

Practitioner article

The role of advice and information in preventing homelessness

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The role of advice and information in preventing homelessness

In this article, GHN's Claire Frew discusses how offering advice and information to the right people at the right time can help prevent homelessness, and looks at the challenges of delivering effective advice and information services.

Introduction

Homelessness prevention. It's what we are all working towards. It is a key element in meeting the 2012 target of abolishing the priority need distinction in Scotland. The question continually arises, however, about how we actually go about stopping homelessness from occurring in the first place.

One part of the jigsaw is the provision of good quality advice and information. After all, how can people invoke rights they don't know they have, or access services they do not know exist?

This issue was recognised by the Homelessness Task Force as being one important strand of preventative work, and this was taken forward in Section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, which states:

Advice on homelessness etc.

2 (1) Every local authority must secure that advice and information about –

(a) homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, and

(b) any services which may assist a homeless person or assist in the prevention of homelessness,

is available free of charge to any person in the authority's area.

Section 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 was commenced on 1 October 2001. Scottish Executive guidance on the form and content of the advice and information to be provided was included within section 2 of the Code of Guidance on Homelessness. Strategies are in place at a local authority level to ensure that this advice and information is available where and when it is required.

Advice and information: a holistic approach

The Homelessness Task Force Research Series recognised that homelessness can be caused by any number of issues other than housing, such as drug or alcohol addictions or the particular needs faced by people leaving an institution, and that this should be reflected in the range of advice and information available.

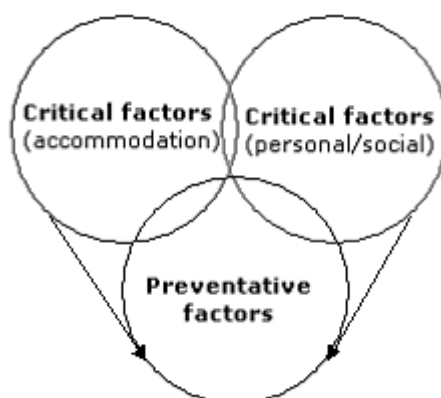
In essence, the provision of advice and information must be sustainable and must address the underlying needs of a person in housing crisis and the issues bringing it about, not just the housing crisis itself.

Therefore, a holistic approach to homelessness advice and information would comprise of:

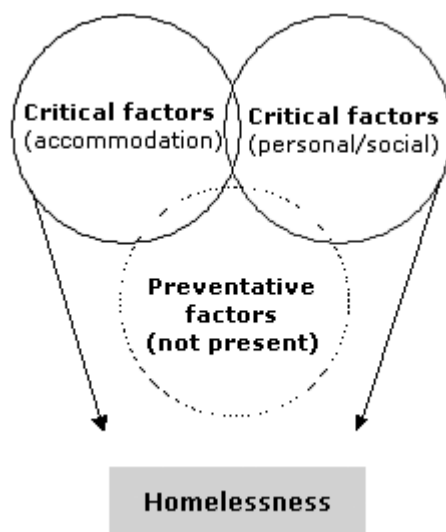
- information on homelessness processes and procedures
- housing advice and options
- information on mental and physical health
- money and legal advice
- advice on employability and opportunity
- information on dealing with drug and alcohol misuse
- advice and information on building or re-building social networks - this might include mediation, mentoring and befriending services.

The following 'Homelessness Prevention' diagram highlights these issues:

People with 'preventative' factors are more likely to be protected from homelessness crisis:



Whereas, people without preventative factors are more likely to experience homelessness:



Critical factors relate to accommodation (for example, eviction) and personal/social triggers (for example, mental ill health) that contribute to homelessness.

However, there are people who encounter a complex mixture of critical factors but who manage housing transitions without experiencing homelessness. Often, this is because the person will be protected by the following '**preventative**' factors:

- positive social networks of family and friends
- meaningful occupation – for example, they may be employed, volunteering, in training or in education
- access to a relevant range of advice and information about their circumstances and situation
- sufficient financial resources.

For those who do not have access to positive social networks or meaningful occupation, access to relevant advice and information is critical. This advice and information needs to include a mixture of housing advice, as well as covering issues such as social networks, employment, education and any other issue that may be relevant to the situation of an individual.

This allows for people to make an informed choice about averting an incidence of homelessness occurring through the consideration of their pathway to employment. Meaningful occupation has regularly been identified as an important tool in the prevention of homelessness, not least because it provides regular income, but also because it encourages the building of new social networks.

The provision of good quality advice and information, in a general publicity format, can play an important role in allowing people access to services that can work with them to improve their social networks and meaningful occupation and pathways to employment, and therefore working to provide a more solid base for preventing homelessness occurring.

Who needs preventative advice and information?

People working within the homelessness field know that the reasons for people becoming homeless are wide and varied, and are quickly able to recognise the key homelessness 'risk factors.' These known risk factors tell us who needs access to specific advice and information to prevent homelessness occurring, including:

- people leaving institutions such as prison, the armed forces, hospital or local authority care
- people experiencing mental ill health
- people fleeing domestic abuse or other forms of harassment
- people experiencing relationship breakdown
- people with money/debt problems.

In addition, since we also know that homelessness is something that could feasibly happen to anyone, advice and information needs to be widely available to the general public.

Who should be providing it?

This then prompts the question of who should be providing such wide-ranging advice and information in order to prevent homelessness. The fact is that, currently, effective preventative advice and information is provided by a large number of organisations and agencies working outside of 'homelessness.' It is essential that this good work is built upon and expanded, allowing those services working with, for example, people going through relationship breakdown to recognise that their clients may be at risk of homelessness. These services should then be able to signpost and refer people at risk of homelessness to relevant services that can inform them of their rights under legislation and tell them what further help is available.

Housing providers that recognise these key risk factors should also have similar signposting and referral arrangements in place, to ensure that people are able to access the particular support they need to maintain their tenancy and prevent homelessness.

As such, the first key challenges in ensuring that the provision of advice and information reaches its full potential in the prevention of homelessness are:

- to raise awareness of the key homelessness risk factors identified above within the services already working closely with people experiencing them, and
- to put in place appropriate signposting and referral arrangements to ensure that the homelessness risk is responded to effectively.

This will go some way towards ensuring early intervention in people's housing problems and, consequently, will play an important role in preventing homelessness.

A framework for providing advice and information: roles, routes and access points

Having considered what people need advice and information about, who it is that needs specific advice and information and who it is that should be providing it, we now need to look at a framework for the development and implementation stage.

Such a framework, developed in Glasgow in 2006, refers to the 'roles, routes and access points' of homelessness advice and information. The identification of appropriate roles, routes and access points are central to the development and delivery of high quality advice and information for people at risk of homelessness.

Roles

Prevention of homelessness is one of the four key roles that the provision of good quality advice and information can play. It is essential that the role (or the intended outcome) of the advice provision is clearly defined in the initial development stages.

Routes

The tools to be used to provide the appropriate advice and information (such as digital technology, general publicity, information packs, caseworking and word of mouth) should be tailored to both the client group it is aimed at and at the role it is expected to play. Cross sector and multi-agency routes should also be routinely adopted to ensure the most effective provision of advice and information.

Access points

Advice and information products, materials and services should be accessible from a diverse range of appropriate and effective access points. In terms of homelessness prevention, these access points should reflect the services and organisations working with people experiencing the key homelessness risk factors.

Conclusions

As you can see, the provision of advice and information has an important role to play in the prevention of homelessness, but there are certain considerations that need to be borne in mind:

1. The provision of advice and information cannot be seen in isolation

To be successful, it is vital that the advice and information acts to prompt the appropriate responses and actions to prevent homelessness. The provision of advice and information is part of a process and cannot be seen as an end in itself.

2. Advice and information can do more than prevent homelessness occurring

Further roles of advice and information include:

- alleviation
- crisis response
- sustainable resettlement.

The lessons learned from using advice and information as a preventative tool can be transferred to each of these roles.

3. A framework for the development of advice and information products, resources and services is essential in ensuring success

To ensure that the provision of advice and information is both appropriate and effective, the following issues must all be taken account and defined at a very early stage:

- who the advice and information is aimed at
- the stage of homelessness they are currently experiencing
- the best way to deliver the information, and
- the best places to distribute the information.

Further information

GHN has recently produced a report into the *Role of advice and information in the prevention and alleviation of homelessness*. You can access the report by visiting www.ghn.org.uk. Alternatively, you can email info@ghn.org.uk or telephone **0141 302 2760** to request a copy.