



HOME TRUTHS

HOUSING-LED APPROACHES TO HOMELESSNESS

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SUMMARY

Nationally, there is a lack of political urgency in reducing homelessness. The most meaningful progress has instead come from places where local leaders have made homelessness a priority, driving improvements in both the provision and delivery of homelessness services. At a time where trust in the state is low, rough sleeping is a visible manifestation of the failure of our public services. Tackling homelessness should be, first and foremost, about supporting people in times of crisis. But there is a wider impact - shifting the sense of malaise and rebuilding trust in the capacity of the state to deliver for people.

Despite the publication of a national homelessness strategy in December 2025, the government's interventions on homelessness to date reflect a continuity approach to managing the problem, rather than a step change in tackling its root causes or taking a different approach. The strategy calls for cross-government working, but is lacking the long-term vision for truly ending homelessness, and buy-in from across government.

Although spending on homelessness increasing over the past decade, the problem has got worse. By the end of September 2025, the number of households in temporary accommodation (TA) reached over 130,000, the highest number ever recorded. An additional 80,000 households were categorised as being eligible for support to prevent or relieve homelessness, a number which has increased since 2021.¹ If homelessness continues to increase at the rate of the past five years, by the end of the decade, 25 per cent more people will be facing homelessness.

National government used the language of “housing-led” in the homelessness strategy (*‘A National Plan to End Homelessness’*,² referred to throughout as the National Plan). However, a lack of an agreed upon definition of “housing-led” means that this is open to differing interpretations. Indeed, the National Plan seems to suggest that housing-led is accommodation-based support, rather than an understanding of the value of homelessness interventions that prioritise getting people into their own homes early. Government must follow up to clarify its approach, expand upon its support for people who are currently falling through the cracks in existing homelessness provision, and outline how it will support local and regional leaders who deliver and facilitate these programmes on the ground.

One of the overarching barriers to the implementation of a housing-led approach is the lack of shared understanding of what “housing-led” means, including by government. We recommend the following definition be used:

“A housing-led approach moves people into their own settled homes as quickly as possible, with support in place as appropriate”

This work draws on three case study areas: Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (NEMSA), and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). GMCA represents a mature combined authority, with a mayor who has made homelessness a priority. NEMSA is a newer combined authority, in

1 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2026) ‘Statutory homelessness in England’, live tables, accredited official statistics. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

2 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) ‘A National Plan to End Homelessness’, policy paper. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-national-plan-to-end-homelessness/a-national-plan-to-end-homelessness>

the process of writing a homelessness prevention blueprint. OCC is not a combined authority, but is a two-tier authority with some similarities to the relationship between a mayoralty and the constituent councils, and has implemented a county-wide approach to homelessness that has lessons for newer combined authorities.

Across a series of interviews, we identified several other barriers to the implementation of housing-led approaches, which can be addressed by a combination of action by national government and mayors.

The barriers are:

1. Lack of social housing supply
2. Legislative and bureaucratic barriers
3. Siloed thinking
4. Lack of political will
5. Risk aversion
6. Lack of funding

The most deep-rooted challenge to housing-led provision is the lack of available social housing.

Recommendation: Mayors should use their strategic planning powers to set ambitious Section 106 targets for social housing and nominations requirements for new developments.

National government should avoid undermining this agenda by imposing reductions on these numbers, as happened recently in London, where ministers forced the mayor to reduce the number of social and affordable homes required in new developments. However, delivery of new homes is slow. Government can support councils to boost numbers of social housing in the short term through providing funding for an acquisitions programme.

Recommendation: Support a programme to bring empty homes back into use for temporary accommodation and housing led interventions.

To further support housing-led approaches, the whole system must work together. This includes national, local and regional government, but must also involve housing associations.

Recommendation: National government should introduce a duty for registered providers (RPs) to house homeless tenants when referred by the local authority (strengthen the duty to cooperate).

Without a holistic, whole-government approach, efforts to reduce rough sleeping and homelessness will fail. A lack of political will was identified as a significant barrier to action on homelessness. Government must show that tackling homelessness is a national priority.

Recommendation: National government should establish a strategy delivery unit, learning from the Rough Sleepers Unit of the 1990s and 2000s, bringing in external expertise, to coordinate action across Whitehall and beyond, provide leadership, set ambitious targets on reducing rough sleeping and support local leaders in their delivery.

Recommendation: National government should roll-out a scheme that learns from A Bed Every Night (ABEN) to tackle rough sleeping across the country.

Finally, our case studies illustrate that housing-led approaches rely on collaborative working between all parts of the public sector. Such working does not rely on mayors, as shown by the experience of OCC, but mayors are well placed

to facilitate this across their regions. In the best cases, councils across the region work in teams that bring together housing, health, justice and others to deliver the best outcomes for people.

Recommendation: Mayors should use their convening powers to bring together interdisciplinary teams from across their constituent local authorities. Engagement should be incentivised through mayoral funding. These partnerships should facilitate data sharing, create opportunities to share best practice, and, where appropriate, support the development of evidence-based regional approaches to addressing homelessness.

1.

HOUSING-LED APPROACHES TO HOMELESSNESS

In England, most homelessness provision is based on the ‘staircase’ model, which requires people to move through several steps before accessing a home. This is particularly true for people with multiple, complex needs.

Housing First emerged in the 1990s and has gained popularity as an alternative approach to supporting those with complex needs. Housing First approaches are established, evidence-based strategies that have been implemented in areas across the UK and Europe (ECCH 2010). They are based on a set of principles that include non-conditionality and intensive support. The evidence for the effectiveness of Housing First is unequivocal – particularly when applied as a ‘high fidelity’ model. Housing First programmes (or similar) result in “significantly better housing stability outcomes than other approaches” (Keenan et al 2020).

There are many international examples of their implementation. In the United States, the Pathways to Housing programme is the most effective way to support people out of homelessness long term (Tsemberis and Eisenberg 2000). In Finland, since 2008, long-term homelessness has been reduced by 68 per cent through immediate access to permanent homes and voluntary support, alongside a major shift away from short-term shelters (Pathfinders 2024).

Other benefits of Housing First approaches include the following.

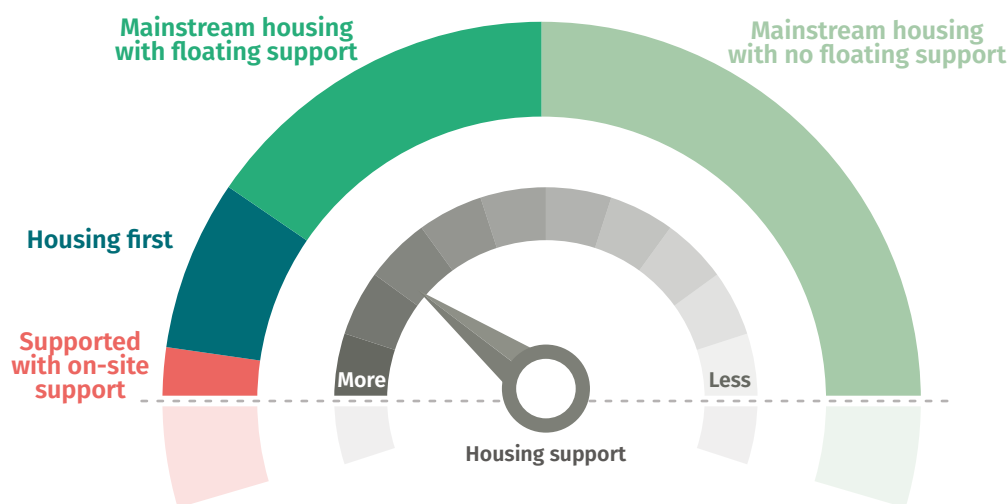
- **Higher housing stability:** Housing First approaches achieve 80 to 90 per cent higher tenancy retention over two years for people with multiple complex needs. This far exceeds the 30 to 50 per cent success rates of traditional staircase models where people frequently drop out or cycle back into rough sleeping (Crisis 2024). Rapid rehousing considerably reduces the time spent in temporary B&Bs or hostels, preventing repeat homelessness for most people (Perth & Kinross Council 2019).
- **Improved wellbeing and recovery:** by providing secure housing upfront, Housing First boosts mental health outcomes, quality of life, and social connections – people engage better when not preoccupied with survival (Crisis 2024). The HMT green book has guidance on wellbeing which should influence policymaking, but the current homelessness system does not reflect this, driven in part by a lack of robust evidence (HMT 2021).
- **Lower costs:** Housing First yields net savings by reducing emergency hospital visits, police callouts, and temporary accommodation bills. Evaluations of Housing First pilots estimate net savings in public service use at around £10,900 to £15,900 per person per year (MHCLG 2024a).

Unlike Housing First, there is no widely agreed upon definition of “housing led”. It generally describes an approach that moves people into their own settled homes as quickly as possible, with support in place as appropriate. In some places it is referred to as “rapid rehousing” (Cunningham et al 2015). It minimises the use of hostels or temporary accommodation and provides support for the person if needed. Housing First can be thought of as a subset of a housing-led approach (figure 1.1), targeted at people with high and complex support needs.

FIGURE 1.1

A “housing-led” approach to homelessness interventions includes round the clock support, Housing First approach, and a spectrum of others

The spectrum of housing-led approaches, showing the different levels of support required and Housing First as a subset of the approach



Source: Reproduction of Homeless Network Scotland (2024)

The government’s National Plan referred to “housing-led solutions, including Housing First” (MHCLG 2025a), but it was not defined in the strategy, and there is no unifying definition used across the sector. Our definition of housing led is set out in the box below.

DEFINING HOUSING-LED

We define housing-led as follows:

“A housing-led approach moves people into their own permanent homes as quickly as possible, with support in place as appropriate”

In places where homelessness has not been preventable, we believe housing led should follow these principles:

- **Housing is a right:** it is not conditional, and people do not have to prove they are “housing ready” (sober, for example). Housing provided must be suitable for the person and their needs (in affordability, size, quality, etc).
- **Rehousing should be quick, with minimal steps:** people should be able to access permanent housing quickly, without multiple steps or moves.
- **Unconditional wrap-around support (where necessary):** not dependent on other conditions, person-centred and trauma informed, separate from housing provision.
- **Freedom and choice:** housing is offered with choices over location and housing arrangement, and people have a choice over how much support they need.
- **Situated in an integrated policy framework:** housing interventions are aligned and coordinated with other parts of the public sector where relevant.

While housing-led approaches can often require higher upfront investment than traditional, staircase models, they generate net savings over time (MHCLG 2024a), and the scale of funding varies according to the support required. As many of these long-term savings accrue to other parts of the public sector rather than directly to councils, mayors and local authorities are not properly incentivised to commit to housing-led provision at scale.

TABLE 1
Different approaches to homelessness provision

Approach	Core principles	What it looks like in practice
Traditional/staircase	People have to move through steps before they get a long-term home.	The person starts in a night shelter or hostel, then moves to other ‘move-on’ housing before a permanent home. Often have to show they are ‘ready’ (for example, stop using drugs or always engage with support) before they can move on. People can get stuck in the system or be forced back on the street.
Housing-led	Get people into a home quickly, then give them support.	Aim for a fast move into an ordinary flat or a house – not long stays in hostels or B&Bs. Support is adjusted to suit the needs of the person, ranging from lighter touch support (such as help with money, bills, health or immigration status), or Housing First interventions (for example support for mental health or substance use). Support is available for as long as it is needed. Assumes most people can manage a tenancy if they have the right help at the right time. Keeping the home does not depend on taking part in treatment; the tenancy is as secure as anyone else’s.

Source: Authors' analysis

Across England, there are places that have adopted approaches that have some housing-led elements. Greater Manchester represents somewhere that has transitioned towards a housing-led approach over time, building capacity and expertise, and making evidence-based interventions responding to the needs of local people (Teixeira 2025). However, this approach is not widespread across England.

2. HOMELESSNESS POLICY ACROSS GREAT BRITAIN

COUNCIL DUTIES ON HOMELESSNESS IN ENGLAND

Under part seven of the Housing Act (1996), local housing authorities³ have specific duties towards someone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness. Under Section 184, the council must determine whether a person is eligible for assistance, and if so, what duty is owed to them. People might not be eligible for assistance if they are a foreign national, an asylum seeker, or have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

For people who are eligible for support and are considered to have a “priority need”, the council is obliged to provide accommodation. Typically, this is temporary accommodation before people are moved into social housing or the private rented sector (PRS). People who are pregnant or have children, are homeless because of domestic abuse, are care-leavers who are aged 18 to 20, or fall under the council’s definition of “vulnerable”⁴ are always considered priority need (Housing Act 1996).

For those who are not considered to have a priority need, the council must take steps to provide the person with support to secure accommodation. This might be help to calculate their local housing allowance (LHA) entitlement, connecting potential tenants with landlords in the private rented sector (PRS), or, in some rare cases, acting as a guarantor for a deposit (although the Tenant Fees Act 2019 made it more challenging for councils to provide upfront payments to private landlords to support homeless households to access the PRS). They can also add people to the long-term housing register for council housing. If you are entitled to help but do not have a “local area connection”, the local authority might refer you to another council for support.

IMPLICATIONS OF LOCAL AUTHORITY REORGANISATION

Under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, introduced in 2025, district and county councils will be combined into single, unitary authorities covering areas with populations of around 500,000 people. This has implications for the functions that are currently delivered under two-tier authority areas, including housing and homelessness, which currently sit at the district level. Bringing these together should make some interventions around homelessness easier.

THE ROLE OF MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITIES (MCAS)

Mayors do not currently have statutory duties for addressing homelessness, and most do not deliver frontline homelessness support. However, under the 2026–30 integrated settlements, mayors received funding that is to be used for homelessness, rough sleeping and domestic abuse (MHCLG 2026). They were

3 In England, local housing authorities are district councils, unitary councils, and the London borough councils. In Wales, the responsibility sits with the county councils or county borough councils.

4 The housing authority definition of vulnerability might include old age or disability, but they have a degree of discretion, particularly around disability, to assess whether the “impact of this makes the application significantly more vulnerable as a result” (MHCLG 2025b).

also given a series of functional responsibilities, several of which reference homelessness, including:

- a. Setting the regional ambition on homelessness, in partnership with local authorities, and develop regional structures to deliver these ambitions.
- b. Encouraging a preventative approach to homelessness and rough sleeping.
- c. Convening homelessness and rough sleeping partners, including in the voluntary, community and faith sectors, to strengthen services across the region.
- d. Delivering, as appropriate, region-specific interventions that will enhance the statutory work of Local Authorities and relevant public sector partners with respect to homelessness and rough sleeping.

MHCLG 2025c

These responsibilities are used by MHCLG to determine funding for the mayoral combined authorities (MCAs). GMCA meets all of these responsibilities, but newer MCAs who are earlier in the development of their approach to homelessness might not.

RAPID REHOUSING IN SCOTLAND

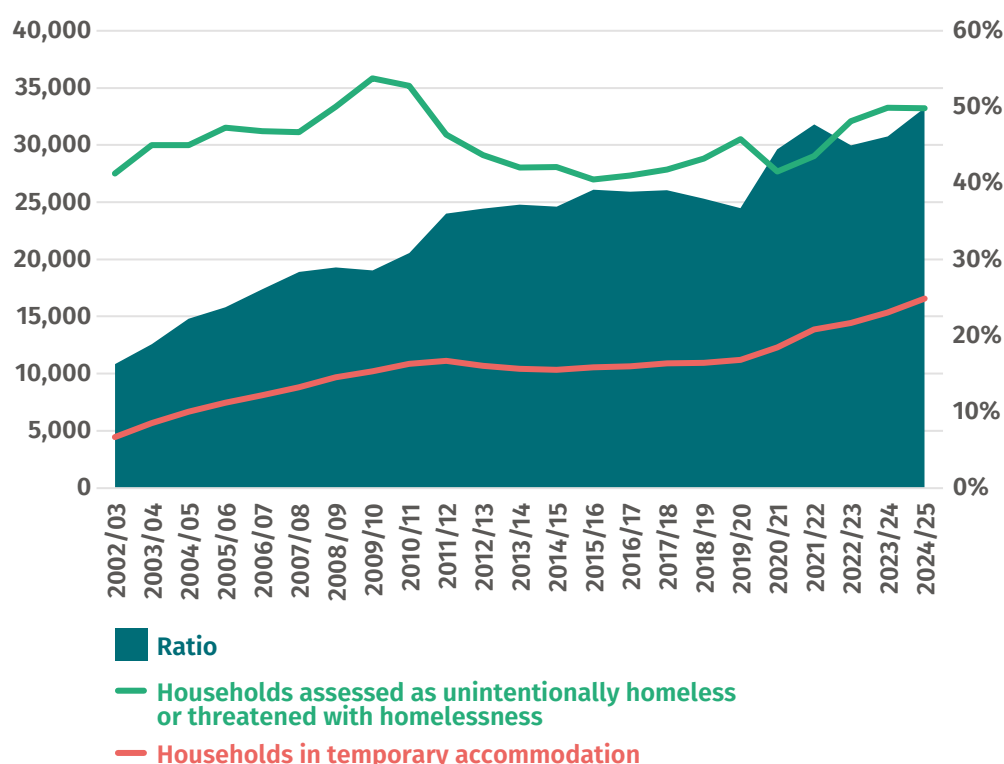
Scotland's legislation on homelessness is held up as some of the most progressive in the world, having removed "priority need" from homelessness allocations in 2012 (Crisis 2022). Local authorities are obliged to support people facing homelessness into housing (Downie et al 2018). However, there is some conditionality; people must be eligible and must be "non-intentionally homeless".

Under its *Ending homelessness and rough sleeping: action plan*, published in 2018 (Scottish Government 2018), Scotland adopted a rapid rehousing approach and Housing First for those with multiple and complex needs. Twenty-six local authorities (out of a total 32) have a Housing First programme (Scottish Government 2025a). Rough sleeping in Scotland fell between 2008 and 2016, plateauing until 2021/22, when it has started to rise again (Scottish Government 2024).

FIGURE 2.1

While overall numbers of homeless households has held reasonably constant, the proportion of households in temporary accommodation has increased, particularly since 2020

Scottish households assessed as unintentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness and total number of households in temporary accommodation (financial year), and the ratio between the two



Source: Scottish Government (no date)

Note: Temporary accommodation statistics are reported by calendar year, so an estimate has been made in financial years by taking appropriate weighted averages of the calendar years.

Figure 2.1 shows that while absolute numbers of households assessed as homeless has not significantly increased, the number of households in temporary accommodation (TA) has, with almost 50 per cent of households assessed as homeless spending time in TA. Since 2017, the average time spent in temporary accommodation in Scotland has increased by around two months, although this is higher for households with children, where the increase has been over 100 days (Scottish Government 2025b).

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES IN WALES

The Welsh Government has had a commitment to housing-led approaches since 2019 (Watts-Cobbe et al 2025). In early 2026, the Senedd voted for a new homelessness law (Welsh Government 2026) which makes it easier for local authorities to act in ways that are consistent with housing-led principles. The law has a significant focus on preventative measures, alongside interventions to promote joined-up working across the public sector, and an explicit aim to support people into housing long term.

Some of these measures include:

- early intervention, allowing people at risk of homelessness to access support much earlier
- “ask and act” duties and multidisciplinary responses to homelessness from Welsh public services
- a commitment to phase out “priority need”, although no time commitment has been established
- new powers for local authorities to help in areas where allocations to homeless households are proving difficult.

The impact assessment of the bill estimates that expenditure on homelessness will increase initially, mostly associated with staffing costs. However, the benefit-cost ratio is 2:1; for every £1 invested in homelessness reforms it will deliver £2 of benefits. This is primarily accrued through better health outcomes and lower use of health services, loss of earnings, and wider costs to the public sector (Welsh Government 2025).

3.

CASE STUDIES: LEARNING FROM GREATER MANCHESTER, THE NORTH EAST AND OXFORDSHIRE

The devolution agenda is an opportunity to embed housing-led approaches to homelessness across the country. We identified three regions in England for our case studies to identify barriers and opportunities to adopting a housing-led approach.

We identified Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) as an established mayoral combined authority (MCA) tackling homelessness, North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (NEMSA) as a younger MCA working on their homelessness blueprint, and a non-mayoral region of Oxfordshire that have taken a regional convening approach.

GREATER MANCHESTER COMBINED AUTHORITY (GMCA)

The mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, has made homelessness a “key priority”, running on a mandate to end rough sleeping (GMCA 2017). Unlike many MCAs, GMCA commissions frontline services alongside its convening role. Stakeholders told us that they are able to be more experimental with trialling interventions than councils as they are “not as exposed to the frontline risk of statutory duties.”

What have they done?

GMCA published its homelessness prevention strategy (GMCA 2021b) in 2021, with an interim review published in 2024 (GMCA 2024a). The combined authority have taken a person-centred approach to tackling the root causes of homelessness, and recruited a research team to ensure their approach is evidence-based (GMCA 2026a). They have implemented a range of programmes that support and enhance local initiatives.

- **Housing First Unit:** aims to build capacity across the region, address barriers in supply, standards and support and reduce costs long term (MHCLG 2025d; GMCA 2024b, 2024c).
- **A Bed Every Night (ABEN):** provides a minimum of 600 beds in emergency accommodation for those not owed a statutory duty across the 10 boroughs (GMCA 2024d).
- **Young Persons Homelessness Prevention Pathfinder programme:** made up of regional organisations aiming to prevent young person homelessness with a three-year homelessness prevention pathfinder, delivered through **Greater Manchester Better Outcomes Partnership** (GMBOP 2021).
- **Rough Sleeping Social Impact Bond:** a housing-led approach for rough sleepers that bypasses conditionality. Commissioned by GMCA and partially funded by central government, it has supported several hundred long-term rough sleepers into long-term homes and provided wraparound support (GMCA 2021a).

Since Andy Burnham's first term as mayor of Greater Manchester and the roll out of these programmes, the official one-night rough sleeping count in Greater Manchester has fallen by around half from its peak in 2017 (GMCA 2025a).

Learnings from GMCA

The ability to pull together relevant organisations (local authorities, registered providers, frontline services and others) has allowed joined-up thinking and sharing of best practice across the region. The approach in Greater Manchester also benefitted from the following.

- **Pooled funding streams.** GMCA utilise council tax precepts to fund A Bed Every Night, but also draw on funding from a range of sources including Probation, Police and Crime Budgets, charitable funding from the GM Mayor's Charity, and NHS Greater Manchester. This incentivises engagement from all the organisations involved (GMCA 2024e).
- **Strong political will.** Stakeholders commented that the mayor's public commitment to addressing homelessness helped bring local authorities on board, particularly since he had been elected with tackling homelessness as part of his manifesto. This lent his agenda more urgency and helped to align local action with mayoral priorities.
- **Investment in relationship building strengthened collaboration.** GMCA convenes meetings where homelessness leads from all 10 boroughs come together fortnightly to review their programmes and delivery, and assess their progress against overarching aims and objectives, supported by shared data across the region. This routine engagement has built trust between officers from different councils and the combined authority, facilitating collaboration and information sharing between boroughs and regionally.
- **Evidence-led strategy underpins credibility and impact.** GMCA has purposefully built strong analytical capacity around homelessness, using shared data as the starting point for conversations with local authorities about rough sleeping trends, temporary accommodation flows, and where people are "falling through the cracks" of statutory provision (GMCA 2021b). Although data sharing on homelessness can be complex, GMCA has invested in common case management systems and new national rough sleeping data frameworks to make cross-borough information useable in practice. This has enabled GMCA to design and refine programmes such as ABEN and the youth homelessness prevention pathfinders on the basis of demonstrated need and outcomes.

NORTH EAST MAYORAL STRATEGIC AUTHORITY (NEMSA)

Set up in 2024, when Labour's Kim McGuinness was elected as the first North East mayor, NEMSA is still in its infancy. The MSA represents seven local authorities, with a combined population of around 2 million. As part of NEMSA's deeper devolution deal (DLUHC 2024) and regional growth plans (NEMSA 2026), NEMSA has committed to deliver more affordable and social housing through Homes England and develop a homelessness prevention blueprint that builds upon the region's Housing First pilots.

What have they done?

Newcastle and the wider North East have already tested several prevention and housing-led approaches that NEMSA can build on, including the following.

- **North East Housing Partnership:** while the partnership has a remit that goes beyond homelessness, it has supported collaboration across the region, particularly between councils and registered providers.
- **Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer:** joined-up work between the City Council, Jobcentre Plus and Crisis to support people at risk earlier (Newcastle City Council no date).

- **Crisis Housing First Programme (2021):** a programme tested in Newcastle, with an evaluation (Blood et al 2025) showing its role in the shift to a housing-led system.

There are also examples of councils working together to deliver positive homelessness outcomes across the region on a smaller scale. Gateshead and South Tyneside councils have commissioned a joint Housing First service that sits across administrative boundaries, offering 15 beds.

Learnings from NEMSA

NEMSA's experience offers valuable insights for new and emerging combined authorities. Tackling homelessness in the region has been intertwined with local and national politics. NEMSA's early journey has presented significant challenges – but also generated significant lessons, including the following.

- **Newly established combined authorities need dedicated homelessness expertise and data from day one.** NEMSA's early experience suggests that building specialist homelessness capacity, analytical expertise and strong data foundations from the outset can be crucial in helping a new combined authority set clear direction, make a strong case for investment and engage confidently with partners.
- **Combined authorities and mayors are viewed as key convenors and standard setters.** Stakeholders want the mayor to use convening powers to bring together local authorities, registered providers, and health, justice and voluntary providers and to “insist” on a regional approach. They see value in NEMSA having some oversight, setting expectations and coordinating programmes while leaving statutory casework with councils.
- **A regional footprint is seen as the right scale for housing-led work.** Interviewees repeatedly argued that Housing First and housing-led work will be more effective at North East-wide or combined authority scale. There is strong support for a North East homelessness strategy, a change of rules on local connection and a regional housing-led programme. Stakeholders highlighted how a lack of regional consensus makes it harder to sustain housing-led change, and that systems often revert back to familiar staircase and hostel-based models when finances, politics or partnerships come under pressure.

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL (OCC)

Oxfordshire currently has a two tier system of local government. The upper-tier County Council, which does not have any formal duties over housing or homelessness, and its constituent district councils: Oxford; Cherwell; South Oxfordshire; Vale of White Horse; and West Oxfordshire. It has a population of just over 750,000.

What have they done?

In 2019–20, Crisis undertook a housing-led feasibility study across Oxfordshire, recommending a transition to a housing-led approach through increasing housing supply, countywide governance, partnership working, pooling of budgets, and strategic alignment across departments and housing pathways (Blood et al 2020).

In 2021, OCC approved a 2021–26 homelessness and rough sleeping strategy, informed by the feasibility study, which committed to a housing-led/Housing First approach (OCC 2021). Alongside the OCC strategy, in early 2022, the Oxfordshire Homeless Alliance was launched. This is a housing-led service, co-commissioned by OCC and the five constituent councils. The housing-led approach across Oxfordshire has been facilitated by:

- the establishment of a Prevention of Homelessness Directors Group, chaired by the CEO of Oxford City Council, brings together relevant parts of the constituent

councils. A Joint Management Group, which reports in to the Directors Group, is much closer to operational delivery.

- a pooled budget of £3.8 million to commission services across the county
- a forum for multidisciplinary working, bringing together housing, social care and health services teams
- a commitment to review commissioning practices to support delivery in alignment with housing-led principles.

Learnings from OCC

Unlike Greater Manchester and the North East – where combined authorities and mayoral structures drive regional coordination – Oxfordshire’s progress has come through a voluntary, county-wide alliance. Its experience shows how local partners can achieve similarly ambitious housing-led reform without a formal devolution framework. Key lessons from OCC include the following.

- **Good governance at multiple levels is essential to secure buy-in between and within councils.** The Directors Group acts as the interface between homelessness and other parts of the council, including adult social care and health. Stakeholders explained that having senior buy-in helps set the tone across the council and place homelessness as a priority. The Joint Management Group, which is closer to the operational side, has helped improve alignment across the county, moving districts away from siloed working towards a joint plan on supply, prevention and rapid rehousing.
- **Co-commissioning via pooled budgets secures buy-in from all parties.** Interviewees praised the county-wide pooled budget, highlighting how it has enabled a more coordinated, housing-led approach by bringing multiple providers together under a single framework that covers the majority of homelessness provision. It also has the additional benefit of incentivising engagement from the constituent councils. However, stakeholders stressed that efforts to move away from the staircase-based system were undermined by the budget and the need to maintain support for existing clients. To transition to a housing-led approach would require transition funding.
- **Existing social housing stock, affordability and the labour market context shape what ‘housing led’ looks like.** Oxfordshire is one of the least affordable areas outside of London, with a significant cohort of low paid workers unable to afford local rents. This means that housing-led interventions cannot rely solely on the private rented sector or on small numbers of Housing First units; they must explicitly include the expansion of social and genuinely affordable housing, or they risk becoming undeliverable.

4.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO HOUSING-LED INTERVENTIONS

Over a decade of austerity has meant local authorities have had to cut back on services that aren't directly delivering statutory duties. Homelessness policy sits in this context, where funding constraints have resulted in cuts to staff capacity and a loss of expertise within local authorities and the third sector. Cuts to prevention services and wider welfare provision mean homelessness services have seen increases in their caseloads.

Many of the barriers to widespread adoption of a housing-led approach to homelessness lie with central government, but local and regional governments have powerful levers they can use to support a transition to a housing-led approach.

BARRIER 1: LACK OF SOCIAL HOUSING SUPPLY

"If the prime minister said 'we're going to do Housing First', then people would say 'but where are the homes?'"

Director of the local branch of a national homelessness charity

Limited social housing is a central barrier to a housing-led approach to homelessness in England. This shortage means stock is rationed and conditionality creeps into the system, undermining one of the key principles of a housing-led approach (Clarke et al 2019). In places that have tried to use the private rented sector to deliver housing-led approaches, affordability and lack of assured tenancies have been a barrier. Despite changes in the Renters Rights Act, tenants in the private rented sector are still vulnerable to eviction, and the continued freeze of local housing allowance (LHA) rates means these properties are unaffordable for many. IPPR has previously called for LHA to be uprated, which should address some of the affordability challenges (Parkes et al 2025).

A lack of social housing causes other issues when implementing housing-led approaches.

- **Move on:** limited supply means people spend extended periods of time in temporary accommodation, or are unable to move out of supported accommodation or Housing First programmes.
- **Property suitability:** lack of stock means people may be placed in unsuitable properties.
- **Choice:** tenant choice over location and tenancy type is a key principle of Housing First and housing-led approaches, but limited stock makes this difficult to achieve.

In Greater Manchester, the lack of social housing supply has resulted in a temporary freeze on acceptances onto the Housing First programme.

The government has taken action to prevent further decline of the social housing sector, including the significant commitment to the social and affordable homes programme in the 2025 spending review, although this spending is back-loaded. The

government has also taken significant action to reduce the loss of social housing stock through restrictions to the Right to Buy scheme. Since its introduction in 1980, Right to Buy has resulted in the sale of over two million former council houses, many of which have not been replaced (MHCLG 2025e) and almost 40 per cent of which have found their way into the private rented sector (Diner and Wright 2024).

Recommendation (national): Government should bring forward SAHP funding to kick-start delivery of council and social housing.

These restrictions are likely to significantly reduce the sales of social housing, and the government is currently consulting on taking these restrictions further. These steps are positive and should prevent continued loss of social housing, supporting councils and mayors to adopt housing-led approaches.

In the short term, however, there is a need to boost overall social housing numbers. An acquisitions programme has been called for previously, including by the Affordable Housing Commission (2020) who highlight how such a programme could quickly boost social housing numbers. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation have also called for such a programme, highlighting its impact on reducing the cost and improving standards of temporary accommodation (Baxter and Elliott 2024).

Recommendation (national): Support a programme to bring empty homes back into use for temporary accommodation and housing led interventions.

Greater Manchester's Empty Homes Programme is bringing empty homes back into use as temporary accommodation, which acts to mitigate the inflationary impact since empty homes are 'off-market'. GMCA has learnt from the experience of Wigan Council, which has successfully brought 750 empty homes back into use (Wigan Council 2026). GMCA approved a budget of £11.5 million for 2026/27 to bring 400 empty homes back into circulation, and to employ 17 empty homes officers (GMCA 2025d). Scaling this programme up across England, at a similar level of ambition, would require 333 officers, and would bring around 8,000 empty homes back into use. Assuming costs are similar across the country, this would require a capital spend of £220 million, and ongoing revenue spend of £18 million to cover officer costs.⁵

Councils have right of first refusal for people who are selling homes they have bought through Right to Buy, and across the country there are examples of councils or mayors taking advantage of this to replenish their lost stock. This includes the Greater London Authority's Right to Buy Back programme 2021–23 and the current Council Homes Acquisition Programme, which have supported councils to buy homes including ex-Right to Buy homes. Elsewhere, councils are being more ambitious. In Brighton, the council is investing £50 million to acquire existing housing from private landlords.

There is precedent for capital investment in acquisitions. The fourth round of the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) allows the fund to be used to purchase homes for use as temporary accommodation. IPPR had previously argued for a capital subsidy programme (Mort and Morris 2024), building on a recommendation by Kate Wareing and Bethany Eckley that was specifically focused on asylum accommodation (Wareing and Eckley 2024).

There is a risk that government subsidised purchasing of houses for temporary accommodation or homelessness provision could be inflationary. This would have negative consequences on affordability, particularly in places where house prices are already unaffordable for most, such as London or Manchester. This risk could

⁵ Estimates calculated using national homelessness estimates (Shelter 2025), vacant homes statistics (ONS 2021) and GMCA (2025d) costings of their programme to scale the costs.

be mitigated through the design of the programme, such as in London's Council Homes Acquisitions Programme (CHAP).⁶ These mitigations should be as follows.

- Acquisitions should only be available to social landlords.
- Grant rates should be capped.
- Total spent per property should be capped.
- Mayors should act to ensure councils are not competing against each other to purchase homes (for example through the LAHF or a CHAP equivalent).

Note: it should be possible to boost council acquisitions and building through reforming the Public Works Loan Board borrowing rules and rates to deliver more social housing. This is beyond the scope of this briefing, but should form part of any government strategy to increase social housing numbers.

Recommendation (mayoral): Mayors should use their strategic planning powers to set ambitious Section 106 targets and nominations requirements for new developments. These targets should be 50 per cent on public land and 35 per cent elsewhere, and should be reflective of local need in terms of types of homes delivered.

Mayors will have some powers over aspects of the Social and Affordable Homes Programme, use of public sector land, and land assembly. In London, the mayor has set ambitious social and affordable housing targets through the London Plan, and has implemented fast-track planning permissions for places that meet these targets (GLA, no date), although national government recently intervened to reduce them. These targets are, as outlined above, 35 per cent for land without public subsidy, and 50 per cent on public land. Mayors should work with local planning authorities to set nominations requirements in their developer contributions guidelines (through Section 106) to ensure that council nominations happen more strategically across new developments.

BARRIER 2: LEGISLATION, DUTIES AND BUREAUCRACY

"I've worked across the third sector for decades, but never homelessness and housing. This is the most over-engineered system ... it's so complicated ... and the most convoluted service I've ever been in"

CEO of a frontline service provider

Homelessness policy in England is governed by a combination of specific legislation and local authority duties, but with councils facing the very real threat of bankruptcy, provision of services that do not fall under explicit statutory duties has decreased. In our stakeholder engagement, we heard that duties, bureaucratic process and legislative barriers manifested themselves in two ways.

1. Councils using their statutory duties as a way of not having to take on further responsibility for already over-stretched services (for example by deferring to priority need or local area connection).
2. Bureaucratic systems actively hindering creative ways to address homelessness. These are covered in more detail in the 'siloes thinking' section below.

As Scotland's experience shows, removing priority need shifts many more people into the responsibility of the council; but without changing how services are provided and delivering new affordable housing supply, this can cause the use of temporary accommodation to balloon. Among most of the stakeholders we spoke with, there was nervousness that expanding the council's remit of who was owed a duty would put pressure on already strained services.

⁶ See: <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/housing-and-land/housing-and-land-funding-programmes/council-homes-acquisition-programme>

However, a truly housing-led approach to homelessness will require significant changes to the following legislative barriers, alongside a transition plan and in conjunction with an increase in funding.

- **Priority need:** removing priority need as a category.
- **Intentionality:** removing “intentional homelessness” would mean that fewer people fall through the cracks.
- **Local area connection:** in most mayoral combined authority areas, and even in places that are not, people tend to be transient across boundaries. For some people, being housed in a different location (but still close to support networks) can be beneficial for their wellbeing and ability to maintain a tenancy.

It is worth noting that local government reorganisation and unitisation will increase the area over which local area connection applies, with housing policy operating over larger geographies. Local authorities can already form agreements between themselves about referrals (MHCLG 2025f).

Recommendation: The government should set a timeline for legislative changes to the Homelessness Reduction Act (2014) to remove priority need and intentional homelessness, bringing English homelessness policy in line with Scotland and Wales.

Removing priority need and intentional homelessness would result in an increase in the numbers of people eligible for support from the local authority, placing significant pressure on council budgets, and likely increasing temporary accommodation use. In practice, such a change would require additional funding for councils and resourcing for their homelessness teams prior to its introduction, and should be linked to the government’s strategy around housing supply. As such, we recommend that MHCLG sets a realistic timeline for these conditions to be removed – alongside commensurate support in the local government finance settlement to ensure local authorities can manage the increase in caseloads that such a change would introduce.

Recommendation: Mayors should facilitate regional approaches to homelessness so that local need informs public service provision, resource allocation and housing supply. More specifically, this should apply to:

- allocations policies
- local area connection.

Mayoral combined authorities can learn from Oxfordshire who have a pooled budget, and from GMCA, where the mayor has secured buy in across the region by supplementing funding with additional resources. The councils we spoke to were open to stronger collaboration at a regional level, on the condition that funding was fairly allocated.

BARRIER 3: SILOED THINKING

"We need to ensure government departments aren't designing in homelessness in their policies"

Strategic lead for homelessness and migration at a mayoral combined authority

"Homelessness services end up catching people who have fallen through the cracks due to austerity and budget cuts in other council departments"

Homelessness lead at a district council

While housing is a key pillar of housing-led approaches to homelessness, wraparound support is necessary to the success of a tenancy and long-term stability. The most effective homeless interventions, and particularly housing-led interventions, require all relevant parts of the public sector to work together.

This needs to start with national government. The recent homelessness strategy goes some way to addressing this, calling the strategy “a whole-government effort”, and naming the Home Office, Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Health and Social Care, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice, Cabinet Office, and His Majesty’s Treasury as all having “come together and agreed clear commitments that put preventing homelessness at the heart of government” (MHCLG 2025a). However, it is unclear how this will translate to implementation. There is a risk that the actions of one department could result in an increase in homelessness – the continued freeze of local housing allowance rates by DWP, for example, or the actions of the Home Office resulting in destitution among some groups of asylum seekers.

At the regional and local level, there are more practical barriers. One of our stakeholders explained that data sharing rules meant they could not share information with other relevant departments in the council. One of the key learnings across our case studies was that bringing people together across the region and between different areas of the public sector led to better outcomes, but that this was not always easy to do.

Recommendation: Mayors should support the movement towards regional approaches to homelessness by ringfencing part of the integrated settlement for collaborative homelessness interventions, delivered with all constituent local authorities and relevant teams. This will incentivise engagement, and will facilitate multidisciplinary approaches to tackling homelessness, data sharing and opportunities to share best practice.

An example of mayors breaking down silos is the Restricted Eligibility Support Service (RESS) programme, commissioned by GMCA in 2023. It works with residents facing immigration-related barriers, helping them to navigate complex systems to enable them to move out of homelessness (GMCA 2025c). RESS is a partnership between the Boaz Trust, Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (GMIAU) and the Booth Centre. Together, they deliver specialist floating support and immigration advice to people who have restricted eligibility to public funds due to immigration status and are facing or are at risk of homelessness.

An independent evaluation found that this integrated model is highly effective, generating positive housing and immigration outcomes for people with multiple needs (GMCA 2025c). The evaluation also found the RESS programme delivers an estimated £1.57 in savings for every £1 invested over five years (ibid). By bringing together case-level data from all three delivery partners and GMCA to track needs, actions and outcomes, RESS shows how combined authorities can use shared data infrastructure to overcome organisational silos and coordinate more effective support across local councils and services.

BARRIER 4: LACK OF POLITICAL WILL AND SALIENCE

"Lack of political will and poor understanding really limits the effectiveness of Housing First and housing-led approaches"

Strategic lead of a regional branch of a national homelessness charity

The UK government has tackled rough sleeping before. The Blair government reduced rough sleeping by two-thirds in a five-year period (Barradale 2024). It was a political priority and funded as such, with the Rough Sleepers Unit given backing from the prime minister (Norris 2024), local authorities given additional duties and priority need expanded. Overseas, Finland’s success in rolling out their Housing First programme was attributed to strong political will and the presence of a national strategy (Shelter Scotland 2019).

Clearly, political will alone is not enough to reduce homelessness or deliver a housing-led approach, but without political will, action on homelessness has stagnated. The recent homelessness strategy sends a positive signal, but does not capture the urgency needed to address the crisis of rising homelessness. Transitioning to a fully housing-led approach will take longer than one parliament, and the lack of cross-party consensus on homelessness, particularly at a local level, is likely to make this challenging.

Stakeholders suggested that the priorities of national government can have an impact locally. Mayors or council leaders having a personal interest and willingness to expend political capital has a huge impact. National government should take action to show that tackling homelessness is a priority, setting a direction of travel, and taking action to show it is committed to tackling homelessness.

Recommendation: National government should establish a strategy delivery unit, learning from the Rough Sleepers Unit of the 1990s and 2000s, bringing in external expertise, to coordinate action across Whitehall and beyond, provide leadership, set ambitious targets on reducing rough sleeping and support local leaders in their delivery.

Alongside establishing a new delivery unit, the government should commit to rolling out a national programme, building on the success of A Bed Every Night in Greater Manchester. Such a programme will illustrate the government's commitment to tackling homelessness and empower local leaders to act. Rolling out a programme of a similar level of ambition to GM should cost in the order of £140 million.

Recommendation: National government should roll-out a scheme that learns from A Bed Every Night (ABEN) to tackle rough sleeping across the country.

Mayors have an important role to play in influencing national government through raising the salience of homelessness. They can also use funding from their integrated settlements to support their constituent local authorities, or to provide interventions for people who fall through the cracks in local government provision.

BARRIER 5: RISK AVERSION

"Mayoral combined authorities can be more experimental than local authorities as we're not as exposed to the frontline risk of statutory duties"

Mayoral combined authority homelessness team

The public sector is risk averse, and this has been heightened by limited funding and increasing pressures on council budgets. New interventions need to be rigorously evidenced and show that they can stand the test of time, but many Housing First and housing-led interventions are limited by timescales, funding, housing supply and a change in leadership or commitment (MHCLG 2024b).

This can be a self-fulfilling cycle. In the North East, the cancellation of Housing First pilots due to funding shortages or changing priorities has meant other councils in the area are a little more nervous to try new approaches. In GMCA, a lack of supply of social housing has meant "we can't place people into the programme, which in turn limits evidence, and therefore support, for it."

Several frontline providers talked about the reluctance of some registered providers (RPs) to take on tenants perceived as 'high risk'. The RPs themselves describe tight financial situations and concerns about financial viability, alongside long waiting lists, that lead them to prioritise tenants whose tenancies are more likely to be sustainable long term.

Recommendation: Introduce a duty for registered providers (RPs) to house homeless tenants when referred by the local authority.⁷

The RPs we spoke to were committed to the principles of housing-led approaches, but some of the front-line providers suggested that in their experience, some RPs can be reluctant to accept formerly homelessness tenants. Under the Housing Act 1996, housing associations are required to “co-operate to such extent as is reasonable in the circumstances” (Housing Act 1996). This gives them a degree of discretion over whether to accept allocations from the council.

Under section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, registered social landlords (RSLs) have a duty to house “statutory homeless people who are referred to them by a local authority” (Scottish Government 2019). Under this law, an RSL can only refuse if they are not able to make a property available within a given timeframe, or they do not have a suitable property. The National Plan acknowledges this as an option available to government to address homelessness in England.

BARRIER 6: LACK OF FUNDING

“We inherited a 54-bed hostel. We know it isn’t the best way to support these individuals, but how do we move from a 54-bed hostel to five 10-beds without making everyone homeless in the meantime?”

Homelessness provider

Most homelessness provision across the country is based on the traditional staircase model. Even when providers know this might not be the best option for their clients, councils and providers are unable to transition to a new approach because they must use their funding to maintain existing provision and avoid gaps in their statutory services (Downie et al 2018).

Crisis’ feasibility study for the Liverpool City Region identified the need for a two-year period of double funding to transition (Blood et al 2017). These costs are driven by the need for wraparound support, which requires higher staff-to-client ratios than are currently standard, more staff training, and greater collaboration with other support services (Blood et al 2020). Wales’ recent legislative change includes an increase in funding to cover these costs. For the Liverpool City Region, Crisis estimated these costs to be around £1.2 million for the first two years, before resulting in cost savings in subsequent years (ibid).

Recommendation: Councils should be granted transitional funding to transfer to housing-led approaches. We recommend a two-year period of double funding.

This funding can be used to recruit and train staff and support workers, and to ensure there are no gaps in services for homeless provision during the housing-led adoption process. The scale of this funding will vary according to the scale of homelessness in the area.

Tackling homelessness has been done before, and there is no reason it can’t be done again. Government must be clear that reducing homelessness is a national priority, and should lay out a housing-led approach to achieve this. A successful approach to tackling homelessness benefits those at the sharpest end of the housing crisis, but also should save money, and helps rebuild trust in the state to deliver.

⁷ It would be necessary to consult the ONS on the impact of such a change on the classification of housing associations (HAs). Currently HAs are classified as ‘private non-financial corporations’. However, if the ONS considered this change to be ‘excessive regulation’ they could change the classification to be ‘public sector corporations’ which would bring their debt onto the UK balance sheet.

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