

Press release: Hospitals, prisons and Jobcentres to refer people at risk of homelessness

For the first time, prisons, probation services, Jobcentres and NHS Trusts will be among the organisations that have a duty to help those at risk of becoming homeless and refer them to a housing authority, Minister for Homelessness Heather Wheeler confirmed today (22 February 2018).

The [Homelessness Reduction Act](#) – the most ambitious legislative reform for decades – places new legal duties on English councils to intervene at an earlier stage to prevent homelessness.

Councils will now be required to ensure the advice and information they provide is designed to meet the needs of particular at risk groups including care leavers, people leaving prison, people who have left the armed forces, survivors of domestic abuse and those suffering from a mental illness.

In addition to new duties to refer those at risk of homelessness, the reforms will include:

- providing free information and advice on preventing homelessness and the rights of homeless people, to all residents, including information tailored to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups
- a new duty for those who are already homeless so that that local authorities will work with them for 56 days to help secure accommodation

Minister for Homelessness Heather Wheeler said:

Everyone should have a home to call their own and we have put in place strong protections to guard families and individuals against the threat of homelessness.

Our reforms – putting prevention at the heart of everything we do – are designed for lasting change and to back this up we're investing almost £1 billion over the next 4 years to break the homelessness cycle once and for all.

The government has backed the Act with £72.7 million of funding to help councils to deliver these changes. In time, it is expected that the increased preventative work brought about by the Act will lead to substantial savings for councils.

The confirmation of which public bodies have a duty to refer is part of a wider package of regulations made ahead of the roll-out of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April.

Alongside the new duty to refer, the government is continuing to work closely with key sector organisations to identify different ways services can contribute to preventing homelessness and supporting the successful implementation of the Act.

In particular, the department is working with the National Housing Federation to explore how housing associations can support the Act, including by making referrals, and working with the National Police Chiefs' Council to develop a 'test and learn' project in Brighton & Hove focusing on homelessness prevention.

The government is already taking significant action to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping through:

- providing £315 million to local authorities for their work on homelessness, and an additional £402 million in Flexible Homelessness Support Grant funding, which local authorities can use to work more strategically to prevent and tackle homelessness pressures in their areas
- announcing £28 million for 3 Housing First pilots in Manchester, Liverpool and the West Midlands to support long-term rough sleepers off the streets and help them to end their homelessness. Individuals will be provided with stable, affordable accommodation and intensive wrap-around support. This will help them recover from complex health issues, for example substance abuse and mental health difficulties and sustain their tenancies
- investing £9 billion to build more social housing, including council homes

Case study: Southwark council

Southwark council receives the third largest numbers of homelessness applications in England. MHCLG funded Southwark to be an 'early adopter' of the act and implement measures that mirror key elements of the new legislation, including assessments and personalised housing plans and delivering bespoke prevention and relief services to households regardless of whether they are in priority need.

The latest statistics from Southwark show that from the 1 April 2017 until 31 January 2018 the number of households accepted as owed the main housing duty had decreased by 49% compared to the same period the previous year (April 2016 to January 2017), from 789 to 405. In addition, Southwark has eliminated its use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless families.

The council also report that they have successfully trained staff to focus on the prevention of homelessness. This is reflected by a marked increase in positive feedback from families and a decline in the number of reviews requested by applicants. Southwark have been actively sharing their learning with over 250 other authorities across the country.

The government supported the Homelessness Reduction Bill which was introduced to the House of Commons in summer 2016 by Bob Blackman MP, and progressed through Parliament with cross party support. The Act received Royal Assent on Thursday 27th April 2017.

The government worked with a group made up of local authority and charity representatives, as well as specialists relevant to particular issues, to inform the review of the code of guidance. The new code brings together and updates existing guidance, as well as providing new guidance to cover the duties brought in by the Act. An 8 week [consultation](#) was launched on 16 October 2017 and closed on 11 December 2017.

The [Homelessness code of guidance](#) provides direction on how local authorities should exercise their homelessness functions and apply the law in practice. It also applies to local housing and social services authorities, who are required by law to have regard to this guidance when exercising their functions relating to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. to have regard to the guidance in exercising their functions in relation to homelessness.

The duty to refer is one element of a wider package of regulations required to enable the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act. The regulations also set out the procedure to be followed by housing authorities when carrying out reviews of homelessness decisions, and issuing notices to applicants who deliberately and unreasonably refuse to co-operate with them. See [factsheets on the regulations](#).

How the duty to refer works in practice will be determined in each local area. For example, housing authorities may want to develop standard referral mechanisms, and public bodies may want to undertake training to support their staff in identifying people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.