

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IN DEVON

A REPORT FOR THE DEVON STRATEGIC HOUSING GROUP



Working for Affordable Homes in Devon

SUMMARY

The Devon Strategic Housing Group commissioned this report to describe the current practice in prevention across Devon and identify recommendations for moving forward in terms of publicising Devon's prevention work, sharing good practice, achieving consistency, and better monitoring. In summary, this report recommends that:

1. A website, accessible to the DHMG and other partners, is developed to hold information around practice of prevention in Devon. This would be co-ordinated centrally and updated on the request of Local Authorities when practice changes.
2. An email forum is developed to enable communication and information sharing between officers carrying out homelessness prevention work.
3. A meeting is co-ordinated twice yearly to encourage working across LA boundaries, sharing of information and incorporating one common training issue per meeting.
4. Consistent performance monitoring is achieved by gathering information about what and how prevention work is recorded.

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INTRODUCTION

The Devon Strategic Housing Group has set itself 4 broad and overarching challenges; securing an effective voice for Devon, innovation and good practice delivery, developing streamlined and consistent operational and strategic processes, and maintain a consistent housing evidence base. This report investigates the progress that has been made against these challenges in terms of homelessness prevention in Devon and makes recommendations for improving it further.

In their advice note 'Achieving Positive Outcomes on Homelessness', the ODPM defined homelessness prevention as "activities that enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or that provide options to enable a planned and timely move and help to sustain independent living". Increasingly, Local Authorities are adopting a prevention ethos in their housing advice and homeless departments. This means that instead of automatically taking a homeless application for a client presenting as homeless other avenues, to either save the clients tenancy or provide alternative accommodation, will be explored in the first instance. There are many ways to do this depending on the cause of homelessness, type of household, and individual options available to different households.

Prevention often leads to a better outcome for the client with less disruption to ordinary life. Even if the client has to change accommodation in the long run there will be more opportunity to make this a planned move, they are likely to evade the Local Authority homeless process, and a potential stay in temporary accommodation can be avoided. Prevention can save resources for the Local Authority and helps to meet government guidance around reducing homeless acceptances and targets for reduction of households staying in temporary accommodation.

Voluntary sector and organisations external to the Local Authority can all contribute to the prevention agenda. It is important that there is sign up to prevention locally to avoid conflict between agencies and mixed messages being given to clients. Ensuring that consistent advice is given to homeless and potentially homeless clients throughout the whole of the local homeless advice sector is essential for the success of prevention work. Specific prevention initiatives are also developed and administered through the voluntary sector in partnership with Local Authorities.

This report sets out the types of prevention initiatives currently employed by the Devon Local Authorities. It is hoped that experiences and ideas shared through this report will help to develop well-informed new prevention ideas across all areas of the county, encouraging consistency across boundaries. This report shows that there are some prevention initiatives that are widely

used across Devon but with variation locally, understanding each different way of carrying out the same prevention will encourage Local Authorities to look at their service critically. There are also schemes that have been developed in only one Local Authority, sharing these experiences is useful for those other Local Authorities that are considering developing new prevention schemes.

The information was collected using a survey template and informal interviews. It was collated into a draft report and circulated for verification. Subsequently a meeting was held on 18th October 2005 (see appendix 1 for the notes of this meeting) to discuss current prevention practice, update the report, and discuss the recommendations for taking work forward.

CURRENT INITIATIVES

1. Deposit/Rent Advance Schemes

This is the most utilised type of prevention work in Devon with all of the Local Authorities in the county running a scheme that encourages access to the private sector by providing deposits and/or rent in advance. There is however variation between Councils around details such as; who is eligible for the scheme, whether the deposit is paid or just guaranteed, whether it is a loan or grant, and if it is a loan how the money is recovered. These variations are summarised in Appendix 3, Table 1.

Some learning points that were raised when discussing rent advance and deposit schemes include the need to involve environmental health to assess whether identified properties are suitable for the scheme, the need to carry out your own inventory of the contents/condition of the property, and the need to carry out credit checks and do an affordability test on the client to ensure that the tenancy is suitable and that they can make any repayments. Most councils struggle to get their deposits/rent in advance repaid however Torridge DC use their Housing Benefit Department to deduct the repayments that the client owes from their benefit, Housing Benefit then reimburse it to the Housing Department. This system guarantees the return of the money but is obviously only appropriate if the client is on housing benefit. Teignbridge DC have a dedicated finance officer dealing with loan repayments as well as B&B charges etc.

When recruiting Landlords for the scheme some councils offer incentives e.g. fast tracking of housing benefit (Torbay BC), the offer of a direct link to support from the council if the tenancy starts to breakdown (Torbay BC) and incentives around landlord accreditation through Environmental Health (Teignbridge DC). Teignbridge DC try to encourage landlords using the scheme to take on 12 month tenancies as opposed to a 6 month assured shorthold to enable more stability for the client.

2. Home Visits, Mediation, Behaviour Contracts

Most Local Authorities are carrying out some or all of the above. These prevention initiatives are predominantly focussed around relationship breakdown and youth homelessness although can be used for disputes between landlords and tenants. The way in which these initiatives are implemented varies across councils e.g. some employ professional mediators while others carry out informal mediation using existing staff resources. These differences are described in Appendix 3, Table 2.

There are lots of ways in which home visits, mediation and behaviour contracts can prevent homelessness. Being able to carry out a home visit is generally seen as the ideal situation because by really exploring the reason why a relationship has broken down a solution can sometimes be found; effective communication can be facilitated between the parties involved in the dispute; and home visits can serve as a reality check for both parties about exactly what the homelessness route entails and often this is not as appealing as expected. Even if a permanent solution to the homelessness isn't found often crisis is avoided and extra time is created to deal with the situation more effectively through a planned move. Exeter CC and Teignbridge DC use Nightstop as a short cooling off period for the young person, and to enable focussed prevention work in a supportive and safe environment.

There have been some learning points identified through people's experiences with developing and using behaviour contracts. One of these is the need to work with all the external agencies involved with the client to ensure that the requirements of a behaviour contract can be realistically achieved, this is very important because if the contract is broken it can sometimes be used as grounds for intentionality. Involving all external agencies and making them aware of the contract also means that maximum support is given to the client in trying to meet the requirements of the contract. It is important that each case is dealt with on an individual basis with thorough exploration of the homelessness causes. When developing a behaviour contract, it is also important to make sure that the contract isn't one sided because often both parties within a dispute need to compromise for success.

3. Staff Structure

Some Local Authorities in Devon employ specific officers to carry out prevention work, whereas others continue to have a generic pool of workers that carry out prevention, housing advice and homelessness investigations. Some prevention workers carry out specific types of prevention whereas others carry out general prevention work. The size and resources of the Local Authority, level of interaction with voluntary sector partners, and individual preference influence this variation. Some Local Authorities prefer that one officer works with the client throughout the whole housing advice/homelessness process while others prefer that different officers carry out the work at the different stages of a case. Table 3, Appendix 3 summarises the variation across Devon.

Prevention workers often administer a fund. This fund can be used for things such as repairing damage to property, helping a landlord to update property, paying off rent arrears, paying for travel etc. Local Authorities generally carry out this work for both non-priority and priority cases, and both social and private tenants.

Some of the learning points expressed include the need for the more specific prevention posts to be developed in conjunction with other partners e.g. Local Authorities who employ Debt Workers are likely to have discussed the development and funding of the post with the Benefits Agency and Citizens Advice Bureau. There are instances where specific prevention workers are funded by the Local Authority, but hosted by a voluntary sector organisation e.g. the temporary accommodation support worker in North Devon is hosted by Barnstaple Poverty Action Group (BPAG). Although most prevention officers are employed for a specific casework role, North Devon and Torridge have employed a joint projects worker to look strategically at how homelessness can be prevented. This work has resulted in the development of a multi-agency model, which has attracted funding and resources from other statutory organisations and is currently being piloted. Torbay also talk about the importance of networking with other agencies to make sure that frontline workers are aware of the Local Authority homelessness prevention services to ensure that intervention can happen at a very early stage.

4 Interactions with Housing Benefit

Housing Benefit forms an integral part of the homelessness process. Good working relationships between Homelessness and Housing Benefit Officers means that homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment outcomes improve considerably. Housing Benefit Officers are often involved when people are threatened with homelessness due to rent arrears and good relationships between the departments mean problems can be resolved more easily. Being able to demonstrate these good relationships help when encouraging private landlords to take on tenants because they will be more confident about receiving their rent payments. There are varying ways in which Homeless Units interact with their Housing Benefit Departments described in Table 5.1.

5 Court Representations

Torbay BC, South Hams DC, and North Devon District Council all provide officer time to represent people facing possession orders at court. This intervention can either be a prepared case whereby the client had approached the council for help previously, or cases can be picked up on the day of the hearing. In Torbay BC the possession hearings are now organised for on one morning every week instead of at any time, this enables the prevention worker to organise their time more efficiently. A leaflet has also been designed and is circulated with every court summons detailing the services that they can receive from the Council. There is a duty rota of solicitors who will attend every week at court for the possession hearings.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Government has recently released a Best Value Performance Indicator 213 (BVPI) around prevention. ODPM guidance states that the “purpose of this indicator is to measure the effectiveness of housing advice in preventing homelessness or the threat of homelessness.” Some key summary points from the guidance include:

- The indicator is not restricted to households who are statutorily homeless, to households threatened with homelessness within 28 days, or those who the council would normally consider to be in priority need. The indicator should record prevention work carried with all households who consider themselves to be homeless or threatened with homelessness irrespective of the above.
- To be recorded as prevention in the BVPI the housing advice has to have been carried out by a dedicated Housing Advice service funded through the local authority, or in house housing advice service.
- Detailed casework that is signed off by a senior officer or other advisor not directly involved in the case has to be recorded for inclusion in the BVPI statistics. This ensures that one off advice or signposting without follow up is not included as prevention.
- For the purposes of this BVPI, prevention is judged to have occurred if a household homelessness has been resolved and it is likely that this will be sustainable for a period of at least six months. Resolution is defined as “actions which resulted in the household not having to make an application for homelessness assistance under Part VII of the 1996 Housing Act; or actions which resulted in the household no longer needing to pursue an application for homelessness assistance.”

Through discussions with staff monitoring prevention work for internal purposes and for the BVPI 213 it is fairly clear that different Local Authorities are using different IT systems, monitoring different outcomes and following the guidance in different ways. Table 6 (Appendix 3) identifies some of these differences. The general feeling is that it would be difficult to achieve absolute consistency because of the different systems in place, but if all housing advice departments were recording the same types of information it would be possible to report centrally and make Devon wide comparisons. It would also mean that the BVPI 213 returns to Government were made on the same basis. As a result of the meeting (18th October) it was agreed that all Local Authorities would forward what they are currently recording to the Homelessness Co-ordinator for collation and some specific work around consistency in monitoring should be undertaken. It was felt that extra support in this area would be valued.

SUMMARY

As stated in the introduction, the Devon Strategic Housing Group has set itself 4 broad and overarching challenges and this section summarises the progress that has been made against these challenges in terms of homelessness prevention in Devon, and makes recommendations for improving it further.

Challenge 1: Securing an effective voice for Devon.

This report will be circulated beyond the Local Authority partners of the Devon Strategic Housing Group thereby raising the awareness of what is happening in the county.

Challenge 2: Innovation and good practice delivery

During the collection of information and throughout the meeting held on 18th October the value and importance of sharing information across Local Authority boundaries was clear. Officers were able to learn from each other's experiences and potentially apply new ideas to local practices. When asked how information could be best shared in the future a few methods were suggested. These included; updated information accessible through a web format, a system where staff can communicate with each other easily on specific issues/queries, and meeting up biannually to discuss key issues and tackle joint training needs. This report is accurate at the time of writing but with the constant development of new initiatives it is likely that the information will be out of date quickly, which highlights the need for sharing information further.

As well as sharing information around specific practice issues, it was also useful to discuss each other general approaches to prevention and some of the differences in what is considered prevention work and when homelessness applications should be taken.

Challenge 3: Developing streamlined and consistent operational and strategic processes

It is encouraging to see the common themes in homelessness prevention across Devon. Most Local Authorities are carrying out the same work but there are variations locally. This is generally due to local resources, demand and also local preferences for how to run schemes. The development of ways to share information more effectively, as well as better monitoring, should help to achieve consistency because Local Authorities should migrate towards the most appropriate ways of preventing homelessness. There is also an opportunity to look at joint working across boundaries particularly across certain schemes where outside agencies are

commissioned to provide a service e.g. mediation. Training was also highlighted as something that Local Authorities could do together, if all officers attend the same training it is more likely that the services provided would be consistent.

Challenge 4: Maintain a consistent housing evidence base

Consistent performance monitoring on the prevention work being carried out in Devon is important for service improvement and development decisions. In summary, the monitoring currently occurring is not joined up or comparable across council boundaries. Local Authorities use different IT systems, interpret the BVPI 213 guidance differently and record different outcomes. Some specific work in this area needs to be carried out.

RECOMMENDED ACTION PLAN

CHALLENGE	ACTION	LEAD	TIMESCALE
Securing an effective voice for Devon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circulate report 	Katy Shorten	
Innovation and good practice delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a website • E mail Forum • Biannual Meeting/Training 	Katy Shorten	
Developing streamlined and consistent operational and strategic processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Look into joint commissioning services 	Katy Shorten	
Maintain a consistent housing evidence base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collate current BVPI methods of recording • Identify ways of getting consistency 	Katy Shorten	

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IN DEVON

PRACTITIONERS MEETING

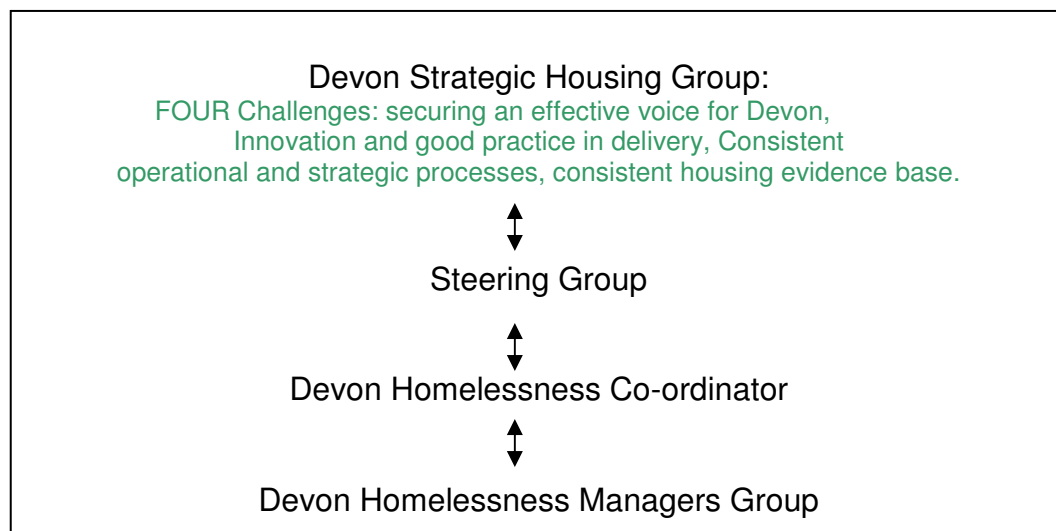
18th October 2005, 2 – 4.30pm
Old Forde House, Teignbridge District Council

NOTES

PRESENT: Katy Shorten (Devon Homelessness Co-ordinator), Karen Williams (Exeter CC), Beth Neal (North Devon DC), Kate Oppong (South Hams DC), Sally Walach (Teignbridge DC), Teresa Hunt (Torbay BC), Ellen Mitchell (Torridge DC), Philippa Mayland (West Devon BC).

APOLOGIES: Frances Bennett (East Devon DC), Jane Cookson (Plymouth CC).

INTRODUCTION: The meeting commenced with an introduction of the purpose of the meeting and context setting.



REPORT CONTENT: Extracts from the draft report “Homelessness Prevention in Devon” detailing current prevention practices were circulated. The information was categorised into Rent Deposit Schemes, Home visits/Mediation, and Staff Structure. Representatives from each Local Authority got into pairs and had the opportunity to amend the information, discuss differences in practice and talk about what is working well or less well. This took up the bulk of the meeting and is summarised in the final report.

REPORT FORMAT: The group discussed how information could be shared in the future and whether the report format was appropriate.

- EM suggested that information be put onto a website and updated centrally when changes occurred.
- PM felt that it would be useful to have the opportunity for more direct contact with officers from neighbouring LA's, sharing of contact details was suggested. KS informed the group about the DHMG e-mail problem-solving group whereby people can e-mail the group with a query and other members respond. Something similar could be set up on specific prevention issues.
- The group also agreed that it was useful to meet up and make contact with officers doing the same work, biannual meetings were suggested, to avoid the problem of being seen as simply a talking shop SW suggested that training could be incorporated into the meetings. We need to be clear about what the meeting was for so that appropriate staff could attend (e.g. team leaders or officers?).
- Some discussion followed about general issues including the need for LA's to work more closely with each other. If there is going to be more transparency about the prevention practice that is going on it should be clear that there isn't an opportunity to refer clients to LA's that can provide more prevention services. It was suggested that this discussion should be taken to the DHMG where they are already carrying out work on a good practice model for taking homelessness applications.
- There was also some discussion around the discrepancy between what the law states i.e. if someone approaches and is homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days should they be considered homeless and their application taken as one - and what the ODPM are advising LA's to do around increasing prevention work prior to taking an application. Again, the need for clarity and consistency across Devon in terms of this is needed and was suggested that it also go up to DHMG.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING: There was clearly some confusion about how people were recording for the BVPI 213. This spanned across both the specific outcomes that were recorded, and the type of work included in the monitoring as a result of different interpretations of the BVPI guidance. It was agreed that each LA would forward KS the specific ways in which the BVPI was recorded to identify what standard information needs to be collected.

Meeting closed.

Appendix 3, Table 1 Deposit/Rent Advance Schemes

LA	Eligibility	Paid or Guaranteed	Loan or Payment	Repayment of loan
EDDC	Priority need	Paid to LL	Loan	Repayment direct from client
ECC	Those who are in priority need. Offered prior to homeless application unless clearly intentional	Paid direct to LL	Loan	Repayment direct from client
	Exeter Homeless Action Group (EHAG) offer smartmove to people not in priority need			
MDDC	Prior to homeless application if likely to have a statutory duty	Paid direct to LL	Loan	Repayment direct from client
NDDC	Priority need CPND – funded by NDDC – intentional families and single people. Bond scheme and rent in advance	Paid direct to LL/Agent “ “	Loan Loan (CPND)	Repayment direct from client weekly If tenancy lasts more than 12 months – no repayments (CPND)
PCC	Anyone threatened with homelessness	Bond	Bond	
SHDC	Priority and non-priority for deposit. Probably priority and unintentional for rent. Both offered prior to homeless application	Deposit guaranteed. Rent in advance paid direct to LL	Deposit is guarantee. Rent is a loan	Repayment direct from client
TeiDC	Both accepted and non priority Limited non priority. Intentional and priority, prevention before Homeless Application is taken, use of NARent Guarantee Scheme for non-priority. Ask for a 12 month tenancy from Landlord as opposed to 6 month AST.	Deposit guaranteed. Rent in advance paid direct to LL	Loan	Repaid through Council's in house debt recovery. There is now a specific finance officer that deals with all B&B charges etc.
TBC	Priority Need	Bond	Bond	
TorDC	Anyone threatened with homelessness, or intentional if savings will be made on temp accommodation	Paid direct to LL	Loan (3 years max)	Loan repayments are deducted from clients Housing Benefit (HB) and HB then reimburse Housing
WDBC	Anyone who is threatened with homelessness	Paid direct to LL	Deposit only	Deposit repaid by LL

Appendix 3, Table 2 Home Visits, Mediation and Behaviour Contracts

LA	Home Visits	Mediation: professional or informal	Behaviour contracts	Nightstop
EDDC	Encouraged	Informal AND looking into Derek Finch	No	No
ECC	Strongly encouraged	Informal AND Devon Mediation AND Nightstop	Homelessness Prevention Contract if appropriate	Yes
MDDC	Encouraged	Informal AND Devon Mediation Services	Looking at developing homeless prevention contracts	No
NDDC	Strongly encouraged. Can provide homeless at home payments as prevention.	Informal AND North Devon Mediation	No	Barnstaple Poverty Action Group (BPAG) can offer 3 night emergency placements for non priority
PCC	Encouraged	Informal AND Derek Finch	No	No
SHDC		Informal AND South Devon Mediation Services	No	No
TeiDC	When appropriate	Informal and Nightstop	When needed on drug use and behaviour	Yes
TBC	When appropriate	Informal AND Derek Finch	No	No
TorDC		Informal AND Derek Finch, North Devon Mediation, Family Group Conferencing, Family Mediation Service		Looking into it
WDBC		Informal AND Derek Finch	Acceptable Behaviour Contract if appropriate	No

Appendix 3, Table 3 Staff Structure

LA	Prevention Officers with Specific Roles	Prevention Officers	Combined Housing Advice/Homelessness Officers
EDDC	1 Tenancy Sustainment Worker	0 Workers	YES
ECC	1 (part time) Debt Worker, 1 Rent Arrears Worker 1 Former Tenant Arrears Worker	5 workers	
MDDC		1 Worker	YES
NDDC	CAB (funded by NDDC) 1 Temporary Accommodation Support Worker	3 workers	
PCC	1 Debt Worker, 1 Rent Arrears Worker	2 workers	
SHDC		1 worker	
TeiDC		0 Workers	YES
TBC		0 Workers	YES
TorDC	Resettlement Team (sustainment)	1 worker	
WDBC			YES

Appendix 3, Table 4 Interactions with Housing Benefit

LA	Specific HB Worker for Homelessness	Fast Tracking System
EDDC	NO	NO
ECC		
MDDC	One HB Officer deals with all homelessness, B&B, PSL claims. Based in HB Dept	
NDDC	NO	NO
PCC	Located in Homeless Unit	
SHDC		
TeiDC	HB provide assessments to applicants on affordability for rent in private sector and Specific LHA officer and arrears worker based at Forde House	
TBC	Located in Homeless Unit	
TorDC	NO	Fast track DHP claims for homeless clients
WDBC		

Appendix 3, Table 5 Court Representations

LA	Court Representation
EDDC	NO
ECC	NO
MDDC	NO
NDDC	We attend court once a month. We can assist clients with mortgage cases and rent arrears cases on that day. Also we can attend court on other days at the request of the client.
PCC	NO
SHDC	In South Hams this intervention is usually used when the tenant is facing possession or eviction for breach of tenancy because of rent arrears. The intervention is usually only effective if it is early and there is a realistic expectation of payment.
TeiDC	NO
TBC	All possessions hearings happen on set day with LA prevention officer and a duty rota of solicitors available for advice. A leaflet is sent out advising of the service with every court summons.
TorDC	NO
WDBC	NO

Appendix 3, Table 6 Performance Monitoring

LA	Software	Ability to track outcomes of specific prevention work	Prevention outcomes recorded	BVPI target
EDDC	In the process of setting up a system			
ECC	Access	Reason, possible means of prevention, specific prevention undertaken, outcome	Found alternative accommodation, no more contact – could be prevention but might not.	
MDDC	Not recorded			
NDDC	Allocat and Excel	Can identify what the outcomes of prevention are. The level of take up for individual prevention initiatives is also recorded for financial reasons but it is not possible to correlate the two.	Retained home, found alternative accommodation, outcome unknown	
PCC	Citrix	Type of prevention/referral	Outcome Homelessness prevented.	
SHDC	Excel	Can track reason for homelessness, the type of prevention undertaken and what the outcome was		25
TeiDC	Excel Soft ware up dated to include more information	Type of prevention and outcomes are coded		
TBC				
TorDC	Anite			
WDBC	Excel			