

Homelessness: The Challenge of Prevention

FEANTSA seminar, Brussels, 6 June 2008

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Presentation Overview

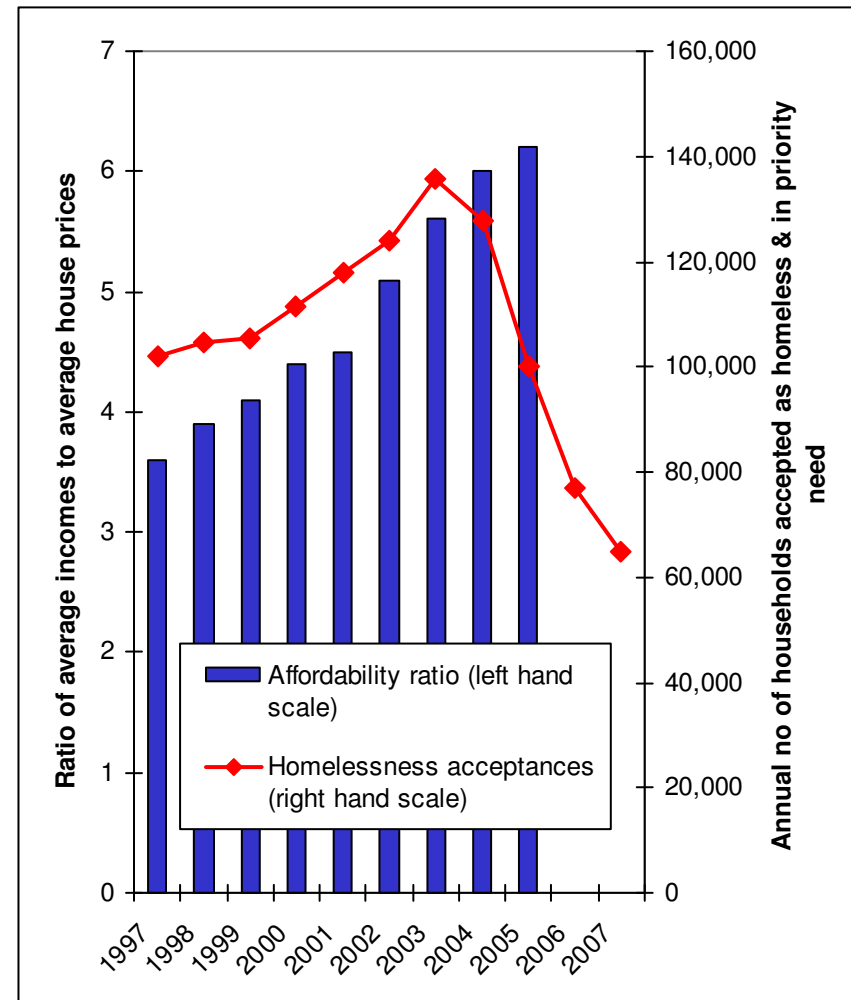
- UK legal context
 - Recent trends in homelessness numbers
 - Central govt instigation of LA prevention activity
 - Overview of prevention techniques
 - Detailed consideration of selected prevention techniques
 - Weighing up impact of prevention initiatives
 - Conclusions
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- Draws on studies undertaken for central govt. in England and Scotland

Summary of UK Legal Framework on Homelessness

- Local authorities responsible for assessing claims of homelessness and securing tenancies for households judged as:
 - Legally homeless – no suitable accom available to occupy
 - Homeless through no fault of their own
 - In ‘priority need’ – i.e. household contains a pregnant woman, a child or a ‘vulnerable person’ (e.g. individual over pension age, with serious medical condition or disability)
- Households assessed as ‘unintentionally homeless and in priority need’ termed ‘homelessness acceptances’
- LA duty to provide temp accommodation until permanent tenancy (usually social rented) becomes available

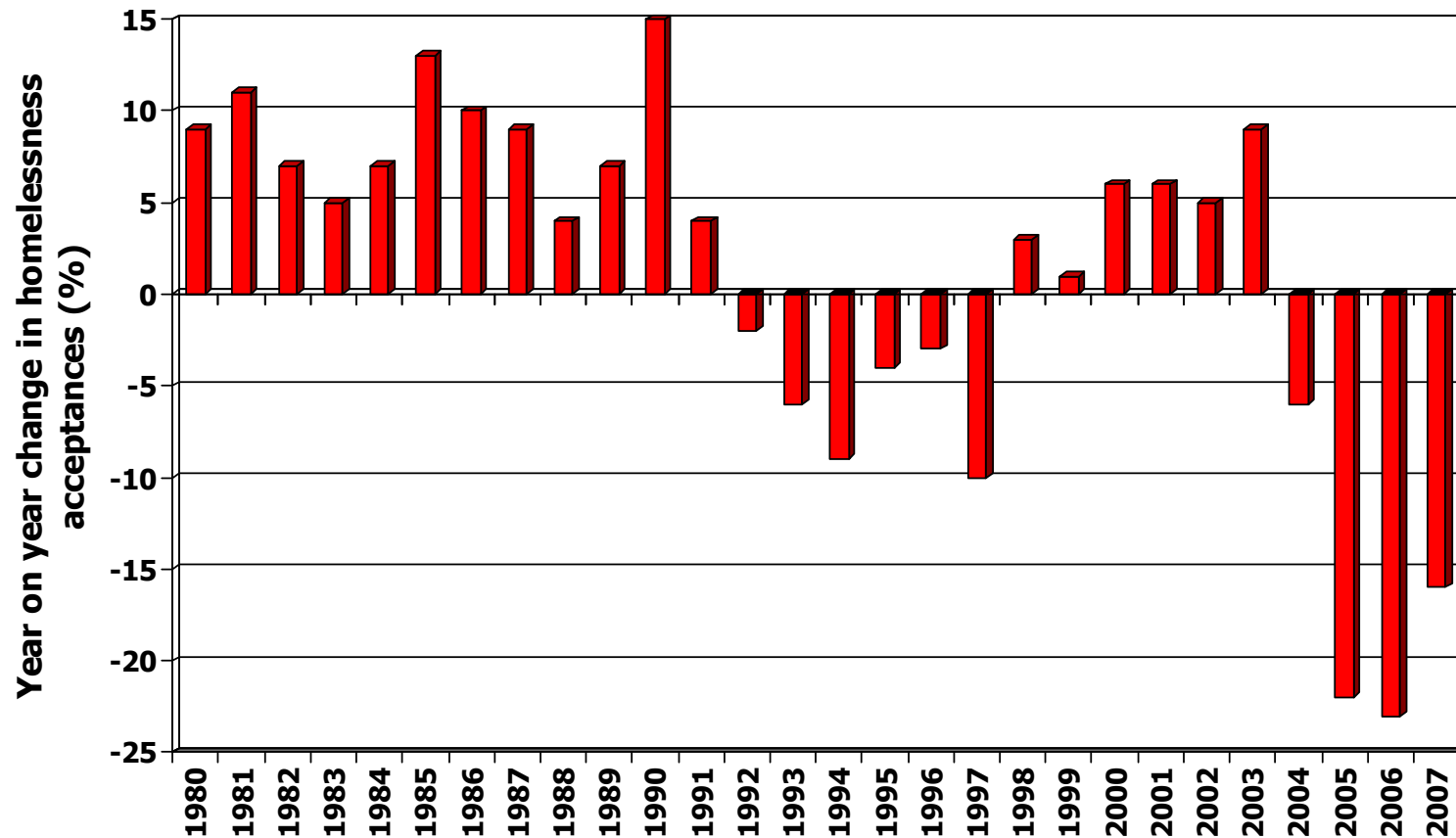
Recent Trends in Homelessness Acceptances and Home Ownership Affordability, England

- Historically, homeless acceptance trend in tandem with home ownership affordability
- Relationship disrupted since 2003 when LA homelessness strategies introduced
- By mid-2007 acceptances down by >50% in 4 years – lower than since early 1980s



Homelessness Acceptances – Longer Term Trend

Year on Year Change in Homelessness Acceptances in England, 1980-2006



Central Govt Instigation of Local Authority Homelessness Prevention



- Homelessness Act 2002 obliged LAs to produce 'prevention focused' strategies. First wave issued 2003
- National targets set to:
 - Eliminate use of B&B hotels for families (by 2004)
 - Halve 2005 homeless temp accommodation placements by 2010
- Guidance has advocated:
 - specific forms of homelessness prevention – e.g. family mediation
 - new approaches to homelessness work – e.g. being more proactive in seeking to avert a household's loss of accommodation
- £500 million earmarked for grant funding to underwrite prevention activities – 2002-09
- LAs highly receptive to Govt agenda

- Primary prevention:
 - Action(s) to help a household avoid homelessness occurring in the first place (where there is already a specific threat – e.g. eviction date)
 - Usually triggered by an approach to the LA on the part of an individual claiming homelessness
- Secondary (or precautionary) prevention:
 - Action(s) to help a household avoid possible *future* homelessness (as yet no specific threat)
 - Usually based on a local authority's judgement that a household is 'at high risk'

Overview of prevention activities

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Target group(s)</i>	<i>Typology category</i>	
		<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary/ precautionary</i>
Housing advice	(a) private tenants seeking to retain existing tenancies, (b) people seeking to access private tenancies	•	
Facilitating access to private tenancies	(a) 'potentially priority homeless' households not yet formally assessed, (b) priority homeless ineligible for social housing, Non-priority homeless aged >25	•	
Family mediation	Young people excluded from the family home	•	
Sanctuary schemes	Women threatened with homelessness by threat of violence from former partner	•	
Tenancy sustainment support	Social sector tenants judged 'at risk' of being unable to sustain a tenancy		•
Supported transitional accommodation	(a) Young people aged 16-18 (incl. those previously in local authority care); (b) Former rough sleepers and others discharged from institutions		•
Housing education	Secondary school-age children		•

Facilitating Access to Private Tenancies

- Aim: to provide financial and/or practical help to enable someone threatened with homelessness to secure a private tenancy
- Policy components:
 - LA (or contractor agency) provides rent deposit guarantee or bond
 - Sometimes offer landlord 'bounty payments' or other incentives – e.g:
 - 'Fast tracked' Housing Benefit claims
 - Property insurance
 - Guarantee to meet rent shortfalls through changes of tenancy
 - Willingness to bridge gap between rent charge and standard HB payable
 - Requirement for participating landlords to notify LA where tenancy at risk or terminated
- Challenges for LAs
 - Development of closer liaison and trust with private landlords
 - Recognition and overcoming of landlord inclination to avoid 'risky' tenants
 - Judging what HB shortfall is acceptable
 - Negotiation of tenancy terms (ideally improving on what would be available through simple market transaction)

- Aim: to conciliate between young people and their parents to enable the former to remain in/return to the family home (at least long enough to facilitate planned move)
- Mediation provided by homeless casework staff *or* specialist agency contracted to receive and assist referrals
- Challenges for LAs:
 - Striking appropriate balance between:
 - a) ensuring that false claims of abuse are not made to secure a social rented tenancy and
 - b) avoiding encouraging a young person's return to former host household if this might place them at risk of violence or abuse
 - Recognition that effective reconciliation may require several sessions (and, possibly, some ongoing support)
 - Structuring framework for prioritising housing waiting list applicants to incentivise people in insecure accommodation to wait in orderly queue

Sanctuary Schemes

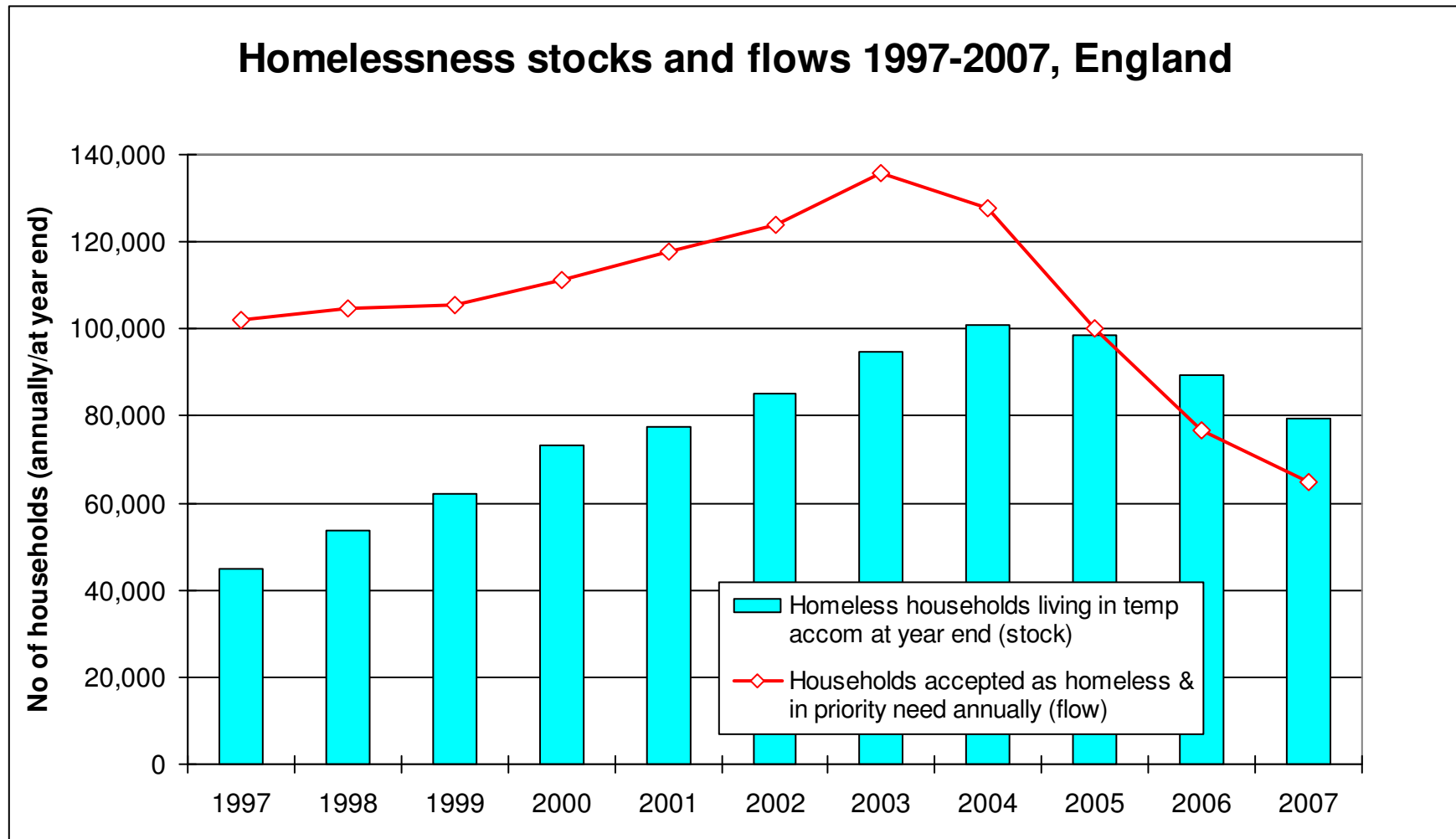
- Aim: to enable women to remain in the family home even when threat of violence places them at risk of homelessness
- Policy components:
 - Action usually triggered by homelessness application from woman under threat from former partner
 - ‘Sanctuary’ provided by installation of security and alarm equipment to boost confidence in ‘staying put’ option
 - Possibly associated help – e.g. to secure legal injunction banning former partner from making contact
- LAs making sanctuary provision assert that few, if any, beneficiaries ever re-apply as homeless
- Challenges for LAs:
 - Encourage women to ‘stay put’ without concealing legal responsibility to rehouse if this is felt too unsafe
 - Reacting sufficiently rapidly to safeguard victim before irrevocable decision to abandon home

- Secondary or 'precautionary' homelessness prevention - v. common among LAs in England and Scotland
- Services generally include assistance with:
 - budgeting, benefit claims, self-esteem and employment
 - accessing specialist help – e.g. addiction counselling
 - linking into local social networks
- Challenges for LAs:
 - As in any precautionary practice, accurate identification of those seriously at risk if unassisted
 - Deciding over what period assistance is justified
 - Demonstrating additionality – to what extent can we be confident that someone 'assisted to retain their tenancy' would, in fact, have otherwise become homeless?
 - Demonstrating *cost-effectiveness* – individualised support (especially if ongoing for a period) potentially v. expensive

The Role of Prevention Initiatives in Cutting Homelessness Numbers

- Only limited statistical evidence demonstrating effectiveness of individual prevention initiatives
- Likely that these have played a role in reducing acceptances ***but...***
- Also significant have been administrative changes in LA homelessness procedures
- Many LAs have adopted procedures where a formal homelessness assessment will be undertaken only when 'prevention options' have first been explored – legality of this approach highly questionable
- LAs accused of unacceptable (and potentially unlawful) 'gatekeeping'
- Consequently, some people at risk of homelessness informally channeled away from an assessment through 'help' – e.g. in accessing a private tenancy
- While the law facilitates challenges against LA *assessment decisions*, refusal to *conduct an assessment* is harder to contest through the courts
- But in Scotland LAs more effectively policed through housing inspection regime and regulator sensitivity to 'gatekeeping'

Homelessness prevention impacts



Conclusions

- Step change in LA approach to fulfilling homelessness duties
- Emphasizes pro-active efforts to address current housing problems rather than necessarily proceeding direct to statutory assessment
- Effectively incorporates more restrictive interpretation of circumstances in which a formal assessment will be undertaken
- Changed official policy transmitted through funding and exhortation not legislation
- Combined impact of (a) constructive help and (b) gatekeeping has been dramatic reduction in scale of LA 'homelessness rehousing' obligations (i.e. homelessness acceptances)
- Is helping to facilitate steady reduction in homeless temp accommodation placements, hence saving public money
- But achievability of 2010 TA reduction target partly dependent on social housing turnover rate & impact of expanded social housebuilding
- Interventions aimed at preventing individual instances of homelessness no substitute for broader action to expand affordable housing provision

Research reports

- Pawson, H., Donohoe, A., Munro, M., Wager, F. & Netto, G. (2006) *Investigating Tenancy Sustainment in Glasgow*, Glasgow: Glasgow Housing Association
http://www.gha.org.uk/content/mediaassets/doc/full_tenancy_sustainment.pdf
- Pawson, H., Netto, G. Jones, C., Wager, F., Fancy, C. & Lomax, D (2007) *Evaluating Homelessness Prevention*; London: Communities & Local Government
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/preventhomelessness>
- Pawson, H., Davidson, E. & Netto, G. (2007) *Evaluating Homelessness Prevention Activities in Scotland*; Edinburgh: Scottish Executive
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/26095144/0>

Good practice guide

- Pawson, H., Netto, G. & Jones, C. (2006) *Homelessness Prevention: A Guide to Good Practice*; London: Department for Communities & Local Government
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/150973>

Journal articles

- Pawson, H. (2007) Local authority homelessness prevention in England: Empowering consumers or denying rights? *Housing Studies* Vol. 22 (6) pp867–883
- Pawson, H. & Davidson, E. (2008) Radically divergent? Homelessness policy and practice in post-devolution Scotland; *European Journal of Housing Policy* Vol 8(1) pp39-60