

Keep Our Doors Open

Toolkit for homelessness services
seeking to influence local authority
budget setting



Homeless Link

Context

The pressures of rising inflation

As rising inflation drives up costs across the country, a combination of long-term funding deficits, staff shortages and increased demand for support has pushed the already stretched homelessness sector into crisis. Homeless Link's campaign - Keep Our Doors Open - is aiming to get homelessness services the resources they need to continue to effectively support people in this challenging environment.

Local authority budget setting

The 1992 Local Government Act requires local authorities to complete and approve their budgets in March, prior to the start of the financial year on 1st April. Due to rising costs and minimal extra Government funding, the Local Government Association has said that councils "face significant challenges in setting their budgets and trying to protect services." One area of spending that is particularly vulnerable to potential cuts is homelessness support.

Over January and February, every local authority in England will be negotiating their budgets for the next financial year across all services. Many local authorities will have published draft budgets already, but these are still very much up for debate. Building relationships with key local stakeholders can play a vital role in protecting already slim homelessness budgets.

Advocating against potential cuts to homeless budgets

It's clear that homelessness services across the country are already struggling to meet rising costs, while the number of people turning to them for support is also increasing. Therefore, actual or real-terms cuts to existing budgets would be devastating. As a sector, we therefore must make the case against this. This document sets out tips as to how homelessness organisations can attempt to influence local authority budgets to protect their funding.

If you would like any further support on this issue, please don't hesitate to get in touch with Campaigns Manager Nye Jones at nye.jones@homelesslink.org.uk. Please also send any updates on actions taken and achievements.

Understanding the local council(s) you work with

Having a good understanding of the workings and political situation of your local council is key to successfully influencing their decisions.

County council vs district councils

Many parts of England have two tiers of local government: County councils and district, borough, or city councils. County councils are responsible for services across the whole of a county such as education and social care. District, borough, or city councils cover a smaller area and normally have the housing and homelessness brief. London and some other parts of the country have unitary authorities, meaning one organisation covers everything.

Getting up to speed with your local council(s) budget process

It's important to understand what your local council is planning in terms of budget setting to know how to react. Many local councils will have published draft budgets online by now, so try to seek these out. If they haven't, try to gain intelligence through your contacts within the local authority or other third-sector stakeholders.

The political situation in your local area

Understanding the political situation in your local area will help you to identify where power lies. For example, if one political party holds a large majority on the council's cabinet then you will often achieve more through developing relationships with representatives of that political party. However, this is not to say you can't be successful working with a councillor from an opposition party, but be careful to prevent the narrative from becoming about political point scoring.

Knowing who to contact

Councillors are elected representatives, representing different wards within the local authority area. Some councillors are cabinet members, meaning they have a specific policy area of responsibility like housing or young people. Often your first point of contact will be the councillor(s) for the ward(s) you work in and the cabinet member with a responsibility for housing and homelessness issues. However, if you have existing good relationships with other councillors or even the leader of the council then utilise these too.

If you aren't sure who to contact, the councillors for your local area will be listed on the local authority website. You can also contact other local organisations and groups to see if they have connections, can introduce you to key figures, or are interested in working jointly to build support.

Keep your commissioner in the know

It is likely that Commissioning Officers will be supportive of services in their challenge to protect and preserve homelessness budgets. It is also likely that Commissioning Officers will be presenting strong cases to their Senior Leadership Teams as to the dangers of cutting budgets and the impacts on vulnerable people. However, it's important to let them know about the actions you plan to take so they are aware of the situation in case a councillor approached them about it, and work collaboratively with them on joint approaches rather than going about this alone.

Getting the messaging right

Local authorities across the country are in a really tough position. They don't want to have to make cuts to local services, but with need and cost rising faster than their income they are left with little choice. Unlike national government they are obliged to set a balanced budget each year. They can dip into their reserves (up to a point), but they can't run significant deficits or borrow to cover their annual running costs. Therefore, getting your messaging right will be really important in building relationships.

Be understanding of the tough situation councils face

Make sure you communicate you understand the difficult position councils are in and that they are being forced to take some very tough decisions. This shows your service understands the situation and helps foster good relations.

Be clear on what you are asking for

It's important to be clear about what you are asking for and what is realistic. This should be based on the intelligence you have regarding your council's draft budget. For example, if your council plans to implement actual cuts to homelessness support budgets then realistically you would call for the budgets to be protected as they are. However, if your council plans to implement a small rise due to inflation, you might call for the rise to be higher to mirror the national inflationary rate.

Using evidence

Sharing clear, localised evidence of the potential impact of cutting homelessness budgets will be extremely important in building the case to protect funding. Decision makers within local authorities need to understand what the potential consequences of cutting homelessness budgets will be on commissioned providers, people experiencing homelessness and wider public services. With the above in mind, it's important to include the following in your correspondence/when meeting with councillors:

Current examples of the impact of the cost of living crisis

This could be the percentage rise in your energy bills, a fall in donated income or a sharp rise in the number of people approaching your service for support. This evidence shows how services are already struggling to make ends meet on current budgets.

Clear examples of the way your service may have to scale back

For example, this could be not renewing the lease on some accommodation units, having to end a specialised support service or the risk of losing key staff due to not being able to pay competitive wages.

The impacts on people experiencing homelessness

For example, closing an accommodation project could lead to more people sleeping rough or ending a specialised support service could lead to safeguarding concerns for a vulnerable group of people.

The impact on other local services

Homelessness services help reduce strain on local emergency services which, due to the often-preventative nature of homelessness services, also means a reduction in the amount of money spent on these expensive emergency services. Communicating evidence of this can help show your local authority the broader impact of cutting homelessness budgets within a local area.

The impact on the general public

Councillors are elected by the public, so can be swayed by potential negative impact on voters. One example might be an increase in visible rough sleeping if budgets are cut.

Invite councillors to see your work

Councillors often prefer human stories over dry data, however, a healthy balance of both is important. Therefore, invite them to come and visit your service

and hear from staff and the people you support about the work you do and the potential impact of cutting budgets, as well as using any useful data you have to show them the impact of your service in quantitative terms too.

Using media and social media

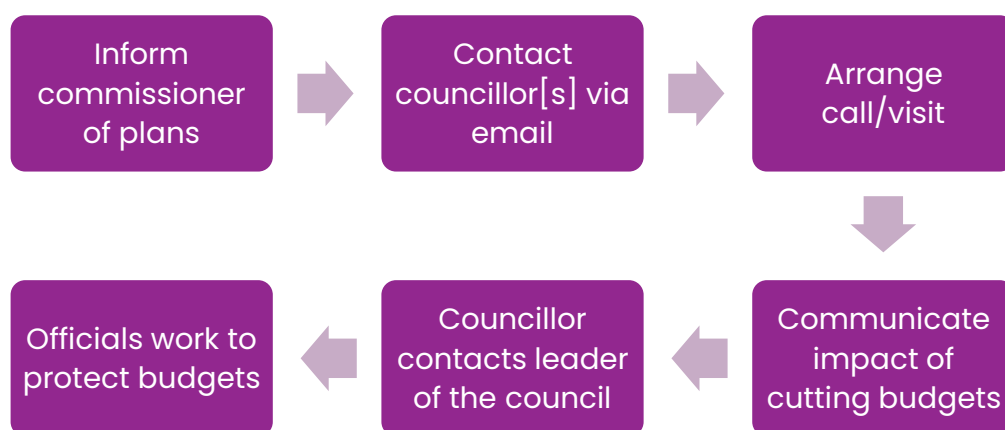
If you feel you aren't getting buy in from local authority officials, then it can be effective to make some 'noise' in local media and through social media. You can also attend council meetings, where you can table a question beforehand. However, these tactics are best used when other routes have been unsuccessful.

If you would like support with how to go about this please get in touch at nye.jones@homelesslink.org.uk

Influencing process

Given the fact that many local councils have already published draft budgets, it's important to start your influencing activities as soon as possible. Ideally, you should have contacted relevant councillors by the end of January at the latest.

The political situation within local councils differs by area, so there is no one size fits all approach. However, the below process diagram shows a standard series of events that services can follow.



What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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**Let's End Homelessness
Together**

