**Housing and homelessness services: the struggle to meet demand**
LEARNING REPORT                                    Thursday 28th October 2021

## Background
This event was organised to explore system capacity, a growing concern for services. Demand is increasing. The homeless and housing situation is getting worse. Despite our combined efforts, and agreement on the importance of investment and prevention, crisis continues. It was part of a collaborative approach to understanding:
- Who is served by the services we all provide?
- What does system capacity look like?
- With communication and collaboration, could we be better placed to support the client journey?

## Outcomes
The event and this report are intended to contribute to:
- Informing Shelter's work supporting the user journey and system capacity.
- Identifying key partners with an interest in further exploration of the issue.
- Equipping participants to consider their own approach to capacity, data gathering, signposting and services.
- Developing a shared vision for next steps.

## NOTES

### PART ONE: SETTING THE CONTEXT - SYSTEM CAPACITY AND DEMAND
### Managing Capacity: Helpline and online resources
Helpline Operations Managers Liz Clare and Sam Sargeant outlined the vital role of data and service design in identifying capacity and responding to user needs.

The situation: Shelter's voice Helpline advisers meet just over 10% of demand on average. To respond to such high demand, the Helpline was repositioned as an emergency service, with analysis into where callers came to the Helpline from and the nature of their needs.

The analysis: identified that the largest proportion of people were referred from an advice or support professional. Most (around 80%) did not have an urgent issue.

The response: A dedicated product team have focused on improving digital advice user experiences and increasing the chance of speaking to an adviser through a series of experiments since 2018. User research identified that the service offering wasn't clear enough for those in need - self-service and switching between different service channels weren't easy. A number of online advice pages now contain information, tools and templates to help clients resolve their emergency and non-emergency housing issues, including a Tenancy rights checker, Ending a tenancy tool; information on tenancy deposits; how to make homeless applications; complaints to agents; dealing with disrepair; housing benefit and other welfare benefits.

## Managing Capacity: Using professional resources

Alexa Walker and Ewa Brem, Senior Legal Writers, described the support provided:

- To housing professionals, through technical legal content
- To other professionals who encounter housing problems, through accessible content.

## Developing a user centred approach – navigating information

Online resources make detailed content easy to find and use, with navigable links.
For example:

Housing options webpages for people experiencing domestic abuse give:

- an overview of options
- legal rights when a survivor leaves the home
- legal rights to exclude the perpetrator by applying for a court order.

A New Homelessness applications page covers every step of how to make an application:

- who is included
- local authority duties
- how to challenge decisions.

## Data-informed content

Content and resources are informed by user research and website engagement dashboards.
For example:

- page views
- devices
- sessions by time and location
- interactions
- keyword research
- search terms.

## The 'whole system' and levels of Support

Lisa Smith, Relationship Manager, outlined Shelter's 'whole system' approach, based on understanding the key drivers of homelessness. People and families are often stuck in a loop caused by the wider system around them:



A SYSTEMIC VIEW OF WHY PEOPLE BECOME AND REMAIN HOMELESS

Most people contact services when they are struggling. If intervention doesn't happen at the right time, or the wrong intervention is made, people move into acute need. This leads to repeat demand. Our aim should be to empower the person to get back into control. These stages are illustrated by Richard Davies' 'Levels of Support'.
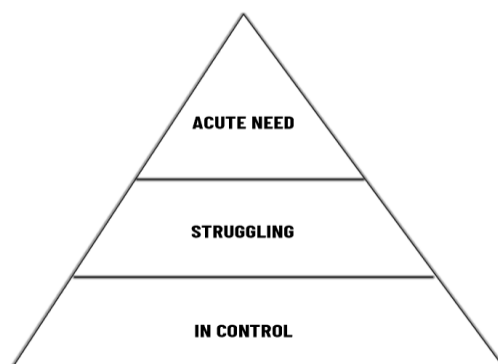


Illustration: Levels of Support (Richard Davies)

**Understanding capacity**

Graeme Reekie, from The Lasting Difference Consultancy, outlined the core components of capacity from their guide to Managing Capacity.

Storage capacity: The amount of something that can be *contained* or *managed*. Examples include revenue, physical space and resources, staff numbers and availability, size of caseload/workload.

Production capacity: The ability to achieve something, and the amount that can be done or produced. Examples include demand, reach, targets and activities.

There's also a *qualitative* aspect: not just how *much* can be done, but how *well.*

Assessing system capacity

To make the most of the capacity available in the housing and homelessness system, we need to know how much there is. The following indicators can help:

- Levels of un/met need – including diversity.
- Levels of engagement/activism
- Number and range of supports
- Number and nature of joined up responses (networks, alliances, practice sharing).
- Level of innovation and adaptability
- Level of resource – funding, training, knowledge, staff turnover
- Responsiveness of feedback loops e.g. lag between evidence, practice and policy change.

Managing system capacity

To build system capacity, your role is to be 'valuable, not precious'.

- Acknowledge that you don't have the answers.
- Prioritise learning as a way to manage change and uncertainty.
- Use your resources to facilitate learning and collaboration.
- Support capacity building
- Create and tolerate slack
- Welcome deviation
- Attend to the negative effects of competition and tendering.

## GROUP ACTIVITY: FACILITATED DISCUSSION

Do you recognise the situation that has been described by the speakers?
What do you know about the levels of need (or capacity) in your own area? If you don't know, how can you find out?
What questions do you think Shelter should be exploring about system capacity?

### Q1 – Do you recognise the situation that has been described by the speakers?

#### Housing demand

The systemic issues identified by the speakers are evident. There are not enough Private Rented Sector properties available to meet increased levels of demand. Prices are increasing and the Local Housing Allowance won't cover rent. Landlords are turning properties into Houses in Multiple Occupation (or, in one area, Airbnb lets). People are leaving prison with nowhere to go and some council Temporary Accommodation services are closed, putting even more pressure on the system. Evictions are increasing.

#### Growing demand on services and the revolving door

Referrals to housing and tenancy support services have increased greatly. Charity services have become the first port of call because they are open where some Local Authority services are not, or are reluctant to take on referrals. Some support services won't assist where there are mental health, alcohol or dependency issues. Call volumes are extreme, with many going unanswered. Webchat services aren't always successful.

In addition to existing clients, new demographics have emerged, e.g. people who were working and have lost employment. They are not used to the housing system so are often at crisis point by the time they seek help. It's difficult to refer them on for appropriate support, because other agencies lack capacity.

Individuals end up being passed from one service to another, with the central issue never being dealt with.

Other issues
- Services may need training to recognise that someone is homeless and to refer early enough.
- Where specialist services are commissioned, there can sometimes be conflicting expectations between commissioners and services e.g. about the volume and breadth of work that's needed.

#### Rough sleeping, waiting lists and funding

Waiting lists are very long, especially for specialist services and limited hostel spaces. There are high numbers of people sleeping rough, but low numbers of people funded to work with them. Money has been put into rough sleeping services, but it doesn't seem to be having an effect. When 'Everyone In' when money ran out for the hotels, there was huge pressure to find alternative housing.

### Workforce knowledge, capacity and wellbeing

The lack of support for people means professionals are taking on extra workload and doing things outside the usual scope of their service. Knowledge becomes stretched as staff deal with a wider range of enquiries, or new services are created with the same staffing and resources. Services are struggling to recruit experienced people on the pay rates available, so existing staff have bigger workloads. Working beyond capacity is affecting staff wellbeing, with increasing stress, sickness and burnout.

### Virtual work

Not seeing people face to face exacerbates capacity problems, for example cases might be centrally allocated, and staff mobile numbers given out, before staff have had the chance to assess need. Many clients are not able to use the internet to access information, yet funding often goes to online support. In one example, funding cuts meant that services can only issue letters not give face to face advice.

### Example of a system level approach

Having identified a system capacity issue, with a revolving door of people going in and out of hospital, Hackney Council and partners refocused on meeting needs together, not separately, creating:
- A dedicated Pathway Team, giving people one point of contact
- Shared support plans
- Shared accountability between partners.

## Q2 What do you know about the levels of need (or capacity) in your own area? If you don't know, how can you find out?

### Data gathering

Data is gathered on presenting issues, which helps with triage, identifying that more referrals are now in the 'struggling' or 'acute' section of the triangle above. Using data helps to inform management teams, funders and service design – seeing trends and allocating resources. The national Homelessness Case Level Collection system is useful for showing trends (but there's a six-month lag in data).

One organisation noted a big increase in presentations by single people, so developed a single persons' support pathway. Another service measures repeat demand to take a case-by-case basis and build capacity/reduce dependence. In one area, a mapping exercise of who is involved in homelessness forums identified that drug and alcohol services were not part of the conversation. A directory of services was needed.

Services use data to respond to changing need, for example identifying that landlords are issuing s21 notices with two months' notice and that more people are presenting with possession orders. This becomes difficult, as no temporary accommodation is available.

### 'Failure demand' - the demand caused by systems that don't work

People often approach services at the point when have been asked to leave. The eviction ban was beneficial, giving Local Authorities time to look at options. Again, people get stuck in a cycle. They often aren't seen until it's too late, only occasionally approaching services at an early enough stage to carry out effective prevention. They tend to be referred at acute stage with rent arrears, rather than at the first missed payment. Another cycle is created by Band 1 status only being permitted when people come into the system and until housing is offered. Once offered, the status is then lost. If accommodation is lost then 'Intentional Homelessness' is an issue. Demand increases as a result.

One support service identified that when people fall out of temporary accommodation and then return for support, they are often single. A Temporary Accommodation Resettlement Officer was recruited, whose role is to engage and work with single people or ex-rough sleepers to prevent this.

### Example of system level approaches

The National Housing Advice Service gives services the knowledge they need to empower the people they support https://www.nhas.org.uk/

CAB publish high quality up to date information on advice trends. It is aimed at national government departments, regional agencies, third sector advice or social policy organisations, and social policy researchers. https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/advice-trends/advice-trends/advice-trends-on-tableau/

Similarly, the National Frontline Network run an annual survey on access and needs, sharing statistics to influence and inform policy. 2020 results available here.

Data can be used to anticipate trends too - predicting the enquiries that are likely to come and getting materials and resources in place early.

### Q3. What questions do you think Shelter should be exploring about system capacity?

### How to develop capacity and empowerment?

Developing advice services' capacity: if we're just signposting, can we do more casework?
If we do casework, can we empower people more too?
Do we empower people? Or do we try to solve things and 'do for' people? Does making referrals stop us equipping people to solve and do things for themselves?
Do people want empowerment?
If it is more user friendly to call Shelter than use the online services, what does that do to capacity and the amount of need that can be met?

### Is housing advice as specialist as we might think?

How/can we upskill other workers to take on appropriate advice work (i.e. not the more legal or technical parts)?
Could Shelter run public training sessions - workshops on common themes? More needs to be done to inform the public and increase general knowledge of housing.
Push training to other organisations more, be more visible and proactive.

## NEXT STEPS: VISION AND INTEREST

*'None of us can fight homeless alone'*

'I'd be very interested in working more closely together with Shelter to both share information and evidence but also how across the Black Country we can support one another - for example, running in-house training, webinars for our service users, joint advocacy etc.'

'Bristol CAB are pursuing a capacity building project with our local Shelter, including training and best use of specialist capacity.'

People don't necessarily know the language or concepts of 'system change' - but they know they're part of a system. Can we help them to see themselves and their roles in that context, 'from the outside in'?

## REFERENCES SHARED ON THE DAY

Housing and advice
National Housing Advice Service
https://www.nhas.org.uk/professionals/advice-line

Shelter legal resources for professionals
https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/legal

Citizens Advice – advice trends  https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/advice-trends/advice-trends/advice-trends-on-tableau/

Free national network for frontline homelessness workers - training fund, client grants, events etc www.frontlinenetwork.org.uk

Frontline Network annual survey - 2020 report
https://frontlinenetwork.org.uk/resources/frontline-worker-survey-2020-report-launched/

Systems and capacity
Lasting Difference free guides to non-profit capacity and sustainability
 https://www.thelastingdifference.com/resources/

New Systems Alliance information on system approaches
https://newsystemalliance.org/wisdom-from-the-system/