do. I’ve just got to repeat it.”**

However, lack of personalisation within the plans was highlighted and with 25 per cent of respondents disagreeing that their plan was personalised to their needs there is a need for local authorities to explore their own practice here.

**“They talked about personalised plans. There was nothing personal about it.”**

Following on from the initial assessment and engagement period participants overwhelmingly reported issues with ongoing contact and follow-up. There were reports of a general lack of communication over long periods of time post their assessment which led to people feeling uncertain about their situation and confused.

**“But even once every two weeks or something, just to let me what’s what. So I don’t feel alone, because when I say I’m completely lost, I’m completely lost, I’m just going every day not knowing what to expect or what’s going to happen, am I going to be stuck here forever with my son?”**

Under the Duty to Refer there are more opportunities for public bodies

<sup>2</sup> Housing Options is a catchall description that encompasses the ways a local authority can strive to prevent homelessness, and the need for a household to be rehoused under statutory homelessness duties to provide an offer of new settled accommodation.

<sup>3</sup> Dobie, S., Sanders, B. and Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away, the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

to work with local authorities to meet their prevention duties. Sixty nine per cent of research participants were engaged with at least one other service at the time they engaged with Housing Options. Out of these respondents, over a third (36%) reported that they had seen their GP before attending Housing Options but since their housing issues had occurred, however only 28 per cent were advised by their GP to seek support through Housing Options. Conversely although subject to the Duty to Refer only 26 per cent of those engaging with the Jobcentre said they were advised to attend Housing Options, despite 34 per cent disclosing their housing need.

The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority however at this stage in its implementation it is not clear that wider public bodies are taking up their responsibilities within the spirit intended. Research participants also reported that they are engaged with a much wider network of services than the current duty specifies. For homelessness prevention to be effective this wider system needs to be engaged to ensure that people are reaching support at the earliest possible stage to increase the chances of a successful prevention outcome.

### Cause of homelessness

There was substantial variation between causes of homelessness and reported housing situation at the point of approaching Housing Options. Over half (52%) of those living in the private rented sector reported their homelessness was caused either by affordability issues or through issues related to their tenancy such as dispute with their landlord, eviction or landlord requiring the property back. People who were already rough sleeping when they presented at

Housing Options were most likely to cite wider support needs (38%) as a cause of homelessness and most commonly mental health issues and loss of employment. Sofa surfers were most likely to report that relationship breakdown (49%) was the cause of their homelessness.

### Housing outcomes and support

**“I hoped there’d be more options, like, places to stay for people that are homeless.”**

The intention and ambition of the HRA is being constrained by the housing market, welfare system and funding. Whilst there has been a broadly positive experience of initial contact and engagement with Housing Options staff, the research has shown significant barriers and issues with the support on offer and people’s housing outcomes.

Overall only 39 per cent of respondents agreed when asked whether the local authority had helped them to resolve their housing issue. A further 31 per cent of participants reported that they had either supported themselves or with the help of family or friends, and 30 per cent reported that their issue was still ongoing.

Overall 56 per cent of survey respondents reported a more positive housing situation when asked to compare their current position with the night before they presented at Housing Options. Of these the highest proportion were people who had remained either in social housing or in the PRS (but this may not be in the same property). Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) of respondents reported a negative housing situation, in either going from a housed situation to rough sleeping or sofa surfing, or remaining in that situation. Sixty six per cent of this group were single, with 45 per

cent single males. Whilst the research has shown the HRA has increased access at the initial assessment stage there are clear barriers for single people in accessing stable permanent accommodation.

Temporary accommodation was offered to 31 per cent of households as part of their support from Housing Options. Of these 36 per cent (110) had dependent children, 40 per cent (122) were single males, and 22 per cent (69) were single females. The most commonly reported type of temporary accommodation used were hostels including reception centres and emergency units, followed by Bed & Breakfast. However, there is variation amongst household types with single households most likely to be placed in hostels, and with a much greater proportion of those with children being placed temporarily in the PRS.

Longer term outcomes across both waves of the research show that in general those presenting who are at risk of homelessness (i.e. the prevention stage) are more likely to have their homelessness resolved and not experience other forms of homelessness. More specifically those in permanent accommodation helped at the prevention stage were much more likely to stay in permanent, stable accommodation strengthening the case for why prevention is both the right thing to do and a more effective use of resources.

People who are rough sleeping and sofa surfing were more likely to have negative and more turbulent housing outcomes. Particularly for people rough sleeping, they are more likely to remain homeless after seeking assistance from Housing Options.

The research found the most common form of intervention offered is information on accessing the private rented sector. A number of participants in the research highlighted that this was the only support they were

offered and at its most basic consisted of a list of potential landlords for them to contact, of which a number of participants reported that they were unable to access these properties due to housing benefit no longer covering the cost of the cheapest market rents.

**“Basically they just said to look at these websites and this is your like weekly allowance, weekly rent allowance, just went through things like that. But as I say, a lot of the websites that they give are like Zoopla, Prime Location, things like that, and as I say, a lot of the landlords don’t want to know.”**

With a scarcity of social housing available in all areas, local resourcing and the accessibility of the PRS have a significant impact on the ability for housing options teams to meet both their prevention and relief duties. There were large concerns raised by staff across all housing markets we conducted the research in on how access to and function of the PRS would help support the HRA.

**“The market is totally... as soon as the government cut the LHA to the 30th percentile it was like a tap switching off. It really was. You could see the pre and post difference and what landlords were willing to accept. And landlords are not accepting rents that are set on the 30th percentile.”**  
– Housing Officer

Lack of affordable housing both social and PRS means that local authorities are increasingly constrained in the realistic outcomes that they can achieve. Both local authorities and people experiencing homelessness talked about the growing pressures leading to a lack of options they had to prevent or alleviate homelessness in their area, citing affordability, lack of supply and access to accommodation as primary drivers.

**“And it doesn’t tackle the big elephant in the room, which is that – not that there’s a shortage of housing, it’s that there is a shortage of affordable housing. If property were affordable, then we wouldn’t be here.”**

– Team leader

However, there are clear areas where the local authorities could improve practice, such as ensuring rent deposits are paid efficiently, that would stop people losing out on properties they’ve found and ensure a cleaner move through the system for those who have been able to find properties.

Prevention requires a whole council approach as officers need to have workable options available to them to be able to quickly find alternative accommodation or solutions that will keep a household safely accommodated.

## Recommendations

Ensuring everyone has safe, stable housing creates a stronger society where homelessness has no place. The HRA provides a framework to ensure prevention is at the forefront of ending homelessness across England. The evidence in this report highlights areas where short and long term changes are needed to ensure this ground-breaking legislation reaches its full potential.

Additional investment is needed to address structural barriers that currently restrict local authorities from fulfilling the duties placed on them by the Homelessness Reduction Act and must include:

**1 Investment in LHA rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents (realigning back to the 30th percentile)** – The under investment into Local Housing Allowance rates is a barrier to

preventing homelessness and means people cannot be supported out of homelessness and into the private rented sector where suitable.

**2 Investment in social housing and a national target of an additional 90,000 social homes each year for the next 15 years** – In England, there is no national target for building homes at social rent levels. Government policy since 2012 has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of homes for social rent, making it harder for local authorities to house homeless households.

The HRA should be changed and strengthened in the following ways:

**3 Introduce a statutory code of practice to raise the standards of local authority homelessness services across the country** – The Secretary of State has the power to produce a statutory code of practice which should provide a clear and enforceable set of standards for local authorities.

**4 A duty to prevent homelessness should be placed on all relevant public bodies including the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office and the Department for Education** – The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority. However, while this is an important first step the actual requirements it places on public authorities are minimal. The legislation should go further and place stronger requirements on public authorities to work with local housing authorities to prevent homelessness.

**5 Strengthening the code of guidance to ensure the HRA works to its full potential.** This should include more guidance for local housing authorities on i) amendments to allocations policies that emphasises the need for policies and nomination agreements that support prevention rather than hindering; ii) advice and information for specific groups and expectations around this in light of the strengthened advisory duty; iii) determining “affordability”; iv) on “regular contact” and progression within the 56 days; v) around early interventions for those at risk of homelessness, but not within 56 days.

Further investment and longer term funding is required to provide greater financial stability to support local authorities to prevent and end homelessness:

**6 Introduce national provision of private rented access schemes across England including a national rent deposit guarantee scheme** to improve access to stable, decent private tenancies for homeless people, reducing the burdens on individual schemes, and help local authorities procure properties more easily as part of their prevention and relief duties.

**7 The Government must continue to invest in homelessness services to ensure a sharper focus and investment in prevention measures,** and evidenced based, housing-led solutions to meet its target of ending rough sleeping by 2024 and end all forms of homelessness. This should include a national outcomes and performance framework to provide consistency and accountability across policies and service delivery of the HRA at a national and local level.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Policy context

In nearly all cases, homelessness can be prevented. The Homelessness Reduction Act has made homelessness prevention a central part of the statutory framework. It was designed to put prevention at the heart of homelessness assistance in England and remove barriers for people accessing statutory homelessness services.

Since 1977 there have been targeted and successful political attempts to reduce homelessness. The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act (1977) provided an entitlement to long term rehousing for people considered homeless in Great Britain (extended to Northern Ireland in 1988). The Act crucially distinguished between those who would qualify for assistance and those who would not. Only those deemed in priority need would be entitled to housing, primarily families with dependent children, single people and childless couples had to prove they met strict vulnerability tests. Homeless people also had to prove they were blameless for their situation and local authorities only had to consider applications where people had local connection to an area. Notwithstanding the impact of

these arbitrary distinctions, the Act has helped more than 4.5 million households into alternative long-term housing since it came into force. The Homelessness Act (2002) in England and Wales brought in new duties and preventative approaches including the introduction of Housing Options which meant more people could access advice and assistance.<sup>4</sup> The increased use of prevention led homelessness acceptances figures to reach a low of 41,790 by 2009/10.

In 2014, Crisis conducted a 'mystery shopping' exercise<sup>5</sup> to examine the treatment of single people experiencing homelessness who approach their local authority for assistance. The study uncovered widespread problems with the advice and information provided, with some turned away without any help or the opportunity to speak to a housing adviser. The introduction of the HRA helps to redress this imbalance of support offered to single homeless people by widening access through the prevention and relief duties. The origins of the HRA come from an independent panel convened by Crisis in 2015 to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the existing statutory framework.<sup>6</sup> It drew from the Housing (Wales) Act (2014) which introduced

similar prevention and relief duties. Originally a Private Members' Bill supported by MP Bob Blackman, it was supported by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee and received royal ascent in April 2017.

The Homelessness Reduction Act came into force in April 2018. It introduced two new universal duties: a 'prevention duty' and a 'relief duty'. Under the prevention duty local authorities must take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for anyone at risk within 56 days. Under the relief duty local authorities must take reasonable steps to help secure accommodation for those who are currently homeless and eligible. Both new duties apply to people regardless of priority need, which identifies those eligible for housing either because they have dependent children or because they meet set vulnerability tests, and intentionality that could exclude households on the basis that the council considers they are at fault for their homelessness. The prevention duty is also local connection blind meaning people are eligible regardless of their long-term connection to an area.

The Act has also introduced the Duty to Refer, a new duty on specified public authorities to refer people to a housing authority if they are homeless or likely to become homeless within 56 days. The public authority must have the consent of the individual before making a referral. The public authorities with a duty to refer include prisons, probation services, Jobcentres, social service authorities, hospitals and emergency departments.<sup>7</sup> This duty came into force on 1 October 2018.

Another key element of the Act is the use of 'personalised housing plans' which provide a framework for local authorities and applicants to work together to identify appropriate actions to address their homelessness.

## 1.2 Existing evidence

Early findings from other studies suggest a mixed response from local authorities in interpreting and implementing the HRA. A survey with 167 local authorities in summer 2018 showed that the Act was having the biggest impact in London, most notably that authorities were able to introduce new prevention and relief services (71% in London compared to 58% overall) and the Act had enabled a more person-centred approach (79% in London compared to 62% overall).<sup>8</sup> One of the biggest changes reported is the positive culture shift across local authority practice. Alongside the introduction of new services – including debt advice, help with accessing accommodation, and more general and specialised housing officers – these are widely recognised as some of the most positive impacts of the new legislation.

Early reports show this is very much dependent on individual local authority responses to the HRA and echoes findings from the final evaluation of the Housing (Wales) Act (2014). The evaluation found significant variation across Wales and also within local authority areas regarding the adoption of a new organisational culture and approach to tackling homelessness the extent to which the ethos of the new Act has been adopted and the effectiveness of prevention and reasonable steps.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Housing Options is a catchall description that encompasses the ways a local authority can strive to prevent homelessness, and the need for a household to be rehoused under statutory homelessness duties to provide an offer of new settled accommodation.

<sup>5</sup> Dobie, S., Sanders, B. and Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away, the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

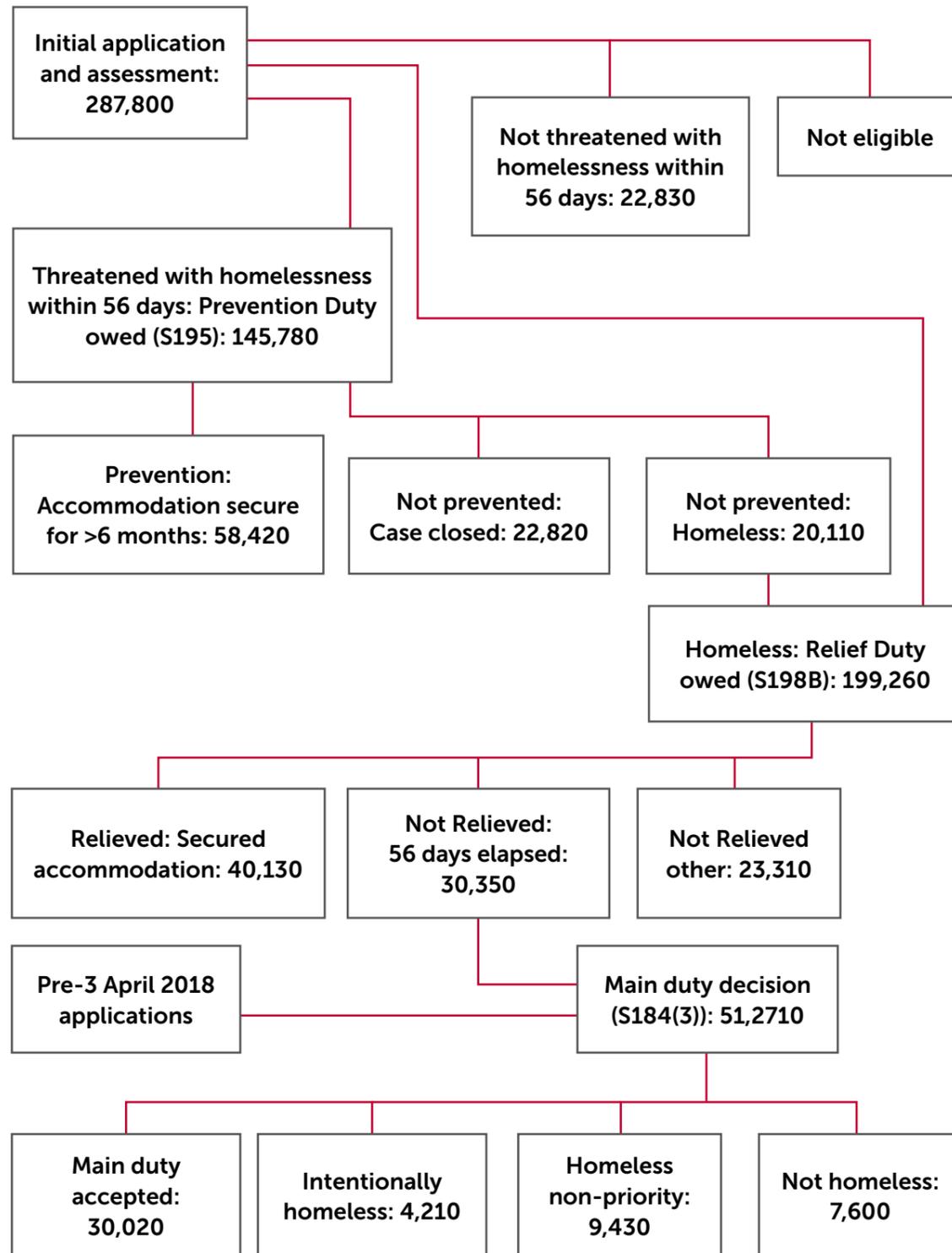
<sup>6</sup> Crisis (2016) *The Homelessness Legislation: An independent review of the legal duties owed to homeless people*. London: Crisis.

<sup>7</sup> The full list of public authorities is listed in the Homelessness (Review Procedure etc.) Regulations (2018)

<sup>8</sup> Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wood, J., Watts, B., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2019) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2019*. London: Crisis

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, A., Jones, K., Gibbons, A., Rogers, M., Wilding, M. and Madoc-Jones, I. (2018) *Post-Implementation Evaluation of Part 2 of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

**Figure 1.1: Homelessness Reduction Act: Flow chart of decisions**



Source: Ministry of Housing and Local Government (2019) *Statutory homelessness live tables*

The HRA has had the intended effect of increasing the number of people eligible for homelessness assistance. In 2018/19 265,040 households were assessed as homeless or at risk of homeless under the HRA, of which 171,550 (65%) were either single adults or couples without dependent children.<sup>10</sup> This is a very different profile to those receiving statutory assistance under the old legislation, whilst not directly comparable in 2017/18, only 24 per cent of those owed a main homelessness duty were single adults. This is further supported by a survey by the Local Government Association in 2018<sup>11</sup> which found that over three quarters (78%) of the councils where presentations have increased felt this is directly attributable to the introduction of the Act. Both this research and the Homelessness Monitor: England 2019 reported that the Act had seen a positive impact for single people and some improvements for people rough sleeping approaching for assistance (although less commonly reported).

At the early parliamentary stages of the 'Homelessness Reduction Bill', concerns were raised that whilst it might benefit single people there may be unintended consequences for families in broadening assistance to more people. Early reports show 36 per cent of local authorities reporting the Act as beneficial for families with children and 53 per cent reporting neutral effects. Chapters two to four of this report further explores the different experiences of families and single households.

For the first time through H-CLIC data<sup>12</sup> we can see a more in-depth profile of who is approaching for homelessness assistance, as well

as demographics local authorities are collecting data about support needs, employment status and previous accommodation. Whilst still experimental statistics, data from 2018/19 show that out of everyone assessed as homeless or at risk of homeless under the HRA 21 per cent had a history of mental health issues, 13 per cent had physical ill-health or a disability and nine per cent were at risk or had experienced domestic abuse (more information in Table 1) .

71,210 households (27%) who were owed a prevention or relief duty were either in full time or part time employment showing that increasingly homelessness is an issue affecting working people. Examining the type of accommodation people were in at the time of approaching for assistance, nearly 3 in 10 (28%) of households were living in the private rented sector, 24 per cent were living with family and 10 per cent were living with friends. A further 10 per cent were living in social housing which is coupled with a 47 per cent increase in the number of households for whom the ending of a social tenancy was the primary cause of their homelessness.

H-CLIC data also sets out the reasons that people exit the homelessness system either at prevention, relief or full duty stage. In 2018/19, the largest groups were people exiting due to loss of contact – 9,670 households at the prevention stage and 12,230 households at the relief stage. A new refusal to cooperate duty has been introduced through the HRA under which last year 390 households have had their assistance ceased at the prevention stage and 400 at the relief stage. This is an area that raised

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *Initial assessments of statutory homelessness duties owed, England, April 2018 to March 2019*

<sup>11</sup> Local Government Association (2019) *Homelessness Reduction Act Survey 2018 – Survey Report*. <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Homelessness%20Reduction%20Act%20Survey%20Report%202018%20v3%20WEB.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *Initial assessments of statutory homelessness duties owed, April 2018 to March 2019*

**Table 1.2: Support needs of households owed a prevention or relief duty**

Support needs of households owed a prevention or relief duty	Total 2018/19	Proportion of total households assessed as owed a prevention or relief duty
History of mental health problems	55,840	21%
Physical ill health and disability	34,970	13%
At risk of/has experienced domestic abuse	23,570	9%
Offending history	18,890	7%
History of repeat homelessness	16,130	6%
Drug dependency needs	13,940	5%
History of rough sleeping	13,050	5%
Alcohol dependency needs	10,840	4%
Learning disability	10,880	4%
Young person aged 18-25 years requiring support to manage independently	10,500	4%
Access to education, employment or training	8,700	3%
At risk of/has experienced abuse (non-domestic abuse)	6,740	3%
At risk of/has experienced sexual abuse/exploitation	5,230	2%
Old age	3,210	1%

Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) Initial assessments of statutory homelessness duties owed, England, April 2018 to March 2019

concerns in the Welsh legislation,<sup>13</sup> leading to reports the most vulnerable people being excluded from assistance.<sup>14</sup> Whilst data on why people exit the system before they reach an outcome is still emerging this should be considered going forward to better understand those who are disengaging from support.

One of the main challenges impacting the delivery of the HRA is the lack of housing and insufficient housing benefit, with both being reported as stifling local authorities ability to house people under the relief and full homelessness duty.<sup>15</sup> In the past year the number of households in temporary accommodation has continued to increase (increasing from 80,720 in quarter 1 2018 to 86,130 in quarter 2 2019)<sup>16</sup> partially as a result of insufficient permanent housing options for local authorities to discharge their homelessness duties. Between April 2018 and March 2019 £1.1 billion was spent on temporary accommodation for homeless households. Whilst the majority of this is funded by the DWP, local authorities were forced to spend £280 million of their own budget to meet the need.<sup>17</sup>

A recent evaluation of the Wales legislation also found that whilst it is clear that local authorities are preventing homelessness on an individual basis and reacting to homelessness and the problems it causes, the structural causes of homelessness remain unaddressed.<sup>18</sup> Affordability issues caused by the gap between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and local rents add pressure to the housing options available to local authorities.

In addition to the structural challenges the bureaucracy, paperwork and insufficient IT systems have also been cited as a barrier for local authorities implementing the HRA.

The funding provided to implement the HRA has for some authorities not been adequate. The LGA found that almost one third (29 per cent) of the respondents to their survey did not think they had been sufficiently resourced to deliver their new duties. The Homelessness Monitor: England 2019 found that only 11 per cent of local authorities perceived the new burdens funding as fully or nearly adequate, in London this reduced to zero.<sup>19</sup> A report for London Councils

13 MacKie, P., Thomas, I. and Bibbings, J. 2017. *Homelessness prevention: Reflecting on a year of pioneering Welsh legislation in practice*. European Journal of Homelessness 11(1), pp. 81-107

14 Shelter Cymru, *Homelessness and failure to cooperate: we need to talk about this*. <https://sheltercymru.org.uk/homelessness-and-failure-to-cooperate-we-need-to-talk-about-this>

15 Shelter Cymru (2017) *Homelessness and failure to cooperate: we need to talk about this*. <https://sheltercymru.org.uk/homelessness-and-failure-to-cooperate-we-need-to-talk-about-this>; McClenaghan, M., and Maher, C. (2019) *Locked Out: New homelessness law brings delays, denials and dead ends*. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 5th October 2019. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-10-05/locked-out-new-homelessness-law-brings-delays-denials-and-dead-ends>

16 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *Table TA2 – Households in temporary accommodation at end of quarter by type of household*.

17 MHCLG (2019) *Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2018 to 2019 individual local authority data – outturn*

18 Ahmed, A., Madoc-Jones, I., Gibbons, A., Jones, K., Rogers, M., Wilding, M. *Challenges to Implementing the New Homelessness Prevention Agenda in Wales*, Social Policy & Society (2020) 19:1, 157–169

19 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wood, J., Watts, B., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2019) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2019*. London: Crisis

by LSE has examined the new burdens funding in more detail.<sup>20</sup> It estimates that from the year preceding the HRA's introduction to 2022/23, London boroughs will spend an extra £80 million as a result of anticipated increases in homelessness and the costs of managing these services. The report suggests that the unit cost of handling a homelessness case in London is more than twice as much as in England as a whole, largely due to the higher costs of securing accommodation in London.

### 1.3 The research

Whilst evidence has so far concentrated on local authority responses to the HRA including the forthcoming evaluation from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, very little analysis exists about the views and experiences of people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This report is the first full report documenting the Act from the perspective of people using local authority services and will answer the following questions:

- What are the pathways and experiences through Housing Options of individuals seeking assistance?
- What do these journeys and experiences tell us about what is working well and what is not working well with the HRA?
- Has the HRA changed the support offered?
- What are the housing outcomes of people approaching Housing Options for assistance?
- What policy and practice solutions do the research findings offer?

### 1.4 Methodology

The research is based on two waves of an in-depth three-year research study, funded by the Oak Foundation, examining the impact of implementing the HRA across six local authority areas in England. Surveys were conducted between April and December 2018, and April and September 2019. A total of 984 surveys were completed over the first two years. In year one of the study, 545 structured surveys and 51 in-depth interviews were conducted with people approaching their local authority for assistance as well as 20 interviews and focus groups with local authority staff. In year two, a further 437 surveys and 38 in-depth interviews were conducted with people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and a further 132 follow-up surveys were conducted with participants from the first wave of research. The findings throughout the report have both been aggregated to give an overview and been split out to show differences between the first and second year of the research. Unless otherwise stated all charts and tables are taken from the first two waves of fieldwork combined.

Participants have been recruited through direct referrals from the local authorities taking part in the research and homelessness organisations supporting people in these localities. The surveys have been conducted through a mixture of face to face, telephone and online formats. The six local authorities have been anonymised throughout the report and have been selected to represent a range of housing markets, geographies across England and footfall through Housing Options services. They include two London boroughs, two Northern cities and two cities with neighbouring semi-rural areas.

## Chapter 2: The journey through Housing Options

### 2.1 Causes of homelessness

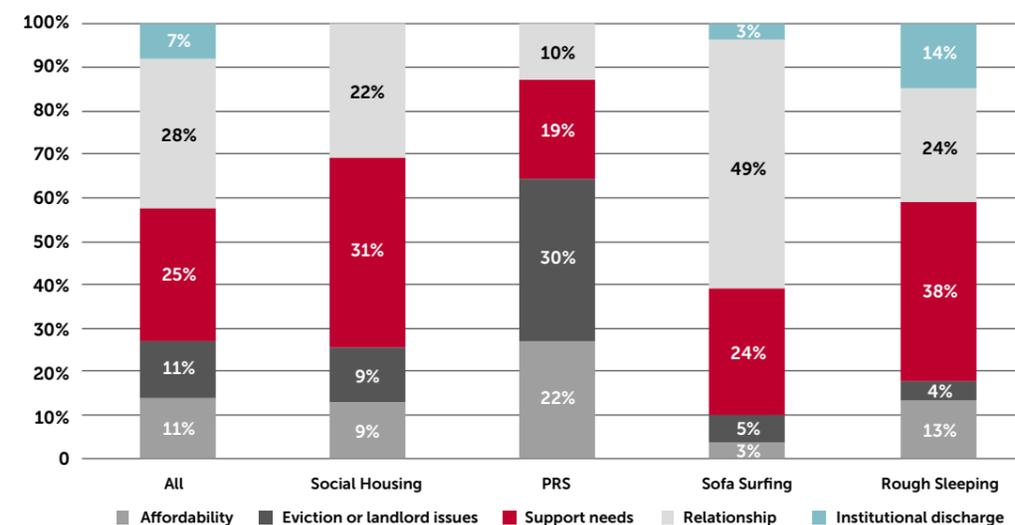
Understanding the causes of homelessness amongst participants is vital to help appreciate the potential support needed from the local authority but also to better understand the profile of those experiencing homelessness.

Respondents identified a wide range of primary causes of their homelessness however almost all could be separated into five core categories: issues related to affordability; issues related to a tenancy including eviction or landlord dispute; specific support needs; issues related to personal relationships; and institutional discharge (see appendix 1 for categorisation breakdown). There were some causes that sit outside of these such as fire, exploitation, or pregnancy meaning a property was no longer suitable.

There was substantial variation between causes of homelessness and reported housing situation at the point of approaching Housing Options. Figure 2.1. shows the reported primary cause of homelessness across those presenting from the private rented sector (PRS), social housing, rough sleeping, and sofa surfing.

Figure 2.1: Primary cause of homelessness

N=809



<sup>20</sup> Scanlon, K. and Whitehead, C. with Edge, A. and Udagawa, C. (2019) *The Cost of Homelessness Services in London*. An LSE London project for London Councils

For those who presented from the PRS, 52 per cent reported that their homelessness was caused by the pressures of either affordability issues or through issues related to their tenancy such as dispute with their landlord, eviction or landlord requiring the property back. These are all structural causes that typically sit outside of individual control with the latter speaking to the insecurity of PRS tenancies. Whilst there will always be instances where homelessness cannot be prevented, many of the cases within this could be resolved through pro-active prevention work such as discretionary housing payments (DHPs), mediation or budgeting support.

Thirty-eight per cent of people who were rough sleeping when they came to Housing Options stated that their wider support needs were the primary cause of their homelessness. The most prevalent of these were mental health issues and loss of employment. It is also worth noting that the majority of those whose homelessness was caused by institutional discharge such as prison release presented as rough sleeping. Perhaps unsurprisingly issues to do with personal relationships were overwhelmingly the primary cause amongst sofa surfers, as people exhausted the hospitality of their family or friends.

Support needs were also the primary cause of homelessness amongst those from social housing although this is heavily driven by domestic abuse, both perpetrators and those fleeing abuse. For people fleeing domestic abuse, access to safe, secure accommodation is vital. Without this, there is a risk that survivors will be left with no option but to return to a dangerous situation or sleep rough putting themselves at risk of further abuse and exploitation.<sup>21</sup>

The variation in causes across different tenure types, and consequently

amongst those who would be owed a prevention or relief duty respectively clearly sets out the need for a differing approach to support offered. The HRA is intended to promote a personalised and holistic approach to ending homelessness but this suggests that there is a need to establish clear prevention and relief pathways that recognise the differing interventions needed.

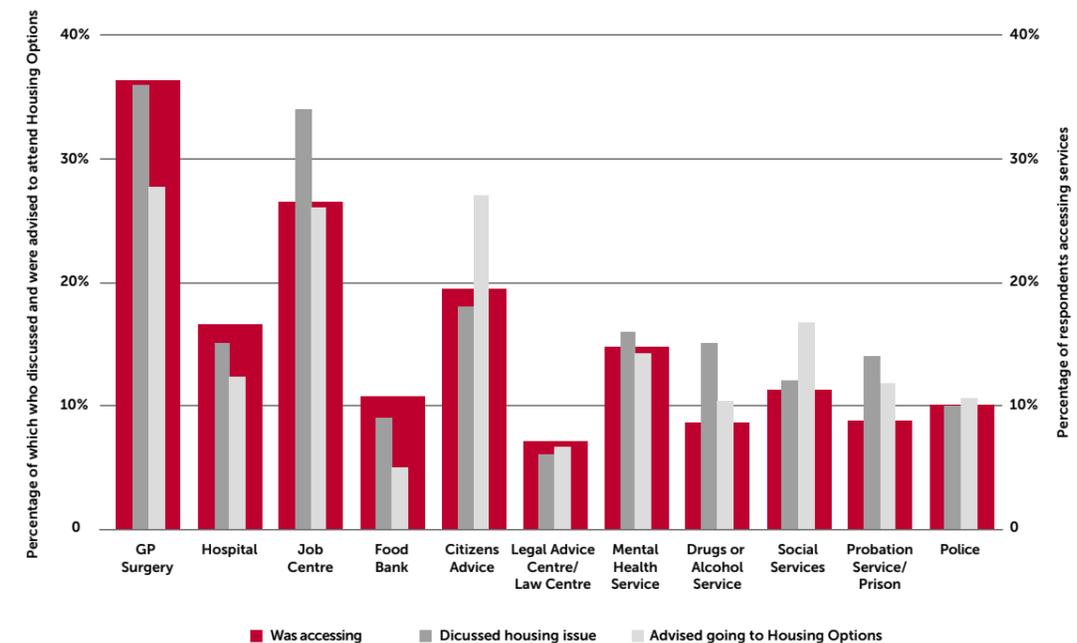
## 2.2 Duty to Refer

The Duty to Refer was introduced in October 2018, six months after the introduction of the HRA. The premise behind the Duty is that homelessness prevention is not just the responsibility of the local authority and that for effective prevention other public bodies must play a role. Currently the Duty to Refer applies only to specified public bodies including prisons and other secure offending institutions, Jobcentres, social services, and NHS secondary care and A&E provision. The research asked more broadly about different services that participants were engaged with at the time their housing issue was developing to establish a clearer understanding of what services people are interacting with.

Sixty-nine per cent of research participants were engaged with at least one other service at the time they engaged with Housing Options. Figure 2.2 sets out the different services participants were engaged at the time they approached Housing Options, and then percentage of which both discussed their housing issue with that service, and were advised by that service to seek support from their local authority.

Over a third of respondents (36%) reported that they had seen their GP before attending Housing Options but since their housing issues had occurred. Of these respondents only

Figure 2.2: Percentage of respondents engaged with wider services N=955



28 per cent were advised by their GP to seek support through Housing Options and it is notable in this context that GPs are not subject to the Duty to Refer. Conversely although subject to the Duty to Refer only 26 per cent of those engaging with the Jobcentre said they were advised to attend Housing Options, despite 34 per cent disclosing their housing need. This does not necessarily mean that a referral was not made to Housing Options but that this was done without clear communication with the individual.

Participants highlighted how effective other services can be in both making them aware and encouraging them to attend Housing Options.

**“I went to see my doctor, my GP, and told him the position I’m in because if I sleep rough I wouldn’t last long with all my health conditions I’ve got, you know? And they put me in touch with the homeless unit.”**

**“Yeah, the Jobcentre got me in touch with the housing and then I think the Jobcentre got me in touch with**

**[youth service] as well, and I’m still in contact with them.”**

The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority however at this stage in its implementation it is not clear that wider public bodies are taking up their responsibilities within the spirit intended.

Research participants also reported that they are engaged with a much wider network of services than the current duty specifies. For homelessness prevention to be effective this wider system needs to be engaged to ensure that people are reaching support at the earliest possible stage to increase the chances of a successful prevention outcome.

## 2.3. Awareness of the HRA

Prior to the introduction of the HRA there were concerns that the change in legislation would substantially increase the number of people

21 Crisis (2019) 'A Safe Home' Breaking the link between homelessness and domestic abuse. London: Crisis

accessing Housing Options support. More people are now eligible for support, reflected both in the numbers of people receiving either a prevention and relief duty (see section 1.2) and the Homelessness Monitor: England 2019 in which 71 per cent of Local Authorities reported that homelessness approaches had been increasing in their area with many citing the HRA as an affecting factor.<sup>22</sup> However, the research has not found that the HRA itself was a motivating factor in increased Housing Options attendance.

Awareness of the legislation is low with only 16 per cent (154) of respondents reporting that they were aware of the introduction of the HRA. Of those who were aware of the change in legislation 44 per cent (67) said that it had encouraged them to attend Housing Options, this translates to only seven per cent of the overall total. There was virtually no change in awareness between the first and second waves of fieldwork.

In addition to the legislation change itself, overall most respondents were not aware of what support was available from Housing Options in general. Only 20 per cent (196) of respondents stating that they were aware of what was available to them before attending:

**“No, none at all [expectations]. Very alien to me, it’s not something I’d ever considered that I, myself would end up in.”**

**“I just always heard from people like some friends that, you know, if you’re looking for, you know, they can maybe put you in temporary accommodation.”**

**“To be honest with you I didn’t really know what to think or expect when I got there. I had a thought that they would help me because I was**

**in a position where I needed help, but I wasn’t too sure on what help or advice I was going to get.”**

This was reflected in the respondents’ views on what support they felt would have been most beneficial to them when they first approached their local authority. Respondents identified a range of different types of support that they felt would be helpful. Not surprisingly, the most commonly identified support related to accessing permanent accommodation both in social housing or in the private rented sector. However nearly a third of respondents (28%) reported that support with paying rent, as a prevention measure would have been of benefit. Other support identified for both prevention and relief purposes included general financial support, referral to other services including mental health and substance misuse services, and support and advice on job seeking. The range of welcomed support identified suggest no set expectation of Housing Options and an openness to a variety of different interventions:

**“Not really. I didn’t expect that they’re going to come and say, “Oh, yeah, we’ve got a property for you to move in,” something like that, no. But I did, I did, I cannot say expected, I was hoping that they might give me advice where shall I look for the property as a single mum in the circumstances which I’m in.”**

#### 2.4. Initial engagement

Each of the local authority areas included in this research have a different model for initial engagement and triage of Housing Options. These include a one-stop shop contact centre, an online application and a telephone-based application.

Online applications can create challenges for those with poor digital literacy or who are unable to readily access computers. Where there is a digital by default application local authorities need to ensure that there is appropriate support so that all who need to are able to apply. Of those surveyed in areas where access to Housing Options is predicated on an online form, 22 per cent (60) stated that there was no support available to help them complete the form, with 29 per cent saying that they do not find it easy to access and use internet and computers. Being aware of those that are digitally excluded and making sure that all those entitled to support are able to access it is critical for local authorities. However, it is important to highlight that for many people there was a positive experience with online forms, including on being assisted by local authority staff.

**“I had to fill out like a, is it a homeless form, homeless application. And they helped me with that, they came to the computer and helped me to fill out what I needed to fill out. So it was very good, the service was quite good.”**

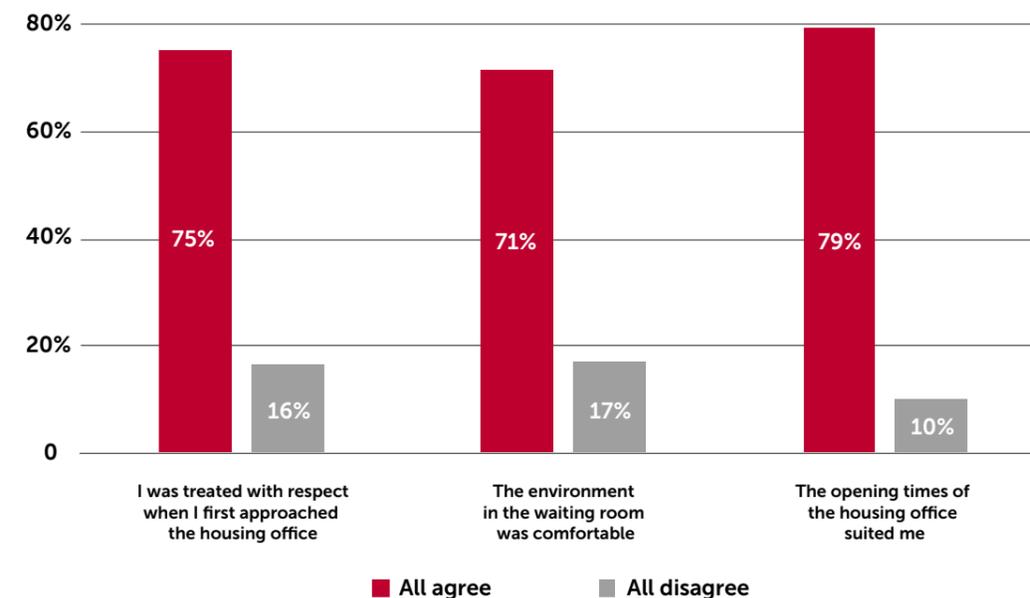
Survey respondents had generally positive perceptions (Figure 2.3) of their initial contact with Housing Options in relation to both the physical environment and their first communications with housing office staff, reporting that they were treated with respect, and were able to communicate confidentially. There is no notable difference between the responses of different groups with consistency between both prevention and relief, and singles and families.

Typically, those first interactions were with reception staff within the council building. Survey respondents reported varying outcomes from these conversations ranging from extremely positive to traumatic. This varied within authorities as well across the areas the research was conducted in, indicating that individual staff can make a difference in making the initial contact a positive experience for people approaching for assistance:

**“Everyone else in the council in reception were really useful. The security were lovely because there were no directions, like, no one tells you anything you have to ask when you go in. So yes those initial staff were lovely.”**

Figure 2.3: Perceptions of initial contact with Housing Options

N=971



<sup>22</sup> Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wood, J., Watts, B., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2019) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2019*. London: Crisis

**“Oh yeah, well the first time, yeah the first time I can remember going and sort of crying a lot about it, and the staff there were really sort of then being supportive about it because they could see that I was really upset.”**

**“Awful, awful, I don’t feel that I should have to explain myself to a receptionist of why I’m there. [...] I didn’t like the way she approached me, the way she spoke to me, I’ve never, as I said to you, I’ve never had to access this kind of help before, but it’s like she wanted to know the ins and outs, I don’t want to discuss it with you, you’re a receptionist. [...] I’ve got an appointment to see somebody, I don’t see why I should have to go through it in front of other people sitting behind me. [...] I’ve got to be honest with you I was actually quite upset about it, to the point where I became a little bit agitated.”**

**“When I first went there I would rather have talked to a brick wall because she was just not interested and after about five or six weeks they managed to give me a Housing Officer.”**

Although the reception staff are not trained housing support workers, they are an integral part of the Housing Options pathway and are typically the first person someone meets when they enter the service and can be an integral part of removing gatekeeping. One local authority highlighted that this lack of training could be unintentionally turning people away.

**“I’ve found by accident that some have just been triaged by them and it’s not a proper triage, it’s just sent away, and that is sort of the old gatekeeping thing that the local authorities used to do that is still happening a bit in [Local authority]. I think that’s purely training and actual education about what we do in the HRA.”**

– Housing Officer

## 2.5. Accessing support

Nearly a third (32%) of respondents reported that they met with a case worker for their assessment on the same day that they first attended, with a further 39 per cent being asked to return for their appointment on another day. On average follow-up appointments were within seven days of initial contact within the majority seen within three days.

Across both waves of the research nine per cent of respondents (83) state they were given no support. However, this has doubled from six per cent in wave 1 to 12 per cent in wave 2. This includes a mixture of prevention and relief cases with people reporting a range of reasons given including: no recourse to public funds, lack of local connection, not being able to provide evidence of current situation, and a general lack of eligibility for support.

This is particularly notable in the context of the 2014 Crisis mystery shopping exercise conducted to examine the treatment of single homeless people who approach their local authority for assistance, and which found that there was a widespread problem with the advice and information provided with some turned away without any help or the opportunity to speak to a housing adviser. The research findings suggest that this is one of the most substantial changes observed since the introduction of the HRA and that the change in legislation has had a noticeable impact on widening access to single homeless people, with participants highlighting what this has meant to them:

**“I think like getting my support worker in 2019, I think that was a huge like surprise, because I was actually like, oh my god, I’m getting fully supported and like, there is someone here who is actually like going to help me.”**

### Case study: Family served a section 21 notice looking for alternative accommodation

Laura and her two children had a good relationship with her landlord of 7 years but was given a Section 21 eviction notice as the landlord wanted their property back. At the time of approaching Housing Option she had two months remaining on her notice.

She approached Housing Options because she wanted advice about claiming Universal Credit (UC) and finding a property that would accept a family claiming UC. She was hoping to receive advice about what would help her situation but did not expect the council to accommodate her.

She registered herself online and then was given an appointment in two weeks’ time to attend an assessment. She was sent an email outlining which documents she needed to bring with her to the assessment.

When she first went into the council building there were a number of staff approaching people to see what they needed and help to direct them to the service that they needed. She described these staff as being ‘very positive, very kind, very polite’. She waited 10 minutes for her appointment.

During the assessment her housing officer went through all the processes and procedures of the HRA. They went through all the documents that she brought with her and was also told what documents she would need to get from her landlord.

**“The lady who I spoke to, we talked through exactly every single thing, so the situation I was in. And she explained to me, I believe, twice, she wanted to make sure that I do understand exactly what’s the procedure and that I don’t really have to worry, she’s going to help me. So, yeah, it was good enough for me.”**

Laura felt involved in the development of her PHP and could clearly see what activities she and the council needed to undertake to action her support. The support she has received so far has all been outlined in the plan. She says that it is helping her to know what to do, and what to expect at each stage of the journey so that everything is in place to help her into a property when a suitable one is found.

**“The information exactly about the documents that the landlord needed to submit, what exactly is the procedures, what is going to happen if I do certain points as well, from my side, that I need to be involved in the whole procedure, which is from the very beginning. What is expected from council, from housing department, what is expected me to do and what I kind of can expect from them. There was also information about where I can get in contact with people who might help me to find accommodation as well. Lots of information, really a lot of information.”**

Housing Options are helping her to find PRS accommodation that accept Universal Credit. She is looking for properties herself but is struggling to find places that are affordable.

Her housing officer is in contact with her regularly and Laura has described the experience with Housing Options as being a ‘very, very, very positive and very good experience.’ The ongoing support has made her feel less alone and is confident that she will find somewhere before her notice runs out on her current property.

**“I expected to get no help like I had the previous few times, so it kind of blew me out of the water how much help I actually got this time around.”**

However, there were a small number of cases who reported they were turned away under criteria that would have applied prior to the introduction of the HRA or who felt they were turned away unfairly:

**“I was informed I was not entitled as I was sofa surfing.”**

**“They said sorry you are not priority we can’t help you.”**

Embedding a whole new approach to delivery takes time and there is inevitably going to be some continuation of previous practice as the new system embeds, however ensuring that these barriers to access are eliminated should be a key priority for all local authorities. There needs to be more consistent practice to ensure people are not turned away when they are eligible for assistance as it beds in to practice.

## 2.6. Assessment

One of the biggest changes introduced with the HRA is the introduction of the in-depth assessment. For most of the respondents there was not a clear-cut separation between the advice and assessment stages of their interactions. Overwhelmingly advice and assessments were conducted within Housing Options with only 11 per cent of respondents saying they were initially directly referred to another service for advice. This suggests that local authorities are still primarily delivering their services and advice in-house. Whilst local authorities have a responsibility to deliver the initial assessment there

is opportunity to engage with the wider sector and services available to support with delivering elements of the HRA or to assist them with helping both prevention and relieving homelessness. There were examples given to suggest that integrating the assessment and consequently support plan into existing specialist services could be beneficial to local authorities both in terms of increasing their own capacity, but also ensuring people are accessing the right advice and support for them.

This is further supported by examples through our practice work which found that local authority staff have limited capacity (both time and skills) to signpost clients to the range of services they require to prevent/relieve their homelessness. In some areas there are limited services for Housing Options staff to signpost their clients to which prevents holistic service responses. There are often limited service offerings available to include in Personalised Housing Plans (PHPs) to facilitate ‘wrap around’ responses for clients. These service offerings can be limited for client groups such as single people, people leaving care, people experiencing domestic abuse, people with complex needs (i.e. mental health and substance misuse issues), young people and people exiting prisons and hospitals. This is a result of a combination of a lack of funding and/or a disconnect between what frontline practitioners identify as gaps in what they are able to offer and how this is communicated back to budget holders/commissioners.

Positively, 74 per cent of participants reported that their assessment took place in a safe and private environment. This is a stark contrast to Crisis’ 2014 research into the experiences of single people experiencing homelessness<sup>23</sup> which found that lack of privacy, interactions

with staff, the office environment, and waiting times all had a profound impact and often compounded feelings of anxiety, stigma and shame. The importance of privacy was also highlighted by people who had less positive assessments and emphasised the value in having privacy during conversations dealing with emotional and vulnerable experiences.

**“It felt alright, but I felt it was quite a public space, and exposing some of the information was quite personal at times, so I kind of felt it may be better in an enclosed room, expressing that sort of thing.”**

**“He didn’t give me an option, he just said, “There’s this girl here and she’s training and she needs to come and see what we’re doing.” You know like normally when you go to the doctor’s, you’ve got the option to have a student or not to have a student. And this girl just sat there, listening to all my business and just, you know, not commenting or doing anything. I wasn’t given the option whether I wanted her there or not, you know, which I found a bit unnerving. I’m not easily threatened but I just found it a bit unnerving, and at some stages she started nodding**

**profusely and it was things like, “You can’t do this and you can’t do that,” and I just didn’t find that very respectful to be honest. Because I think if she wants to be there, she should be either engaging in stuff or not engaging, not doing a half-hearted – so that wasn’t great. I think if I was in a really, you know, low space mentally, it would be a hard thing. I mean, I’m finding it hard but I’m managing, you know.”**

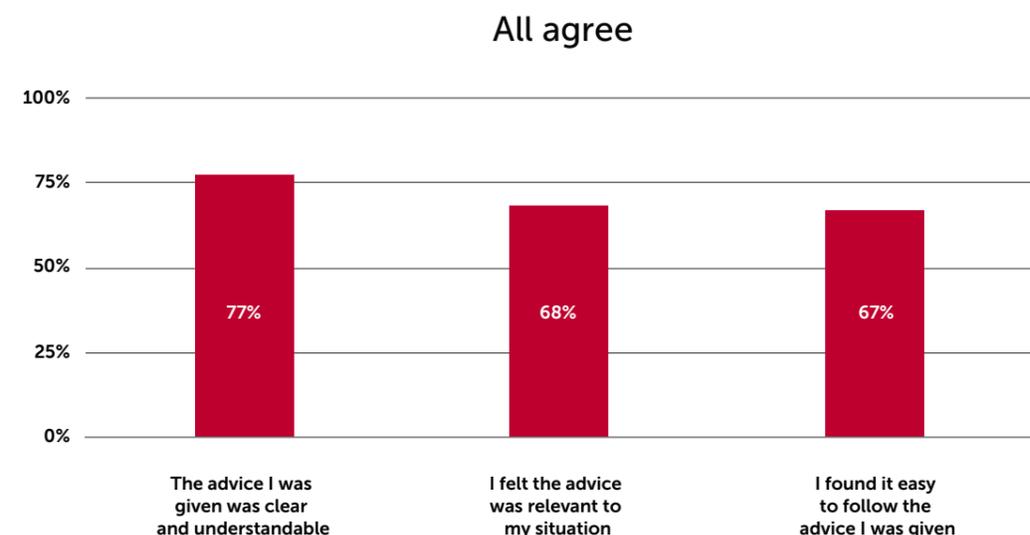
However, as with their initial contact the majority of respondents were generally very positive about the standard of the advice they were given, finding it relevant, clear and easy to follow (Figure 2.4).

Research participants valued the opportunity to spend a decent amount of time with a housing officer and build a relationship with them as part of the assessment process. The majority of people we spoke to highlighted how thorough the assessment was and how the time spent made them feel valued and informed:

**“The guy was absolutely fantastic. I mean, I probably sat there with him for over an hour. Obviously I was a bit emotional because of the situation and everything, because**

Figure 2.4: Standard of advice at initial assessment

N=654



<sup>23</sup> Dobie, S., Sanders, B. and Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away, the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

### Case study: Young person fleeing domestic abuse being supported by a youth pathway service

Samantha left home at 18 following violent abuse in the family home. She spent a period of time moving between sofa surfing and rough sleeping. During this period her mental health deteriorated. She initially approached the Housing Options service in May 2018. She reported finding the experience within Housing Options as difficult, stating there was a lack of compassion and empathy from staff. She was also intimidated by the number of people at the council service and felt uncomfortable and that it was obvious that she was there because she was homeless.

Samantha was placed in a hostel for individuals with high support needs where she stayed for a year before being forced to leave after being attacked by another resident. In May 2019 she approached Housing Options again and was referred to the youth pathway to complete her assessment and PHP.

The youth pathway provides dedicated support for young people experiencing homelessness. Samantha found this to be a much more supportive and understanding environment. She found it to be a less daunting space than the main Housing Options service. They offered her tea and made her feel comfortable rather than waiting in line with all of her belongings. The service delivered her assessments in a trauma informed way stopping if the conversations about her situation got too difficult. This more personalised and holistic approach helped her feel more comfortable helping to build a trusting relationship.

She was quickly assigned a support worker via another organisation who she met with regularly. They provided useful advice and connected her with services that were able to further support her and understood her situation. She completed a PHP collaboratively, that was revisited and updated regularly. This helped her to keep track of her support and what was happening with her case.

She was placed in a suitable hostel for 3 months where she felt safe and well supported. Whilst in the hostel she bided 'religiously' to secure social housing and the support given to her made this much easier to keep track of. Samantha has now moved into a housing association property with a 12-month review to make sure it is suitable to her needs and will then be able to carry on living there long term.

Samantha felt that the dedicated support from the youth pathway meant that her case was dealt with much more urgency and found the ongoing contact reassuring.

**"I felt a lot more supported, I felt like there was actually someone sort of fighting my corner, because the first time when I was homeless, I felt so like miserable, like I was really like suicidal, I even like got sectioned because I was trying to kill myself one time...Whereas like this time round, in 2019 it was a lot more better, it made a huge difference actually having someone there who was like professional, like sort of looking out for me and everything. Yeah, it made me feel a lot safer."**

Overall, she described her experiences in 2018 and 2019 as being different in terms of the choice she had in her support.

**"In 2018 no, I didn't feel like I had a choice, because like I said about the safehouse, I was going towards it and I was a bit like I don't think that I need this, but obviously I needed somewhere to live, but I didn't think the safehouse was the right, but obviously couldn't say or do much about it"**

**"In 2019 I did feel like I had a choice. Like I said, I had a choice in what route I went down and what type of support I got as well yeah."**

Through the two years of support she has had her situation improved but she described this as it being a "rollercoaster of a journey" having gotten worse before it got better.

**"I've never been through this before, and he was quite understanding. He did kind of explain things to me."**

**"Then I got appointment to go and meet with the, the worker over there, the lady. The lady, she took me through all the procedures which I need to go through and she gave me a lot of information. She told me about the document I need to get from my landlord and what's going to happen exactly, from very beginning to the very end."**

Having a longer period of time is also critical to helping build a trusting relationship with an officer and can be key to feeling like someone is listening and understands.

**"The housing officer, the initial was very much sceptical, fact based, kind of felt like she thought I might be lying to her, for me she was on her guard. And after 20 minutes or so that guard seemed to drop and there seemed to be some empathy and some understanding."**

As Table 2.1 sets out there was a feeling that staff were respectful, well informed and created a trusting environment. There was little to no

variation between the different groups, both in terms of household profile and their presenting situation, in terms of their perceptions of assessment.

However, despite the majority of participants reporting positive experiences there are still examples of people having poor assessments. The outcome of a negative experience at this stage can be significant ranging from increasing the trauma and vulnerability of an individual through to leading them to disengage from support overall:

**"I went along to the appointment and the lady I'd seen was not helpful in any way, shape or form. I found her very dismissive of my situation and what she – in the end of the conversation, she was actually – she said to me she didn't think I was on the Housing List and that I wouldn't be eligible for housing, which left me in a very distraught state because I had nowhere else to go."**

**"I went along to the meeting but when I got there, I had to wait a substantial amount of time, so about an hour and a half from when the lady came, she seemed to, from**

**Table 2.1: Experience of assessment process.**

N=690

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I felt the staff listened sensitively and with respect to my situation	23%	53%	8%	10%	6%
I felt it was difficult to be honest about my situation	6%	20%	6%	50%	17%
I felt the staff made clear what was available to me and why	17%	56%	10%	11%	5%

what she said to me, was that she'd just been given this in the last 15 minutes to go and do, to come and see me. She didn't seem very prepared and she wasn't empathic, she wasn't – of my situation. In fact, I found her quite aggressive and quite rude and after breaking down and about an hour and a half of actually sitting there, having the consultation, she actually told me that all she could recommend that I do was find private housing. She didn't actually think I was on the Housing Register, even though I am, and she was very dismissive of my whole application. Subsequently, I was left high and dry without any support or help."

Local authorities were aware that there was inconsistency in delivery between officers with some identifying differences between old and new staff. Staff who had been involved prior to the introduction of the HRA were less likely to see the value and were more reluctant to buy into the ethos of the HRA. Much of this was a perception that the HRA had not changed previous working practices. This was highlighted by newer members of staff:

**"When I was training, I was really quite shocked by the variety of service provided by the different Housing Advisors. Well, also I think we've been employed because of our support background but then we've been told, "You can't be**

**engaging with clients that much", like, "You cannot help them ring up private landlords; you're an Advisor", or like other people in our team are just like, "Why are you doing that?"**  
– Housing Officer

Housing officers and team leaders highlighted that the change of emphasis has been difficult.

**"My job is completely different from what I was doing before. Before I was initial assessment, which was basically a quick chat for 10 minutes, with the public, now it's a lot more in-depth case work, and I wasn't used to that, so it's quite challenging."**  
– Housing Officer

Some frontline staff highlighted that this attitude was also evident at the middle management level affecting the leadership and direction of delivery, although there was acknowledgement that this is improving. Managers also acknowledged the shift in role to focus more on softer skills and support backgrounds rather than traditional local authority housing services approaches, and how this is helping with the delivery of the HRA.

Whilst the research shows generally positive experiences of the assessment process the same was not true about the likely outcomes with only 52 per cent of reporting that they left their assessment feeling positive about

their options. There was little variation between different households, although single men did report slightly higher than average (53%). Similarly, those who were relief cases at assessment stage reported slightly more positive perceptions than those at prevention, 47 per cent to 44 per cent. However overall it is clear that despite the effort given to developing good relationships the actual reality of what support would be available to them was an evident disappointment.

**"I hoped there'd be more options, like, places to stay for people that are homeless."**

**"It's crazy because there's such an epidemic with regards to housing and homelessness and yet there's still so little support out there for people and that's really frustrating."**

More detail on housing outcomes is reported in chapter 4.

Participants did seem to be aware that some of these challenges were not the fault of the housing officers and were able to acknowledge their support whilst expressing frustrations at their options.

**"Yeah, the process is a bit slow but, aside from that, it's a warm, reasonably safe environment."**

**"I was told that it's not a quick process, not an easy process. It definitely wasn't but I did get a good result out of it."**

## 2.7. Personalised Housing Plans

Personalised Housing Plans (PHP) form the foundation of the support offered under the HRA. They are intended to constitute a holistic support plan that is developed collaboratively with actions for both the local authority and the applicant. Despite this only 40 per cent

of participants were able to identify that they a PHP had been created for them. This had increased somewhat between the first and second wave of the fieldwork, raising from 37 per cent to 45 per cent, which suggests awareness is increasing.

There are some respondents who rightly did not receive a PHP either because they were not eligible for support because of their immigration status or their housing issue was resolved at advice stage. Likewise, this does not mean that these were the only people to receive a PHP as, despite being in receipt of support other respondents may have not been aware that a PHP had been created for them. However, it does suggest that awareness of PHPs was low, and indicates a lack of clarity in communication from local authorities as to the process they are engaging their customers in. Of those who received a PHP, just over half, (52%), of participants stated that they were involved in creating their plan, with 83 per cent stating that they had agreed to their plan. Respondents highlighted how helpful their PHP was in terms of helping them manage what they needed to and making them feel less overwhelmed.

**"Yeah, that [PHP] did help a lot. I was a lot less forgetful, a lot less scatty, a lot less feeling like there was a lot that I had to do, just seeing it in a few bullet points, and then it was like, actually, I've got not much to do. I've just got to repeat it."**

**"I knew that if it was documented [in my PHP] then that sort of is like a statement really...and I think that it did help in a few situations."**

Whilst the majority of respondents reported that their PHP was personalised to their needs and that they understood their plan there is a still sizeable population who disagreed with this (see Figure 2.5).

As one of the new elements introduced under the HRA there is likely to be bedding in time as processes and ways of working in delivering PHPs are developed. However local authorities should be working to ensure that their PHPs are effective support tools to help people coming through their services. In particular the lack of personalisation within the plans was highlighted and with 25 per cent of respondents disagreeing that their plan was personalised to their needs there is a need for local authorities to explore their own practice here (see figure 2.5).

**“They talked about personalised plans. There was nothing personal about it.”**

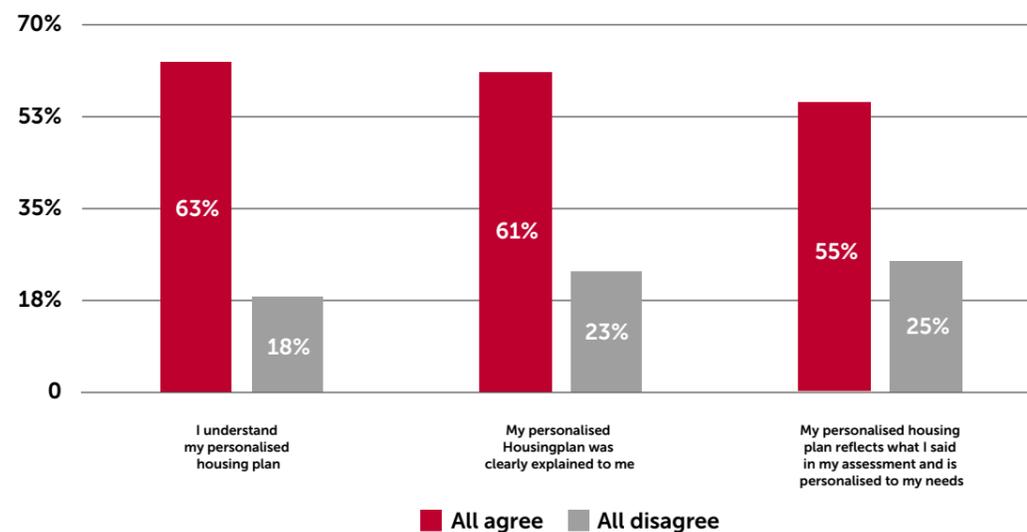
Local authorities are not naïve to this highlighting generic plans, and expressing frustrations in the tools that encourage this.

**“There was nothing “personal” about the PHP, it was very generic.”**  
– Housing Officer

**“When I first joined the team in April, I was asked to specifically review cases of personal housing plans, and I found them all the same, and it wasn’t kind of like tailored for the individual person or their case, and that was an issue that I kind of brought up to the manager.”**  
– Housing Officer

**Figure 2.5: Understanding and use of PHPs**

N=380



**Case study: Impact of lack of ongoing, holistic support.**

Mark is a care leaver who had a difficult transition when leaving care due to a series of bereavements which led to him being inappropriately housed with his father, during which time he became involved in criminal activity and substance misuse. He lost contact with social services and had no support at the time he moved between children’s and adult services. He left his father’s house at a point when his mental health had deteriorated, with a diagnosis of depression and PTSD, and moved in with his partner’s family. During this time he began looking for both work and more permanent accommodation.

The Jobcentre referred Mark to Housing Options and booked an appointment for him. He described his Jobcentre advisor as going above and beyond to secure him support as he had been having difficulties getting through to Housing Options on the phone himself.

He was assigned an officer who completed an assessment. Mark described the advice and support he was given poor. The options available to him were looking for private rented accommodation and bidding on social properties. He was given no advice or support on how to do this. Despite being a care leaver, he was given a low banding for social housing. It took 3 months to get this raised but it was repeatedly lowered incorrectly due to association with his father who was banned from social housing in the area.

After the assessment he only had contact with his designated officer two or three times, but he found it difficult getting hold of them and said that they did not try and contact him. Mark describes his experience with Housing Options as an ‘extremely rough time’ where ‘every single thing went wrong’. The communication was poor, he would call and email with no response from his housing officer. During this period Mark was asked to leave his accommodation and began sofa surfing.

He went back to Housing Options in person to follow-up on his case but was told by the receptionist that he had been removed from the housing list and that he had no local connection, and his appointment had been cancelled. He was advised to return to his mum’s where he had a connection, despite his mum having died prior to him entering care. This was a negative and traumatic experience which was resolved but increased his distrust of the Housing Options service.

Mark had been attempting to access a PRS property through property websites and contacting landlords. However, as he had not been told that he was eligible for the one bed LHA rate and therefore had been looking for properties on the lower shared accommodation rate he was struggling to find anywhere affordable.

After several weeks of coming to Housing Options on a daily basis an officer in the private sector team took it upon themselves to help Mark to secure a property. This officer sat down with Mark and called a number of private rented sector landlords that the council had relationships with until she found him a place he could stay, paid for by the one room housing benefit rate. Mark is now housed in this property.

Marks situation shows numerous systemic failures across different services from social services to Housing Options. A lack of holistic and ongoing effective support from Housing Options who provided him with poor quality generic advice and a lack of clarity in his status leading to miscommunication and bad practice. The work that was done to secure him a property could have been conducted straight away and would have saved time and distress. A personalised and trauma informed approach to cases such as these would lead to cases being dealt with much quicker buying officers time to deliver higher quality support.

Local authorities also reflected on the challenges in delivering PHPs based on their respective administrative and technological set-up:

**“Especially with the way the PHP is set up on our computer system; to make tasks you have to do each one manually and it probably takes you about five minutes to do each task, and if you’re sitting with a person in front of you when you’re doing that it’s not good personal service.”**

– Housing Officer

PHPs are intended to be living documents that respond to the changing situation of the individual or household however only 19 per cent of participants stated that their plan had either been reviewed or updated:

**“It hasn’t been updated, definitely. We might have reviewed it at one point but it definitely hasn’t been updated.”**

Without a review process PHPs may quickly become outdated and not respond to current need, this is particularly true for individuals in volatile housing situations, or whose situation changes over the course of their time engaging. It is worth considering the implications of not reviewing a PHP if an individual is moving from prevention to relief for example.

**“They did a homeless assessment on me and awarded me [banding]... I went back to housing last week and, as I say, I am now literally homeless, I’m just like sofa surfing at the moment, and they’ve told me they can’t offer me temporary housing because the [status] that I was awarded at the time of my homeless assessment still stands even though the circumstances have changed.”**

If local authorities are not reviewing PHPs then it suggests a lack of engagement with them as an effective tool:

**“In my head a PHP is a support plan and it’s possibly the worst support plan I’ve ever seen. I’ve used lots of different support planning tools and just the layout of it, how it’s done, it just doesn’t... it’s not person-centric, it’s not holistic. We can override and write our own tasks in but it would be so much easier – and for them to be able to see is as well visually; for people to engage in the support plan they have to be able to read it and see it easily and it’s just not.”**

– Housing Officer

This is also echoed by participants with 34 per cent reporting that they have neither read or looked at their PHP:

**“It was just like a massive pack of paper, just a complete waste of paper just saying, “This is your housing plan, do commit to looking for houses, do everything that we’ve agreed.”**

The feedback from local authority is not wholly negative and in cases where the local authority has embraced the support plan aspect of the PHPs they are emphasising the benefit of them.

**“Well, I create, on the personal housing plan, I put a lot of detail in there about affordable, affordability and different areas, properties that are available in different areas. I do research on properties and put links, type links onto the personal housing plan, so they’re really specific in showing what the housing options are.”**

– Housing Officer

**“We are always trying to work more on going the extra step, though, with the plans. When we trained it all out, we were very much like ‘oh it’s very restorative’, you know, you can address someone’s mental health with them, you can talk about how if someone’s got an addiction issue they’re going to get help and**

**we very much wanted to go in that direction where we could help fix the cause of the issue rather than just fixing the issue itself, and there’s always work to do around that.”**

– Team leader

One local authority partaking in the research has commissioned out the delivery of their PHPs for certain cohorts emphasising the need for the support in the plan to be embedded with the actual delivery to ensure a coherent pathway for the individual.

**“So, rather than have other people involved unnecessarily, they’re working, they’re engaging with that person, they’re building their confidence and trust with that person, so they carry on and do the plan with them.”**

– Management

Ultimately a PHP is only as effective as the support it entails and as chapter 3 sets out this can be limited. Only 44 per cent of participants said that they felt the steps in their plan would help resolve their housing issue.

## 2.8. Ongoing engagement

Following on from the initial assessment and engagement period, participants overwhelmingly reported issues with ongoing contact and follow-up. There were reports of a general lack of communication over long periods of time post their assessment:

**“Now, my dedicated worker who is meant to set up I think like fortnightly or monthly check-ups with me – never. It was never like the Job Centre where it was like every two weeks you come back and pop your head in. It was never like that, I had only seen my worker three times in total, and that was right at the start, ever since then I didn’t hear anything. He gave me his number, he gave me his office**

**number, just never responded to my calls, I’ve left him voicemails, I’ve sent him texts and there’s been no communication ever.”**

**“And then I haven’t from – I mean according to them I was made homeless on the first of September I haven’t heard from them since. I haven’t heard from them since that first initial contact which was in August.”**

Difficulties in managing to get through to their housing officer was also highlighted with people reporting leaving multiple voicemails and sending emails to no response:

**“No one was communicating with me, I’d send emails to people who would never get back to me, I called people. Sometimes when I needed to be in work, I’d call them once every hour just to try making emergency calls to them and they’d never get back to me. I had a million and one problems with the housing.”**

For many people this lack of being kept informed left people feeling uncertain and confused about their situation, and increasing their distress in an already difficult time:

**“But even once every two weeks or something, just to let me know what’s what. So I don’t feel alone, because when I say I’m completely lost, I’m completely lost, I’m just going every day not knowing what to expect or what’s going to happen, am I going to be stuck here forever with my son?”**

However for those who were reliant on rent deposit or other forms of financial incentive, particularly within the PRS, these kind of delays in communication could mean the difference between securing a property or missing out.

It is important to highlight that this is not a universal experience with

participants also reporting good communication with their housing officer, and associated ready actioning of support:

**"If I send an email, she'll respond to email within, well, let's say, maximum half an hour. [...] It makes me feel good because at least I know that it's not something like, you know, you're sending into the air, you're sending the email, then you wait for the response, a couple of days. Then you feel really unsecure and unsafe and you don't know what to do. So as far as how good a contact with the lady, she responds to my emails very quickly and she's giving me the answers which makes me feel OK."**

**"Quite a bit, she's been chasing me up for this form about the extra money, because I've been really ill in the last two or three weeks I just haven't been able to fill out the form so yesterday I actually got round to doing it and I spoke to her on the phone and then emailed the form across. Also, I spoke to her on the phone because I was just a little bit stuck on a few questions so she was able to help with that as well."**

Where ongoing communication was poor local authorities reflected that this was overwhelmingly due to their caseload size and inability to manage the level of case working that was now expected of them. They reported that the increased administrative burden was challenging to manage and that this restricted them from being able to do the required follow-up and continued that is expected from the HRA and new ways of working.

Local authorities particularly emphasised the challenges of their caseloads and how this was becoming prohibitive to constructive case management working.

**"So, you had a maximum amount of cases that actually at that point it**

**stopped until you could then start closing cases and stuff. Here that doesn't happen; it's just continuous. And I think I got to 40 a couple of weeks ago and I was like, "It has to stop at some point", and I was just told, 'No, it doesn't; you just keep going'."**

– Housing Officer

**"So, she came in, so my whole day was then with her. Then I was given a case and the whole day was spent with those two people, the whole entire day. So that meant there's 30 cases I've got left."**

– Housing Officer

This is also reflected in the practice work supporting local authorities where Housing Options officers are holding significantly higher caseloads with additional administrative duties as well. This has reduced officers' ability to do effective casework and follow-up to check on clients' progress is almost non-existent. This has highlighted a particular capability and skills gap around 'case management' and is having an inevitable impact on outcomes for applicants. PHPs are not being reviewed or monitored and local authority actions are not being completed, for example if someone finds their own property, tries to contact their caseworker but before they receive a response the property has gone. Despite this there are examples of local authorities who have restructured their teams and processes sufficiently that they were not finding this to be the case, and were better able to keep their caseloads lower:

**"So as part of all the funding we got, our head of service decided to employ a lot of team leaders, so whereas I know a lot of other local authorities spent it on administrative stuff, you could help with the plans and the letters, we sort of went with more of a ... more managers to help manage caseloads, so to begin with I think every single case was coming**

**through a manger and being discussed so the staff didn't feel like they were out on a limb making decisions that they were maybe not confident in, so I think that helped a lot."**

– Team Leader

The increased administrative duties related to the HRA were highlighted across most of the local authorities as being an additional burden that reduces face to face customer time. However, where this was anticipated and incorporated into new ways of working it appears these concerns have been mitigated. Likewise, some local authorities have been particularly affected by their poor IT infrastructure including both case management systems and their ability to interact with H-CLIC. As with the increased

administrative burden where local authorities have both anticipated the impact and ensure the appropriate resource and capacity within the team this can be mitigated.

**"It's not the HRA that's causing the issues, as much. If anyone's struggling to adapt to the change, they need to reconsider their options basically, which sounds harsh, but I do tend to find that... I mean, HRA, you could say, has had an impact on the team, but it's not the laws because it's more favourable towards the customer, and it gives us more time. A new way of working, basically. We are getting the results though, as a whole."**

– Housing Officer

### Case study: Delays in communication with Housing Options

After being given a section 21 by his landlord Simon approached Housing Options for support. The primary action in Simon's PHP was to look for accommodation for him and his family in the private rented sector. He was told that the council would provide them with the first month's rent and a deposit for a PRS property. As instructed, he set up a credit union account in readiness for money to be paid by the council.

Simon found a number of viable PRS properties but was reliant on the financial support from the local authority to secure them. He had repeated difficulties getting his housing office to respond in time before he lost them. This was not only frustrating but as Simon had placed his own money down as a holding deposit he was also being financially affected. After this has happened a number of times Simon stopped looking and instead relied on his housing officer to find a suitable property for them.

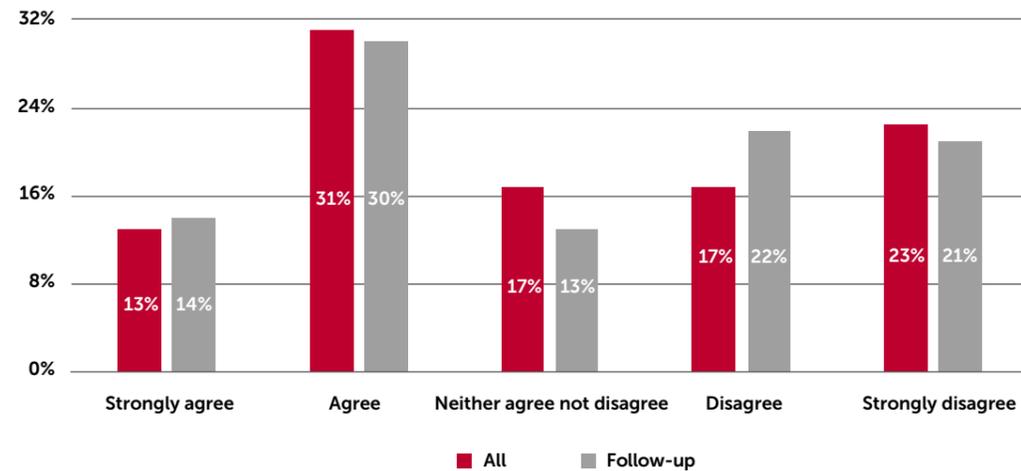
Simon found it frustrating that he was doing everything he was told to do, but his housing officer was not responding to his emails about securing a PRS property. He said that no one took control of the situation to help him and treat this like the emergency that it was. He thought that they were shocked that he was able to find properties and that they weren't prepared enough to respond when he found suitable properties.

Due to these delays Simon and his family's housing situation worsened and they were moved into temporary accommodation. Since then they have been successful in securing a housing association property near where the family had previously been staying.

Despite an overall positive outcome, poor and slow practice meant that quicker and cheaper options were missed and that the proactive actions of Simon to secure accommodation were wasted.

**Figure 2.6: Did your overall experience with Housing Options meet your expectations?**

N=1076



## 2.9. Overall reflections

For most participants, the feeling overall was that the support they had received from Housing Options hadn't resolved their housing issues. Although it should be noted that the proportion who felt that Housing Options had helped doubled between the initial survey and follow-up. This demonstrates the need to consider the whole journey of someone's Housing Options experience and not just capture based on a snapshot in time. As section 4 sets out achieving sustainable housing outcomes can take time and people are often not moved quickly into accommodation.

Participants reflected on their overall engagement with the service highlighting frustrations when the severity or urgency of their situation seriously. The importance of an empathetic approach throughout the whole process was also highlighted. Respondents were generally aware of the lack of support available to Housing Options but wanted to be treated with compassion.

**"Sometimes you just have to say, 'Wait a minute, you know, this is my life we're talking about, it's not a case of 'can I have the cookies or not?'**

**this is 'I need somewhere to live.' "You just want reassurance that things – that there are like options out there for you but there's none of that."**

When considering whether their overall experience with Housing Options met their expectations 44 per cent of both the overall cohort and follow-up participants agreed that it had (see figure 2.6). However, there was still a significant proportion of people who disagreed with this, with 23 per cent and 21 per cent strongly disagreeing respectively.

Based on the experiences of the research participants the current journey through Housing Options is very front loaded with the emphasis on building relationships and the initial assessment process. The ongoing and later stages of the process appear to be less developed and local authorities are finding it challenging to ensure continuous engagement and case work. This is perhaps not unexpected, the most significant procedural new elements brought in with the HRA are all based around the early stages of the journey. However, as the HRA embeds and implementation progresses focus must now be on ensuring this follows through to the whole experience.

# Chapter 3: Support provided

## 3.1 Support provided by Housing Options

From the survey responses and the in-depth interviews the most common form of intervention offered is information on accessing the private rented sector. A number of participants in the research highlighted that this was the only support they were offered and at its most basic consisted of a list of potential landlords for them to contact, of which a number of participants reported that they were unable to access these properties due to welfare:

**"Basically they just said to look at these websites and this is your like weekly allowance, weekly rent allowance, just went through things like that. But as I say, a lot of the websites that they give are like Zoopla, Prime Location, things like that, and as I say, a lot of the landlords don't want to know."**

**"Every single landlord that I had in five months of searching, we're talking about every day applying to ten to 15 properties, every single response was, 'We do not accept DSS [sic].'"**

**"I thought that they would have a list, I thought they'd be able to**

**show me a list of properties where they were friendly landlords who accepted housing benefit or accepted, you know, where I could, you know, a list of people I could ring or they would help me to ring people."**

Tied to advice on accessing the PRS, 69 per cent of respondents stated that they had received either a rent deposit and/or support to pay their rent through a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). For many people the financial support to access a PRS property is vital to being able to secure the accommodation, and alleviates anxiety over affordability.

**"But I do have help from the lady from the council, she's helping me to find accommodation and fill out the documents. They also, they also... advised that the housing department can help with rent in advance or deposit, so that's a lot of help as well. If I find something, I don't have to worry about extra things on the top of finding the property. Because if the property is going to be affordable, as they're checking the budget as well, and the financial situation, my financial situation, then they will be able to help as well with the deposit and rent in advance. "**

### 3.2 Prevention activity

Despite the different support needs of those presenting to Housing Options at prevention stage against those presenting at relief stage, there is generally very similar support offered across both cohorts. There are some variations within this. People presenting at relief stage are more likely to have been offered support around access to the PRS including financial support, whereas those presenting at prevention were more likely to have been referred to other services such as Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice Bureau, or local housing support charities. Figure 3.1 below sets out the full breakdown of support offered on participants PHPs broken down by initial duty owed.

Those who initially presented to Housing Options at the prevention stage were more likely to be offered temporary accommodation. However, given that families are over-represented in the prevention category (51% against 23% single households) this is perhaps not unexpected, as where prevention is unsuccessful households with dependent children will be found in priority need and therefore eligible for interim accommodation.

Challenging illegal section 21 notices were discussed in a number of cases by participants as an action many local authorities were using to extend the time available before the 56 days under the prevention duty:

**“And so the notice he’d given me, which was two months, wasn’t actually legal and in order for the two month notice to be legal he had to do a series of bureaucratic moves which we then did. [...] The support that they gave me was to reassure me that whatever it is my landlord had told me up to that point was not legally binding so he couldn’t throw me out. [...] So it was kind of buying time.”**

Whilst for some this was viewed positively in terms of giving them extra time others found this frustrating as they felt it was delaying an inevitable outcome, and in the meantime, they were dealing with a stressful situation with their landlord:

**“Useless, I felt like they were quite useless. It was a bit stressful. Like I felt like it was just really useless even going there, do you know what I mean? They just told me, do you know what I mean, to get a Section 21, they weren’t going to help me until that. So I felt kind of like, “Oh, it’s come to nothing,” do you know what I mean? I cried when I came out but I thought what can I do?”**

However ultimately the findings suggest that there is little activity occurring by way of proactive and genuine prevention. To deliver improved prevention outcomes, staff working in local authorities highlighted they lacked the time needed to do effective prevention work.

**“If they came in at prevention they’d both be on the backburner anyway because we haven’t got the time to deal with prevention cases as fully as we should be doing.”**  
– Housing Officer

The research found that in a lot of areas crisis management cases were often prioritised either through finding alternative accommodation via a relief duty or use of temporary accommodation and the full duty. This approach often led to a vicious circle where prevention opportunities were missed leading to more relief and temporary accommodation cases:

**“I don’t think more cases are being prevented. I think that, with caseloads being as they are, then you might have a time window for prevention, but that time window can, in some cases, be missed, just because of caseloads.”**  
– Housing Officer

**Table 3.1: Support provided under the HRA**

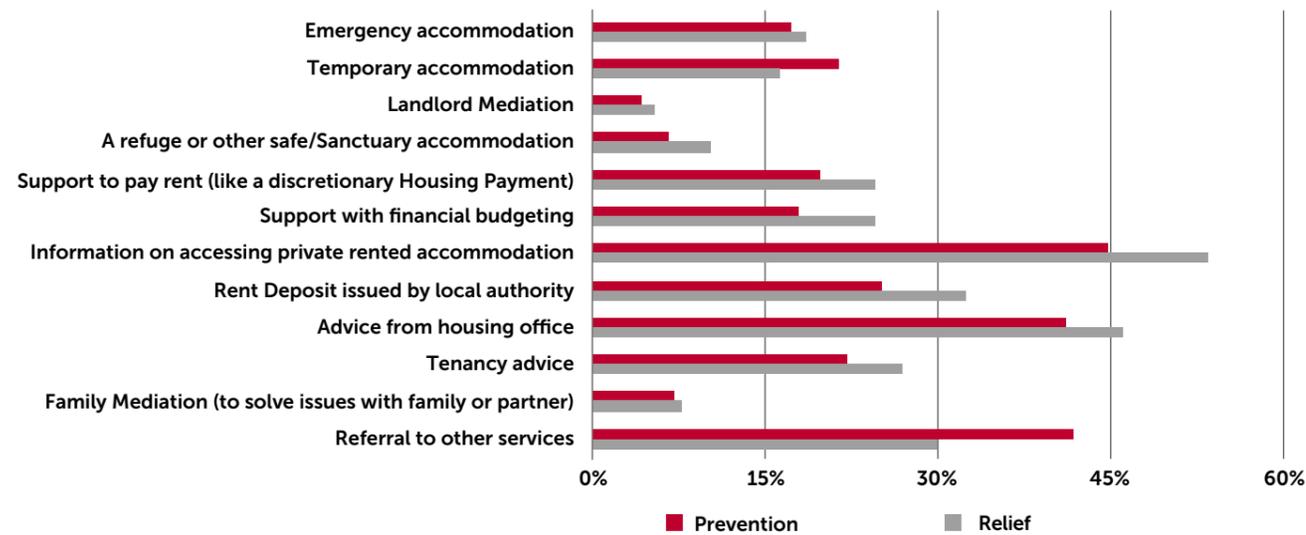
Intervention	Count	%
Attempting mediation/conciliation where an applicant is threatened with parent/family exclusion		
Landlord mediation	24	6%
Family mediation	37	9%
Assessing whether applicants with rent arrears might be entitled to Discretionary Housing Payment		
Support to pay rent	127	31%
Providing support to applicants, whether financial or otherwise, to access private rented accommodation		
Rent deposit	158	38%
Information on accessing the private rented sector	281	68%
Assisting people at risk of violence and abuse wishing to stay safely in their home through provision of ‘sanctuary’ or other measures		
A refuge or other sanctuary accommodation	43	10%
Helping to secure or securing an immediate safe place to stay for people who are sleeping rough or at high risk of sleeping rough		
Temporary accommodation	109	26%
Emergency accommodation	101	24%
General support		
Support with financial budgeting	115	28%
General advice	243	59%
Referral to other services		
Legal services	9	5%
Homelessness charity or service	51	27%
Women’s service	8	4%
Drug and alcohol service	12	6%
Adult social care	6	3%
Mental health services	17	9%
Children’s social care	4	2%
Jobcentre Plus	18	9%
Domestic abuse services	8	4%

Some staff felt that outcomes had got worse since the introduction of the HRA due to the lack of time that they had to deal with the people on their caseloads. It was also suggested that prevention outcomes had not improved. There was also reports from some areas that there was less pre 56-day prevention was being done than prior to the HRA:

**“I feel that under the old legislation there was more flexibility to intervene a lot earlier, early intervention. And we kind of have that as an informal way of working but that’s because we’ve decided to do it, not because the legislation tells us to do it.”**  
– Housing Officer

Figure 3.1: Support offered through PHPs

N=380



**“I think some of the frustration is that we’re doing quite a lot of early intervention, so pre-prevention, and that’s not being recognised or that’s not being accounted for anyway.”**

– Housing Officer

Interviews with staff have highlighted inconsistency both between and within local authorities on the contact time officers have with applicants and also the length of time between contacting people and making progress with a case. As well as having a detrimental impact on people applying for assistance, staff also felt the effects of these delays as it meant that they had to deal with this frustration taking up more of their time. In one authority, delays in developing PHP’s also mean that prevention opportunities are missed which in turn adds more of burden onto officer’s caseloads.

Prevention requires a whole council approach as officers need to have workable options available to them to be able to quickly find alternative accommodation or solutions that will keep a household safely accommodated. This requires support not just from across housing teams but from wider housing need and

management teams, probation, children services, and adult social care. The staff interviews indicated more work needed to be done to make this more effective. In one area officers suggested that due to the increased support available at the relief stage, in terms of allocating an increased banding for social housing, case officers were more likely to wait till the end of the 56 days of prevention before initiating more meaningful support.

**“When I go back to when I was a case officer [...] I am pretty convinced I got more preventions then than I do now. Because now it’s just – a lot of the time, for example with situations where they’ve been served a Section 21, I can’t really do anything with them because they’re not allowed to reward the band C until they’re in a relief, so we’re just sitting waiting for the relief.”**

– Housing Officer

This has the potential to create a perverse incentive with the prevention duty not being used to its potential. There is a need for greater emphasis to be put on changing the culture and practice of officers so that they are

### Case study: Prison leaver released with no fixed abode

Nick was released from prison with no fixed abode. He was rough sleeping for two weeks before a charity advised him to attend Housing options.

Nick suffers from mental health issues that can make things like assessments difficult, but he found that the housing officer he was working with reassuring and made him feel comfortable. He was then placed in an emergency night shelter for that evening.

Nick was offered a place in supported accommodation however he was unwilling to take this offer up because of its reputation and his anxiety that it would negatively impact on him. His housing officer advised that he return each day to see if an alternative offer had been found for him. Nick attended Housing Options every day over a three-week period however no alternatives were found. He was told he should have taken his original offer.

Nick got frustrated with the process and had a disagreement with one of the staff. He apologised but became disengaged from support. He stopped going to Housing Options after getting frustrated with the lack of options available to him. He is now sofa surfing and has not been followed up with by Housing Options since losing contact with them.

The most successful approaches to prevention are those that start as early as possible to identify people at risk of homelessness. Those leaving institutions such as prison, like Nick, should be assessed much earlier to ensure that they are not released homeless. Interventions such as Critical Time Intervention (CTI) could play a vital role in helping ensure that people vulnerable to homelessness because of a transition are effectively supported into housing with their additional support needs met.

more focused on some of the softer interventions focussed around prevention available to them rather than relying on council provided accommodation.

**“The culture; definitely culture. Everyone needs to be on-board with preventing homelessness and understand that message. Officers need to be empowered to be able to make decisions and people need to accept that that decision is going to affect other services, and they’ll have to accept that because we’re a statutory service.”**

– Housing Officer

## Chapter 4:

# Housing outcomes

### 4.1 Housing need at presentation

The overall intention of the HRA is to improve outcomes for people going through Housing Options. Whilst it is evident that the HRA has opened up access and the number of people eligible for support at this stage it is less evident that it is having an effect on overall housing outcomes. The examination of housing outcomes in this section look at the overall cohort of respondents, but also look at the outcomes for participants in the follow-up survey. Table 4.1 below sets out the housing situation of research participants at the time that they approached Housing Options.

Families and those with dependent children typically presented whilst still in accommodation either in the private rented sector or social housing, although 26 per cent of family cases reported that they were either sofa surfing or staying with friends or family in the short term. Conversely 70 per cent of people rough sleeping were single males.

### 4.2. Temporary Accommodation

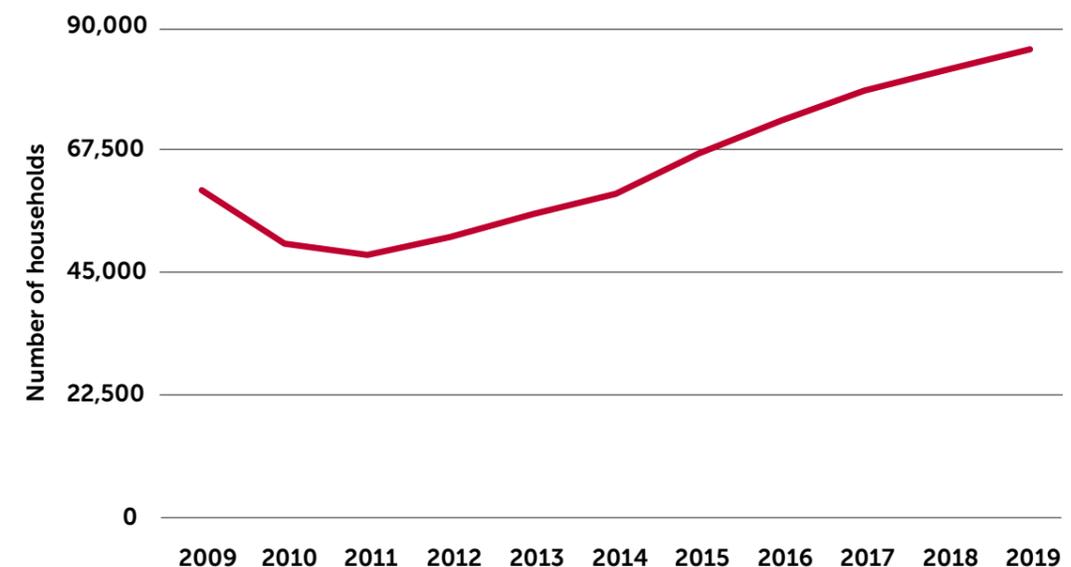
The use of temporary accommodation (TA) in England had been growing substantially prior to the introduction of the HRA. Reaching its lowest point in 2011 it had increased by 70 per cent immediately prior to the introduction of the HRA. One of the highlighted concerns of the HRA was that by widening those eligible for support it would further put pressure on TA use. In the first full year of the HRA, TA use increased by a further 5 per cent taking the overall increase since 2011 to 78 per cent. However, this rise is in line with the ongoing trend in TA use that has been increasing since 2011.

The majority of those accessing TA, both prior to, and post the HRA are families with dependent children however since 2017 the highest growth in TA has been seen amongst single households. As this pre-dates the introduction of the HRA consideration must be given as to whether this increase is also due to a wider focus on reducing rough sleeping numbers.

**Table 4.1: Housing situation the night before attending Housing Options**

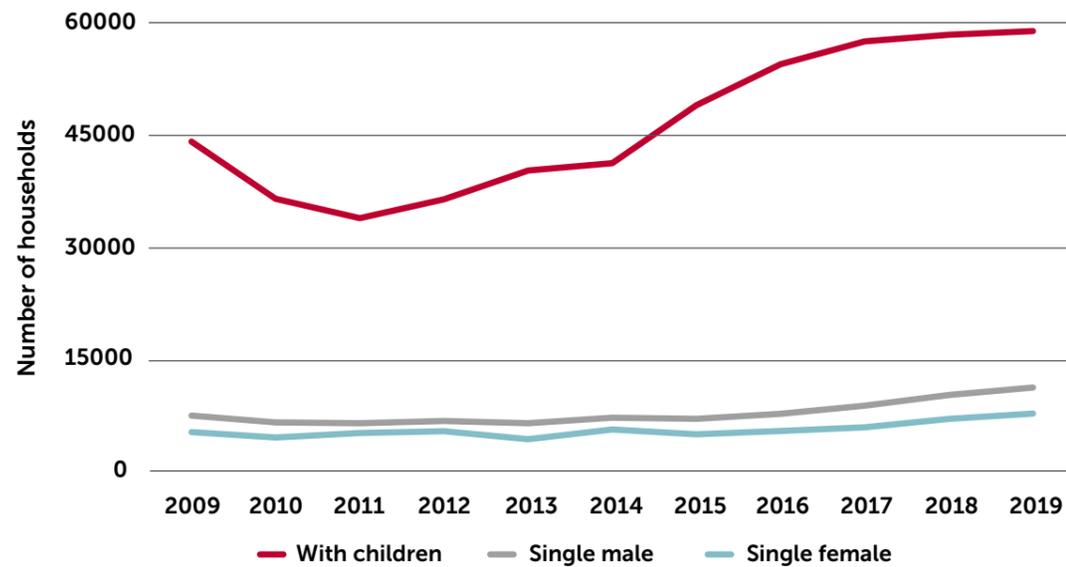
	All		Follow-up	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Living in a property you own	15	2%	4	3%
Renting a council or housing association property	54	5%	9	7%
Renting a private rented property	230	23%	32	26%
Street homeless/Rough sleeping	213	22%	18	15%
Living with family/friends – long term	67	7%	12	10%
Living with family/friends – temporarily	237	24%	34	28%
Lodging (not with family or friends)	12	1%	1	1%
Supported housing or supported accommodation	26	3%	4	3%
Unsuitable TA e.g. hostel, B&B	44	4%	2	2%
Squatting	2	0%	0	0%
Drug or Alcohol Rehab Unit	1	0%	0	0%
Hospital	4	0%	0	0%
Living in a refuge	11	1%	0	0%
Prison	11	1%	1	1%
Nass Accommodation (Home Office accommodation)	8	1%	1	1%
Tied accommodation	3	0%	1	1%
Car	5	1%	0	0%
Other incl. house boat, static caravan	18	2%	2	2%
Unknown	23	2%	2	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 4.1: Temporary accommodation use for all households in England, 2009 – 2019**



Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) Table TA1 – Households in temporary accommodation at end of quarter by type of household

**Figure 4.2. Temporary accommodation use by household type, 2009-2019**



Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) Table TA2 – Households in temporary accommodation at end of quarter by type of household

Since the introduction of the HRA, TA use amongst both single males and single females rose by ten per cent, against an increase of one per cent amongst those with dependent children.

Amongst research participants 31 per cent were offered temporary accommodation as part of their support from Housing Options. Of these 36 per cent (110) had dependent children, 40 per cent (122) were single males, and 22 per cent (69) were single females. Those with dependent children were most likely to have presented to Housing Options from either the PRS (32%) or sofa surfing (27%). Single females were most likely to have come via sofa surfing (29%) although 19 per cent had been rough sleeping. Single males were overwhelmingly rough sleeping prior to being offered TA (48%), followed by sofa surfing (17%).

Of the single males who accessed TA, 89 per cent had multiple complex needs, reporting overlapping support needs related to mental or physical health, substance or alcohol misuse,

or offending behaviour. This is in contrast to 65 per cent of single females, and 45 per cent of households with dependent children.

The most commonly reported type of TA used were hostels including reception centres and emergency units, followed by Bed & Breakfast. However, there is variation amongst household types with single households most likely to be placed in a hostel, and with a much greater proportion of those with children being placed temporarily in the PRS.

Given the increased use of B&B accommodation by local authorities it is worth noting that B&B usage was common across all household types.

The median length of time spent in TA was 21 days however 38 per cent of respondents stated that they had been in TA for over six months.

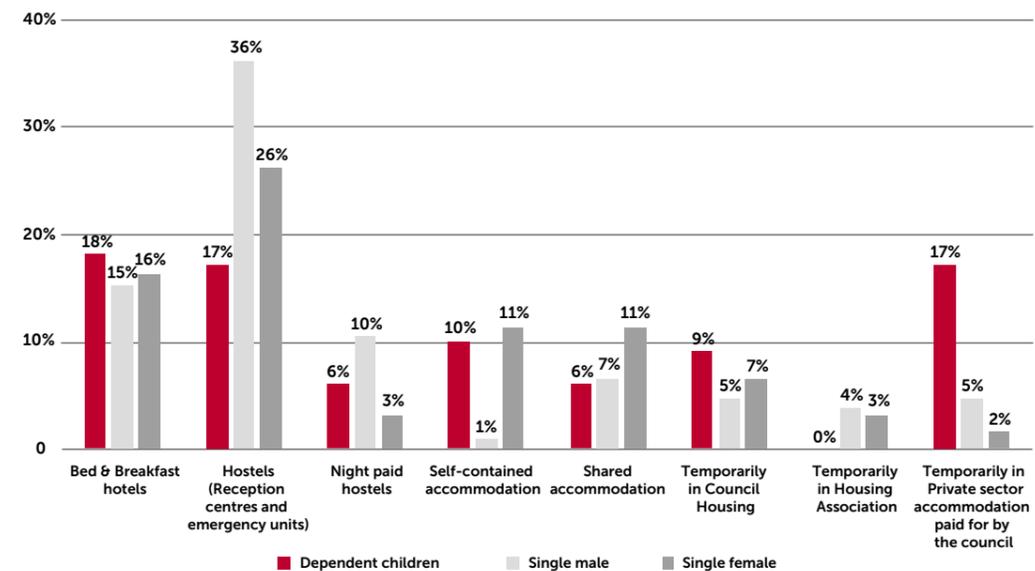
Of those who weren't offered TA, 59 per cent stated that this was because they either still had access to accommodation, or that they were able to stay with family or friends.

**Table 4.2: Housing situation at point of accessing Housing Options for those offered temporary accommodation**

Housing situation at point of accessing Housing Options	ALL	Families	Single male	Single female
Living in a property you own	1%	2%	1%	1%
Renting a council or housing association property	4%	5%	3%	3%
Renting a private rented property	18%	32%	6%	17%
Street homeless/Rough sleeping	26%	5%	48%	19%
Living with family/friends – long term	7%	9%	2%	13%
Living with family/friends – temporarily	23%	27%	17%	29%
Lodging (not with family or friends)	2%	3%	1%	3%
Supported housing or supported accommodation	2%	5%	0%	0%
Living in a temporary accommodation e.g. hostel or B&B	7%	7%	11%	1%
Drug or Alcohol Rehab Unit	0%	0%	1%	0%
Hospital	1%	0%	2%	0%
Living in a refuge	2%	2%	0%	4%
Prison	1%	0%	2%	0%
Nass Accommodation (Home Office accommodation)	2%	4%	1%	1%
Car	1%	0%	0%	3%
Other (please specify)	2%	0%	3%	3%
Unknown	1%	0%	2%	1%

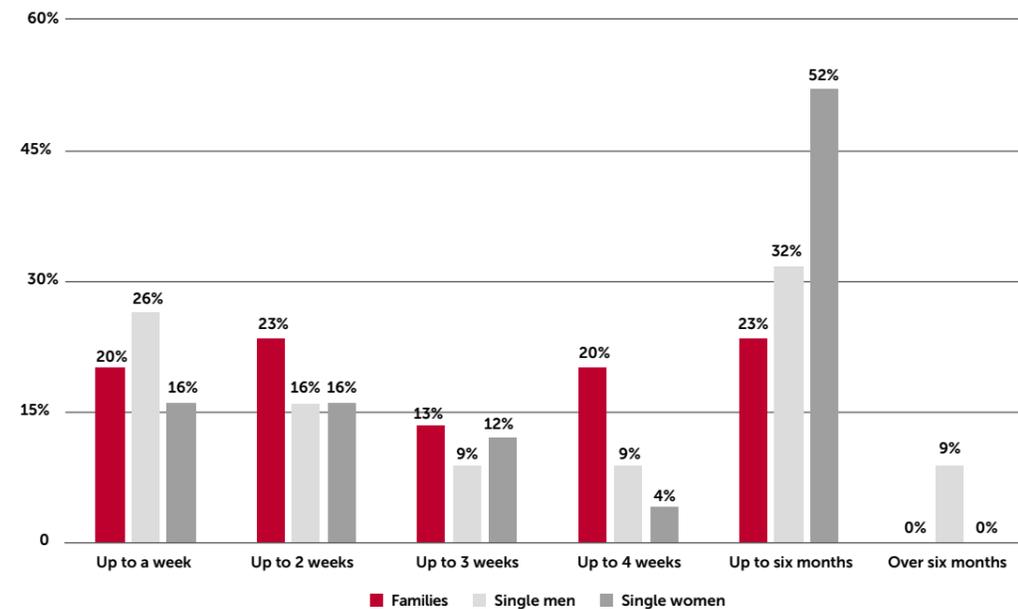
**Figure 4.3: Temporary accommodation by household type**

N=269



**Figure 4.4: Length of time in temporary accommodation by household type**

N=269



### Case study: Trapped in temporary accommodation

Vicky was living with her mum when she became pregnant. The property was not viable for Vicky to continue living there with a baby, and the relationship between her and her mum deteriorated to the point where she was no longer welcome to stay.

Unable to afford a PRS property without additional financial support she contacted Housing Options via their online form. Vicky then waited a month before her assessment. Nevertheless, she described the assessment positively stating the staff were friendly, approachable and that they understood her situation which made her feel happy and confident about her situation

Vicky was placed in temporary accommodation on the same day that she approached and has been told she will be moved into more permanent accommodation once she has had the baby.

Her housing officer also provided her with an information pack that included information on bidding and how to look for properties in the PRS. She said that she found this very helpful, and used the information pack a lot. The council have offered her the one bed rate and will pay for her first month's rent and deposit if she finds a property in the PRS.

Vicky is continuing to both bid for properties and look for housing in the PRS whilst she remains in TA. She describes her situation as having got better because she approached housing options.

This will include those who were at prevention stage and would not necessarily need to be considered for TA.

Sixteen per cent (110) of respondents were told that they were not eligible to access TA because they were not in priority need. Of this population, 66 per cent were single males.

### 4.3. What are people's housing outcomes?

Overall 56 per cent of survey respondents reported a positive housing situation when asked to compare their current position with the night before they presented at Housing Options. Of these the highest proportion were people who had remained either in social housing or in the PRS. It should be noted that this might not be the same property,

for example someone may have been evicted from their PRS property and moved directly into a new property. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents reported a negative situation, in either going from a housed situation to rough sleeping or sofa surfing, or continue to remain rough sleeping or sofa surfing. Sixty-six per cent of this population are single households, with 45 per cent single males. Table 3.3 below sets out the breakdown of these outcomes.

In particular, the housing outcomes for single men presenting at relief stage seem to be seeing the least success despite this being the cohort set to benefit most from the introduction of the HRA. There is also a significant difference in outcomes for this population between wave 1 and wave 2 surveys. During wave 1 28 per cent of single men had presented at Housing Options whilst either rough sleeping,

**Table 4.3: Housing outcome compared to night before approaching Housing Options**

Housing outcome	Number	Percent
From rough sleeping, sofa surfing, cars, tents and public transport to temporary accommodation	66	7%
From rough sleeping, sofa surfing, cars, tents and public transport to housed (social, PRS) or supported	104	11%
Remaining in temporary accommodation	25	3%
From temporary accommodation to housed or supported accommodation	9	1%
Remaining housed or in supported accommodation	273	28%
Housed to temporary accommodation	51	5%
Institutional discharge to temporary accommodation	13	1%
Institutional discharge to housed or supported accommodation	6	1%
Remaining rough sleeping, sofa surfing, cars, tents and public transport	280	28%
From temporary accommodation to rough sleeping, sofa surfing, cars, tents and public transport	6	1%
Housed to rough sleeping or sofa surfing	77	8%
Institutional discharge to rough sleeping or sofa surfing	10	1%

sleeping in cars, tents or public transport, or sofa surfing and remained in that situation at the point they were interviewed. In wave 2 this had risen to 43 per cent. This is compared to 27 per cent and 31 per cent of the overall sample of single households, in which the wave 2 outcomes are driven by an improvement in outcomes for single females. The HRA has increased access to Housing Options amongst single households however single males are still most likely to not be found in priority need and therefore most at risk of reaching the end of their relief duty without a positive housing outcome.

When exploring the longer-term outcomes for specific cohorts we start to see more of a pattern developing between those who present at prevention stage and those who present at relief. The following series of charts highlight the housing outcomes for four of the most common accommodation

types: renting in the PRS, renting social housing, sofa surfing and rough sleeping. These data are taken from the participants in the follow-up survey who were contacted at both wave 1 and wave 2 of the research. The starting point demonstrates their housing situation at the point they presented at Housing Options, the mid-point their situation during their wave 1 interview, and the final point their situation during wave 2.

In general, this suggests that those presenting at prevention stage are likely to have a much smoother and more coherent pathway than those presenting at relief. It also highlights the time needed to achieve positive outcomes, in particular for relief cases: a much higher proportion of the follow-up respondents are housed compared with those who are currently still actively engaging with Housing Options.

Figure 4.5: Housing outcomes for households presenting from private rented accommodation

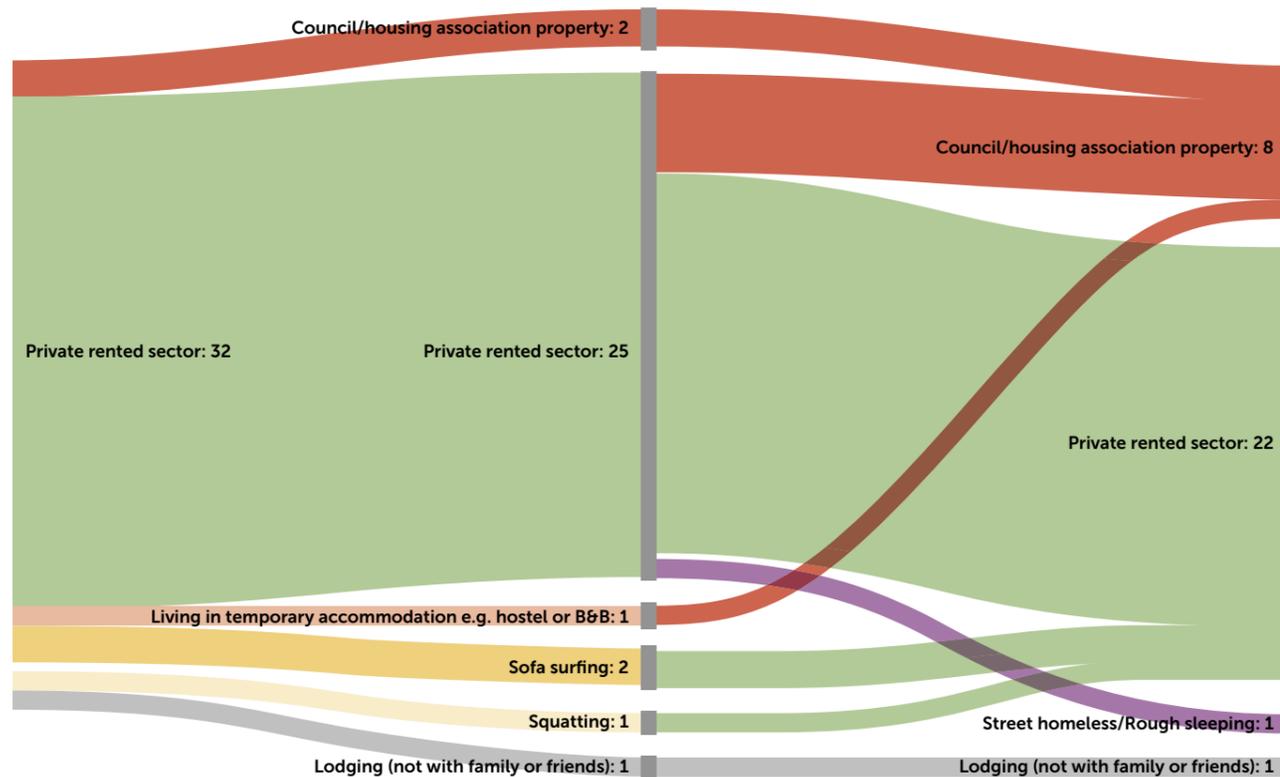


Figure 4.6: Housing outcomes for households presenting from social rented accommodation

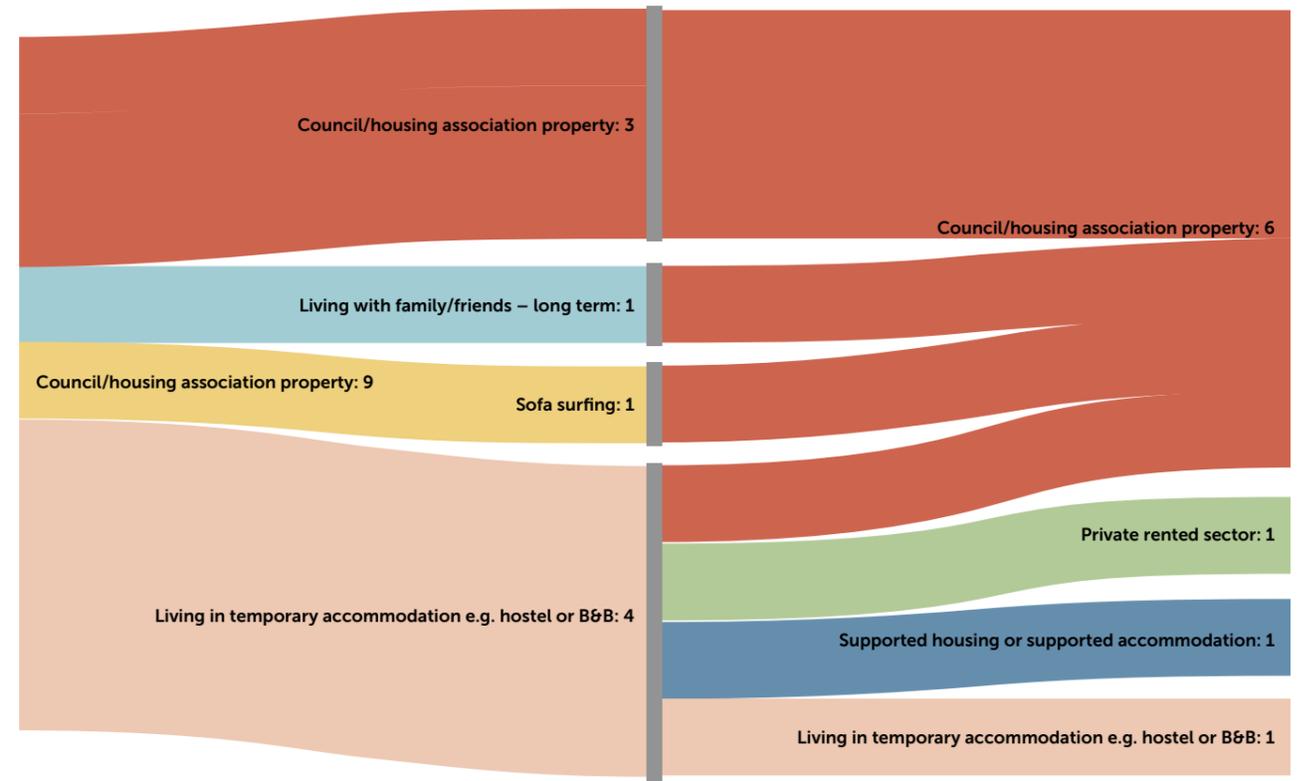
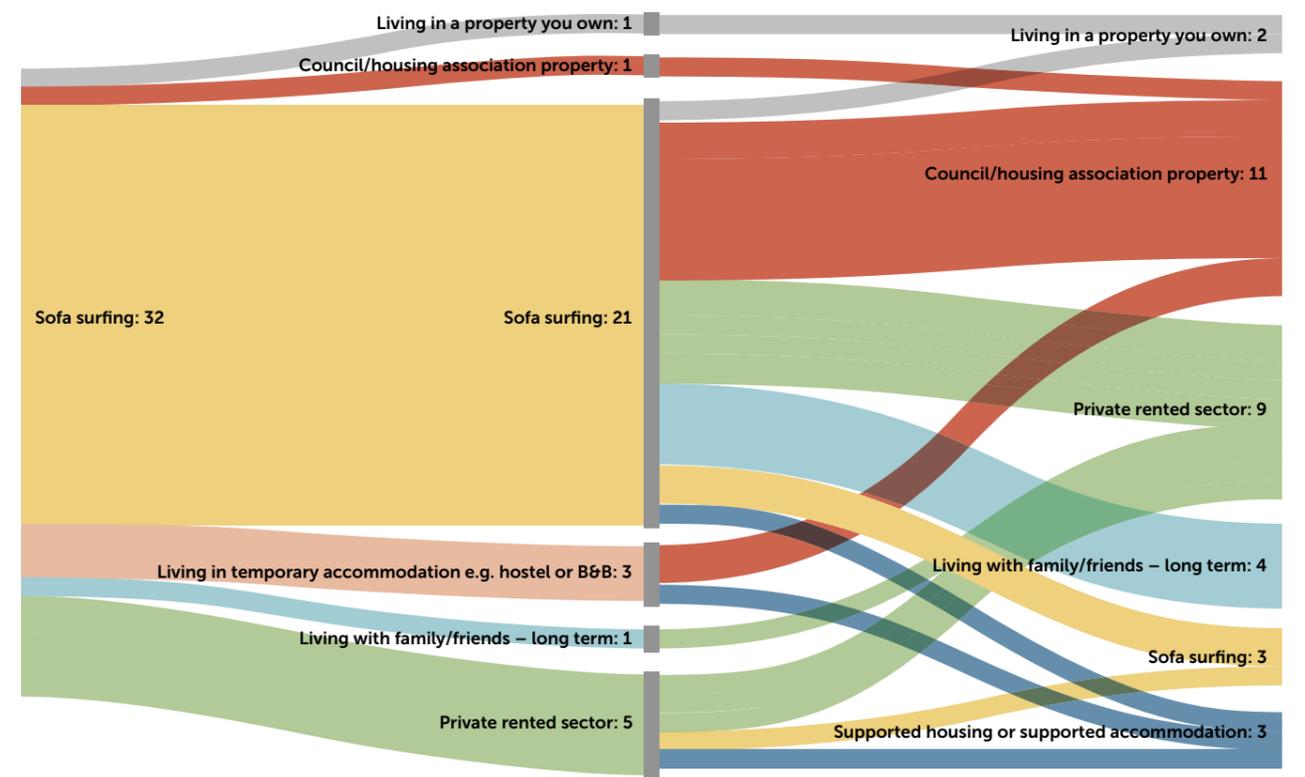
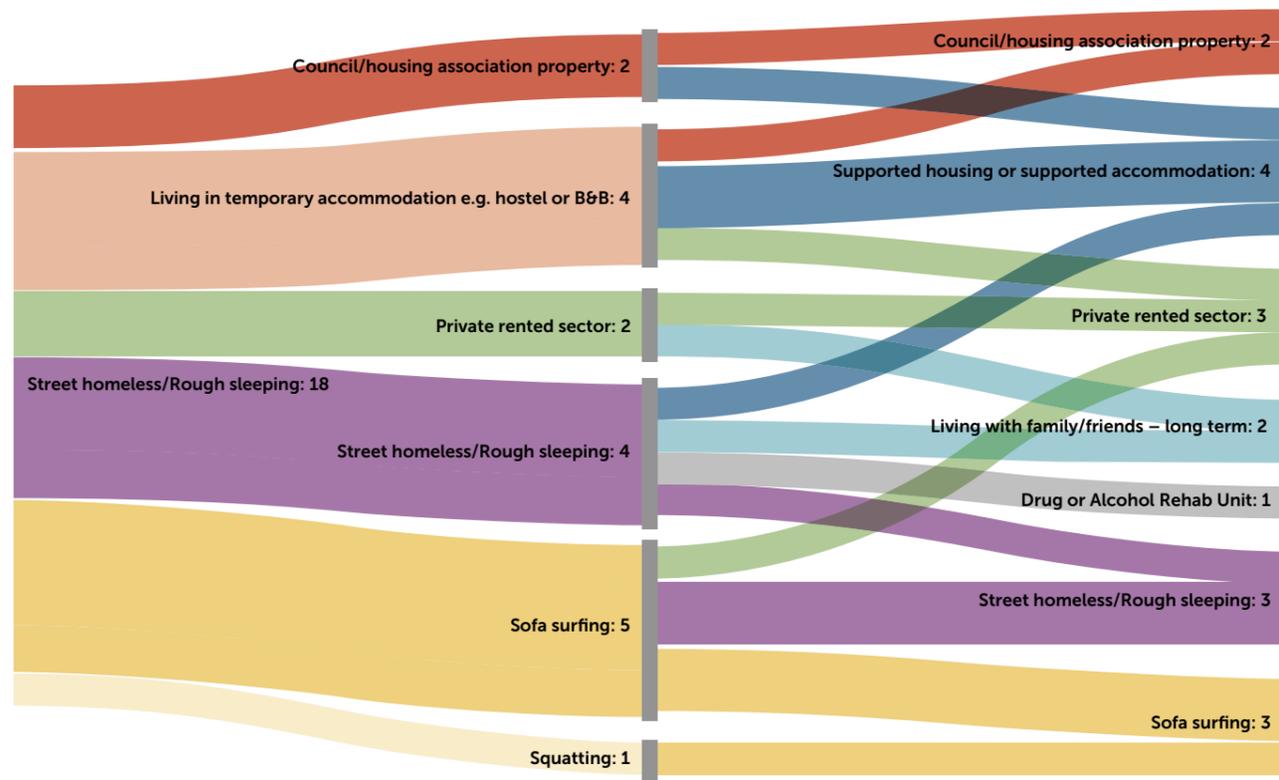


Figure 4.7: Housing outcomes for households presenting whilst sofa surfing



**Figure 4.8: Housing outcomes for households presenting whilst rough sleeping**

#### 4.4 How are housing outcomes achieved?

The previous section demonstrates the difference in housing outcomes based on respondents household type, support needs and when they approached the local authority for assistance. Overall only 39 per cent of respondents agreed when asked that the local authority had helped them to resolve their housing issue. A further 31 per cent of participants reported that they had either supported themselves or with the help of family or friends, and 30 per cent reported that their issue was still ongoing.

Local authorities highlighted the challenges in accessing affordable housing and how this impacts on the outcomes they are able to achieve. Whilst for many of the people gaining access to the bidding system for social housing was one of the key things they were offered as part of their support,

this was heavily caveated to manage expectations:

**“They told me that I should look for private because the bidding could take several years.”**

The lack of availability of social housing effected all participants including families, who whilst eligible were still constrained by the time take for a property to become available:

**“Even though they say you’re a priority because you have children, you have two children, you’re in this priority band, which is supposed to be the highest but then you’re like 915th. So every day, literally people that are more important than me are coming across so you just keep getting pushed back down, do you see what I mean, pushed back down, so it’s confusing.”**

Local authorities further reiterated these challenges particularly for those not found in priority need:

**“Now the way that...the housing register, has been organised is that if people are either prevention or relief duty then they are band 3 or 4 and that means that they’ll be waiting three years or four years or something to be re-housed.”**  
– Housing Officer

With a scarcity of social housing available in all areas, local resourcing and the accessibility of the PRS have a significant impact on the ability for Housing Options teams to meet both their prevention and relief duties. In particular, where Local Housing Allowance (LHA) means that housing benefit no longer covers the cost of rent it can make it more difficult to prevent people falling into arrears, and to find affordable accommodation within the PRS to end homelessness. Alongside changes in the housing market due to shifting demographics these were concerns raised by staff across all housing markets we conducted the research in, highlighting the challenges of how the PRS could help support the HRA.

**“I just felt as though at that time anyway we were struggling as it was with the resources that we had, with all the cuts that we had, supported accommodation was low, private sector in XXX is not fantastic – it never really has been because of the uni’s – so it’s always been a problem there. And I just felt as though it was going to be really difficult for us to sort of work on the prevention aspect side of things mainly due to resources.”**  
– Housing Officer

In many of the research areas there was an emphasis on the need for clients to find accommodation in the PRS even though officers were aware of the difficulties in doing so. For some there was a feeling that cases should

be closed due to none co-operation to encourage people to look for properties.

This was also highlighted by research participants who spoke of being told their only realistic option was to look through the PRS.

**“It was just apply for private housing and that’s it. I wasn’t like – there was no other option.”**

**“The only advice that I was ever, ever given was “Oh, go on Gumtree, sit on the computers, go on Gumtree, go on these websites and look for private rented’, that’s all they told me.” They would just tell me, “Keep bidding on the housing and look for private rented.” No one ever told me how to do it and no one ever told me anything, they said I had to do it all myself or ask my fiancé and her family.”**

Ultimately local authorities felt restricted by being reliant on a PRS that isn’t a viable option for many on their caseloads.

**“I know the HRA focusses on private rent and says that people should be using this as a way out of homelessness but at the moment it’s more a way into homelessness than out of homelessness; it’s not accessible.”**  
– Housing Officer

Despite this some participants did speak to the success they found with the PRS and it being a positive option for them.

**“No, they were telling me I had a choice, but all they were telling me was, “Go bid, go bid, go bid,” but it was extremely unrealistic, it was unrealistic goals. Despite being band A at one point, when I did, I’d still be 100th in the list, do you know what I mean? And they’d say, “Oh, every week you’ll go down the list,” but no, every week I would go**

**up in the list. Some weeks I'd be down to 50, some weeks up be up to 200, so it was never really going down, I was never really making any progress. It was just completely based on luck, whereas private rented, that Marie made one phone call and now I've got a flat, do you know what I mean, after being near enough homeless for – after two years."**

Whilst some success can be found local authorities spoke to the growing challenges of finding viable properties in the PRS. In many cases this was linked to the LHA and the current rates reducing the amount of houses that landlords were willing to rent to those on benefits.

**"The market is totally... as soon as the government cut the LHA to the 30th percentile it was like a tap switching off. It really was. You could see the pre and post difference and what landlords were willing to accept. And landlords are not accepting rents that are set on the 30th percentile."**

– Housing Officer

Research participants also identified LHA as a barrier to them successfully moving into the PRS and the challenges of finding properties that were affordable to them.

**"The government only recognise properties, two-bedroom properties in [location] as costing £834. They don't recognise anything above that level. So I'd found one that was £1,195. A two bedroomed terraced house. But the government don't recognise that that's how much properties cost in [location]."**

However, LHA was not only the reason highlighted as a barrier with respondents speaking to some of the challenges they faced with the local authority in terms of both financial support and helping to facilitate their move into the PRS. One participant

spoke of finding a property but due to the cost was denied a rent deposit from the local authority.

**"I did actually find a property. The old property I was in, I was paying £450 a month. The place I found was £550 a month, and because the rent on the place that I was looking at was £100 more than the old place, they wouldn't issue the bond, like the bond payment, which didn't really make sense because it would have been – for the sake of £100 and me getting a roof over my head, I thought it was a little bit petty really."**

Also identified was the impact that delays in local authority taking action has on properties remaining available. Participants spoke to lags in follow-up from the local authority meant that either there were significant delays on being able to move into the property or that housing that they could have moved into was lost.

**"I contacted the estate agent two, three days later just because I thought it was in hand and she said, "I'm still waiting for the council to send us information that they'll be covering the amount." This whole process of going back and forth with the council and the estate agent took about another six or seven weeks."**

**"They said, "Look in the private sector and we'll help you with your first month's rent and your deposit." My housing officer said, "Once you find somewhere don't [tell them] that you're going to get it through us but just get hold of a draft tenancy copy and the EPC certificate, book an appointment with us, bring in those documents and then we can sort out the first month's rent and the deposit." But my housing officer told me not to call her, she said, "Don't call me because I won't respond, I won't answer." [...] I emailed her about**

**booking an appointment and I've had nothing but she said, "Just email me once you've got a place secured and we'll find the time and you can come in providing there'd be a tenancy agreement and your EPC certificate and then we'll get [payment sorted]" but I've not heard from them. But from the fact that I've had no response over the last four months I think well you know what I'm not even going to rely on it so I went directly to another option."**

Lack of affordable housing both social and PRS means that local authorities are increasingly constrained by the realistic outcomes that they can achieve. However, there are clear areas where the local authorities could improve practice, such as ensuring rent deposits are paid efficiently, that would ensure a cleaner move through the system for those who have been able to find properties.

Nevertheless, without addressing the structural challenges that undermine efforts to end homelessness local authorities will remain limited in the outcomes they can achieve. This will require a significant increase in the supply of homes for social rent and restoring Local Housing Allowance rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents. Ultimately not taking action to address the continuing acute shortage of truly affordable housing options for people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness risks undermining the delivery of the HRA.

**"And it doesn't tackle the big elephant in the room, which is that – not that there's a shortage of housing, it's that there is a shortage of affordable housing. If property were affordable, then we wouldn't be here."**

– Team leader

## Chapter 5:

# Conclusion

Homelessness has a devastating impact on people and communities. With the introduction of the HRA as one of the most important changes to homelessness legislation in England in the past 40 years we are in a position to ensure that prevention is at the heart of homelessness support. Prevention is the key to any effective homelessness strategy and the HRA looks to shift local authorities focus to stopping people experiencing homelessness in the first place. Two years in to its implementation, the research has found the change in law has achieved one of its primary goals – to significantly expand access to homelessness assistance, particularly for single people.

Overwhelmingly people reported a more positive experience when first approaching Housing Options for assistance. Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and the research has shown respondents were mainly satisfied with the physical environment and how staff treated them when they first approached for help. On the whole the initial advice they were given was reported to be relevant, clear and easy to follow. The majority of people we spoke to felt that their assessment took place in a safe and private environment. This was reported across all household types. This is a stark contrast to Crisis' 2014 research<sup>24</sup> which found that lack of privacy, interactions with staff, the office environment, and waiting times

all had a profound impact and often compounded feelings of anxiety, stigma and shame. This is supported by evidence in the Homelessness Monitor: England 2019 where 62 per cent of local authorities reported the HRA as having enabled a 'more person-centred approach', with this response more common in London (79%). Whilst not yet universal, this shift in culture at the early assessment stage is one of the clear successes of the HRA so far and an area where local authorities can and should continue to develop to deliver and share best practice.

However, the intention and ambition of the HRA is being constrained by the housing market, welfare system and funding. Whilst there has been a broadly positive experience of initial contact and engagement with Housing Options staff, the research has shown significant barriers and issues with the support on offer and people's housing outcomes. Mirroring the national trend of the growth in temporary accommodation both pre and post the HRA, nearly a third of (31%) of participants were offered temporary accommodation. In many cases this accommodation is short term and unsuitable – the most commonly reported type of temporary accommodation used were hostels including reception centres and emergency units, followed by Bed & Breakfast.

Both local authorities and people experiencing homelessness talked about the growing pressures leading to a lack of options they had to prevent or alleviate homelessness in their area, citing affordability, lack of supply and access to accommodation as primary drivers. In many cases this led to people feeling abandoned by Housing Options staff who had been managing their case, and whilst some were able to find their own accommodation many were left trapped in homelessness. Whilst structural barriers are impacting on the HRA meeting its full potential, the research has also highlighted areas where local authorities could be doing more to meet their duties and prevent and relieve people's homelessness. Lack of contact and delayed or limited communication left people feeling uncertain and confused about their situation, and increasing their distress in an already difficult time. It is also clear that local authorities are not using the shift in focus to prevention to its full potential and solutions were often limited to a list of landlords and bidding on a limited supply of social housing leaving people trapped in limbo.

Two key elements of the HRA, personalised housing plans and the Duty to Refer, are being used inconsistently. When used to its full potential, PHPs are an effective tool to give people experiencing homelessness and staff targeted and individualised support. Unfortunately, there was evidence of practice where these lacked personalisation and were not updated and were little use to anyone involved. Similarly, the Duty to Refer when used effectively by other agencies encouraged individuals to approach Housing Options at an earlier stage but it does not go far enough. The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention

can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority but at this stage it is not clear that the reciprocity of the agreement is working in the way it was intended.

Early indications from our research show that those presenting at prevention stage are likely to have a much smoother and more coherent pathway than those presenting at relief. More specifically those in permanent accommodation helped at the prevention stage were much more likely to stay in permanent, stable accommodation strengthening the case for why prevention is both the right thing to do and a more effective use of resources.

The HRA is an integral part of a system that can help to support people out of homelessness but we can't stop here. A lack of affordable housing, high rents, and welfare reform are creating a constant pressure that pushes people into homelessness and restricts local authorities in their options. The most effective way to end homelessness is to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. If local authorities have the right resource and support, and action is taken to address the acute shortage of truly affordable housing options, the HRA can be at the heart of ending homelessness for good.

<sup>24</sup> Dobie, S., Sanders, B. and Teixeira, L. (2014) *Turned Away, the treatment of single homeless people by local authority homelessness services in England*. London: Crisis.

## Chapter 6: Recommendations

Ensuring everyone has safe, stable housing creates a stronger society where homelessness has no place. The HRA provides a framework to ensure prevention is at the forefront of ending homelessness across England. The evidence in this report highlights areas where short and long term changes are needed to ensure this ground-breaking legislation reaches its full potential.

**The Westminster government should ensure there is sufficient supply of genuinely affordable housing.** Additional investment is needed to address structural barriers that currently restrict local authorities from fulfilling the duties placed on them by the Homelessness Reduction Act and must include:

**1 Investment in LHA rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents (realigning back to the 30th percentile)** – The under investment into Local Housing Allowance rates is not only a barrier to preventing homelessness but means people cannot be supported out of homelessness and into the private rented sector where suitable. Where people are stuck in hostels and temporary accommodation without being able to move on, this reduces access to these services for others, leaving people with few choices and sometimes meaning they are more likely to have to sleep rough. Between April 2018 and March 2019 £1.1 billion was spent on temporary accommodation for

homeless households. Whilst the majority of this is funded by the DWP, local authorities were forced to spend £280 million of their own budget to meet the need.<sup>25</sup>

Investment in LHA will significantly improve the ability of councils and private landlords to support people to move on from homelessness and find a stable job and home, and reduce expenditure on temporary accommodation. It is a crucial element of reducing homelessness, and of fulfilling the Westminster Government's commitment to end rough sleeping in England by 2024 and the duties placed on local authorities to prevent and relieve homelessness under the Homelessness Reduction Act.

**2 Investment in social housing and a national target for building homes at social rent levels** – In England, there is no national target for building homes at social rent levels. Government policy since 2012 has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of homes for social rent, making it harder for local authorities to house homeless households. The Westminster Government should set an annual target of delivering an additional 90,000 social homes each year for the next 15 years and invest in substantial increases in the delivery of social rented housing

**3 A duty to prevent homelessness should be placed on all relevant**

**public bodies including the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office and the Department for Education** –

The introduction of the Duty to Refer reflects a recognition that successful homelessness prevention can never just be the responsibility of the local housing authority. However, while this is an important first step the actual requirements it places on public authorities are minimal. It is possible for public authorities to fulfil their duty through creating a narrow referral process that by itself is likely to have little impact on preventing homelessness.

The legislation should go further and place stronger requirements on public authorities to work with local housing authorities to prevent homelessness. Effective joint working is key to help address the range of factors that can cause an individual to become homeless, and successfully prevent it. The duty to refer falls short of this and fails to fulfil the government's ambition to embed homelessness prevention across all government departments.

In addition to introducing a duty on public bodies to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness, the MHCLG should review the existing Duty to Refer to ensure that sufficient measures are put in place so that local authorities and other public bodies cooperate effectively with each other to prevent and relieve homelessness.

**The HRA should be changed and strengthened in the following ways:**

**4 Introduce a statutory code of practice to raise the standards of local authority homelessness services across the country** – **The Secretary of State has a power to produce a statutory code of practice to raise the standards**

**of local authority homelessness services across the country.** This is separate from the Homelessness Code of Guidance and should aim to provide a clear and enforceable set of standards for local authorities that will help them to implement the new duties introduced by the Act more effectively. The Code of Practice should include the following elements:

- Specific examples of good prevention and relief activity that local authorities should have available to them as part of a range of options to help secure suitable accommodation for an applicant or prevent them from losing accommodation. This could include the provision of specialist welfare or debt advice, independent mediation services, use of Discretionary Housing Payments or other financial assistance, Help to Rent projects to help people access the private rented sector, specialist support services for survivors of domestic abuse and joint working arrangements with registered social landlords, prisons and social services.

- Specific guidance on the timeframe for making decisions and providing notifications for applicants at key transition points, for example when moving from the prevention to the relief duty or from the relief duty to the main duty. Previously there was a deadline of 33 working days for a decision on a homeless application, but no specific deadlines are currently in statute or guidance around timely initial section 184 decisions and the prevention to relief transition.

**5 Strengthening the code of guidance to ensure the HRA works to its full potential. This should include:**

<sup>25</sup> MHCLG (2019) Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2018 to 2019 individual local authority data – outturn

- More guidance on amendments to allocations policies that emphasises the need for policies and nomination agreements that support prevention rather than hindering. This should include removing restrictions or blanket exclusions that exclude people based on local connection, half on finances and some on convictions or past behaviour.
- Specific examples and case studies to help illustrate the distinction between being threatened with homelessness and being homeless, and therefore whether the prevention or relief duty applies. This is particularly important in relation to people who are sofa surfing, and whether someone in this situation is seen to be homeless.
- More guidance on the advice and information for specific groups (e.g. people with multiple and complex support needs, those exiting prisons, people fleeing domestic abuse) and expectations around this in light of the strengthened advisory duty. This is one element of the HRA that we have rarely seen reflected in practice as the focus is often on complying with the other legal changes.
- More guidance for local housing authorities on determining “affordability” – particularly following the judgment in *Samuels v Birmingham City Council* [2019] UKSC 28.
- Further guidance on “regular contact” and timescales. In services operating under high pressure, we are seeing limited follow-ups and progression of cases during the 56 days. It would be helpful for specific guidance to highlight expectations around this, with examples that highlight the

importance of flexibility and taking the applicant’s needs into account. This should also emphasise that a duty cannot be ended because 56 days have elapsed if the local housing authority haven’t completed their reasonable steps.

- Strengthening and expanding the guidance around early interventions for those at risk of homelessness, but not within 56 days. Some local authorities have expressed concerns that they no longer feel able to intervene at this early stage because it is outside the statutory framework and these interventions will not be recognised or recorded.

**Further investment and longer-term funding is required from the UK government to provide greater financial stability to support local authorities to prevent and end homelessness and should include:**

- 6 Introduce national provision of private rented access schemes across England including a national rent deposit guarantee scheme to improve access to stable, decent private tenancies for homeless people, reducing the burdens on individual schemes and help local authorities procure properties more easily as part of their prevention and relief duties**
  - While the allocation of £19.5 million investment in help to rent services is welcome, this does not go far enough to meet the scale of need identified. Further funding is needed to deliver both help to rent projects and a national rent deposit guarantee scheme to enable access across the whole of England.

Access to a rent deposit guarantee is essential for people who have been homeless and cannot afford to pay a cash deposit and it will also increase local authorities access to the PRS to meet their prevention and relief duties.

The schemes help reduce the financial risk to the landlord in case of any damage to the property.

- 7 The Government must continue to invest in homelessness services to ensure a sharper focus and investment in prevention measures, and evidenced based, housing-led solutions to meet its target of ending rough sleeping by 2024 and end all forms of homelessness.** This should include a national outcomes and performance framework to provide consistency and accountability across policies and service delivery of the HRA at a national and local level. This would also better ensure that any additional funding for local authorities is being spent on effective prevention services and therefore ensuring that the intention of the Homelessness Reduction Act is fully met and delivers the best value for money for Government.

The MHCLG should commit to longer-term funding budgets for preventing and ending homelessness, providing greater financial stability and security to deliver tailored, housing-led solutions, particularly for people with multiple complex support requirements that necessitate access to services over a prolonged basis.

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## Appendix 1: Categorisation of causes of homelessness

	All	
	Count	Percentage
<b>Affordability</b>		
Benefit sanctions	21	2%
Benefits do not cover the cost of rent	10	1%
Issues relating to Universal Credit	9	1%
Rent increase	12	1%
Unable to afford deposit	15	2%
Unable to afford rent	38	4%
Rent arrears	3	0%
Bedroom tax	1	0%
Issue with housing benefit payment	2	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Support needs</b>		
Bereavement	10	1%
Domestic abuse	88	9%
Mental Health issues	47	5%
Physical health issues	24	2%
Substance misuse	15	2%
Debt	2	0%
Loss of employment	62	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Eviction or landlord issues</b>		
Landlord wanted property back	5	1%
Landlord selling property	14	1%
Dispute with landlord	68	7%
Landlord property repossessed	2	0%
Property no longer suitable	4	0%
Not able to renew tenancy	1	0%
Section 21	14	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Relationship</b>		
Asked to leave by friends and family	23	2%
Family and friends can no longer accommodate	6	1%
Break-up of relationship	127	13%
Dispute with parents/partner	121	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Institutional discharge</b>		
Discharge from hospital or prison	53	5%
Prison release	6	1%
Asylum seeker	6	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>7%</b>



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Together  
we will end  
homelessness