
Evaluating Homelessness Prevention in Newcastle

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Key points

Newcastle City Council (NCC) and Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) invited Heriot-Watt University and Northumbria University to evaluate their work on homelessness prevention, with a view to extracting transferable lessons for other local authorities. The key points which emerged were as follows:

The homelessness prevention activities and services delivered by NCC and YHN are, taken as a whole, highly effective. This positive conclusion was supported by both statutory and voluntary sector key informants in the city, and was also consistent with the statistical trend data obtained on statutory homelessness acceptances, homelessness prevention activity, repeat homelessness, social housing evictions, and tenancy sustainment.

Factors which have contributed to the establishment of a 'culture of homelessness prevention' in Newcastle include: a strong strategic partnership between NCC and YHN; senior-level commitment to the prevention agenda; an emphasis on partnership working with voluntary sector providers and housing associations in the city; and effective deployment of a strong evidence base in developing preventative options and in service commissioning.

Specific initiatives within Newcastle that may be of interest to other local authorities include:

- a strong emphasis on managing debt and rent arrears, including rigorous implementation of a Preventing Evictions Protocol;

- the commissioning of a range of support services provided to those at risk of losing their tenancies, including Advice and Support Workers and Family Intervention Projects;

- the commissioning of a Young People's Service, offering wide-ranging support to 16-25 year olds, as well as an bespoke route through the statutory system for 16 and 17 year olds;

- a 'Gateway' system which controls access to all temporary and supported accommodation in the city, linked to a 'Pathway to Independence' protocol which promotes active and monitored move on to more independent living; and

- intensive case management of rough sleepers and others in extreme crisis, including the appointment of 'Lead Practitioners' who act as named contacts within the local authority for the most complex and chronically excluded cases.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Newcastle City Council (NCC) and the Council's arms length management organisation (ALMO) Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) invited Heriot-Watt University and Northumbria University to evaluate the ways the two organisations work together to prevent homelessness. The main purpose of the evaluation was to extract transferable lessons that may be of interest to other local authorities.

The research questions were as follows:

How effective are the homelessness prevention activities and services delivered by the City Council and YHN?

To what extent can it be said that relevant services within the City Council and YHN have established a culture of homelessness prevention?

How effectively is homelessness prevention activity led, co-ordinated and managed?

Is it possible to demonstrate the financial and social policy value of these initiatives?

The methods employed in the study included: a review of key policy documents; in-depth interviews with 20 key informants in the city; focus group discussions with front-line staff in the city (17 front-line staff participated); and secondary data analysis of official Department for Communities and Local Government homelessness statistics and unpublished additional data collected by NCC and YHN.

Evaluation Findings

The evaluation found that the homelessness prevention activities and services delivered by the City Council and YHN in Newcastle are, taken as a whole, highly effective. This positive conclusion was supported by the evidence gathered from interviewees in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. It was also consistent with the statistical trend data obtained on statutory homelessness acceptances, homelessness prevention activities, repeat homelessness, social housing evictions, and tenancy sustainment, where most of the relevant trends were positive over time and compared well with national averages.

Many factors have contributed to this success within Newcastle, but the strong strategic partnership between NCC and YHN has been critical, as has the (now) very positive relationship with key voluntary sector providers and housing associations in the city. Leadership has also been crucial: there has been longstanding senior-level commitment to the prevention agenda within both YHN and NCC. The effective use of the available data to inform practice change, and the use of SP commissioning and contract compliance procedures to drive this evidence-based agenda forward, has likewise been critical. The strong emphasis on partnership and multi-agency working was noted from all perspectives, and the high level of 'trust' engendered between all key partners can be

identified as perhaps the single most important ingredient in the positive 'story' to emerge from this evaluation.

The culture change in Newcastle that has underpinned these encouraging developments was prompted in large part by the Homelessness Act 2002 and accompanying policy pressure from central government. Within NCC, this was manifested in a post-2002 shift towards a more proactive, flexible and problem-solving style of intervention, as well as a commitment to partnership working. The 'crisis prevention' response to those who are already homeless or in imminent danger of losing their accommodation in the city improved via the work of the council's Housing Advice Centre (which provides both the 'housing options' service and the statutory homelessness assessment function in Newcastle), as well as through enhanced services for single homeless people and rough sleepers (see below). At the same time, there has been a growing focus on 'secondary prevention' for people at risk of housing or income loss, implemented via a series of homelessness prevention protocols and processes, a strong focus on debt advice and arrears prevention, and a wide range of YHN and voluntary-sector provided support services targeting high risk groups.

On YHN's part, the cultural shift has meant a move from primarily 'enforcing tenancies' to 'supporting tenancies', with rigorous implementation of a Preventing Eviction Protocol meaning that evictions are now very much seen as the last resort, as well as the provision of a wide range of 'secondary prevention' activities to prevent vulnerable people losing their homes including Family Intervention Projects, Advice and Support Services, and a Young People's Service. The culture change has extended to the voluntary sector in the city, which was also made accountable for averting crisis and moving people out of the homelessness system and temporary accommodation as quickly as possible, with the SP commissioning framework acknowledged by all parties as a critical lever in this process of change. Housing associations in Newcastle also reported a shift in practices to comply with the Preventing Evictions Protocol (though there were some suggestions that scope remained to further improve housing association practice in this respect).

The focus on dedicated resources and structured case management with rough sleepers, and the provision of a bespoke, individualised service for those with the most complex needs, marks Newcastle out from many other cities. In this context, the role of both the council's Housing Advice Centre and the appointment of the 'Complex Needs and Chronic Exclusion Lead Practitioners' was especially important, and especially the latter's close working relationship with key voluntary and statutory sector partners. Minimising the use of temporary accommodation (and avoidance of B&B altogether) is also a core achievement in the city. The 'Supported Accommodation Gateway' (which acts as a single register for people identified as needing supported accommodation in Newcastle) and the implementation of a 'Pathways to Independence' process have been major steps forward from the 'warehousing' of single homeless people in hostels and other homeless accommodation that preceded this.

Within this largely positive picture, there were a number of issues that had yet to be fully addressed within the city. For example, while Newcastle's approach to homelessness prevention has sometimes been called a 'whole market' approach, in fact the use made of the PRS was still considered rather modest by many interviewees who felt that there was an opportunity to do more to access private lets for those who are homeless or at risk in the city. Particular sub-groups were felt not to have benefited as much from developments in homelessness services as they should have

done – particularly ‘non-priority’ single men – and the engagement of mental health services in homelessness prevention was broadly felt to be inadequate. The use of some quite large-scale hostel accommodation in Newcastle provoked strong differences of opinion in the city, and having both homeless families and homeless single people resident in the same local authority emergency housing block may not be considered ideal (though relocation to a new site should allow for more separation). User involvement was widely acknowledged to be a weakness within homelessness services in the city, though there were exceptions to this (e.g. the Young People’s Service).

Transferable Lessons

Emerging from this evaluation of Newcastle’s approach to homelessness prevention are a number of broader lessons that may be of relevance to other local authorities in the North East region.

First, at strategic level, senior-level commitment to the prevention agenda is clearly indispensable in driving forward culture change. In Newcastle’s case this was prompted in part by legal and policy imperatives, but was also ‘pushing at an open door’ in terms of the frustration of many housing and homelessness staff about traditional approaches which resulted in repeat homelessness and ‘setting people up to fail’.

Second, the importance of establishing effective partnership working between the local authority, mainstream housing providers, and key voluntary sector partners cannot be overstated. The Newcastle experience provides some indications of how this can be facilitated on a practical level, with the importance of the initial round table meetings in facilitating mutual understanding emphasised from all perspectives. The regular nature of multi-agency case management meetings focusing on individuals with the most complex needs was also a strength of the Newcastle approach.

Third, key to Newcastle’s success has been the development of an effective evidence base that has been used to prioritise specific preventative interventions, to develop relationships with partners, and to inform the commissioning process. This evidence-based agenda has contributed significantly to a reduction in evictions, increased move on from temporary/supported accommodation and improved sustainability of tenancies.

Fourth, Newcastle’s emphasis on managing debt and rent arrears more effectively had paid dividends, most clearly with respect to the evident success of the Preventing Evictions Protocol. Also in this regard, the YHN-provided support services for those at risk of losing their tenancies – Advice and Support Workers and Family Intervention Projects - is likely to be of interest, as is the work of the NCC Private Rented Service in supporting tenancies in the private sector.

Fifth, the wide-ranging support that the Newcastle Young People’s Service offers 16-25 years olds, as well as the bespoke route through the statutory homelessness system it provides for 16 and 17 year olds, may well be of interest to other local authorities. Specialised services for young people seem a particularly worthwhile investment given their often very high rate of tenancy failure and the inappropriate nature of the standard statutory housing ‘offer’ for those in the youngest age groups in particular.

Sixth, another operational level innovation in Newcastle that may be worth other LAs considering is the emphasis on intensive case management of rough sleepers and others in extreme crisis. The role of the 'Lead Practitioners' as a named contacts within the LA for all complex cases was highly valued by all relevant parties.

Seventh, the 'Gateway' system in Newcastle was widely felt to be both efficient and effective, particularly as it was linked to a 'Pathway to Independence' protocol which promotes active and monitored move on out of hostels/supported accommodation into more independent living. But it was also acknowledged that the linear progression this model implies does not work for all homeless people, and there was some interest in Newcastle in the 'Housing First' model now gaining popularity across Europe (denoting immediate access to mainstream housing with tailored support packages), as an alternative or supplement to this linear model¹.

¹ For a review of the international evidence on Housing First models, and their applicability in the UK context, see Johnsen, S. & Teixeira, L. (2010) *Staircases, Elevators and Cycles of Change: 'Housing First' and other Housing Models for Homeless People with Complex Needs*.
<http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/PDF/HousingModelsReport.pdf>