

# Let's End Homelessness Together

Policy briefing:

Homelessness Prevention  
- the golden thread



Homeless Link



# Homelessness Prevention – the golden thread

*“Whilst we endeavour to provide upstream prevention, the lack of resources mean that opportunities are missed resulting in people having to access statutory services which is both more costly and a worse experience in most cases.”*

Prevention is always better than cure, and preventing homelessness before it occurs should always be the preferred cause of action. This is not just better for people at risk of losing their home, taking away the trauma of experiencing homelessness, but is also more cost effective and reduces pressure on public services. Unfortunately our current system prioritises crisis intervention at the loss of effective prevention activity and as the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to rise a growing understanding that simply reacting to homelessness crisis without dealing with its root causes can never be enough.

Prevention is delivered inconsistently within our current system. Combined with the shortage of truly affordable housing, this has created a self-perpetuating cycle of worsening need. In the face of rising unaffordability, a new raft of people have turned to the homelessness system for support. With bed spaces already full and too few affordable tenancies for people already experiencing homelessness to move on into, the system has bottlenecked. With it, the cost of meeting statutory duties has spiralled, once exceptional bed and breakfast placements have become the norm, and rough sleeping rates have skyrocketed. Each new case means another person carrying the trauma of homelessness.

Methods to embed homelessness prevention – put simply, activity which prevents homelessness from occurring or re-occurring – have gained traction both nationally and internationally in recent years. And homelessness prevention is the golden thread throughout our ambitions for the new government. Preventing homelessness is almost always the best outcome for the person, the community around them, and the public purse. Our vision is a government committed to preventing homelessness whenever possible as part of a shared mission to end it for good.

## What do we mean by prevention?

The term ‘homelessness prevention’ defines a wide range of activities, and different understandings of what qualifies as homelessness prevention have created challenges when embedding it into strategic planning. In response to this problem, Fitzpatrick, Mackie and Wood<sup>1</sup> laid out a five-stage prevention typology which can provide a useful lens through which to define different activity:

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzpatrick, S., Mackie, P. and Wood, J. (2021). *Advancing a Five-Stage Typology of Homelessness Prevention*. International Journal on Homelessness. Heriot-Watt University.

- **Universal prevention:** preventing or minimising homelessness risks across the population at large.
  - **Example:** Tackling destitution; improving living wage and labour conditions; increasing welfare rates; activity to help people maintain healthy lives and relationships.
- **Upstream prevention:** early-stage homelessness prevention focused on high-risk groups.
  - **Example:** Targeted support for vulnerable young people delivered in schools or youth settings; housing-oriented support during risky transitions such as discharge from hospital, release from prison or leaving local authority care.
- **Crisis-stage prevention:** preventing homelessness likely to occur within a foreseeable period (e.g. following an eviction notice).
  - **Example:** Help paying off rent arrears or managing mortgage arrears; family or landlord mediation to avoid eviction.
- **Emergency-stage prevention:** support for those facing imminent homelessness or who are already homeless and at risk of sleeping rough.
  - **Example:** Provision of temporary accommodation; support meeting essential needs.
- **Repeat prevention:** preventing a reoccurrence of homelessness for people who have recently been homeless.
  - **Example:** Specialist 'floating' tenancy sustainment support; [Housing First](#).

### The current system

*"It is extremely hard, given local government financial pressures, to justify investment in upstream prevention which may not show immediate in year savings. The focus for our limited resources is on crisis management, and the relief of homelessness."*

An acknowledgement of the importance of homelessness prevention has led to significant legal reforms aimed at reorienting homelessness policy and practice towards prevention. Developments include the Homeless Reduction Act 2017, which extended local authority duties to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness if it is likely to occur within 56 days.

Despite this, the current system is far from prevention led. Targeted measures are limited and often take place just prior to eviction, by which stage it may be too late for meaningful prevention to take place. Increased need for homelessness relief has seen local authorities pull resources away from prevention to meet statutory duties and growing emergency and crisis demand. When prevention does take place, its effectiveness is often hampered by the shortage of truly affordable housing.

The result is an increasingly unsustainable system. As more people face avoidable homelessness lack of affordable housing then traps households in expensive,

unsuitable temporary accommodation, and the rising costs are driving local authorities into financial crisis.<sup>2</sup> Unless concerted efforts are made to prevent homelessness among people currently at risk, costs will only continue to spiral and we will do nothing to stop the record flow of people becoming homeless.<sup>3</sup>

### Barriers to effective prevention

Despite evidence of the benefit of improved homelessness prevention, structural barriers undermine these efforts at all stages. These barriers do not sit neatly within one department, and recent history has shown that government policies can be responsible for driving homelessness up even as other departments work to reduce it. Effective prevention is therefore an essential cross-government effort and cannot be delivered in a silo.

The shortage of social housing and the insecurity of the private rental sector (PRS) means that those on low incomes are vulnerable to rent increases or no-fault evictions. Insufficient welfare policies have seen essential costs outstrip household budgets, forcing households to go without essentials, prioritise which bills get paid and placing their housing at risk.<sup>4</sup> Policies across government can also counter prevention efforts, with recent examples such as changes to asylum cessation causing a huge spike in rough sleeping and overwhelming local authority housing teams. Such decisions reflect the need for the whole government to prioritise meaningful prevention.

Prevention is a worthwhile investment, but providers are too often forced to justify proactive activity. Prevention rarely offers immediate, in-year savings, with impacts that take time to show change and can be difficult to measure through traditional indicators. New approaches often also require innovation and flexibility, which can be perceived as too high-risk to fund against traditional homelessness services. Progress on prevention requires a willingness to do things differently and balance funding alongside, rather than in competition with, reactive relief services.

### A case for change

Recent years have shown us that business as usual is no longer an option. Preventing homelessness is always cheaper than relieving it,<sup>5</sup> and without progress in prevention, local authorities will be overwhelmed by the cost of homelessness relief. Investing in prevention works, and while upfront costs may seem high they pale in comparison to the cost of relieving homelessness and responding to the needs that come alongside it.

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<sup>2</sup> Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee (2024). *Financial distress in local authorities*. Third report of session 2023-24.

<sup>3</sup> Homeless Link (2022). *Keep Our Doors Open: The homelessness sector and the rising cost of living*.

<sup>4</sup> Bannister, L. et al. (2024). *An Essentials Guarantee: Reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Trussell Trust.

<sup>5</sup> Pleace, N. & Culhane, D.P. (2016) *Better than Cure? Testing the case for Enhancing Prevention of Single Homelessness in England*. London: Crisis.

Even higher-cost repeat prevention initiatives such as Housing First have consistently been assessed as delivering value for money as compared to business as usual.

There are blueprints for improvement across the country and internationally. Scotland maintain a Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group alongside increased duties towards ending homelessness.<sup>6</sup> Welsh government have more recently taken on a system-wide prevention approach, with a focus on early intervention across public services and a suite of further recommendations which would open prevention pathways up to six months before a planned eviction.<sup>78</sup> Finland's large-scale Housing First programme offers world-leading repeat prevention, meaning they have largely eradicated 'long-term' homelessness.<sup>9</sup> All these examples reenforce the role of prevention as an essential aspect of ending homelessness.

Every person pushed into avoidable homelessness is a person pushed into unfathomable trauma that will echo throughout their lives, with great cost on their mental and physical health. People who have experienced homelessness face some of the worst health inequalities of any group, with universally worse health outcomes and a significantly shorter lifespan. Homelessness in childhood impacts development, learning and life outcomes, dramatically increasing the chances of multiple disadvantage and homelessness in later life. Effective homelessness prevention can circumvent this entirely, keeping people in their own homes and reserving emergency accommodation for genuine, unavoidable emergencies.

## Recommendations

### **A whole-government commitment to homelessness prevention.**

- Homelessness prevention does not sit neatly within one department, and every part of government must get involved to ensure its policies do not inadvertently drive homelessness. Any new government policies should be assessed as to their impact on homelessness and measures put in place to overcome the risk that they cause preventable cases of homelessness.
- Ensure trauma-informed care is at the heart of any cross-government strategy to end homelessness, with sufficient funding for homelessness providers to offer meaningful, trauma-informed support to break the cycle of homelessness for good.
- Acknowledge the need for innovation in delivering prevention, including in developing new approaches to preventing homelessness, variation for different populations and to monitoring the impact of those changes outside of current norms and metrics.

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<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2024). *Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group*.

<sup>7</sup> Llywodraeth Cymru (2019). *Strategy for Preventing and Ending Homelessness*.

<sup>8</sup> Llywodraeth Cymru (2023). *Consultation on the White Paper on Ending Homelessness in Wales*. 10<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Juhila, K., Raitakari, S. and Ranta, J. (2022). *Housing First: Combatting Long-Term Homelessness in Finland*. Successful Public Policy in Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges. Sept 2022.

### **Deliver universal prevention:**

- Invest in building 90,000 new social homes per year for the next 10 years.
- Act on commitments to introduce an improved Renter's Reform Bill, immediately banning S21 evictions.
- Ensure the welfare system does not push households into homelessness.
  - Guarantee Universal Credit is sufficient to cover essential costs.
  - Commit to permanently unfreeze Local Housing Allowance in line with the lowest 30% of market rents.
  - End the benefit cap, or at the very least or at the very least ensure it is uplifted in line with LHA rates.
  - End welfare practices which discriminate against young people living away from family, including equalising benefits across age groups and ending the shared accommodation rate.
- End the bedroom tax.

### **Ensure upstream prevention**

- Invest in critical juncture support for people leaving state institutions – including intensive support for those leaving hospitals, prisons or asylum detention.
- End the practice of immediate eviction from asylum accommodation, ensuring newly recognised refugees are given the time and resources to identify alternative accommodation.
- Invest in in-school programmes to identify and support high-risk young people, following examples trialled by Llamau in Wales and Geelong in Australia.<sup>10</sup>
- Strengthen support for care leavers, including increased investment in 'Staying Put' and 'Staying Close' schemes.
- For the health system, strengthen cooperation with the Duty to Refer including expanding its use to GP settings, as well as implementing programmes such as intermediate care so that nobody is discharged from hospital to inappropriate accommodation or onto the street.

### **Crisis-stage prevention**

- Invest adequately in local authorities to ensure they can deliver on their duties within the Homelessness Reduction Act.
- Ensure providers receive sufficient long-term funding to deliver high-quality, person-centred support.
- Improve the delivery and flow of relief accommodation options so that everyone has access to support that works for them.

### **Repeat prevention**

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<sup>10</sup> Crisis (2023). *Homelessness prevention by Llamau*. Available at: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/resources-for-practitioners/homelessness-prevention-guide/llamau/>

- Invest in specialist programmes such as Housing First.
- Deliver trauma-informed care as standard across the homelessness system.
- Deliver in-tenancy support for those with histories of homelessness, ensuring support establishing a home and ongoing check-ins to identify and resolve tenancy problems early.
- Improve access to health and social care provision for people with experience of homelessness, including expanding adult social care pathways for those with long-term severe and multiple disadvantage.