North West Regional Homelessness Strategy 2006

A Consultation Paper by the North West Regional Housing Board
# North West Regional Homelessness Strategy 2006

A consultation paper by the North West Regional Housing Board (August 2006)

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Introduction

1. The North West Regional Housing Board carried out an extensive public consultation exercise in early 2005 as part of the process of reviewing and updating the Regional Housing Strategy. This consultation exercise sought stakeholders’ views on the region’s housing priorities. Feedback from this showed continuing support for the priorities in the 2003 Regional Housing Strategy – delivering urban regeneration in the North West, providing affordable homes to maintain balanced communities, delivering decent homes and helping those in housing need. The Board’s approach has been that of targeting resources at the first three priorities in order to have the biggest impact which will in turn go a long way to addressing the fourth priority, housing need issues.

2. However the 2005 consultation exercise also showed widespread concern at the rise in homelessness in the region. The number of homeless households in the North West had increased by 48% in the four years up to March 2004. Since then, homelessness in the region has fallen in each quarter, primarily because of the prevention efforts of local authorities and the voluntary sector, but it remains a cause of great concern.

3. Homelessness is not just about sleeping rough. In most cases it is about vulnerable individuals and families living in temporary accommodation. There is also the phenomenon of hidden homelessness and “sofa surfers”– people staying with family or friends in often overcrowded conditions. This can have adverse knock-on effects on health, employment, and children’s education and behaviour.

4. The Board decided that the best way it could address this problem of rising homelessness was to develop a Regional Homelessness Strategy promoting preventative measures and illustrating good practice.

5. The Board decision to proceed with a Regional Homelessness Strategy echoes the Government’s further commitment to prevent homelessness “Sustainable Communities: Settled Homes, Changed Lives”, published in March 2005, which set out the target of halving the number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010.
How you can contribute

6. You will find questions for you to consider and respond to throughout this consultation paper. The Board welcome your views on those questions, on other issues raised by this paper, or on issues not mentioned here but which you feel are relevant. We would also welcome your ideas for achievements we can highlight in the final Strategy. The questions have been summarised in Annex A for ease of reference. They are intended to help spark off discussion, and not to restrict you in responding, although it would be helpful if you could refer to the question numbers in your response. Please note that you don’t need to give your views on all the questions – just refer to the ones that are most relevant for you or your organisation.

7. Please note that this Strategy does not aspire to address each and every cause of homelessness as these are many and varied. Instead, the Board aims to concentrate on the main causes of homelessness, pointing to where it and its partners can make a difference by changing policies and practices, and by showcasing examples of good practice. In responding, we would welcome your views on whether the draft Strategy has identified the right priorities and whether it is proposing feasible and effective actions to prevent homelessness. In responding, it is crucial to providing evidence to back up your points or to support or refute the Board’s views.

8. The Board intend to publishing written responses to this consultation paper on their website (www.nwrhb.org.uk), and in due course to produce a consultation response document to fit alongside the final Strategy. The Board will assume that any responses received are for publication unless you clearly state otherwise.

Please send responses to:

glyn.newton@gonw.gsi.gov.uk or
alastair.bishop@gonw.gsi.gov.uk

9. If you can send your views electronically, that will help us to share them quickly among the team working on the final Strategy. However, if that’s not possible, please send them to the following address anyway, they will be considered:

Glyn Newton
Government Office for the North West
City Tower
Manchester M1 4BE
0161 952 4026

10. The deadline for all responses is 17 November 2006.

Acknowledgements

11. The Board wishes to recognise the contribution from colleagues in GONW – Alastair Bishop and Glyn Newton – for their efforts in leading this work on our behalf.
Policy context

12. Local authorities have a duty to find accommodation for the homeless under the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002. Under the 1996 Act, local authorities have responsibilities to those who they have reason to believe are either homeless or threatened with homelessness. A person is homeless if he or she has no accommodation in the UK, has accommodation but cannot secure entry to it, or has accommodation but where it would be unreasonable to for him or her to continue to occupy it. A person is threatened with homelessness if he or she is likely to become homeless within 28 days.

13. If a local authority has reason to believe that a person is homeless or threatened with homelessness, it is required to make inquiries and decide whether it owes the applicant a duty to find accommodation for him or her. In each case local authority staff need to conduct assessment interviews to determine whether each applicant is actually homeless, eligible for assistance, in “priority need” and not intentionally homeless. If an applicant meets these criteria, the local authority has an immediate duty to provide temporary accommodation for him or her and for anybody who normally resides with them.

14. Local authorities owe a lesser duty to applicants who are not in priority need or who are intentionally homeless. In some circumstances, local authorities must help these applicants find temporary accommodation for long enough to find their own accommodation. They may also be under a duty to provide them with advice and assistance in finding their new accommodation.

15. Where an applicant is threatened with homelessness and meets the above criteria, local authorities have a duty to take reasonable steps to ensure that the accommodation remains available for his or her occupation.

16. The 2002 Act shifted the emphasis away from crisis management to preventing homelessness. Local authorities are required to carry out a homelessness review and then draw up a homelessness strategy which should then be periodically updated. These homelessness strategies should include measures to prevent homelessness, ensure that sufficient accommodation is available for the homeless, and to provide support services for people who may become homeless.

17. The homelessness legislation categorises certain groups of households as being in “priority need”. These are households:-

- with dependent children
- with pregnant women
- with people who are vulnerable due to old age, mental illness, handicap, physical disability or other special reason
- rendered homeless or threatened with homelessness because of a disaster such as a fire or flood.
18. In 2002 these priority need categories were extended to include:-

- children between 16 and 17
- care leavers under 21
- people who are vulnerable as a result of having been a member of the armed forces
- people who are vulnerable as a result of having been in prison or on remand
- people who are vulnerable as a result of threats of violence.

Question:

1. Is the national policy emphasis on homelessness prevention appropriate to the North West?

2. Are there other objectives which should be included in a Regional Homelessness Strategy for the North West?
Regional context

19. In 2005/06 the number of households in the North West accepted as homeless and in priority need amounted to 13,190, according to the Department of Communities and Local Government’s (DCLG) national data base of homeless households. This amounted to 14% of the total of 93,980 acceptances in England, slightly more than the region’s 11% share of the total population.

20. However homelessness is now falling. There was a 24% reduction in the number of households accepted as homeless and in priority need in the North West between 2004/05 and 2005/06, compared with a 22% reduction in England as a whole.

21. Nearly 60% of all homeless households in the North West contained dependent children or pregnant women.

22. The DCLG data for 2005/06 also record the causes of homelessness:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REASONS FOR HOMELESSNESS</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Eviction</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eviction by Other Relatives</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-violent Relationship Breakdown</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Relationship Breakdown</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination of Tenancy</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Reasons</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23. Nationally, the single biggest identifiable cause of homelessness was family break-up with parents evicting their grown up or teenage children, though this was rather less common in proportional terms in the North West than elsewhere.

24. The North West Regional Housing Board believes that this shows the importance of local authorities interviewing all applicants claiming that they are about to be evicted, along with their parents, preferably at their home if possible, and offering a mediation service to heal a family rift. The Board also believes that such interviews are necessary to counter the urban myth that young people can queue-jump the housing waiting list and get their own accommodation by claiming that they are about to become homeless.

25. The second most significant cause of homelessness in the North West is domestic violence, which is more prevalent in this region than in the rest of England. The Board considers domestic violence in more detail later in the Strategy.

26. However over a third of all homelessness recorded in the ODPM data is due to “other reasons”. This shows that the causes of homelessness are extremely diverse and that further work is needed to identify these causes.

27. Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, for example, carried out an exercise to examine the households that were accepted as homeless for “other reasons”. Members of these households were mostly found to be suffering from medical conditions which made their current accommodation unsuitable.

28. Further insights into the nature of homelessness may be obtained from Multi-Agency Monitoring (MAM) initiatives in parts of the region. The purpose of MAM initiatives are to bring together all agencies involved with the homeless or those in housing need and to
develop common monitoring arrangements so that they can share information and get a better understanding of their client groups.

29. Shelter has developed an exploratory MAM initiative in Cheshire (including Halton and Warrington). Although it looked wider than statutory homeless households in priority need, it does afford a separate analysis of those with accommodation difficulties. MAM is discussed further in Annex B.

30. Most of those presenting themselves to Cheshire housing agencies were young and single, with only slightly more males than females. (In contrast, most of the homeless which the DCLG data recorded were families, but the MAM data picked up a variety of housing needs in addition to those who were statutorily homeless in priority need.) Other findings were that:-

- One third had previously stayed with friends or relatives, 11% had previously stayed with their parents, 11% had slept rough, and others had previously stayed in hostels, private tenancies, prisons or young offenders institutions.
- About a third of those recorded were on means tested benefits and nearly half of the households had incomes of less than £10,000.
- The most significant contributory factors to their housing need were a family breakdown (26%), relationship breakdown (15%), offending (14%), alcohol problems (12%), drug abuse (11%), eviction (8%) and household friction (8%).
- About a third had had some form of prison or probation involvement.

31. DCLG data records where homeless households are found temporary accommodation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHERE DO THE HOMELESS GO?</th>
<th>North West</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Accommodation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;B</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostels</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA / HA Stock</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Leasing</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32. Traditionally, North West local authorities had their own plentiful housing stock. In many areas this provided an easily accessible source of temporary accommodation. The position is beginning to change as stock has been transferred to registered social landlords and arms length management organisations. Local authorities need to reflect this change in stock management in their homelessness strategies.

33. The North West also makes considerable use of hostels to provide temporary accommodation for the homeless, nearly three times as much as the national average.

34. In contrast, the North West makes conspicuously little use of the privately rented sector as a source of temporary accommodation. The Board considers that local authorities in the region might be under-using this resource. This is discussed later in the Strategy.

35. DCLG data shows where the greatest numbers of homeless households are found and where homelessness is growing and falling.
WHERE ARE THE HOMELESS?

Local Authorities with the Greatest Number of Homeless, 2005/06 (% change from 2004/05)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Number 2005/06</th>
<th>% Change 2004/05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salford</td>
<td>1,376</td>
<td>(-15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>1,341</td>
<td>(-2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wigan</td>
<td>1,120</td>
<td>(-20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>(-26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldham</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>(-22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochdale</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>(-21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolton</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>(-24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wirral</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>(-20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockport</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>(-33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

36. The implication is that most of the homeless are found in the major population centres in the region, though it is higher than expected in Wigan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHERE IS HOMELESSNESS GROWING 2004/05 – 2005/06</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carlisle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellesmere Port &amp; Neston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salford</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHERE IS HOMELESSNESS DECLINING 2004/05 – 2005/06</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hyndburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tameside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pendle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackburn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vale Royal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

37. Apart from the effects of the floods in Carlisle, there seems to be little pattern explaining as to where homelessness is rising or falling. It seems from this data that local factors causing homelessness can change very quickly. It also shows that there is no correlation between Housing Market Renewal (HMR) and an increase in homelessness. In fact homelessness has fallen in the East Lancashire HMR authorities.

Questions:

3. Does this analysis reflect your understanding of the region’s homelessness issues?

4. Should the analysis reflect sub regional or City region groupings of local authority areas?
The way forward

38. The Board shares the view that it is better to prevent homelessness, although unfortunately this cannot always be the case. It recognises that people can become homeless for a wide variety of reasons. Rather than try to address every single cause of homelessness, the Board believes that the Regional Homelessness Strategy should focus on the main causes of homelessness in the North West, where local authorities and the voluntary sector can make a difference by changing their policies and practices, and showcasing best practice. These issues are addressed in turn in the next sections.

39. In its 2005 Regional Housing Strategy the Board considered that the rise in house prices between 2002 and 2004 was almost certainly a contributory factor behind the rise in homelessness in the North West. However this is not a straightforward linear relationship. For example, information from the Housing Corporation (see map opposite) has found that there has been little correlation between the areas where homeless has increased most sharply and where house prices have increased the most. This suggests that there may be other immediate and complex causes of homelessness, or differences in the capacity of local authorities to deal with homelessness.

40. Nevertheless, the Board feels that the increasing affordability problem does make it more difficult for many households to find permanent accommodation. Therefore 45% of the regional housing pot is being allocated to Priority 2 of the Regional Housing Strategy, providing affordable homes to maintain balanced communities.
This map shows housing affordability based on the ratio of house prices to earnings. It also shows statutory homeless lets as a percentage of regional total.

House price data is from Her Majesty's Land Registry 2006 and is workplace based. The average wages data is from the Office for National Statistics.

Statutory Homeless lets are from CORE data 04-06 (http://www.core.ac.uk/).

Legend

- Housing Affordability Ratio
  - 160+ (≥ 1.6)
  - 120 - 160
  - 90 - 120
  - 60 - 90
  - 30 - 60
  - 10 - 30

- Statutory Homeless lets %
  - 5%
  - 10%
  - 15%
  - 20%
  - 25%
  - 30%

Based on Ordnance Survey data
Crown Copyright 2006
DCLG licence number: DCLG01 0906
41. A key part of homelessness prevention is making sure that households get information about the housing options and services that are available. Similarly, as rent arrears can lead to eviction, some households need access to advice about budgeting and debt management. Annex C describes the work of the Legal Services Commission in providing advice about housing and financial management.

42. Homelessness can lead to health problems. The Department of Health White paper “Our Health, Our Care, Our Say” requires joint needs assessments between local authority social services directorates and the NHS from 2006/07. Homelessness should be a specific issue for consideration in the new joint needs assessment processes. Health and social care needs should be included in local negotiations within the NHS on primary care and practice-based commissioning arrangements. These should ensure specific actions are defined for local delivery to address the needs of the homeless population and put in place arrangements for monitoring service delivery.

Questions:

5. Have you hard evidence on the linkage, or lack of linkage, between increases in house prices and trends in homelessness?

6. Should the matter of affordability receive greater attention in this Strategy?
Addressing the region’s issues

43. In addressing Priority 4 of the RHS, the Board suggested:

“The RHS cannot, and should not, attempt to address in detail the needs of every community and all individuals. These needs are as diverse as the region itself making it unfeasible to cover them in any detail and housing provision will often need to be linked with funding streams, support and care services that lie outside the Board’s remit.”

44. Similarly the Board should not attempt to address in detail the needs of all client groups at risk of homelessness. Instead it has set about focussing on the key areas where it can make the most difference.

45. The focus of the Board can be separated into two distinct themes, People issues and Places issues. It is recognised, as with Priority 4, that there exists significant interconnectivity between these factors and that addressing one may go some way towards alleviating the problems with the others.

46. The issue of homelessness can be addressed partly by looking at the processes by which we administer our housing stock and partly by looking at the needs of groups which are vulnerable to homelessness.

47. The Process issues are:-

- Local authorities’ nomination agreements with registered social landlords;
- Local authorities’ capacity to carry out their homelessness responsibilities;
- The region’s use of hostels and supported accommodation; and
- Making better use of the privately rented sector.
48. In addition, the Board has identified the following People issues where groups of people are at risk of homelessness:-

- Victims of domestic violence;
- Homelessness amongst the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities;
- Refugees and asylum seekers; and
- Prisoners being released without a home to go to.

49. The following sections together with the supporting annexes will address these issues in turn, offering examples of best practice and a regional direction of travel.
Process Issues

Nomination Agreements

50. Traditionally, most local authorities in the North West used to use their own housing stock to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households. Any household that became homeless could quickly be given the keys to an empty council house. However there has been a sea change in social housing provision in recent years. Virtually all new social housing stock is owned by housing associations, and an increasing volume of former local authority stock is being transferred to housing associations or arms length management organisations. Therefore local authorities will increasingly need to cooperate with housing associations to discharge their duties to find suitable accommodation for the homeless.

51. The Board recommends that local authorities draw up nomination agreements with registered social landlords so that they offer them a proportion of their stock, including households nominated because they are homeless. The DCLG’s “Effective Co-operation in Tackling Homelessness: Nomination Agreements and Exclusions”, written with the co-operation of the Housing Corporation, the National Housing Federation and the Local Government Association, explains the legislative foundations to nomination agreements and provides advice about how they should work.

52. The Housing Corporation’s Regulatory Code expands on the statutory requirements of registered housing associations. It provides that “When requested to do so by the local authority and to such an extent as is reasonable in the circumstances, housing associations provide a proportion of their stock to local authority nominations and temporary accommodation to the homeless.”

53. However, there is evidence that at least some North West local authorities are not making best use of housing association stock. Only about 10% of all social lettings in the region – i.e. in both local authority and housing association stock combined – go to homeless households. In contrast, between 20% and 30% of social lettings in London go to the homeless.

54. The Board notes that some local authorities seeking to make nomination agreements with housing associations and other registered social landlords seek ambitious targets for accepting their nominees, including homeless nominees. The Board generally supports this approach, but urges some flexibility in the operation of these agreements so that nominated households are only put in suitable accommodation. The Board does not want to encourage nominating households to unsuitable accommodation simply to meet a quota or a target in the nomination agreement.
Contents of Nomination Agreements

55. Local authorities' nomination agreements with housing associations should set out what is expected from both parties.

56. Nomination agreements should cover such issues as:-

- A nomination entitlement figure expressed as a percentage of new lets;
- The profile of the housing association stock to be offered for local authority nominations;
- The nominations process, eg whether the process begins with the local authority nominating an applicant to the housing association ("applicant-led"), or the housing association informing the local authority about a vacancy they have available ("vacancy-led");
- The number of nominees to be referred for each vacancy under a vacancy-led system;
- The respective roles of the local authority and the housing association in selecting and prioritising applicants;
- The agreed method for identifying and counting referrals to housing associations as a nomination and for counting lettings to nominations;
- The information about nominations and vacancies to be supplied by the respective parties;
- Grounds under which housing associations might refuse nominations, and a dispute mechanism where a local authority and housing association disagree;
- The agreed procedures for the acceptance and rejection of nominees;
- Agreed timescales for each stage in the process;
- Monitoring arrangements to see how the nomination agreement is working, recording both successful and failed nominations, and a process for reviewing the agreement so that it meets the changing needs of both parties.

57. Further advice is contained in the DCLG’s “Effective Co-operation in Tackling Homelessness: Nomination Agreements and Exclusions”.

58. Particular attention should be paid to outlining the sort of information which local authorities provide with their nominations for potential tenants. The main reasons for “nominations failure” are local authorities providing inaccurate or outdated information and nominating vulnerable applicants without saying how their support needs are to be met. The information on nominated applicants should include:-

- Details of long-term illnesses and health problems that require specialist housing, care or support;
- Details of other support needs, eg vulnerability due to learning difficulties
- Existing or previous care packages
- Relevant history of previous anti-social behaviour that might impact on community safety
- Nationality and immigration status
Exclusions

59. Whilst nomination agreements set out the basis for co-operation between local authorities and housing associations in finding accommodation for the homeless, there may be some households for whom a housing association is unable to provide a suitable letting.

60. The Board believes that blanket exclusions of types of potential tenants, eg not accepting tenants under a certain age, should not be used. Each nomination should be considered on its own merits. The Housing Corporation’s Regulatory Code expects “efforts [to be] made to resolve any possible ineligibility” and advises that applicants should only be excluded if their “unacceptable behaviour makes them unsuitable as a tenant.” The Board also recommends that local authorities should resist any insistence from housing associations that all nominees should be economically active, as this discriminates against the homeless.

Halton Borough Council’s Nomination Agreement

Halton BC is drawing up a nomination agreement with Halton Housing Trust Ltd, which has taken over the Council’s former stock, and other Housing Associations in the area. The agreement gives the Council the right to nominate potential tenants for all new housing association schemes in the first round of lettings and 50% thereafter. The Council will also have a right to nominate 50% of tenants for other housing association schemes. The agreement states that nominees will include homeless households as well as households drawn from the Council’s housing needs register, the exact mix being left to the Council’s discretion. It adds that the associations are expected to play a full role in accommodating the homeless, those in priority housing need and the vulnerable.

The agreement states that the housing associations will offer a range of property types and that the Council will take into account the suitability of the property when making a nomination.

Where a homeless nominee has a history of debts or unacceptable behaviour, a different housing association will be asked to assist. The Council will provide information on the nominee’s past debt or conduct that it considers relevant.

The agreement recognises that housing associations must be free to determine who they house, but they should accept nominations in accordance with agreed published guidance. Where an association rejects a nomination it must give reasons, and if the Council considers these to be inadequate it will seek to resolve differences.

The agreement sets out procedures for nominations. When a dwelling which is eligible for nomination becomes vacant, the housing association will inform the Council which will provide three nominations in priority order within three working days. For new build schemes, nominations will be invited about two months before expected completion. If none of the three nominees accept the property, the Council will nominate three more. If none of these accept, the association may offer the property to other applicants.
Supporting tenants

61. Local authorities may be able to overcome some registered social landlords’ reluctance to take vulnerable tenants by providing a support package, drawing on the resources and expertise of other agencies and the voluntary sector.

Knowsley High Priority Panel

Knowsley Council’s Housing Strategy Team has set up a High Priority Assessment Panel consisting of representatives from the Supporting People team, Social Services, the Mental Health team, and Registered Social Landlords to find accommodation for vulnerable people whilst ensuring that a support package is in place.

The Panel meets monthly. All agencies can make referrals, whilst the Registered Social Landlords bring along information on vacant properties. The aim is to find accommodation for the would-be tenants and to identify their support needs to make a tenancy feasible. In its first 9 months the Panel found accommodation for half of those referred.

“Peter” is a disabled man with cerebral palsy and epilepsy requiring wheelchair accommodation. He had been in emergency accommodation for six months after his mother became unable to cope. The Panel found a property which could be adopted for a wheelchair, and “Peter” has now been re-housed.

“Susan” had been in hospital for 4 months with mental problems. Whilst there, she agreed to renounce her part of a joint tenancy she held with her husband meaning that she had nowhere to live when she was due to be discharged and so was blocking a bed for other patients. The Panel found her suitable accommodation within a month of being referred.

Debt

62. Registered social landlords are wary of taking tenants who have a history of rent arrears. However they can also take on some of the responsibility for teaching tenants how to better manage their budgets. For example, Calico, which has taken over Burnley Council’s former housing stock, requires all new tenants to have an interview with an income adviser. They will offer another interview if tenants get into arrears.

Anti-social behaviour

63. Anti-social behaviour can put tenants on the road to homelessness. The Government is committed to tackling anti-social behaviour, but registered social landlord tenants who perpetuate anti-social behaviour risk eviction. Similarly, registered social landlords may be reluctant to offer new tenancies to households with a history of anti-social behaviour.

64. Local authorities should see if there are ways of supporting perpetuators of anti-social behaviour so that they are helped to change their behaviour, become acceptable tenants and cease to be at risk of homelessness.
Tenancy Support Plus Service

Manchester City Council’s Tenancy Support Plus Team provides support for homeless families who often have complex needs and have been involved in anti-social behaviour. The service works intensively with families and develops a good working relationship. It challenges anti-social behaviour with the aim of breaking its cycle and enabling them to live in their new home and in their neighbourhood. It discusses with families what being a good neighbour means, ensures that they understand the consequences of anti-social behaviour, tells them the impact anti-social behaviour has on them as a family, and what such behaviour has on the community.

Families are assisted with basic parenting skills, finance and budgeting, training and employability. The Team encourages parents to attend local parenting classes. Particular emphasis is placed on good school attendance, as school is one of the most protective environments for young people.

The Team works intensively with families to identify the root causes of anti-social behaviour, and in doing so help them to help them accept support. A key element is building a family’s confidence and understanding so that they recognise the need to change their behaviour. Once the root cause has been recognised, the Team makes referrals for specialist help with such issues as drug and drink misuse, mental health, parenting and training. The Team also identifies activities for the children such as football clubs, dance classes and youth clubs.

The families that have been supported have gone on to live successfully in their new homes and have become part of the community. Some parents have found employment. They have not become involved in further acts of anti-social behaviour.

65. The Board believes that voluntary sector, working in partnership with local authorities, can play an important role in turning around anti-social behaviour.

The Inclusion Project, Rochdale

Shelter and Rochdale Council have developed the Inclusion Project to pilot an approach to tackling anti-social behaviour. It works with households in their own homes to identify and deal with the causes of anti-social behaviour and to build on the skills they need to resolve these problems. Ultimately the Inclusion Project aims to prevent the risk of eviction and to provide a route back to settled housing.

The Project works with households who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless due to their behaviour. It works on the basis that anti-social behaviour is often the result of unmet support needs.

Referrals come from a variety of sources, such as housing services, social services, housing associations, school nurses, health visitors and drug and alcohol workers. All those referred had been warned about their anti-social behaviour, nearly half had received written warnings and nearly one-third were under threat of eviction. The commonest problems were noise, rowdy children, neighbour disputes, vandalism, untidy gardens, rubbish hoarding, and ill-behaved visitors.
After an initial assessment, a multi-agency support plan is drawn up and the household is required to comply with it. The support plan may include:-

- Working with children to address their behaviour and improve school attendance;
- Advice on parenting skills;
- Support in developing self-confidence and social skills;
- Advice on benefits, money management and debt repayment;
- Support on health issues, particularly depression;
- Practical assistance on tidying up their property.

The Project is overseen by a multi-agency steering group including the housing department, education and social services and Registered Social Landlords.

The main source of funding is Supporting People, with additional funding coming from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, the Children’s Fund, Shelter and the DCLG’s Housing and Homelessness Directorate.

In the first two years, all action against adults for anti-social behaviour had ceased, anti-social behaviour amongst children had been drastically reduced, and none of the households were now at risk of eviction and homelessness.

66. Often the main causes of complaint about bad tenants is their failure to control their children’s behaviour, usually due to bad parenting skills but sometimes compounded by substance misuse or drink or drug addiction. Sometimes rowdy households are headed by a lone parent in need of support. The Board believes that local authorities and the voluntary should work together to identify the root cause of poor parenting, provide the support that is needed, improve children’s behaviour and school attendance, remove the risk of eviction, and improve the children’s life chances.

NCH Foundations Project, Manchester

NCH Foundations is a project set up to offer support to families experiencing difficulties with their tenancies. It will help families involved in anti-social behaviour and who are at risk of eviction. It is managed by NCH, an independent children’s charity, in partnership with Manchester City Council. It provides an outreach service for 23 families and a residential unit for up to four families.

Families who are referred to the project are asked to enter into a commitment with a support worker, with whom they work on a one-to-one basis, to identify the reasons why they have been referred, to develop skills in parenting, create more stable family lives, and to promote more consistent school attendance. The support worker will liaise with other agencies to provide a support package.

The aim is to help parents better cope with family responsibilities, develop a package of support and sanctions to help improve their children’s behaviour, and remove the risk of eviction.
Questions:

7. Do paragraphs 49-53 present an accurate picture of nomination arrangements in the region?

8. Do paragraphs 54-56 capture the key ingredients of robust but fair nomination agreements?

9. Are the steps proposed to address nomination failures realistic? Are there any issues around sharing personal data?

10. Are there any other examples of support for problematic tenants who might be included in the Strategy?
Local authority capacity

67. The North West Regional Housing Board believes that local authorities should be sufficiently resourced to carry out their responsibilities to the homeless. However some of the region’s local authority homelessness units are very small.

68. The Board recognises that there have been changes in the way in the region’s local authorities have had to tackle homelessness. When they owned large amounts of housing stock themselves, it was a relatively easy task to give the key of an empty council property to any family presenting themselves as homeless. However now that most local authority stock has now been transferred, or is in the course of being transferred, to registered social landlords, local authorities’ role has changed from one of providing accommodation themselves to one of finding accommodation with other providers.

69. The Board recognises that tackling homelessness can be resource-intensive. It shares the DCLG’s view that homeless applicants should be interviewed first to see whether they are indeed in priority need for temporary accommodation, or whether another remedy is more applicable. It also considers that some form of mediation should be offered when the immediate cause of homelessness is family or relationship breakdown. In addition, the Board also considers that additional outreach workers may be needed to offer an effective homelessness service to BME households and to victims of domestic violence. Dedicated staff may also be needed to liaise with private landlords if the local authority wishes to make use of the privately rented sector and also to liaise with any local prisons to prevent ex-offenders becoming homeless, as discussed elsewhere in this Strategy.

70. The Board believes that employing temporary staff in homelessness units is a false economy. Inexperienced staff may be more prone to accept households with housing problems as being homeless and in priority need than may be the case.

Local Authority Homelessness Fora

71. The Board believes that local authorities can help themselves by collaborative working. Most local authorities in the North West are now in sub-regional homelessness fora, often involving other organisations with an involvement with the homeless. They can discuss homelessness issues in the area and swap best practice.

72. The homelessness fora also offer a method of cascading training to its members. Local authorities who have sent officers on a training course or to a conference can provide feedback to their colleagues from other authorities and thereby help each other reduce the cost of training.
Cumbria Homeless Forum

The Cumbrian local authorities have set up the Homelessness Forum to discuss homelessness issues in the county. The Forum includes statutory and voluntary homelessness service providers or those with an involvement in homelessness prevention such as registered social landlords, Primary Care Trusts, the Citizens Advice Bureau, the Youth Offending Service, the Prison Service and Shelter. The Forum has produced the Cumbria Homelessness Strategy and monitors its implementation.

The Forum has two sub-groups.

The Homelessness Strategy Group aims to improve homeless services in the county by developing policies and protocols between the relevant agencies and to progress implementation of the Homelessness Strategy.

The Front Line Officers Group consists of homelessness officers from each local authority and is involved in sharing best practice and ensuring consistency in service provision for homeless applicants. The group is involved in producing advice booklets, common service standards and monitoring customer feedback.

Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI’s)

73. ODPM has introduced BPVI’s to measure local authority performance in addressing and reducing homelessness and to show that Ministers take homelessness prevention seriously. The BPVI’s for 2005/06 are set out in Annex D.

74. The Board believes that local authorities in the region’s sub-regional homelessness fora can use this data to compare their own performance and to tease out good practice lessons.

Regional Champions

75. ODPM has appointed a number of local authorities with a good record of tackling homelessness as regional champions. In the North West the regional champion for 2006/07 is Blackpool Borough Council. Manchester and Burnley have previously been regional champions.

76. Regional champions are asked to visit other local authorities, not in their immediate area to preserve objectivity, to offer peer review and act as a critical friend. They are also asked to promote networks and good practice in their own areas.

User Feedback

77. The Board believes that feedback from homelessness service users can often help to shape and improve the services that local authorities and registered social landlords can offer. The problem, however, is that some service users are sometimes difficult to reach. Nevertheless, local authorities have started to establish innovative ways of involving the homeless.
Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations

In February 2006 the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations, in partnership with the 10 Greater Manchester Supporting People teams, held a consultation event for service users. The event included live theatre and a video box to encourage service users to give their opinion on the Supporting People programme and homelessness services. A DVD was produced of the event.

Oldham Service User Strategy

In Oldham, joint working between the Housing Strategy and Supporting People teams produced a Service User Consultation and Involvement Strategy. The action plan for implementing this Strategy includes a 'speak out' event, consultation with specific groups of service users, documenting experiences of homelessness and surveys of service users. Following on from this, a number of service users expressed an interest in becoming more involved in shaping future services and the Council is now arranging for them to meet.

Questions:

11. Do paragraphs 66-69 present an accurate picture of local authority capacity issues in the region?

12. Are there any other steps that might be taken to improve local authorities' capacity to deal with homelessness?

13. Is there scope for building on the work of sub-regional fora of local authorities in tackling homelessness?

14. Is there scope for building on the work of regional champions?
Hostels and Supported Accommodation

78. The North West makes extensive use of hostels to provide temporary accommodation for the homeless, more than three times the national average. The Regional Housing Board believes that, as well as providing accommodation, hostels should also provide access to lifeskills and / or vocational training (either themselves or in partnership with another agency) so that their clients can move towards independent living. The Board also believes that there is a need for more “move on” accommodation, either in the privately rented sector or provided by registered social landlords, to reduce the amount of time people spend in hostels.

79. The Board therefore welcomes the work of Homeless Link, an umbrella organisation for frontline homeless agencies, to assist hostel providers to develop and increase the range of services that they deliver. The aim of the programme is to transform hostels to places where people can address the reasons for being homeless and to develop the skills and confidence necessary to move on with their lives.

80. Homeless Link’s role is to increase opportunities for people living in hostels by providing access to education, training and employment, promoting service user involvement, reducing the number of abandonments and evictions, and improving access to suitable “move on” accommodation. Homeless Link aims to achieve these outcomes through developing partnerships, providing networking opportunities for hostel providers, disseminating good practice and promoting staff training.

Victoria House

Victoria House is a 38 bed supported accommodation project for single homeless in Manchester which aims to change people’s lives through training and support and providing a clear pathway from homelessness to independence.

All service users have to sign a contract, which changes depending upon their needs, and to engage in a wide range of activities. These include a one-week personal development course, arts, IT, gardening, drama groups and a wide variety of taster courses run by experienced tutors. Achievements on these courses are recognised by prize-giving days which are open to the wider community. There is also access to courses run by local collages.

Staff at Victoria House encourage residents to address the issues that led to their homelessness and can offer access to a wide range of services such as health, alcohol and drugs counselling and debt management. They aim to develop residents’ skills and confidence to enable them to move on and live independently. They also aim to empower residents to make decisions and choices affecting their own lives.

Victoria House also offers a resettlement and floating support service to its residents as they make the transition to independent living.
The Foyers Project

The London-based Foyers Federation accredits hostels for young single homeless such as the Access Housing Association’s Foyers Hostel in Chester which offers an ethos of living and learning. Young people up to the age of 25 are referred by Social Service, Probation, the Housing Department and other hostels. There are also self referrals.

The key feature of Foyers is a licence agreement between the client and the hostel. The hostel will provide accommodation and training, the client has to draw up an action plan for personal development and remain drink and drug-free on the premises. Action plan objectives might include building relationships with one’s family or cutting down on drink. The action plan is revisited monthly and its objectives changed according to the progress that has been made.

Training can cover cooking, cleaning, washing, housing advice, budgeting and communication skills. There is also training by an external provider which can lead to a City & Guilds qualification.

Not everyone is ready to undertake a licence agreement. Youngsters who are not yet ready to make a commitment are found another hostel with suitable support needs. Clients who breech their licence agreement are told to leave, but are found a place to stay beforehand.

The aim of the Foyers project is to make clients capable of running their own homes. The Chester Foyer has nomination agreements with two local registered social landlords, though Foyer staff usually find move on accommodation through personal contacts rather than formal arrangements. The Foyer will also continue to provide support for clients for 6 months after they leave, arranging housing benefit, fixing them up with utilities and finding furniture.

81. The Board looks to hostels to work with their clients to develop lifeskills, tackle the causes of homelessness such as drink or drugs, seek vocational training and build up their self esteem to enable them to live independently.

82. The Board also welcomes the DCLG’s £90m Hostel Capital Improvement Programme which, alongside the development of staff and services, aims to change the physical environment of hostels so that they become “places of change”. In the North West this programme is currently financing large scale investment in both Liverpool and Blackburn to build hostels fit for the 21st century.
Day Centres

83. Day centres provide a valuable service for the homeless as they are often the first organisation with which homeless people come into contact. They provide an important link into other services such as temporary accommodation and healthcare. They provide a vital service for rough sleepers to address their basic needs. Day centre staff are also able to deal with enquiries which can prevent or minimise homelessness, such as assisting with people’s benefits, housing problems and legal issues, in a non-threatening environment.

84. Day centres are able to offer an individual service to their users and will have the knowledge to assist them finding suitable accommodation depending on their needs. Staff are able to spend time with often challenging clients, help them to address their issues at their own pace and enable them to move on with their lives.

85. Day centres provide access to other services such as health, drugs and alcohol which can act as a catalyst for people to move away from homeless and access mainstream provision. Many day centres also provide activities which can help to build self esteem, confidence and skills, as well as access to education and training to enable people to progress their lives.

The Booth Centre

The Booth Centre in Manchester is visited by over 100 people a week. It provides advice and support for people who are sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation. It also helps those in accommodation to keep it through tenancy support. A health link worker registers people with a local GP. Local authority outreach workers run advice sessions at the Centre. Special provision is made to help street drinkers address their alcohol problems. The Centre employs a drug and mental health dual diagnosis worker to provide extra help for people with very complex problems, enabling them to access treatment services. A full programme of activities including education, training, creative arts, sports and outdoor activities helps people build up their skills and self esteem and to work for nationally recognised qualifications. The Centre also runs a supported employment project to help people get back into work.
Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations

Staff working in hostels and day centres work at the cutting edge of need and deprivation, but many do not possess formal health and social care training.

The Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations (GNCVO) has provided training for over 600 members of staff within 200 different organisations involved in providing housing and support to vulnerable people in the North West. It is also developing six Open College Network accredited training courses covering the core supporting people competencies. This is a unique initiative and could have a real impact on the quality of supported accommodation within the North West.

Emmaus

86. Emmaus is a worldwide secular movement that has been running Communities offering a holistic long-term solution to homelessness since the 1950’s. They provide a home and work in a supportive environment. There are currently over 400 Communities world-wide. There are 13 in the UK, including two in the North West, at Mossley and Bolton. Others are proposed at Preston, Salford, Burnley, Carlisle and Merseyside.

87. Emmaus Companions (as Community residents are known) sign off benefits and work full time collecting, refurbishing and re-selling furniture and household goods donated by the public. For this they receive a weekly allowance together with a sum which is put aside for when they move on.

88. Emmaus helps people to regain a sense of purpose and self-worth through work rather than relying on hand-outs. Training is available for those wishing to learn new skills. This could include life skills such as literacy or computer skills, or work-related activities like driving or woodwork.

89. Once established, Emmaus Communities are self-sustaining. Any surplus generated by the business is directed too support other charities and people in need. They provide a useful service to the wider community as a recycling service and as a source of affordable furniture for households on low incomes.

90. There is no limit on how long people can stay within an Emmaus Community. Some will stay for only as long as it takes to get back on their feet, whilst for others it will be a long-term home. Companions are required to live by a few basic rules. No drink, drugs or violence is allowed within the Community, all are expected to participate in Community, and all are expected to work to the best of their ability.
Questions:

15. Are there any practical lessons in providing lifeskills and vocational training which could be included in the Strategy?

16. What can be done to encourage the provision of “move on” accommodation?

17. Are there any other recommendations that could be included in the Strategy to enable hostel residents to achieve independence?
Privately rented sector

90. The North West makes very little use of the privately rented sector to accommodate homeless households. This may be a legacy of the days when local authorities had their own housing stock in which to accommodate the homeless, or to an historic unease about the use of this sector.

91. The Board recognises that the North West contains relative large quantities of privately rented stock, especially in some of the older urban areas where homelessness is concentrated. For example, in 2001, the Manchester / Salford Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder had 16.5% of its stock in the privately rented sector, nearly twice the national average. Most of the privately rented sector is owned by small landlords. Nearly 73% of the stock is run as a sideline by people with other jobs, 17% is run by business landlords, and 10% is owned by churches, charities and other organisations.

91. The Regional Housing Board considers that the privately rented sector may be an under-used resource, at least in some parts of the North West. The Board recognises that the capability of the privately rented sector to accommodate the homeless will depend upon its size and upon rent levels. In some parts of the region, especially where the privately rented sector is small, rental levels may be above housing benefit levels. However in other parts of the region where the sector is bigger and rents are not as expensive, there may be more scope for accommodating homeless households.

92. The Board considers that the privately rented sector may be particularly useful in accommodating large homeless households where social landlords may not have suitable properties.

Rent Deposit Schemes

93. Many local authorities already have rent deposit schemes to help homeless households access privately rented accommodation. These are designed to pay the rent deposits frequently demanded by landlords before they are prepared to let property to new tenants, and which homeless households might be unable to afford.

Chester Rent Deposit Scheme

Chester and District Housing Trust, in conjunction with Chester City Council, operates a rent deposit scheme for rough sleepers and for statutory homeless households. The aim is to increase the use of privately rented properties and to reduce dependence upon bed and breakfast.

The scheme provides upfront cash deposits to landlords for households who would otherwise be unable to provide this deposit from their own pockets. Rent deposits are provided before the clients move in, up to a maximum of £500 except where this has been agreed in advance. The Trust also assesses the support needs of the household when the tenancy commences and arranges for any such support to be delivered.

The Trust will help applicants to identify potential landlords and obtain a tenancy. At the end of the tenancy the Trust asks for the rent deposit to be returned and takes action to recover any outstanding money.
The Trust advertises the scheme in the local media and has posters and leaflets available at service providers’ premises. It accepts referrals from the Council and other agencies providing support for the homeless, reports back to the referring body, and gives a reason for any non-acceptance.

94. The Board endorses the development of rent deposit schemes. It considers that these schemes offer private landlords the security which they would normally expect from non-homeless tenants. It considers the cost of providing a rent deposit well worth the savings from otherwise having to provide bed and breakfast or other forms of accommodation, even if not all of the deposit is recovered.

Lancashire Probation Service Rent Bond Scheme

The Lancashire Probation Service has set up a rent bond scheme aimed at helping high risk offenders and those difficult to place find a home of their own. The scheme was originally piloted in East Lancashire. The Service currently has sufficient funding for 8 people.

The Service will help ex-offenders find a landlord who is willing to offer a tenancy. The Service then meets the landlord, explains the terms of the scheme, takes an inventory, and offers a sum of up to £250 should the ex-offender damage or destroy the property. The Service does not provide cash upfront and only parts with money if the landlord incurs a loss.

The ex-offender then pays the Service either £5 or £10 a week, depending on whether or not he/she is employed, until this accumulates to £250. The money will then be returned to the ex-offender so that he/she can use this as a future bond. The agreement with the landlord will then transfer to the ex-offender and the Service ceases to have any involvement. The Service will then offer the scheme to another offender.

Landlords

95. The Board believes that local authorities can have an important role in demonstrating to private landlords that homeless households are not necessarily bad tenants. They can also assure landlords that support packages can be put in place for tenants where necessary.

Letwise

Letwise is an initiative set up by Manchester City Council designed to help families, and in some instances singles and couples, obtain accommodation in the privately rented sector. It is also designed to assist landlords and letting agents who might be deterred from letting accommodation to people on low income because of their inability to pay a deposit in advance.

To qualify, applicants must either receive Housing Benefit or earn less than £183 a week (or £200 for a couple).
Once a prospective landlord and tenant have agreed a potential viewing, the Letwise service will advise on the rent that can be achieved, whether the property is in a decent state of repair, and whether it meets applicable fire and health and safety standards.

Letwise can then help to provide a cash deposit upfront or a bond against damage to the property during the course of the tenancy. It will also assist in establishing rent payments and provide a support package throughout the tenancy.

At the end of the tenancy all parties will meet at the property and inspect its condition and sign off the inventory. If the landlord can show that there has been damage he/she can submit a claim for compensation subject to the cash limits agreed.

### Improving the Private Sector

96. The Regional Housing Board considers that recent innovations in the management of the privately rented stock can improve the supply of accommodation available to the homeless or at risk of homelessness.

97. Many local authorities have already started voluntary accreditation schemes with private landlords, setting out a code of standards for the physical condition of the property and its management. Although the schemes are voluntary, landlords benefit from the status of being publicly identified as a good landlord and from being distanced from incompetent or unscrupulous landlords. Local authorities can help accredited landlords with promises of advice about council services, fast-track access to the Housing Benefit Department, information on housing management and training, access to grants and loans to bring properties up to the standards set out in the codes, advice on how to tackle anti-social behaviour, and access to rent deposit or rent guarantee schemes operated by the Council.

98. The Board believes that an efficient and high quality privately rented sector is in everyone's interest. It considers that successful accreditation schemes can increase the supply of good quality accommodation to the benefit of both existing and potential new tenants.

99. New private sector licensing provisions in the Housing Act 2004 came into force in April 2006. The Board believes that these can further help to drive up the quality and availability of privately rented accommodation.

100. The Act has introduced selective statutory licensing of privately rented housing in areas of low demand or where there is a significant and persistent problem of anti-social behaviour. This is designed to tackle the phenomenon of inexperienced and unscrupulous landlords buying cheap properties in these areas, carrying out little or no maintenance work, installing poor quality tenants on housing benefit who engage in anti-social behaviour, help to drive other people out of these areas and further add to the problems of abandonment. Managing a rented dwelling in these areas without a licence and without a reasonable excuse will be a criminal offence. Registered social landlords will be exempt from the scheme.

101. The Board sees opportunities for local authorities to coordinate the licensing of privately rented accommodation in these areas with their overall housing strategies and their approach to dealing with homelessness, empty properties and anti-social behaviour.
102. The Act has introduced Interim and Final Management Orders which enable local authorities to take over responsibility for empty properties, carrying out repairs and installing new tenants. The Board considers that these Orders have the potential to open up long-standing empty properties to homeless households.

103. The Act has also introduced new licensing arrangements for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). The Board considers that these new licensing arrangements can raise the standard of accommodation available to the region’s most vulnerable households.

**Cheshire Landlord Links**

The Cheshire local authorities submitted a successful innovation bid to the ODPM’s Homelessness Innovation fund to reduce homelessness by using the private sector and meet their 2001 target for reducing the use of temporary accommodation.

The aim is to employ three Private Sector Liaison Officers to work across the six Cheshire districts, whose role will be to maximise the use of the private rented sector to provide settled accommodation and to prevent homelessness arising due to the termination of tenancies in the private sector.

The role of the Private Sector Liaison Officers will be to:-

- Encourage private landlords to take homeless referrals,
- Redefine the way in which both private landlords and letting agents view housing benefit tenants,
- Encourage landlords to give extended assured shorthold tenancies (preferably 6 months) as a means of either preventing homelessness or providing a settled home for someone who has been accepted as homeless,
- Encourage private landlords to contact the local homelessness team prior to terminating a tenancy,
- Provide mediation in disputes between landlords and tenants,
- Provide an advice service to private landlords and tenants on duties and responsibilities and best practice,
- Liaise with the Housing Benefit service,
- Refer tenants to floating support services to prevent the breakdown of tenancies,
- Link potential tenants with rent deposit schemes, and develop schemes where none exist, and
- Work with Housing Benefit sections to use discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness.
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<td>18. Can you provide details of the benefits and difficulties of operating a rent deposit scheme?</td>
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<td>19. What other steps can local authorities and registered social landlords take to make more use of the privately rented sector?</td>
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<td>20. How can North West local authorities disseminate lessons learned from implementing the provisions of the Housing Act 2004 to bring rented property back into use?</td>
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People Issues

Domestic violence

104. Domestic violence accounts for 25% of all recorded violent crime. Domestic violence is not just something that happens to women; up to 10% of violence happens against men. Nevertheless, a woman is 9 times more likely to be attacked in the home than on the street, and on average, a woman is likely to experience 35 physical assaults before seeking help. Local authorities have a statutory duty to work in partnership with the police and other agencies to reduce crime and disorder. They also have a responsibility to find accommodation for those made homeless as a result of domestic violence. This accounts for 16% of all homeless in the North West, slightly more than the national picture.

Information

105. The North West Regional Housing Board believes that local authorities should provide easily accessible information about the availability of accommodation for those suffering or threatened with domestic violence. This information should be available not only at Council housing offices but also at other places where victims normally go, such as libraries and GP surgeries. This information should also be available in BME languages at places where potential BME victims of domestic violence normally go.

Refuges

106. The Board believes that local authorities and housing providers should work together across administrative boundaries, perhaps in the existing sub-regional Homelessness Fora, to assess the need for women’s refuges and to ensure adequate provision. The Board believes that the advantage of the sub-regional approach is that it enables victims of domestic violence to move away from the immediate vicinity of their home, and this may reduce the risk of intimidation from former partners. In the longer term, choice-based lettings schemes will allow victims to move away if they want to.

107. The Board urges local authorities and registered social landlords to adopt a sympathetic approach to applications for re-housing from victims of domestic violence. Shelter reports that it is not uncommon for victims to be refused a tenancy because of arrears, outstanding repairs bills or bad behaviour attributable to the former partner.
Sanctuaries

108. The Board also supports the move towards sanctuary schemes, allowing victims to remain in their homes if they wish, rather than being forced to move. Forced moves can disrupt children’s education, employment and family networks, especially if victims are forced to move on numerous occasions. Apart from the social benefits, the cost of keeping victims and their families in their homes can be less costly than the provision of emergency accommodation.

109. Key features of the sanctuary scheme include:-

- It provides additional security such as extra locks and lighting, enabling victims of domestic violence to remain in their homes if they wish;
- It only works if the violent partner no longer lives with the victim;
- Arrangements are tailored to meet the needs of the individuals concerned;
- It is voluntary and available to all tenures;
- It should operate in conjunction with the police and support services;
- The fire service should also be involved to prevent building fire traps.

110. As well as changing or installing additional locks on the external doors and windows and possibly bars on the windows, sanctuary schemes often include a safe room, generally the master bedroom. The door is replaced with a solid core door, revised to open outwards, the frame is reinforced, locks are fitted at the top and bottom of the door, strong hinges and bolts are fitted and a door viewer is installed. A phone is installed so that the victim can call the police. Fire safety equipment is provided.

111. It is important that security work is installed quickly once victims asks for help or are referred by another agency, or else they may move.

112. Funding for sanctuary schemes can come from a variety of sources. It can come from the local authorities’ homelessness prevention funds and justified on the “invest to save” approach in that it avoids the cost of finding alternative temporary accommodation. It could be funded through the local authorities’ Private Sector Renewal Strategies. Alternatively, it could be funded by the victim’s landlord as all social landlords have a duty of care to their tenants. Providing a sanctuary is a clear example of keeping tenants safe in dangerous circumstances. However the Board believes that means-testing may deter victims who need help from asking for it.

The Manchester Sanctuary Scheme

Between January and March 2006, Manchester City Council ran a pilot sanctuary scheme in the ten central wards for those likely to become homeless as a result of domestic violence. It was run by the Council’s Domestic Violence Outreach Team, part of its Homelessness Service, in conjunction with “Safe”, a provider of security installations. The police, fire service, health and safety and Women’s Aid are also consulted. Where the property is rented, the landlord’s permission is needed to install the security devices.

The scheme has had its successes. One service user said “The scheme has changed my life. I can now freely move around the house and I can now sleep at night”.

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However not all referrals have been acted upon. One case was not pursued as it was decided that the internal walls were so thin that it would be pointless installing a new secure door when the partner, who had a history of using weapons, could break through the walls.

113. However the Board recognises that a secure room on its own may not always be the best approach in all circumstances. Sometimes it might be more appropriate to make the whole property secure.

Rochdale Safer Homes Project

Rochdale has a high incidence of domestic violence. In 2005 it ran a short feasibility study of providing tailored packages of security measures to those fleeing domestic violence. This enabled victims to remain in their homes should they wish to do so. The scheme proved a success. Not only did it improve the confidence of domestic violence victims, but installing 18 packages of security measures saved the Council over £160,000 when measured against the costs that would have been incurred in providing alternative accommodation.

Clients can be identified by either the Council’s homelessness department or another referring agency. The homelessness team will then organise a property inspection and organise the works at a time which is agreed with the client. The council will also get the landlord’s permission when this is required. The work is done by staff who have been trained in dealing with victims of domestic violence and vulnerable adults. A follow-up inspection is then undertaken to check that the added security has worked. Where additional support is needed, the Council will put the victim in touch with the relevant agency.

A feature of the scheme is that it aims to make the whole property secure, not just one room within it. Sometimes the security work might appear to be modest, eg cutting down a hedge to assure a victim that her former partner was not spying on the property.

114. The Board believes that sanctuary schemes should operate as part of a package in conjunction with Supporting People and the police and probation services. It also believes that if victims of domestic violence still feel insecure and ask to be rehoused elsewhere, they should not be refused on the grounds that they have already been provided with a sanctuary.

Questions:

21. Can sub-regional homelessness fora assess the need for refuges in their area for victims of domestic violence?

22. Do you have other examples of sanctuary schemes working in the North West, and are there any practical lessons that can be learned from them?
Homelessness amongst the Black and Minority Ethnic communities

115. Nationally, households amongst the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities are about three or four times more likely to figure amongst the homeless than their share of the overall population. This happens in all regions. In the North West, the 2001 Census showed that non-white households accounted for 15% of all households accepted as homeless, but accounted for only 4% of the total population.

116. Homelessness data may actually under-estimate the scale of the BME homelessness problem. Amongst the ethnic minority populations, those of Black African or Caribbean origins are twice as likely to be accepted as homeless as those of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origins, although the Asian population is bigger than the Black population.

117. There is evidence that hidden homelessness is a particularly significant problem amongst the younger BMEs, who may seek accommodation from extended family members or friends rather than present themselves as homeless or seek housing advice from the local authority. For example, research carried out for the Oldham / Rochdale Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder found that 6% of the households within the Pathfinder were overcrowded, compared to 1% outside, but this rose to 26% for the Pakistani community and 44% for the Bangladeshi community.

118. Local authorities are carrying out housing needs assessments to help in the preparation of new development plans, the Local Development Frameworks. The North West Regional Housing Board recommends that local authorities work with the voluntary sector and BME registered social landlords to assess the extent of overcrowding in BME communities.

Advice on housing

119. As some homeless BME households may be reluctant to come forward and present themselves as homeless, the Regional Housing Board considers that local authorities and housing providers should be pro-active and innovative in getting information on housing entitlements and housing services to them. There is a statutory duty under race relations legislation to make sure that services are available to all.

120. One means of achieving this objective might be for local authorities and their partners to provide information on housing, in English and other languages, in accessible venues where members of the BME communities go during their daily lives. These might include GP surgeries, health centres, Job Centres, public libraries, post offices, local authority or registered social landlord one-stop shops, Age Concern Luncheon Clubs, youth services and places of worship. They should consider using different agencies to target different groups, eg targeting families through places of worship and targeting single homeless through the youth service. They should also consider ways of using the voluntary sector to convey housing information to BME groups as an integral part of their own in-house services to the BME community. These would normally include advice on homelessness, housing rights, debt counselling and welfare benefits. The Regional Housing Board also recommends that local authorities monitor the effectiveness of these advice initiatives.

121. Information should also be provided to help potential victims of domestic violence.

CDS Housing Association – Tenancy Support

The CDS Housing Association analysed their housing turn-over and found that tenancy failure was particularly high amongst refugees. They responded by developing a targeted support service, funded by an Innovation Good Practice grant.
The service ensured that all new refugee tenants are supported at the start of their tenancy by being given help in setting up payments, benefits, utilities and furniture. For some tenants this help at the start of the tenancy was all that they needed. Others, such as those with health problems or mental health issues, require continuing support and involving other agencies and specialist help.

Staffing

122. The Regional Housing Board considers that it is not enough to rely on written advice on housing issues for members of the BME communities. There is no substitute for face-to-face contact. The Board recognises that this has resource implications for many local authorities, but considers that adequate investment in community development is needed to prevent both homelessness and hidden homelessness in BME communities.

123. Local authorities should ensure that they have enough bi-lingual staff drawn from the BME population on their front line services so that inquiries from BME residents can be answered in their own language.

124. Local authorities should also consider employing bi-lingual outreach staff to make contact with BME communities and provide help and information on housing issues. This outreach work should be mainstreamed rather than seen as a short-term add-on. BME outreach work should not be left to one individual on a short-term contract.

125. If local authorities do not have in-house staff that are able to speak the languages of homeless BME households, they should consider using telephone interpreting services or employing interpreters when required. Front line staff should have clear guidance on when to use these services.
Rochdale Council and the Ashiana Housing Association have produced a strategy to eliminate housing disadvantage in Rochdale’s Asian communities by the time of the 2011 census.

Its objectives are to:-

- Identify the housing needs in Rochdale’s Asian communities
- Take action to meet these needs
- Monitor changing housing needs
- Improve the quality of life for the Asian communities
- Implement an action plan involving renewing inner Rochdale, improving access to social housing and meeting housing and community care needs.

Rochdale’s Asian communities were found to be suffering from severe overcrowding due to a young and growing population, extended families and a concentration within the town’s inner areas where they felt safe from harassment. Whilst the structural quality of the stock was relatively good, there was a mis-match between house and family size.

The Council aims to significantly increase the number of its housing staff from the Asian communities so that it mirrors the composition of the borough’s population, and to provide positive action training for BME housing employees.

The Council aims to increase access to socially rented housing amongst the Asian communities and to provide support for people moving into new areas. It has set up a multi-agency racial harassment forum involving the Housing Department, the Police and the Racial Equality Council to monitor and respond to racial harassment.

The Council has researched the needs of Asian women fleeing domestic violence and has found a lack of awareness within the BME communities of the housing support that is available to victims. The Council has appointed an Asian female housing officer to raise awareness of domestic violence and the help that is available. The Council is also prepared to interview women facing domestic violence at a "place of safety" such as a community centre rather than at the Homelessness Advice Centre.

126. The Regional Housing Board considers that housing associations should consider similar practices to ensure that they cater for BME tenants.

127. The Housing Corporation expects housing associations to ensure that their governing bodies reflect the composition of the local community and provide suitable training for new board members. The Corporation monitors associations’ recruitment statistics against local BME population data to ensure that legislative requirements are being followed and that good practice is in evidence encouraging BME applicants. The Corporation promotes equal opportunities in career development and training for BME employees to equip them for middle management. It also provides guidance on good practice on BME tenant participation.
128. The Housing Corporation also encourages local authorities and mainstream housing associations to transfer good quality stock to the region’s 6 registered BME Housing Associations (Tung Sing, Arawak Walton, Ashianna, Aksa, Pine Court and Steve Biko).

The Right Sort of Houses

129. In order to tackle hidden homelessness in the BME communities, the Regional Housing Board believes that local authorities should have a clear understanding of their local housing needs.

130. There is evidence in some areas of a mis-match between the supply of and demand for large houses to accommodate large or extended BME families, causing chronic overcrowding. However some housing providers also report changing housing needs amongst BME people, with younger households in particular aspiring to similar types of dwellings as the white population and to move away from traditional BME areas.

131. Emerging regional and national planning advice calls on local authorities to work with their neighbours and other partners in carrying out housing market assessments, including the need for different types and sizes of dwellings. Whilst these studies are designed to inform their development plans, the Board believes that they can equally inform the formulation of their housing strategies and plans to tackle homelessness.

The Right Sort of Areas

132. The Regional Housing Board recognises that homeless BME households may wish to live close to their communities so that they can have access to shops catering for their cultural and religious needs, community facilities and places of worship. However the Board also recognises that the wish to be close to their communities and live in areas with which they are familiar can sometimes accentuate homelessness and overcrowding problems and perpetuate the phenomenon of parallel communities or racial segregation within the region.

133. The Board therefore encourages local authorities and registered social landlords to provide opportunities for BME households to move into non-traditional areas. They should also provide support for these households as they move into new neighbourhoods. However the Board recognises the need for caution in introducing BME households into new areas. Local authorities should not try to encourage BME households to move to areas with a reputation for racial harassment.

New Communities

134. In recent years the North West has seen a net increase in international migration. However many of the recent immigrants have come from new areas – southern and eastern Europe, particularly following EU enlargement.

135. Many of these new immigrants have tied accommodation provided with their work, so that they have not yet impacted on homelessness statistics within the region. However these workers may need to find their own accommodation if they leave their jobs, which could lead to an increase in homelessness in the future.
136. The Board considers that local authorities should try to anticipate and prevent homelessness arising within the new communities by making sure that information on housing is easily available and in the right format.

**Questions:**

23. Do we have a sufficient understanding of BME homelessness, or where would more research be helpful?

24. Would planners’ housing market assessments pick up hidden homelessness amongst BME communities?

25. Are there any additional lessons on targeting housing advice to BME communities that the Strategy might convey, and how might local authorities swap best practice?

26. Are there any additional lessons on staffing and language issues that might be set out in this Strategy?

27. Should specific housing be designated for BME groups?

28. Is there any further advice which the Board can give to help BME’s to move to non-traditional areas?

29. Can more be done to prevent potential homelessness amongst the new communities?
Asylum seekers and homelessness

137. The North West is a major dispersal area for asylum seekers and many, if granted refugee status, are likely to settle in the area. The North West Regional Housing Board considers that there is scope for improving the way in which refugees are found accommodation once they are given leave to remain in the country. The Board considers refugees as a potential asset to the region as they are entrepreneurial individuals who often start their own businesses. The region can only benefit if refugees are quickly found settled accommodation and integrated into the community.

138. Asylum seekers in the North West are looked after by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) whilst they are waiting to be granted refugee status and be given leave to remain in the country. Asylum seekers typically spend their first couple of weeks in the UK in induction centres whilst NASS determines whether or not they are destitute and qualify for state assistance under S.95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. About one-third of asylum-seekers make their own accommodation arrangements with family or friends and receive subsistence support from NASS. Two-thirds are provided with accommodation by NASS, usually with private landlords. Asylum seekers receiving accommodation support are dispersed away from London and the South East to other regions.

139. In December 2005 there were 57,845 asylum seekers in the UK receiving help from NASS, of which 35,140 were receiving accommodation support from NASS. The main countries they came from were Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan. Nationally, there was an 11% reduction in the number of asylum claims in the second quarter of 2005. This is projected to continue to fall.

140. Asylum seekers who are refused permission to stay in the UK are told that NASS support will end within 21 days and are expected to make arrangements to leave the country.

141. However successful asylum seekers who are granted refugee status, or given leave to remain in the UK on another basis, lose their NASS accommodation 28 days after the decision.

142. Refugees usually manage to avoid street homelessness by staying with members of their community or faith groups. However this can lead to overcrowding and public health risks.

143. This situation is far from ideal as new refugees experience the following difficulties once NASS support ends:

- They are unfamiliar with local services on offer and cannot navigate “the system”;
- They do not know their entitlements or have low expectations;
- There are language and cultural difficulties;
- They may not have the cash or benefits to access private sector accommodation;
- They often lack a fixed abode from which to access employment or training;
- Local authorities may be informed by the NASS providers that an asylum seeker is to be evicted, but they get fewer than 28 days in which to respond and offer housing advice and support.

144. The Home Office and Department for Communities and Local Government have commissioned pilot studies in the North West and the West Midlands to develop good practice in preventing homelessness amongst new refugees.
Early Local Authority Involvement

145. From March 2006, NASS accommodation providers are contractually obliged to notify local housing authorities of all positive asylum decisions within two days of being asked to terminate NASS accommodation support.

146. The North West Regional Housing Board encourages local authorities to react quickly to such notifications from NASS accommodation providers and aim to prevent homelessness where ever possible.

147. All local authority homeless units are encouraged to provide the NASS accommodation providers with named points of contact to receive these notifications.

148. A simple referral form has been devised which NASS providers and immigration officers should use to notify local authorities of potential refugee homelessness. The form includes details of household composition, health and support needs. Local authorities should then be in a position to arrange a rapid housing options interview and attempt to prevent homelessness.

149. NASS accommodation providers will be providing successful claimants with a “move on” information pack. There is a blank text box in the pack for local authorities to provide clear housing advice and service navigation messages. All local authorities are strongly encouraged to provide as much information as possible to prepare asylum seekers for their transition from NASS support to mainstream housing options.

Delayed Evictions and Tenancy Conversions

150. The Board believes that it should be cheaper and more cohesive to keep refugee households in their NASS – provided accommodation instead of providing bed and breakfast or other temporary accommodation, until a planned move to a more settled home can be achieved. It also causes less disruption for local schools where the frequent movement of children with multiple language needs can impact upon educational attainment.

151. Local authorities are strongly encouraged to enter into block agreements with NASS accommodation providers to delay the eviction of households given leave to remain in the country – ideally creating short assured tenancies - whilst they look for a more settled home.

152. Two of the three NASS accommodation providers in the North West have already provided an indicative menu of the cost of delaying eviction and, in effect, buying extra periods of accommodation for different types and sizes of dwelling and for different timeframes. This will inform negotiations between local authorities and accommodation providers on individual contracts.

153. The third NASS provider may be in a position to agree tenancy conversion and the establishment of short assured tenancies for new refugees. The Board believes that, in the longer term, this should be an aspiration for all of the NASS providers once the transition to the new NASS contracts has been completed in July 2006.

154. Delayed eviction and tenancy conversion can be made a reality if local authorities are creative in using spend to save homeless prevention funds and discretionary housing benefit payments to bridge any potential funding gaps. Similarly local authorities have a key role in supporting refugees and landlords to ensure that the tenants know how to
budget, claim benefits, pay bills and access services and that help is available upon any non payment of rent.

155. The Board believes that the vast majority of refugees want to make a legitimate success of their new lives, and will not run up debts if properly advised.

156. The Board also believes if the number of asylum seekers continues to fall, landlords will wish to keep good tenants as a means of minimising voids and will be prepared to offer assured short hold tenancies to refugees.

Prevention of Homelessness Good Practice Pilot

The North West Consortium (East) of local authorities has been granted £160,000 over 2006/07 and 2007/08 under the DCLG’s Ethnic Minorities Innovation Fund to underwrite a pilot project to prevent homelessness amongst refugees and asylum seekers. The aims are to:-

- Foster better links between refugee communities and local authorities and key agencies to facilitate refugee resettlement and integration;
- Work with accommodation providers to delay eviction, develop move-on accommodation and encourage tenancy conversion; and
- Encourage the development of local refuges to build capacity and provide community support.

The pilot will cover Liverpool, Manchester, Salford, Bolton, Bury and Wigan.

Community Support

157. The Board believes that finding and sustaining settled accommodation plays a vital role in helping refugees to integrate into the local community. However refugees will also need help from local authorities and the voluntary sector to attain access to the services they need and to develop their capacity. Local authorities might consider employing outreach workers to develop contact with emerging new communities.

158. Local authorities may need to ensure that their Supporting People Services are geared up to meet the needs of refugees. They may consider developing specialist refugee floating support services in partnership with Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs). If there are no specialist support services for refugees, they should ensure that general Supporting People staff are aware of specific refugee issues – eg help in accessing benefits and services, setting up accounts with the utility companies and opening bank accounts.

159. The Board believes that local authorities can benefit from developing two-way training programmes with RCOs. Local authorities can deliver training sessions on their housing services to refugee groups. In turn, RCOs can deliver refugee awareness training for local authority staff.

160. The Board believes that local authorities may find it useful to encourage feedback from RCOs on the effectiveness of their services to refugees and other BME communities.

Manchester Refugee Support Network

Manchester has a long history of offering a home to refugees from all parts of the world. Over the past three decades it has become home to over 10,000 refugees.
Manchester Refugee Support Network (MRSN) is a grass-roots charitable organisation serving the needs of Manchester’s refugee communities. It began in the early 1990’s as a network serving the more established Chinese, Bosnian, Sudanese and Kurdish communities. It has since expanded to work with other communities with 6 paid staff and 17 volunteers. It currently has representatives from Zimbabwe, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia on its management committee.

MRSN provides practical help, training and advice to new and established refugee groups on organisational, funding and other capacity building issues. It currently works with 50 refugee organisations within Greater Manchester. It publishes a bi-monthly newsletter, provides access to IT and provides a comprehensive range of advice on issues such as housing benefit to all refugees. It also provides the organisational support for Manchester’s Refugee and Migrants Forum.

MRSN and Manchester City Council are developing a two-way training programme whereby the Council uses the Network to inform refugees about housing options and the network raises awareness of refugee issues within the Council.

SUNRISE

SUNRISE (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services) is a Home Office – funded pilot project to help refugees integrate into the UK. There are four SUNRISE pilot areas, one of which is in central Manchester.

SUNRISE aims to help asylum seekers granted refugee status and leave to remain in the UK quickly integrate into the community. Each household asking to use the service is assigned a Refugee Action caseworker who provides intensive face-to-face advice within the 28 day period before NASS support is withdrawn and at regular 30 monthly reviews throughout their first year of settlement. Each household is given a Personal Integration Plan and access to a free phone help line.

SUNRISE gives help and advice to refugees on homelessness services, housing providers, employment and national insurance, welfare benefits, health services, education, English language tuition, information on family reunification and contacts with community and faith organisations.

Language

161. Language difficulties often act as a barrier for refugees in accessing accommodation and other services. The Board believes that, as with BME communities in general, local authorities should ensure that information about housing and other services is available in refugees’ own languages. Interpreters should be present at any home visits or interviews.

162. All local authorities are encouraged to develop effective interpretation and translation policies and ensure that housing advice is delivered in a range of accessible community locations and in conjunction with refugee community organisations.

Allocations

163. The Board believes that local authorities should check that there are no provisions in their allocations policies that inadvertently discriminate against refugees, e.g. requiring households to have resided in the area for at least 6 months before they are eligible for local authority accommodation or a nomination to a registered social landlord. They should also ensure that there is appropriate support for refugees wishing to bid for
accommodation through a choice-based lettings scheme, eg that they have enough information in their own languages to be aware of the scheme and to be able to make an application.

**Questions:**

30. Do paragraphs 138 – 145 reflect your perception of the problems of preventing homelessness amongst refugees and asylum seekers?

31. What can be done to encourage landlords to delay evicting asylum seekers once they are given leave to remain in the UK?

32. What can be done to encourage landlords to convert asylum seekers’ tenancies into long term ones?

33. What more can be done to encourage community support for asylum seekers to help them settle and integrate?

34. Do you have experience of helping asylum seekers to overcome their language problems?
Homeless ex-offenders

164. Prisoners released from jail without any accommodation to go to are a small but significant contributory factor in the region’s homeless population. Evidence from the Cheshire Multi-Agency Monitoring Study, mentioned earlier in this Strategy, shows that ex-offenders figure significantly amongst those in housing need.

165. The National Offenders Management Service (NOMS) is currently initiating a regional Reducing Re-offending Action Plan (RRAP) to prevent prisoners committing further crimes when they are released from prison. Accommodation issues are recognised as an important aspect of preventing re-offending. If offenders cannot find accommodation quickly after being released from prison they will have difficulty getting benefits, let alone a job, and there is a strong likelihood that they will return to crime to provide an income. The Social Exclusion Unit found that 75% of those who have served a short sentence for burglary or theft are re-convicted within two years of release. It also found that homeless ex-offenders are twice as likely to be reconvicted as those with stable accommodation. The Home Office suggests that finding accommodation for ex-offenders could reduce re-offending by 20%.

166. The Prison Service has set itself a target of releasing at least 77% of prisoners into known accommodation. This target compares with the Social Exclusion Unit’s finding that 42% of offenders have no fixed abode when released from custody. Similarly, the Youth Justice Board has set targets for Youth Offending Teams to find accommodation for juvenile offenders when they are released.

167. The North West Regional Housing Board is working with NOMS on the RRAP initiative to prevent homelessness amongst ex-offenders.

168. Nationally, about one-third of offenders loose their accommodation whilst in prison. The region has about 11,000 prisoners, although not all of them hail from the North West. The Board considers that released ex-offenders could be a significant addition to the region’s homelessness total if they cannot be found accommodation quickly. The Board also considers that it is in local authorities’ own interests to help ex-offenders with accommodation problems to prevent then returning to crime when released into their home communities.

“No ex-offender can really hope to be fully rehabilitated without a home, a physical base which gives them security and stability. At present, about 1 in 4 of prisoners serving short-term custodial services who had previously had stable accommodation lose their homes while they are in prison. The goal we must move towards is that every individual who leaves the prison gates should have planned and guaranteed accommodation, which in the vast majority of places is proper housing rather than a hostel or temporary bed.”

Charles Clarke, Home Secretary, speech to the Prison Reform Trust, 19th September 2005.
A Joined Up Approach

169. Local authorities owe a duty to find accommodation for the homeless, and prisoners who are vulnerable as a result of their imprisonment and who do not have any accommodation to go to upon their release are a priority need. The Board believes that ex-offenders need help. Many have poor life and coping skills, have a history of poor relationships with those who might help them, and are disengaged from support services.

170. The Board believes that NOMS, the Youth Justice Board and local authorities should act together and plan ahead for the release of prisoners without any accommodation rather than wait until they are released.

171. The Board believes that the keys to reducing homelessness amongst ex-offenders are:-

- Early intervention to prevent offenders losing their accommodation;
- Management information systems within prisons which record prisoners’ accommodation needs and pick up those prisoners without any accommodation to go to;
- Advice to offenders on housing options and debt management to help them prepare for release; and
- Assessing accommodation requirements and finding permanent accommodation for prisoners in advance of their release.

172. The Board wants to avoid the situation where homeless prisoners are released without any prior assessment and being left to their own devices to make their way to the Council’s office and present themselves as homeless.

Early intervention

173. Ideally, information should be made available to offenders in court before they start their sentence. The information booklet “Facing Prison? What to do with your Home” provides advice to those arrested or on remand on either keeping or surrendering their homes. It provides information on entitlements to housing benefit (up to 52 weeks) or, if the home is mortgaged, entitlement to income support for the interest part of the mortgage payment. Prisoners on remand should be encouraged to apply for these so that they keep their homes.

174. Once sentenced, housing benefit is then limited to 13 weeks (including time already spent on remand). Prisoners in rented accommodation are advised on how to give up their tenancy if they are to be away for a longer period of time or to transfer the tenancy. Prisoners in mortgaged accommodation are advised to make an arrangement with the mortgage lender, let out the property or to sell it. The Board encourages the Prison Service and the voluntary sector to help prisoners fill in the relevant forms.
Management information

175. The North West Regional Housing Board looks to prisons to have management information systems in place to identify which offenders risk being homeless when they are released. Prisons should inform the offender’s local authority (or another local authority playing a coordinating role) of the imminent release date and the risk of homelessness.

176. Initial housing assessments should be carried out when prisoners are first sent to their local prison, and should be transferred with them when they are subsequently sent to other prisons to complete their sentence. The new end-to-end Offender Management Model should ensure that these records are up-dated after their periodic reviews. It is particularly important that these assessments are updated shortly before the end of the sentence as this is often a crisis stage for prisoners and their families and arrangements may break down shortly before release. If good management information systems are in place, then the local authority should be notified immediately.

177. The Prison Service’s North West Area Office is working with NOMS to develop standard housing needs assessments documentation for use at all of the region’s prisons.

Advice to offenders in prison

178. The Board believes that offenders spend a better chance of avoiding homelessness if they are given advice on debt management and on housing options. There is a risk that prisoners can run up arrears whilst serving their sentence, be evicted, and then have difficulty in finding accommodation upon release.

179. Individual prisons and young offenders’ institutions have done much to provide housing advice, often in partnership with the voluntary sector. However there is little consistency across the region’s establishments in terms of the type, frequency and quality of the advice that is provided.

180. The Board welcomes the willingness of individual prisons to forge links with the voluntary sector and the Legal Services Commission (see Annex C) to provide advice on debt management and housing options to their inmates so that they are better prepared to face up to accommodation issues upon release. The Board particularly encourages prisoners to help themselves in developing advice services as it can lead to them qualifying for professional NVQ qualifications.

HMP Haverigg Foundation Centre

Haverigg Prison in Cumbria has developed its own housing advice service, the Foundation Centre, involving the prisoners themselves in the advice provision. The aim of the Centre is to ensure that prisoners have somewhere secure to live when they are released. Without accommodation, ex-offenders find it difficult to get employment and access to healthcare. Having a place to live reduces the chances of re-offending and reduces risk to the community.

The Foundation Team consists of a Housing Manager plus 3 Housing Advice Workers – prisoners who have been trained to carry out housing needs advice. The Team works in partnership with Shelter, who hold weekly surgeries on housing
issues, and with the Citizens Advice Bureau which advises on debt management.

The Housing Advice Workers carry out weekly inductions for all new prisoners and help them fill in a Housing Assessment Form. If a prisoner’s housing needs change at any time during their sentence they can contact the Foundation Centre and receive advice.

Prisoners will be seen by a discharge board ten weeks prior to their release and any housing issues will be dealt with by an individual action plan. This will also provide advice on training and employment opportunities.

The Foundation Centre sees success in the small number of prisoners leaving Haverigg going to no fixed abode. It sees the secret of its success as early intervention with the induction process, developing individual action plans for each prisoner, and good communications with outside agencies.

It would like to see local authorities getting involved earlier in accommodation issues, assessing prisoners’ accommodation needs before the day of their release, perhaps using a video link to interview offenders in view of the prison’s remote location. It would like to see a bond scheme to enable ex-offenders to access the privately rented sector. It would also like to see a community worker appointed to meet prisoners upon release and take them to their new home.

The prisoners acting as Housing Advice workers have qualified as NVQ Level 3 in Advice and Guidance.

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**Early Assessments**

181. Prisons generally start to assemble information about offenders at least 4 weeks before they are released – whether they will have accommodation, whether they will have a job and whether they are being picked up on the day of their release.

182. The Regional Housing Board looks to prisons, young offenders’ institutions and local authorities to work together at this stage to assess housing needs and arrange temporary accommodation for offenders who would otherwise be homeless. The Board considers that local authorities should plan ahead for the release of ex-offenders rather than wait for the release to trigger their statutory responsibilities.

183. The Prison Service’s North West Area Office is drawing up minimum standards for housing advice services across all of the region’s prisons to raise standards of advice across the estate. These standards include such issues as mechanisms for identifying housing need, closing or maintaining existing tenancies, offering advice on housing benefits, promoting awareness of housing issues amongst prisoners, providing advice on housing options before release and ensuring that housing providers have access to prisoners for interviews. They are keen to develop the role of prisoners in working alongside housing advice service professionals. They are also developing monitoring systems to assist the Prison and Probation Services in measuring performance against NOMS targets.

184. The Board believes that it is essential for local authorities with a statutory duty to the homeless in priority need to carry out housing needs assessments of potentially homeless prisoners before they are released in order to find suitable accommodation.

185. The Board recognises that visiting prisons to assess the needs of potentially homeless offenders may place a burden on local authority staff resources. The alternative would therefore be video conferencing or, if this is not possible, an assessment by telephone interview. The Board notes that the Criminal Justice Act 2003 requires all prisoners to come out to Probation supervision by December 2008, so video conferencing facilities should be available at Probation offices.

186. The Board also recognises the practical problems for prisons in dealing with a number of local authorities as offenders can come from different parts of the country. The Board suggests that groups of local authorities nominate lead authorities to deal with individual prisons, and then pass on information about offenders' accommodation needs to the relevant authorities.

Service Level Agreements

Individual prisons and local authorities are drawing up service level agreements to help prevent offenders being homeless upon release.

One such agreement is between HMP Lancaster and Pendle Borough Council and is designed to ensure that Pendle residents or those with a local connection with the borough get the best possible service when they are released from the prison.

Key points include:

- The prison will inform the local authority of any prisoner serving a short sentence or approaching release who is likely to be homeless;
- The prison will inform the landlords of prisoners serving short sentences if they wish to return to the property, or will arrange for the termination of tenancies for long-sentence prisoners;
- Prisoners are given advice on rent arrears;
- The council ensures that the prison has a supply of housing application forms; and
- Potentially homeless prisoners will be interviewed by phone as near as possible to 28 days before release, and will be informed of the progress of any housing application.

187. The Board also recommends that sub-regional groups of local authorities agree to pool resources and share accommodation resources. They should also be prepared to find accommodation for each other’s ex-offenders should they request a move away from their home areas. One key to preventing re-offending is to move the ex-offender away from his old criminal acquaintances or drug supplier.

188. The Board also recognises that ex-offenders may need support on release, eg advice on how to balance budgets and pay bills. Landlords may need the assurance of such a support package before they are willing to take on ex-offenders as tenants. The Board believes that early assessments of housing needs also provides that opportunity to work out what support package is needed and involve Supporting People and other agencies.
Vale Royal Turning Point Scheme

Vale Royal Borough Council, in partnership with Turning Point, Cheshire Probation and Weaver Vale Housing Trust, provides six self-contained properties across the Borough for offenders leaving prison who have a substance misuse problem. Whilst the scheme offers what may seem a simple solution – accommodation plus intensive support – this is the client group which often slips through the net.

Weaver Vale Housing Trust leases the properties to Turning Point, who in turn give the ex-offender an assured shorthold tenancy and provide intense floating support to enable the individual to address their substance misuse and behavioural problems. They also provide the support necessary to enable the individual to gain the skills needed to live independently and maintain a tenancy. At the end of the programme (usually two years) the individual will be offered a secure tenancy with Weaver Vale Housing Trust at the property where they have lived. Weaver Vale will then offer another suitable property for the scheme.

To date, three people have now secure accommodation with Weaver Vale Housing Trust. Although some individuals have relapsed, the scheme has been remarkably successful in preventing re-offending, given the nature of the client group.

35. Do you share this draft Strategy’s perception of the problems of homelessness amongst ex-offenders and the possible remedies?
36. What are the impediments to developing management information systems to identify offenders due to be released shortly but without a home to go to?
37. Are there any further steps that might be taken to provide advice to offenders on housing and debt management whilst they are serving their sentences?
38. How can local authorities and prisons work together to do housing needs assessment of potentially homeless offenders before they are released?
39. Is it feasible for local authorities to work together with prisons and arrange lead authorities to liaise with particular prisons on homelessness issues?
40. How can local authorities agree to accommodate each others ex-offenders to help them go straight?
Next steps

189. There are many causes of homelessness and it is not possible to address all of them in a single Strategy. It is also impossible for the Regional Housing Board to prevent homelessness on its own. However housing providers and other organisations with an interest in preventing homelessness may find that the examples of good practice cited in this Strategy provide lessons that they can carry forward.

190. Nevertheless, this Strategy has identified a number of actions which the Board expects its partners in the region to pursue. These are:-

- Nomination agreements. The Board’s Support Group will work with the National Federation of Housing Associations and sub-regional fora of local authorities to consider what more can be done to encourage local authorities to draw up nomination agreements with registered social landlords whereby they can nominate homeless households for permanent tenancies.
- Support for vulnerable households to prevent eviction or to assure landlords that they would make suitable tenants. GONW and other members of the Board’s Support Group will discuss with the local authorities and the voluntary sector how the lessons from initiatives such as the Rochdale Inclusion project can be applied elsewhere and how support packages can be provided to help these vulnerable households in the forthcoming Supporting People Strategy.
- Making more use of the privately rented sector. GONW will discuss with sub-regional homelessness fora of local authorities whether greater use can be made of rent deposit schemes. It will also explore with them how the new powers introduced by the Housing Act 2004, such as landlord licensing and Management Orders, can best be implemented.
- HomelessLink will continue to develop lifeskills and vocational training for residents of hostels and supported accommodation.
- GONW will encourage sub-regional homelessness fora to discuss the provision of sufficient refuge accommodation for the victims of domestic violence. GONW will also input into the Home Office’s Regional Domestic Violence Reduction Action Plan to explain local authorities’ statutory responsibilities and to showcase examples of sanctuary schemes.
- Housing information. GONW will discuss with the Department of Health how to provide information on housing for vulnerable people, including victims of domestic violence or BME, in GP surgeries and health centres.
- BME homelessness. The North West BME Forum will consider how the good practice identified in this Strategy can be disseminated and carried forward.
- Refugees. The North West Consortium’s pilot project will disseminate the lessons learned on developing closer links with refugee communities and fostering community groups, delaying eviction from NASS accommodation, developing move-on accommodation, and making tenancies permanent. The Consortium will also consider whether member authorities’ allocation policies unreasonably discriminate against refugees.
- Prisoners. NOMS will work on developing management information systems to identify potentially homeless prisoners before they are released. The Prison Service will raise across-the-board minimum standards of housing advice within prisons. NOMS and GONW will discuss arranging early housing needs assessments of prisoners due for release with sub-regional fora of local authorities.
- NOMS will also explore the feasibility of setting up a pilot project with a prison, a local authority, registered social landlords and the probation service on providing
accommodation for ex-offenders and developing suitable support packages to help them become good tenants.

• Capacity issues. The Board will work with sub-regional fora of local authorities to disseminate good practice.

41. Do you agree with this list of actions needed to implement this Strategy?
42. Do you see the need for additional action, and who should undertake it?
Annex A. Summary of Consultation Questions

1. Is the national policy emphasis on homelessness prevention appropriate to the North West?
2. Are there other objectives which should be included in a Regional Homelessness Strategy for the North West?
3. Does this analysis reflect your understanding of the region’s homelessness issues?
4. Should the analysis reflect sub regional or City region groupings of local authority areas?
5. Have you hard evidence on the linkage, or lack of linkage, between increases in house prices and trends in homelessness?
6. Should the matter of affordability receive greater attention in the Strategy?
7. Do paragraphs 49-53 present an accurate picture of nomination arrangements in the region?
8. Do paragraphs 54-56 capture the key ingredients of robust but fair nomination agreements?
9. Are the steps proposed to address nomination failure realistic? Are there any issues around sharing personal data?
10. Are there any other examples of support for problematic tenants which might be included in the Strategy?
11. Do paragraphs 66-69 present an accurate picture of LA capacity issues in the region?
12. Are there any other steps that might be taken to improve local authorities’ capacity to deal with homelessness?
13. Is there scope for building on the work of the sub-regional fora in tackling homelessness?
14. Is there scope for building on the work of regional champions?
15. Does the strategy capture enough detail on the work of regional champions?
16. Are there any practical lessons in providing like skills and vocational training which could be included in the Strategy?
17. What can be done to encourage the provision of “move on” accommodation?
18. Are there any other recommendations that could be included in the Strategy to enable hostel residents to achieve independence?
19. Can you provide details of the benefits and difficulties of operating a rent deposit scheme?
20. What other steps can local authorities and registered social landlords take to make more use of the privately rented sector?
21. How can North West local authorities disseminate lessons learned from implementing the provisions of the Housing Act 2004 to bring empty rented property back into use?
22. Can sub-regional homelessness fora assess the need for refuges in their area for victims of domestic violence?
23. Do you have other examples of sanctuary schemes working in the North West, and are there any practical lessons that can be learned from them?
24. Do we have a sufficient understanding of BME homelessness, or where would more research be helpful?
25. Would planners’ housing market assessments pick up hidden homelessness in BME communities?
26. Are there any additional lessons on targeting housing advice to BME communities that the Strategy might convey, and how might local authorities swap best practice?
27. Are there any additional lessons on staffing and language issues that might be set out in this Strategy?
28. Should specific housing be designated for BME groups?
29. Is there any further advice which the Board can give to help BME’s to move to non-traditional areas?
30. Can more be done to prevent potential homelessness amongst the new communities?
31. Do paragraphs 138-145 reflect your perception of the problems of preventing homelessness amongst refugees and asylum seekers?
32. What can be done to encourage landlords to delay evicting asylum seekers once they are given leave to remain in the UK?
33. What can be done to encourage landlords to convert asylum seekers' tenancies into permanent ones?
34. What more can be done to encourage community support for asylum seekers to help them settle and integrate?
35. Do you have experience of helping asylum seekers to overcome their language problems?
36. Do you share this draft Strategy’s perception of the problems of homelessness amongst ex-offenders and the possible remedies?
37. What are the impediments to developing management information systems to identify offenders due to be released shortly but without a home to go to?
38. Are there any further steps that might be taken to provide advice to offenders on housing and debt management whilst they are serving their sentences?
39. How can local authorities and prisons work together to do housing needs assessments of potentially homeless offenders before they are released?
40. Is it feasible for local authorities to work together with prisons and arrange lead authorities to liaise with particular prisons on homelessness issues?
41. How can local authorities agree to accommodate each others’ ex-offenders to help them go straight?
42. Do you agree with this list of actions needed to implement this Strategy?
43. Do you see the need for additional action, and who should undertake it?
Annex B. Multi – Agency Monitoring Systems

Often a number of different agencies have contact with the homeless or those in housing need – local authority housing and social services departments, Citizens Advice Bureaux, service providers such as Connexions, Probation, Police, hostels and registered social landlords. A Multi – Agency Monitoring (MAM) system piloted by Shelter in Cheshire identified 142 agencies which needed to be involved.

The aim of MAM systems is for all these agencies with an interest in housing provision to collect data in a common format so that it can be analysed and shared. This will then provide the foundation of improved homelessness prevention services.

Some of the data that could be collected might seek to improve agencies’ understanding of homelessness, eg:-

- The number of people presenting themselves to different agencies with housing or homelessness problems;
- A profile of each household, (eg. age, household size, type gender, ethnicity, disability);
- Where each household previously lived;
- The types of housing problem faced by different households, (eg. eviction, relationship breakdown, mortgage repossession); and
- Other complicating problems, (eg. drug / alcohol dependency, learning problems, leaving care, an offending record).

Other data might help provide a better understanding of the roles of different agencies in preventing homelessness or tackling other housing problems, eg:-

- Measuring the number of cases dealt with by each agency;
- Understanding what types of household approach which agency;
- Recording when households threatened with homelessness approach someone for help, and who they approach;
- Recording the outcome of these initial approaches;
- Tracing which agencies refer homeless households to each other, and what the outcomes of these referrals are; and
- Measuring the extent to which homelessness can be prevented before a household presents itself to a local authority as homeless.

MAM can help to improve local homelessness prevention strategies by identifying unmet needs, identifying gaps or weaknesses in service provision, indicating where services could be redirected to better prevent homelessness, and showing where new services are needed. It also assists cross-agency planning and aligning of homelessness prevention and supporting people strategies. It supplements ODPM’s data on homeless households by including information on non-priority need households and on households who are receiving help from another statutory agency without being statutorily homeless.
Annex C. The Legal Services Commission

The Legal Services Commission (LSC) ensures that people get the information, advice and legal help they need to deal with a wide range of everyday problems. The LSC funds a network of solicitors, law centres and Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) and other advice providers to help more than 2 million people gain advice on a variety of issues including housing and homelessness, debt management, domestic violence, relationship breakdown and welfare benefits. Services provided include specialist legal advice and taking cases to court where necessary.

The LSC has also funded a number of innovative projects to test new ways of delivering advice and preventing homelessness and debt.

Homelessness Advice Service in Wigan

The LSC has funded Wigan CAB to work in partnership with the Council, Shelter and Wigan and Leigh Housing to develop a coordinated homelessness advice service in Wigan.

The aims of the project are to:-

- Establish an effective referral scheme and co-ordinated working between advice agencies, accommodation and support service providers;
- Analyse the options available for reorganising existing services to increase specialist provision;
- Analyse the causes of homelessness and how advice services can provide an effective response, including the incorporation of service provision at Hindley Young Offenders Institution, the Court Duty Rota and preventative services; and
- Establish a set of advice service standards for all agencies and ensure that best practices are incorporated into their methods of working.

Blackburn with Darwen “Facing Facts” Project

The LSC has funded Blackburn CAB to provide education, training and support aimed at preventing people getting into debt. The project has targeted priority groups, such as young people, women in ethnic communities, and people with disabilities and health problems, to make them aware of their rights.

The project has also developed links with the Housing Duty Advice Scheme at the County Court to work with clients with housing related debts.

Information Resources and Training

The LSC has developed information leaflets on common areas of advice needs such as “Divorce and Separation” and “Losing your Home” which can give basic information about rights and entitlements. These can be used by agencies and organisations which have routine professional contact with people who have a legal advice problem. The LSC also has referral lists of advice agencies that they fund to provide legal help.

The LSC is working in partnership with prisons in the North West and the probation service to provide training and information to staff on identifying legal advice problems of offenders and brokering referral arrangements with local advice providers in the areas of family, debt, housing and welfare.
Housing Court Duty Solicitor Schemes

The LSC has funded a number of schemes across the North West to provide an advice service at court for people who are faced with eviction or possession hearings. These schemes are delivered by solicitors, CABs, Shelter or law centres and ensure that people are aware of their housing rights and can be represented at the court hearing. Details of these schemes have been provided to social landlords and to local authorities in the region. A number of them now provide this information to customers at risk of eviction and/or in rent arrears.
Annex D. Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI’s) on Homelessness.

In 2005/06 the BVPI’s were:-

- BV 183a – The average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- BV 183b – The length of stay in hostel accommodation.
- BV 202 – The number of people sleeping rough on a single night within the local authority area.
- BV 203 – The percentage change in the average number of families which includes dependent children or pregnant women, placed in temporary accommodation under the homelessness legislation, compared with the average for the previous year.
- BV 213 – The number of households who considered themselves homeless, who approached the local authority’s housing service for advice, and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation.
- BV 214 – The proportion of households who were accepted as statutorily homeless who were accepted as statutorily homeless by the same authority within the last two years.
Annex E.  Further Reading


Homelessness Prevention and Housing Associations – Contributing to Efficiency. Chartered Institute of Housing & Housing Corporation. April 2006


The Harrow Sanctuary Project. ODPM. July 2005.


Population Dynamics within Rochdale and Oldham. University of Manchester.


