**Report of the South West Homelessness seminar 17 March 2017**

In light of rising homelessness and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 the LGA facilitated a seminar for senior officers from councils in the South West. This note presents a summary of the main topics of conversation, as a record for those who attended, and to inform others in local government, the LGA and other national system partners.

**Introduction**

Rising homelessness has implications for those who find themselves homeless, their families and their communities, and the costs associated with preventing and responding to homelessness are significant for councils and other public sector partners.

In response to demand for support from councils in the South West, the LGA facilitated a seminar for senior officers to enable them to:

- Share knowledge of the scale and nature of homelessness in different areas, including the structural and individual causal factors
- Consider their role in local systems leadership as an effective means to prevent and respond to homelessness
- Discuss the implications of new statutory duties
- Consider the application of best practice from other councils/areas/partners in the system

The intention was for participants to feel better equipped to provide leadership and facilitate change to address homelessness in their council area.

The seminar was hosted by Bristol City Council and opened by Councillor Paul Smith, Cabinet member for Homes and Communities at Bristol City Council.

**Seminar summary**

The following headline objectives have been developed through work by the LGA with national partners, and with local authorities. They provide a checklist for action at all levels.

### 1. *Partners are committed to the shared ambition of ending homelessness, and systems leadership*

Local authorities are committed to homelessness but this cannot be achieved alone: ending homelessness must be a shared ambition: everyone's business. This must be more evident in government policy, the work of national bodies, and relationships within and across national organisations (leadership by example).

Significant transformation is required to achieve the ambition and localities need support: to develop leadership and commissioning capacity and capability; to shift the workforce to asset-based problem solving; to develop the provider market; to transfer learning from public service transformation and from work led by others eg, the voluntary and community sector.

There is a pressing need for health care and social care policy and practice nationally and locally to more evidently contribute to homeless prevention and response: limited access to services (particularly mental health) is a barrier to success.

### 2. *All commissioning is informed by a shared understanding of the problem*

It is difficult to understand the scale and nature of homelessness: limited data is collected and reported nationally (this has been criticised by the UK Statistics Authority); locally, it is very difficult to identify people experiencing homelessness across different systems eg, health care and criminal justice.

Investment in improving data collection and analysis will be essential to improving the understanding of homelessness, it's causes and effects, and 'what works' in prevention and response. In keeping with the need for a shared ambition to end homelessness, other organisations should also collect and share their intelligence.

The government, working with other national bodies, has a role to play in enabling this to happen across relevant systems eg, health care, criminal justice, welfare etc, but local authorities will need to also invest. This is a challenge within existing resources but the experience from Wales has been that it is essential.

### 3. *Commissioning for better outcomes takes a place and asset based approach*

Responses to homelessness, particularly as experienced by people with multiple needs, are often developed using an asset-based approach: one that focuses on what people bring to a situation, rather than just their needs and problems. This approach benefits all involved, building resilience amongst those experiencing homelessness, and augmenting collective resources in communities.

Whilst recognised as important by seminar participants, and described in some examples of practice, it did not receive as much 'air time' as other topics. Given the evidence of effectiveness in related fields eg, health improvement, and the need for local authorities and partners to make the best possible use of local assets, further exploration of the value of this approach in a homelessness context would be beneficial at a local level, and could be supported by national bodies.

A place-based approach was described by several participants who shared plans for embedding their response to homelessness within co-located neighbourhood services (locality working).

### 4. *Services are accessible, timely, flexible, of quality and there are clear pathways in place*

Ending homelessness requires transformation in all local services, not just local authority housing option and homelessness services. The focus of the Homelessness Reduction Act is primarily on the latter, with an expectation that other services will refer. Cross-government and sector working nationally needs to ensure that <u>all</u> services in a locality contribute to prevention, requiring them to think and work differently. Mental health and criminal justice services were considered to need particular attention.

Open and honest conversations with social housing providers locally are needed to allow local authorities to better understand what is on offer to enable them to prevent and respond to homelessness, and to plan to address gaps. Nationally, the LGA, working with the National Housing Federation and CIH (researching this topic now), could usefully support these conversations, and consider the merits of the Welsh framework.

## 5. The frontline workforce is equipped and confident: being able to understand triggers and recognise signs of homelessness and can respond

The need for culture change and workforce development was discussed throughout the seminar, and the scale of the work needed to support this should not be under-estimated by the government (investment in Wales has reportedly not been enough, and continues today).

Local authorities could be considering, with their partners and ideally as part of wider workforce development plans to transform public services, how collective resources can be used to support the necessary culture change in front-line, middle management and commissioning roles.

## 6. People with experience of homelessness can inform commissioning and delivery

Local authorities should engage people with experience of homelessness (across all populations, not just people with multiple and complex needs, where most experience in this engagement currently lies) in the transformation of theirs, and their local partner, services. Nationally, the LGA and partners could enable improved access to sources of support, and learning, from those who have been effective in engaging people in their commissioning and service delivery and can demonstrate evidence of improved outcomes.

## 7. Members of the public can make informed decisions about their own circumstances to prevent homelessness or ameliorate the impact

Enabling access to information, advice and guidance to improve housing circumstances should be considered as part of wider corporate and local partnership strategies ie, it should be integrated into wider approaches that seek to empower the public to meet their own needs in a timely way and before crisis, and not just the work of the housing options or homelessness team.

## 8. Communities can take informed action to support others at risk of becoming homeless, or experiencing homelessness

There is scope to improve and/or increase the role of communities and community organisations in homeless prevention and response. Locally, partners should explore the potential, whilst nationally the LGA and partners could support this with information, messaging and examples of practice.

## 9. Local businesses, economy, employment and enterprise interests contribute to the ambition

Local and national leadership is needed to enable, encourage and support councils to draw in economic partner contributions to preventing and responding to homelessness, going beyond Corporate Social Responsibility to more sustainable and planned commitments.

Action is also needed at all levels to understand the impact of homelessness on the economy, and how this can be mitigated eg, through plans for inclusive growth. Social enterprise has a role to play and should be supported to contribute.

### 10. Homes (temporary and settled) provide a healthy environment, are genuinely affordable and suitable to the household's needs

To successfully prevent and respond to homelessness will require additional, genuinely affordable, rented housing and increased access to existing social housing. Capacity to deliver is constrained by national housing and welfare policies: changes in these policies will be necessary to achieve the ambition of ending homelessness.

**Seminar discussion – full notes**

The main topics of discussion are described under these objectives, alongside local examples where these were provided.

***1. Partners are committed to the shared ambition of ending homelessness, and systems leadership***

Homelessness is everyone's business, and an indicator of our collective success in reducing inequalities. The causes and consequences of homelessness for many households go much beyond 'housing', to health and social care, education, employment and welfare, community resilience, safety and criminal justice systems. Poverty is clearly contributory.

It is unrealistic to assume that one organisation and its services, for example the local housing authority housing options/homelessness team, can be successful in preventing, reducing and ending homelessness. This will only be achieved if:

- It is a responsibility shared across systems, organisations, workforces, professions, services, communities and those affected;
- Positive and productive relationships are developed at every level;
- Commissioners recognise that they can't simply procure for outcomes; providers need the right environment for success and this requires systems change.

This is challenging to achieve at a time when everyone is under pressure to spend less, but it can still bring savings and good homelessness outcomes with a planned and strategic approach.

The multiple and complex needs population is at high risk of homelessness in the current climate; experience is that dwindling resources result in people being found to be 'too complex' for services to support. However, responding to the needs of this population has been the focus of recent charitable funding eg, from Big Lottery, and there are emerging lessons that could be applied to other populations.

The development of frameworks to support relationships between organisations has also proven useful, for example in Wales, between local authorities and social housing providers.

Shifting to integrated commissioning and delivery, making better use of collective resources requires system change but to get this right takes time, and involves learning how to do new things eg, co-production, and to do things differently. Moving from the margins: the challenges of building integrated local services provides further insights for building integrated local public services. Councils clearly have a lead role in bringing partners to the table to find new ways of working.

Finally, the challenge of engaging health care and social care systems was discussed throughout the day. The Sustainability and Transformation Plans are felt to be an opportunity to ensure that there's an acknowledgement that where people live impacts on their mental and physical health; this is perhaps an area of work that the LGA can progress on behalf of councils.

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**Lessons from local working**

Plymouth's experience of creating Community Connections is that new ways of working with partners have emerged in the process of seeking to do more with less, and that this investment in relationships and means of procurement will enable systems change. However, this does

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take time – in Plymouth's case it has taken two years to reach a shared understanding of how to deliver better outcomes across organisations.

Training in systems thinking has been hugely beneficial to those who have sought to deliver change, for example to meet the needs of people with complex needs, as has 'space' to reflect on what has worked and what hasn't, to learn and change. Systems change must allow flexibility.  (See Golden Key, Bristol http://www.goldenkeybristol.org.uk/system-change)

## 2.  All commissioning is informed by a shared understanding of the problem

Investing in a shared understanding is difficult under budget pressures. The data requirements placed on DCLG homeless prevention trailblazers are felt to be onerous, and there is not yet a shared understanding of how data will be used nationally or locally.

The experience in Wales, in implementing new homelessness legislation, is that early investment in collecting the right data is essential. Without this it is impossible to understand if action to prevent and respond to homelessness is making a difference, and to inform necessary changes to services and systems to make a difference.

As has been the case with existing official homelessness statistics, data can only tell part of the story and it's important to remember that people's experience of services that assist in homeless prevention and response is also important.

There are opportunities to understand housing circumstances and homelessness through the lens of other services in a locality eg, health care, and to improve services and outcomes accordingly.

**Lessons from local working**

Connecting Care is the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire [BNSSG] programme dedicated to using technology to support better information sharing between local health and social care organisations, joining up information to ensure care is focused around the individual and their needs, and ensuring that the people who are providing care have the information they need, when they need it.  This is a model that could be beneficially extended so that people experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness, can be more identified and responded to more effectively through connecting NHS data with housing and homelessness service data.

## 3.  Commissioning for better outcomes takes a place and asset based approach

Responses to homelessness, particularly as experienced by people with multiple needs, are often developed using an asset-based approach: one that focuses on what people bring to a situation, rather than just their needs and problems. This approach benefits all involved, building resilience amongst those experiencing homelessness, and augmenting collective resources in communities. This is a useful guide for councillors and commissioners.

Whilst an asset-based approach was described in several presentations this was primarily in relation to service delivery. The distance to travel to this objective – one where systems are asset based - was not discussed in any detail beyond recognising that we must move from the 'deficit' model when working with people, and that assets take many forms, for example staff expertise or the experiences of people who have been homeless. It was also felt there are opportunities to consider how assets in the widest sense could be used more innovatively.

**4. Services are accessible, timely, flexible, of quality and there are clear pathways in place**

Councils are increasingly limited in their ability to prevent, respond to and enable people to move on from homelessness because of reduced or limited access to other necessary services eg, supported housing, education, adult services etc. The need for these services has not reduced. The question remains as to how other services can be encouraged to prevent homelessness in their day-to-day business, and not just refer to the council's services. The sustainability of the latter, once initial investment in supporting these to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act has ended, is of concern: although councils have experienced an overall reduction in grant by 40% in the last seven years, they have maintained spend on homelessness.

Experiences to date have been that health care services, particularly mental health services where capacity is stretched, are the most difficult to engage in homelessness prevention and response, even though they are in a position where they can identify the risk of homelessness. Going forward it is essential that they share ambitions and become part of an effective system; government and NHS England action and LGA support to increase the engagement of mental health providers in local homelessness prevention and response is felt essential.

Whilst new homelessness legislation is viewed positively, concerns about the real cost of implementation and its likely effectiveness considering wider issues, such as lack of housing, remain. Experiences in Wales suggest that these concerns are valid: the number of households seeking assistance has increased (it's not yet known exactly why); culture change is still underway, and with additional investment in service transformation coming to an end there's a question of sustainability. The environment for success in Wales is more likely to achieve results eg, the legislation was against a backdrop of a ten-year homelessness strategy, and within the legislation were other 'supportive' factors eg, licensing all private rented sector homes.

In Wales the development of a framework with housing providers and other protocols, eg, between councils and other partners, has been a useful basis for co-operation and establishing relationships. This is perhaps something the LGA, working with the National Housing Federation and others, could usefully support at a national level in England (see also point 10).

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**Lessons from local working**

Lessons from Somerset's commissioning of a new model of homelessness prevention – 'Preventing Youth Homelessness' P2i - and pathways to sustainable independence for young people are that the development of positive and productive relationships is essential, that action to develop and support the market must begin as soon as possible, and that procurement is only part of the process with early engagement also important.

To overcome the challenge of access to health care for people with mental health problems Torbay's approach has been to employ a mental health worker in the housing options team: the worker is engaged in any relevant 'housing' matter (not just homelessness eg, noise complaints). The worker has worked in the Mental Health Trust and has positive relationships within the Trust. Employing the services of a psychiatrist to make an assessment was suggested as another cost-effective alternative.

In terms of identifying, assessing and responding to domestic abuse, the use of <u>DASH</u> <u>(Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based Violence Risk Identification, Assessment and</u> <u>Management Model)</u> was commonplace. Key to effectiveness – bearing in mind that <u>risk levels</u> <u>can change</u> – is for DASH assessments to be undertaken on a consistent basis, and on every

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occasion there is contact. One council reported holding a daily multi-agency conference call (including housing staff) for all previous day domestic abuse cases to check progress against actions, and this in turn feeds into their Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC).

In relation to services for people experiencing threatening behaviour, abuse or violence, working with schools and services for young people to support the development of healthy (non-violent/non-coercive) relationships was felt key to preventing domestic abuse.

Regular training and development for housing and homelessness officers on domestic abuse matters is also essential and can be enabled via agencies engaged in the MARAC. The existence of a 'champion' for domestic abuse amongst housing advice staff was felt invaluable by those organisations that use this model, whilst others felt that wider training and awareness for front line staff was more beneficial for sustainability.

### 5. *The frontline workforce is equipped and confident: being able to understand triggers and recognise signs of homelessness and can respond*

The need for culture change and workforce development was discussed throughout the seminar. Importantly this was not limited to councils but to all other organisations that are able to identify, prevent and respond to homelessness.

Councils have relevant and potentially transferable experience, for example from their work in transforming social care, and more generally in seeking to deliver outcomes with reduced resources. Increasingly councils are shifting to locality and community-based models of service delivery, co-locating staff with those of other partners eg, health care, Job Centre Plus. On a smaller scale, there is experience from meeting the needs of specific populations, for young people or people with multiple and complex needs – an asset-based approach requires a different attitude and way of working.

In summary, councils know how big a job it will be to transform the local workforce to prevent homelessness more effectively and have experience to draw on, but are unclear what is on offer from the government and others to enable and support this. The introduction of new legislation in Wales was supported by training for local authorities and their partners, and this training continues today.

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**Lessons from local working**

Workforce development and culture change can be enabled through joint working and collaboration, for example multi-disciplinary teams, as has been the experience in Gloucestershire. However, it was felt that co-location on its own will not necessarily nurture the necessary relationships.

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### 6. *People with experience of homelessness can inform commissioning and delivery*

It's evident that engaging and involving people with experience of homelessness in the process of transformation of systems and services is essential: all presentations from speakers stressed this. However, it was not a topic that generated specific discussion. This is not unusual: everyone knows involving people with lived experience is important but it's not yet core business in commissioning and service delivery.

It is likely that this is an area that requires systems leadership nationally to embed in councils work to prevent and respond to homelessness.

### 7. Members of the public can make informed decisions about their own circumstances to prevent homelessness or ameliorate the impact

The experience in Wales of implementing new legislation has been that there is greater clarity as to what services can and will do, and what is expected of the people who are seeking assistance. This has been a positive outcome.

Building relationships and trust is important, particularly when seeking to support people who have more than one support need – early disclosure of information may significantly improve outcomes. This means face-to-face conversations, and reaching out to people in their community. Commissioning services delivered by or with people with lived experience may also be a route to better outcomes.

### 8. Communities can take informed action to support others at risk of becoming homeless, or experiencing homelessness

There is felt to be scope for increasing the role of communities and community organisations in homeless prevention and response, beginning with developing an awareness of homelessness, it's impact, and what the council and other services and partners can do. Some of these messages will be the same for all councils and could realistically be communicated 'top down', for example through joint work between the LGA and national bodies representing and supporting communities.

There are examples of communities taking control, for example Acorn UK exists in Bristol to end evictions, 'rip-off' tenancy fees, and unhealthy housing. Since 2014 they've tackled slum-landlords, won tens of thousands of pounds in repairs and rent reductions, and moved politicians, the City Council, landlords, letting agents, charities and student organisations to back a campaign for Ethical Lettings. Acorn is represented on Bristol Homes Board.

Working with the faith sector to respond to homelessness in a positive way is proving to be a challenge for councils, reported by councils in the West Midlands also. There can be differences in opinion over the provision of food and shelter, and safeguarding concerns for the council with members of the community potentially at risk when assisting people. Faith Action has previously produced a publication on the topic of working with faith organisations (what a difference faith makes to homelessness); this perhaps needs to be shared more widely and/or additional action taken nationally to help overcome some of the challenges councils are experiencing.

### 9. Local businesses, economy, employment and enterprise interests contribute to the ambition

This objective would benefit from leadership to enable, encourage and support councils to draw in economic partner contributions to preventing and responding to homelessness.

Most people at risk of becoming homeless or experiencing homelessness are of working-age. Homelessness is also known to have an impact on educational attainment, and the life chances of children and young people – the future working population. Whilst the annual cost of homelessness to the government has been estimated (in 2012, anything up to circa £1bn (gross), the cost of homelessness to the economy has not been the focus of research but it is known that it can be problematic to access and/or sustain employment once homeless. Most people who have experienced homelessness for some time would like to work but find it difficult to secure employment because of their additional needs, or history eg, of the criminal justice system. St Mungo's in Bristol suggests there is a new cohort of rough sleepers who are working.

Typically the connection between 'work' and homelessness is through welfare: there are a growing number of examples of councils working with Job Centre Plus/DWP at a local level to identify and prevent homelessness, for example in co-located community hubs. This relationship will continue to be important but should not be the only 'economic' link and can be extended to large employers, LEPs, chambers of commerce etc.

Local plans to grow and secure the economy typically involve the development of new homes but the extent to which these homes benefit people experiencing homelessness, or those at risk of becoming homeless, is not known.

Social enterprise is proving an effective route to enabling genuine and quality employment opportunities; enabling these organisations to thrive may be an effective means for councils to increase such opportunities (the LGA has published a practical guide which introduces social enterprise and other delivery models).

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**Lessons from local working**

In Somerset, the growth of Hinkley Point will also bring new workers and new homes: recognising the potential impact on existing residents' ability to access affordable homes, Sedgemoor District Council has sought to secure new additional homes specifically to meet the needs of homeless households.

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### 10. *Homes (temporary and settled) provide a healthy environment, are genuinely affordable and suitable to the household's needs*

The lack of genuinely affordable housing to rent is the greatest challenge to councils in seeking to prevent and reduce homelessness, and was a topic of discussion throughout the seminar. Bristol, for example, reported that only one home out of 180 to rent on Right Move that week, was affordable under Local Housing Allowance.

In Wales most assistance given to people has been to access the private rented sector (PRS), but in England this sector is increasingly, if not already, out of reach financially, and insecure. The recent Housing White Paper does not address these issues in the existing market. Given this scenario, the extent to which councils will be effective in preventing homelessness under the new legislation is questionable.

The current approach of Strategic Housing Market Assessments and Local Plans, and limited planning professional capacity in local authorities, is not enabling a more up-to-the-minute understanding of housing markets, their relationship with homelessness, and what can be done to mitigate negative impacts. New pressures on markets in the South West are reported to include Air BnB and a shift to three-day working in London – people are happier to live further afield because they need to commute less, and alternatives to working at home exist eg, coffee shops. The Housing White Paper suggests that the approach to local assessments of housing need will be revised; consideration to homelessness prevention and response must be within this.

The challenge of working with social housing providers – including council-owned housing services and ALMOs – was discussed at length: providers are increasingly refusing to accommodate people who have experienced homelessness, for example because they do not pass an affordability test, or they have additional support needs; it is challenging for local authorities to provide necessary assurances with less resources, and where the support needs to come from other partners eg, health care. This is something councils want national action on. The CIH and University of Sheffield are in the process of carrying out research into how

and why relationships between councils and social landlords have changed and what this means for the future.

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**Lessons from local working**

Gloucestershire described reaching agreement across district councils that in some circumstances 'local connection' should be overlooked to enable individuals to access the most appropriate accommodation based support service, and be subsequently reconnected and accommodated in the local authority area of their last 'sustained attachment'. Local connection is an area of tension across England (it is a consideration in <u>homelessness decision making</u>, and in the allocation of social housing), and further examples of positive practice could benefit many councils and their partners and help secure better housing outcomes for people at risk of becoming homeless or homeless.

Bristol described their approach to risk assessment for supported housing providers. As a result of a serious case review a new process for undertaking risk assessment was introduced, which includes a single approach to risk assessment, logging the source of risk information, client consent, much fuller risk information and previous support history, how risk has previously been managed, and 'positive' triggers which enable services to lower risk levels.

When a homeless person is referred for supported housing, from one of their agencies 'accredited' to do so, such as the Council's homelessness prevention team or St Mungo's street outreach team, information based on a common assessment process is held on the Housing Support Register (HSR). This provides a central point for all services to share and update information about people needing a service. All supported housing providers and referral organisations have had and will continue to receive regular training to keep the process live and updated. These new and more robust processes will form the basis of introducing 'trusted assessors' in autumn 2017.

The approach means services are better able to understand an individual's needs, to tailor services to them, to undertake full risk and support planning, and to maximise the chances of achieving a positive outcome.

For more information on the risk process and on the Housing Support Register contact alice.brisbane@bristol.gov.uk

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