

Written evidence submitted by Newcastle City Council and the Newcastle Homelessness Prevention Forum to the Communities and Local Government Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness – February 2016

1. Executive summary

1.1 We welcome this opportunity to influence the Government's approach to preventing homelessness and believe that tackling the causes of homelessness needs to extend beyond crisis responses. We want to work with the Government on this agenda and believe that Newcastle has a valuable contribution to make based on our record in preventing homelessness, illustrated by:

- One of the highest homelessness prevention rates in the country; in 2014-15 4,192 cases of potential homelessness were prevented
- An 80% reduction in statutory homelessness since 2005
- No use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation since 2006
- A 69% reduction in Council housing evictions (from 197 cases in 2009-10 to 62 in 2014-15)

1.2 The above shows that our homelessness responses are effective for the majority of people. Much of this effectiveness is based on our work in response to the Homelessness Act 2002. However, we do less well when the causes of homelessness relate to multiple support, health and care needs provided by public services outside of the Council's control.

1.3 Whilst we support the Government's emphasis on preventing homelessness and the possible extension of the duty to prevent homelessness to 56 days, we would like consideration given to a more fundamental public services transformation approach based on longer term insights into the causes of homelessness and the better alignment of public funding and services. The Government's current approach incentivises crisis presentations to councils. This, combined with the Government's austerity and welfare reform programmes, risks increasing the costs councils face in preventing and responding to homelessness.

1.4 We would expect Government to increase the funding made to councils to cover the additional costs incurred by an extension to their homelessness duties.

1.5 More information can be found in Newcastle Homelessness Prevention Forum's quarterly Homelessness Reviews, which are available online at: www.newcastle.gov.uk/housing/housing-advice-and-homelessness/information-for-professionals/active-inclusion-forum. These also provide further detail on the recommendations made below.

2. Homelessness in Newcastle is characterised by three main causal factors:

2.1 **The loss of private rented accommodation** – as with the rest of the UK, the loss of private rented accommodation is our biggest single cause of statutory homelessness. We

are concerned that this may worsen as the cost of social housing increases and the security of tenure is reduced.

2.2 Disjointed public services – most notably this is seen in the asylum process, but it can also occur with people leaving care, prison and hospital. There is a risk that homelessness will increase significantly if the Government's welfare reforms are not aligned with employment and local support services.

2.3 People with multiple needs – these are people who are not meaningfully engaged with the many services they see and who also experience repeated episodes of homelessness.

3. Summary of the issues Newcastle would like the Government to act on:

3.1 The loss of private rented accommodation

We would like the Government to consider the following:

- a. Protecting and investing in good quality affordable social housing to reduce homelessness from the private rented sector. Social housing in Newcastle is integral to the prevention of homelessness. We would ask the Government to maintain the security and more affordable rents in social housing. Newcastle's Arm's Length Management Organisation, Your Homes Newcastle (YHN), manages 27,000 social housing properties and in 2014-15 YHN accommodated 88% of households owed the full homelessness duty and were responsible for 38% of homelessness preventions. In addition, evictions from YHN have fallen 69% from 197 in 2007-8 to 62 in 2014-15 (and between April and December 2015 there were just 30 evictions).
- b. Increasing regulation and resources to improve standards in the private rented sector including extending the security of tenure of tenants to at least three years. This should also include revising the accreditation system for Houses in Multiple Occupation.
- c. Making it a requirement for all landlords to inform the Council if they are seeking to end a tenancy by serving a section 8 or 21 notice, to allow councils to offer support to tenants ahead of the tenancy end date.

3.2 Improving the alignment of public services to prevent homelessness

We would like the Government to consider the following:

- a. A duty for the responsible public body to prevent the homelessness of people leaving the asylum, care, prison and hospital processes. The present arrangements incentivise late or no referrals to councils, which can inadvertently cause homelessness.
- b. Adopting an 'end to end' approach to managing the asylum process. Most asylum seekers are likely to be accepted as refugees. However, the Home Office asylum contracts effectively give only two weeks for councils to manage this transition, which unnecessarily increases the demands and costs on councils.
- c. Improved partnership working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to align Universal Credit and employment support with council services to prevent homelessness.

- d. A duty for public bodies to cooperate with councils to prevent homelessness, supported by information sharing and a governance structure similar to Youth Offending Boards. Related to this is the impact on councils of legal challenges on homelessness when the main causes are non-accommodation related. Whilst the legal and financial systems focus on accommodation, this is unlikely to break the cycle of repeat homelessness experienced by the most vulnerable people.
- e. Recognition of the transition costs of public service transformation related to the Government's austerity and welfare reform programmes. This would include: transition funding for supported housing to ensure that provider organisations do not face mass closures due to the current proposals to apply Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Rates. We would also expect funding for Local Welfare Assistance to be maintained, recognition of social landlords' forbearance in mitigating the risks of homelessness created by welfare reform, and support to manage the reduction in supported housing related to reduced funding. At present in Newcastle, the risk of homelessness related to the "bedroom tax" is mitigated by over £3 million of Council housing rent arrears and is evident of the 'cost shunting' of preventing homelessness from central to local government, we predict a similar risk if the LHA proposal is applied.
- f. Aligning public funding systems to incentivise improved outcomes for people and the long term prevention of homelessness. We would recommend considering extending the Troubled Families Programme approach to single homeless people with multiple needs. We would also recommend incorporating the learning from the Fair Chance Fund particularly the importance of aligning employment outcomes and the development of a long term approach to supporting vulnerable young people.
- g. Working with us to develop aligned funding systems that incentivise better outcomes for people where the main purpose of rent subsidy is to support a vulnerable person. In these cases we want the Government to consider the funding being part of a commissioned contract with the Council, to promote homelessness prevention.
- h. Working closely with us on the alignment of national and local funding to improve supported housing. Eviction from supported housing is the most common cause of single homelessness in Newcastle; in 2014-15 there were 291 evictions (25% of all placements). This mainly relates to the requests above for the improved alignment of public services to respond to the non-accommodation related causes of homelessness, although it also relates to the reliance on Housing Benefit. We would also like the Government to consider giving supported housing residents statutory protection from eviction whilst retaining the option for summary evictions in cases of violence and risk to other residents or staff in communal settings.

3.3 People with multiple needs

We would like the Government to consider the following:

- a. Public perceptions of homelessness in Newcastle are affected by a small but significant group of entrenched rough sleepers for whom the current accommodation based service models have not worked, despite multiple accommodation placements. The perceptions of homelessness are exacerbated by begging. We would want to work with the Government to develop more person centred therapeutic partnership approaches, based on adapting the learning from the Troubled Families Programme, to more

effectively support single people with multiple and complex needs who are over-represented among the street community.

- b. We would recommend considering the extension of a Troubled Families Programme type approach to single people. This would include additional funding and governance arrangements to better align intensive, individualised support to people with multiple and complex needs for whom existing services do not work. This would allow councils to better understand and support these clients, for whom crisis has become entrenched. As part of this we would also ask Government to consider funding the development of Psychologically Informed Environments i.e. services specifically designed to respond to those affected by homelessness and trauma.
- c. This group of people are referred to as severe and multiply disadvantaged in the 2015 report: 'Hard Edges: Mapping Severe and Multiple Disadvantage in England'. In 2014-15 in Newcastle of the 946 people admitted to supported housing, 45% reported drug and alcohol problems, 38% reported offending and 22% reported mental health problems. Of the 291 evictions from supported housing, 22% were people who had been evicted more than once and of the 182 people found sleeping rough 34% were entrenched rough sleepers. The current issues of the lack of alignment are illustrated by our examination of the most entrenched rough sleepers in Newcastle which found that up to 2015 17 of these people had 388 statutory orders between them.

4. Steps to tackling homelessness in Newcastle

- 4.1** Our aim is to prevent homelessness wherever possible and, where this is not possible, to humanely respond to crisis whilst seeking to learn from every episode of crisis to find opportunities to prevent future episodes of homelessness.
- 4.2** We seek to achieve this through our Active Inclusion Newcastle (AIN) partnership, which was developed as part of the Newcastle City Council 2013-16 budget setting process. It responds to the growth in demand for information, advice and support for financial inclusion and housing advice which need to be met at the same time as resources and capacity are reducing across the council. There are currently 94 partners involved in this partnership.
- 4.3** AIN improves the coordination and consistency of information, advice and support, to facilitate more partners to help residents to be financially included and to prevent homelessness. Improved coordination helps us to reduce people's fear and uncertainty and to maximise our resources to maintain the foundations for stability:
 - an income
 - somewhere to live
 - financial inclusion
 - employment opportunities
- 4.4** AIN facilitates all partners to respond to poverty and inequality, thereby improving wellbeing and health, by supporting them to be part of identifying and preventing the risks their clients face due to financial exclusion. This means not just expecting specialist homelessness agencies to do more to prevent homelessness, but proactively supporting non-specialist agencies to do more. This helps to:
 - Identify the risk of homelessness earlier
 - Prevent homelessness through non-specialist early interventions

- Make considered referrals to our limited face to face specialist services
- Learn together from preventable crisis

4.5 We review homeless in Newcastle on a quarterly basis. This, combined with our consultation with partners, allows us not only to be confident that we are meeting our duty in all cases but also to identify opportunities to prevent homelessness.

4.6 We seek to make the best use of our limited specialist services in housing and financial inclusion by helping non-specialist services to prevent and respond to the risk of homelessness. This means moving from signposting to proportionate responses in which all partners can play a role. AIN facilitates partners at the following levels:

- **Primary prevention activities** – making preventing crises “everyone’s business”. The AIN “offer” provides information, briefings, toolkits and consultancy support to partners that are not specialists in housing, welfare rights, debt or employment
- **Secondary prevention activities** – at the core of the model are specialist information, advice and accommodation services that community-based primary services can turn to when they need help
- **Crisis activities** – these services support people when community and preventative support fails to prevent crises. These acute services support people facing destitution

4.7 Key to AIN are our citywide governance arrangements and quarterly Homelessness Reviews, which are based on an agreed evidence base, understanding the local impact and feedback loops to identify opportunities to prevent homelessness earlier.

4.8 To support partners to prevent homelessness, the Council provides the following infrastructure support:

- **Communications and information for the public and staff** – 1,950 people receive our information updates
- **Briefing sessions for professionals and volunteers** – 22 briefings held in 2014-15
- **Trigger point conversations** – how to talk to residents about money, housing and employment for councillors, professionals and volunteers
- **Spectrums of advice: three tiers to differentiate between the provision of information, general advice and specialist advice with training** – 500+ people attend our training annually
- **Consultancy advice for professionals and residents** – 1,140 residents and 486 professionals advised in 2014-15
- **Partnerships and governance** – 94 partners our Financial Inclusion Group seminars and Homelessness Prevention Forums and contribute to our action plans
- **Newcastle Gateway** – allocation of accommodation and support for 1,127 households in 2014-15
- **Protocols and policies** –to provide a citywide consensus
- **Quarterly forums and published reviews** – to create consensus about the impact of our secondary interventions and response to incidents of crisis

4.9 As part of this work we developed a Universal Credit Triage Trial co-funded by Newcastle City Council and the DWP. The focus of the Triage Trial was on the development and

delivery of a common triage process for workers from statutory and voluntary and community sector organisations to use with the residents they work with. The trial has facilitated dialogue between support staff and their clients about the new challenges that welfare reform brings through the use of a questionnaire to guide the assessment process to systematically cover the following areas, which are central both to residents' stability and to them being able to adapt to the requirements of Universal Credit:

- **Digital** – support to residents to go online and manage claims / transactions
- **Financial** – support to residents to budget and manage monthly payments
- **Employment** – support to residents to access work-focussed training and employment
- **Housing** – support to residents to sustain their tenancies and prevent homelessness

4.10 The aims of the Triage Trial were to:

- Enable residents to receive support with the above in an effective and consistent way
- Provide frontline staff with a consistent, trusted framework to discuss the issues residents face in the above areas, so that they can provide support accordingly and are supported themselves to be able to do this
- Support our shared understanding of the issues residents face and how the services and support in the city work together as a system to enable residents to deal with them

4.11 The learning from the Triage Trial is being used to inform building on our partnership approach to help residents to cope with the challenges of welfare reform and was agreed by Newcastle City Council Cabinet on 28 October 2015 as the core of our approach to preventing homelessness and destitution [‘Newcastle’s response to the next five years of the Government’s welfare reforms’](#).

4.12 We have also been working with the DWP locally to improve the alignment of council services that provide support to vulnerable people with the Claimant Commitment. This contributed to a 37% reduction in sanctions in 2015.

5. How Newcastle responds to homelessness and how levels of homelessness are monitored and reported

5.1 Our main aim is to prevent homelessness, which means trying to understand people's needs before they present to us. In Newcastle we monitor and report homelessness through our quarterly Homelessness Reviews. The data comes from the Newcastle Gateway (the single access point for housing-related support services within Newcastle which manages referrals to all supported accommodation and floating support services in the city), the Housing Advice Centre (HAC), Commissioning returns and our statutory P1E returns. We test this against the experience of service users and those working with homeless people, before agreeing priorities. We do this because many of the statutory categories are broad and taken alone would not give a true picture of homelessness.

5.2 To facilitate identifying opportunities to prevent homelessness we have broken our definitions into five categories:

- People who are owed the full homelessness duty
- People at risk of homelessness
- People living in accommodation with support
- Young people (aged 16 to 25)
- Rough sleepers and multiple exclusion

5.3 We recognise that these groupings have limitations and that people may not exactly fit the categories, but differentiating between types of homelessness helps us to develop realistic options that include the wider aspects of social and financial inclusion, wellbeing and health because homelessness is best prevented through coordinated and consistent information, advice and support. The following statistics from 2014-15 provide a summary of our current provision and responses:

- **Advice and support to prevent homelessness**
 - 4,980 households were given housing advice
 - 1,154 people were given advice to provide relief from excessive debt
- **The provision of crisis accommodation responses**
 - 1,762 households were accommodated in the following:
 - 136 units of crisis accommodation
 - 403 units of supported accommodation
 - 126 units of young person's supported accommodation
 - 45 units of statutory emergency accommodation
- **Supporting people to sustain independence**
 - 4,192 cases of homelessness were prevented, facilitated by the following:
 - 730 units of floating support
 - 163 units of floating support for young people
 - The Supporting Independence Scheme (our Local Welfare Assistance scheme that replaced the Community Care Grant element of the Social Fund) – 726 households were supported to resettle, 93% of whom were still in their tenancy after three months. This scheme cost £366,000 per annum less than the equivalent DWP scheme
- **Outreach and Housing First for people experiencing multiple exclusion and rough sleeping**
 - 234 people helped off the street; we have met the No Second Night Out requirements since 2013, facilitated by the following:
 - 60 units of Housing First support
 - 60 units of outreach support for rough sleepers

6. The implications of the statutory duty of care, and possible extension to those in danger of homelessness, particularly single people

6.1 We welcome the Government's interest in extending the statutory duty of care to single people. We hope that the Government's intention in proposing additional support to single people would also include public sector reform to use its influence to better align public services outside of councils' control when the causes of homelessness are not accommodation related. We would also expect the Government to ensure that sufficient funding is made available to meet these expanded duties.

6.2 We would also like the Government to consider the implications this may have on local connection because the extension of priority need may increase demand on those areas, like Newcastle, with a tradition of providing homeless services for everyone at risk. Other councils in the region have relatively little provision and considerable resources are consumed over local connection disputes.

7. The effectiveness of current legislative framework in England with a review of the different approaches taken in Scotland and Wales

7.1 The current legal framework for homelessness is based on legislation developed to provide an accommodation safety net for families with children and vulnerable individuals. As we have stated above, we would like to work with the Government on public sector reform to better align public services outside of councils' control when the causes of homelessness are not accommodation related.

7.2 However, changing the legislation to provide more support to single people could result in a large spike in demand if the levels of hidden homelessness (where people sofa surf etc.) are as high as Crisis and other homeless charities estimate. We would like to work with Government to better understand the demands and costs associated with how to implement these changes to make the best long term difference to vulnerable people at risk of homelessness. We would want to be part of developing a more sophisticated approach to moving from crisis response to crisis prevention in homelessness legislation, and the reduction of the numbers of people falling into crisis and incurring costs associated with emergency support.

7.3 The Crisis Homeless Monitor for Scotland 2015 shows councils across Scotland have reported substantially lengthening periods of time spent by households in temporary accommodation. This is attributed to a combination of the increased demand associated with the duty to accommodate single people, pressure on the supply of permanent social tenancies, and the affordability challenges presented by welfare reforms.

7.4 The Crisis Monitor for Wales 2015 notes that the change in Wales to a prevention-based approach was felt to be helpful in two key respects. Firstly, councils will have to justify the 'reasonable steps' they have taken in the face of potential legal challenge, which could help to protect resources in a context of budget constraints. Secondly, applicants would be compelled to engage with prevention activities. So, a higher threshold of responsibility on both sides was viewed positively. However, in Wales councils can discharge their statutory duty for homelessness into a private rented tenancy of at least six months duration. This would seem a detrimental step from the current two years in England and could risk exacerbating cycles of crisis rather than promoting long term sustainability.

7.5 We would also ask Government to provide clarification on the relationship between any changes in the homelessness duties and recent duties under the Care Act.

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