

# Tackling Homelessness

## District Councils' Network Analysis



# About the District Councils' Network

The District Councils' Network (DCN) is a cross-party member led network of 200 district councils. We are a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA), and provide a single voice for district councils within the Local Government Association. District councils in England deliver **86 out of 137** essential local government services to nearly **22 million** people – **40%** of the population – and cover **68%** of the country. District councils have a proven track record of building better lives and stronger economies in the areas that they serve.

Districts protect and enhance quality of life by safeguarding our environment and promoting public health and leisure, whilst creating attractive places to live, raise families and build a bigger economy. By tackling homelessness and promoting wellbeing, district councils ensure no one gets left behind by addressing the complex needs of today whilst attempting to prevent the social problems of tomorrow. Districts have delivered almost one in two new housing completions in England in recent years and approve 90% of planning permissions. However, districts require further flexibilities to ensure they can deliver the additional affordable homes this country needs.



# Introduction

As the Housing and Planning authorities, districts are at the forefront of preventing and relieving homelessness. In the areas we serve, district councils will often be all that stands between many residents becoming homeless and districts can and want to do more to support their most vulnerable residents.

The challenge of homelessness is increasing. In 2017 Shelter<sup>1</sup> reported more than 300,000 people were homeless, a figure that had increased by 13,000 in a year. The National Audit Office analysis<sup>2</sup> identified that demand in key local service areas in England has changed, with the number of households accepted as unintentionally homeless and priority need increasing at an alarming rate, compared to other changes in demand on councils.

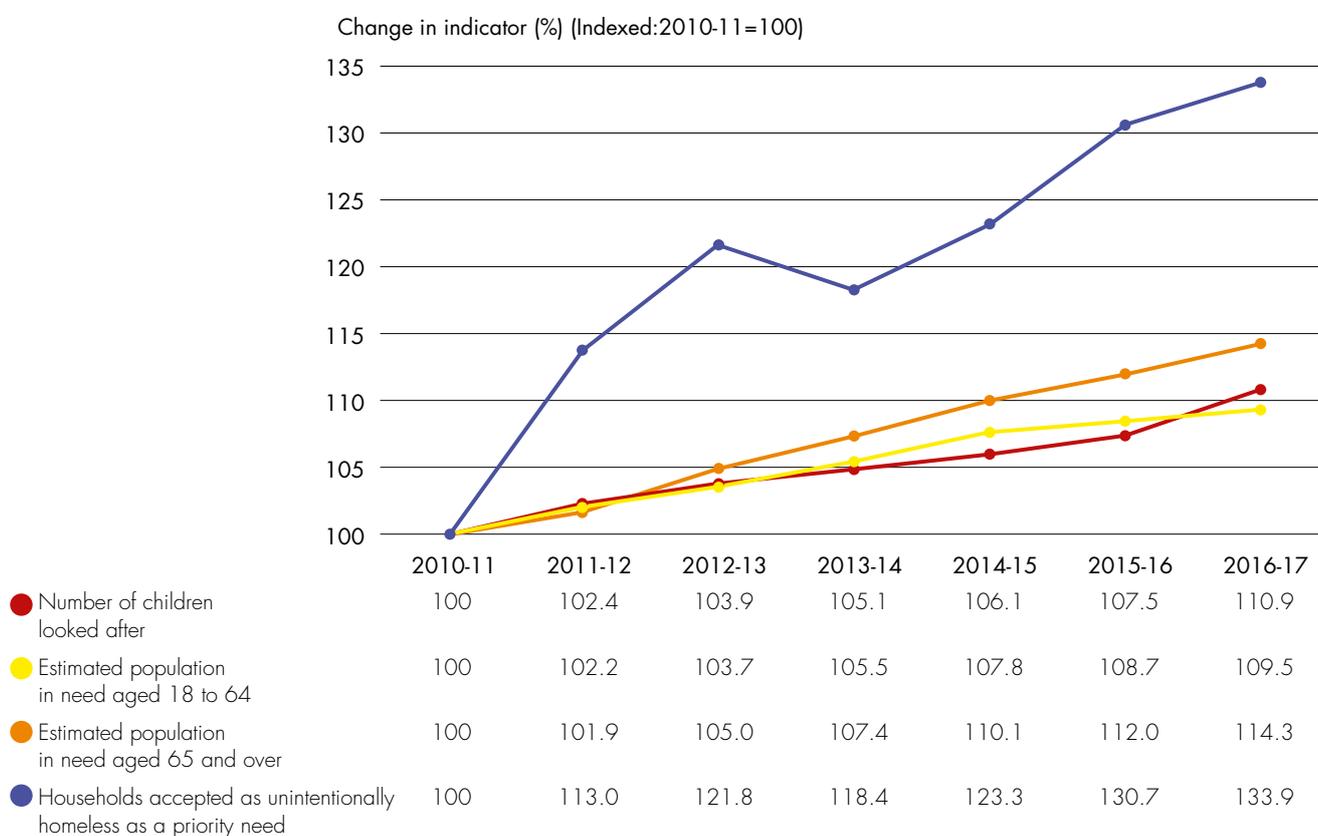
It is against this backdrop that the District Councils' Network has carried out a survey of its members to explore the impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act within districts, 6 months into its implementation.

The survey also explored levels of demand on homelessness services in districts and the financial support required, as well as the availability of affordable housing and measures required to increase this. Finally our survey has provided examples of best practice among district councils and explores how districts can act as the hub in providing multi sector solutions.

Figure 1 National Audit Office analysis of departmental data.

## Change in demand in key local authority service areas in England

There has been growth in actual or potential demand in a range of core service areas



1 Shelter, 2017, Report: Far From Alone

2 [www.nao.org.uk/report/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018](http://www.nao.org.uk/report/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018)

# Executive Summary

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was implemented from April 2018 and is the most significant and comprehensive change to homelessness legislation since the Homeless Persons Act of 1977. It sets new duties for local housing authorities to provide advice and assistance to all households who are already homeless or are threatened with homelessness within 56 days (as compared to the previous 28 days), irrespective of their priority need status. The District Councils' Network fully supports the aims of the Act.

Local housing authorities now have a 56-day Prevention duty to support those who are threatened with homelessness, aiming to help them to sustain their current accommodation, resolving any issues with landlords or family, and supporting clients to address financial or behavioural issues that may be putting their accommodation at risk. Councils also have a 56-day Relief Duty to help those who are already homeless to secure suitable alternative accommodation, sustained for at least 12 months.

The Homelessness Reduction Act places a new duty on councils to undertake an assessment of the housing and support needs with every client who is homeless or threatened with homelessness, and to provide them with a Personalised Housing Plan (PHP) setting out the planned actions that will be undertaken by both the client and the Council to address these issues.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has committed to a review of the impact of the new legislation after 2 years, analysing the new comprehensive homelessness data collection in the H-CLIC system, which is being submitted by housing authorities from April 2018.

Ahead of that review in 2020, the DCN has undertaken an early survey of district councils to understand the impact in the first 6 months since the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA).

This survey was sent out to all of our 200 member councils and carried out in September 2018. It received 65 individual responses from district councils, which is a very good response rate to this type of survey and reflects the importance of the issue.

This report summarises the outcome of the survey result and identifies the following key points:

- The early experience of the HRA in reducing homelessness has been broadly positive, with many districts reporting that the longer 56 day period has allowed them to identify potential homelessness at an early stage. This has allowed district councils to respond proactively with preventative action as opposed to reactive resolution.
- Our survey of DCN members, which is set out in detail in Appendix 1, has demonstrated that over two thirds of district councils have seen an increase in the visible signs of homelessness in their areas, with just over half of district councils reporting an increase in the numbers approaching them for advice.
- There remains a lack of affordable and social housing, and the costs of Private Rented Sector (PRS) properties are unrealistic for those most at need. Whilst there are options for councils to subsidise initial deposits for some private landlords, there is a lack of faith for PRS landlords, due to the change from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit which removes the rent payments being made to landlords directly. Restoring confidence to PRS landlords will provide more long term housing options which will reduce the prospect of recurring homelessness issues.
- The New Burdens funding is insufficient to sustain the work required to fully implement the HRA, with only one in five districts feeling that the current level of funding is sufficient to ensure that councils are properly funded to tackle homelessness, we would call for the fair funding review and new funding formula to reflect the increase in demand for homelessness services, to ensure that support is properly resourced over the longer term.
- There must be greater financial flexibilities underpinned with additional infrastructure funding to enable district councils themselves to build more social housing. The recent announcement regarding the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account cap is a vital policy lever to achieving this.
- The HRA requires more administration than the previous homelessness duties. With people now able to access the service earlier, it is paramount that the process is as streamlined as possible, in order to be the most efficient process it can be. An early review of the requirements is recommended.
- District councils are best placed to strengthen multi-agency working to ensure that customers receive a service that targets the various factors that have either caused them to become homeless, or are preventing them from being rehoused.

# Survey Feedback

There has been a broadly positive response towards the HRA implementation from district councils. Tandridge District Council spoke for many when they reported that

**‘it is providing more time/opportunities for us to arrange alternative accommodation than before, without a full housing duty arising’**

District councils are finding that they are able to identify the threat of homelessness at an earlier stage, and the extended timeframe allows officers more time to work with customers. A number of authorities find that this has enabled frontline staff to provide more bespoke responses to customers.

Since the implementation of the HRA in April 2018, over half of district councils have seen an increase in requests for homelessness advice and assistance, with reports of an over 100% increase in some areas during this six month period. Among those respondents who indicated that there has not been an increase, the accompanying narrative is that numbers of people approaching district councils for this service has remained at the same level, and in 2017/18 district councils accepted a main homelessness duty for 30% of the total reported cases of homelessness prevention and relief<sup>3</sup>.

The survey has raised some consistent concerns regarding funding to support the HRA and the long term sustainability of its delivery by district councils, which are set out in the remainder of this report.

## Affordable Housing

District councils indicated that housing affordability has a major impact on homelessness as the lack of social and affordable housing supply means long term tenancies are unobtainable.

The announcement regarding the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap is warmly welcomed by district councils as it provides opportunities to build the affordable houses which will help provide long term solutions to homelessness. At the time of writing, it is understood that the Housing Revenue Account cap will be lifted on 29 October 2018. This will be a crucial development and districts look forward to rapid confirmation of the new arrangements going forward which should focus on releasing the potential of lifting the cap rather than creative administrative hurdles.

These changes must be implemented as soon as possible to allow councils to deliver more affordable homes, however it should be noted that not all councils are stock-holding authorities and therefore there should be greater financial flexibilities for non-stock-holding authorities to borrow in order to build additional homes.



3 MHCLG Statistical Data Set, June 2018, Table 792: total reported cases of homelessness prevention and relief by outcome and local authority

## Private Rented Sector

This new HRA has prompted an increase in joint working with the private sector, for example increased negotiations and mediation are being explored with private landlords to support customers' needs. Authorities have also explored the options of providing financial assistance in order to secure tenancies; for example, utilising Homeless Prevention Funds, previously primarily used for paying deposits on privately rented properties, to cover Rent in Advance if this is a necessity. These changes allow access to the PRS which is crucial as access to affordable and social housing has become ever more limited.

More efforts, therefore, need to be focused on the relationships with private sector landlords. Accessing accommodation in the private sector is still extremely difficult given the difference between rental cost and benefit levels. Our survey suggested that even those in paid work who are on lower incomes are unable to afford the upfront costs to secure a tenancy in the private rented sector, which can include a deposit, rent in advance and letting fees, as well as the ongoing commitment of further fees to renew tenancies. In order to address this issue there have been calls by DCN members for government intervention to:

**'Legislate the private sector to stop estate agents from charging very high fees and excessive rents.'**

(King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council)

The current passage of the Tenant Fees Bill<sup>4</sup>, which sets out limits on deposits and bans letting fees, is to be welcomed and we would call on the Government to ensure a swift passage of the legislation through its remaining stages.

Landlords are increasingly reluctant to accept benefit claimants or people with previous ASB, mental health issues and rent arrears, who are often the ones who are most at risk of homelessness.

Measures should be introduced by the DWP to work with districts to deliver more promotional work supporting more positive messaging to local PRS landlords about people who are on low incomes and need accommodation. It has been suggested that:

**'More focus on tenancy sustainment and 'life skills' training would help people remain in their homes, for example budgeting and maximising household income to prevent rent arrears. This would also help to encourage more landlords to work with District Councils if they can see that tenancies are being sustained and early intervention is available if things do start to go wrong.'**

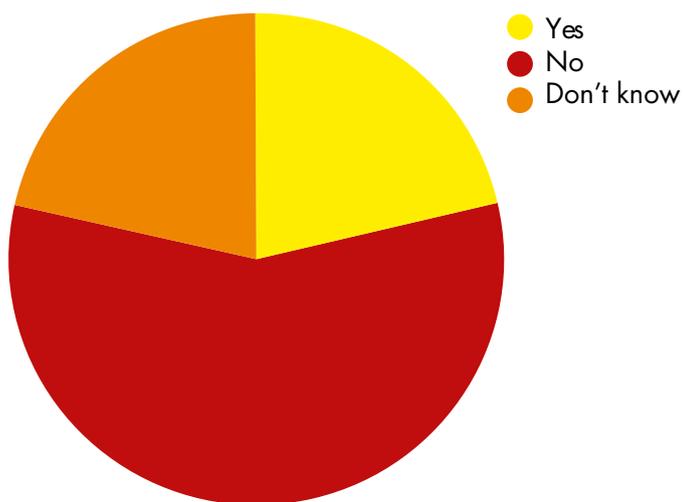
(Sevenoaks District Council)

The DCN will therefore explore the development of best practice guidance for district councils on mechanisms to increase confidence for private landlords, and recommends a review of the current processes for housing payments within Universal Credit which remove the security of direct rent payments to landlords.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2017-19/tenantfees.html>

## Funding



**Figure 2 DCN Survey – Has the additional New Burdens funding been sufficient to support the implementation of the HRA and the Duty to Refer?**

Only one in five councils who responded to the survey felt that New Burdens funding is sufficient to support the implementation of the HRA. 57% of respondents deemed the funding insufficient, with a further 21.5% answering 'Don't Know', often due to concerns in relation to the long term provision of funding. Among the remaining 21.5% of district councils who say the New Burdens funding is sufficient, there is a reiteration of the concerns of other district councils that even though the funding has been beneficial in adopting the initial changes required to deal with the HRA – for example, the purchasing of new software or appointing additional staff – the ongoing costs for these resources far outweigh the funding, therefore the longer term costs for these resources cannot be sustained once the funding is no longer available, despite rising demand.

Providing additional, sustainable funding beyond 2019/20 would allow the continued employment of staff dedicated to working with customers on PHPs and other prevention measures, including the provision of relevant advice and information on issues which are a main cause of homelessness.

To ensure long term funding of homelessness services, the DCN would call on Government to ensure that the rising financial costs are reflected in the new fair funding formula, which is due to be consulted on shortly through the fair funding review. This would provide greater security of funding going forward for district councils and allow districts to implement schemes which can tackle homelessness over a longer time period.

## Addressing rough sleeping

District councils felt that the Government's announcement of the Rough Sleeping Strategy<sup>5</sup> and the target to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027 are a positive start in acknowledging the issues of rough sleeping. In particular there is recognition that the complex issues of substance abuse and mental health can be significant factors in the causes of homelessness and the success in maintaining accommodation. However, district councils believe more work needs to be done to strengthen multi-agency working to ensure that customers receive a service that targets the various factors that have either caused them to become homeless or are preventing them from being rehoused. District councils are well placed to provide co-ordination between multi-agency workforces.

Many district councils have been focusing on the provision of outreach work to rough sleepers or those at risk of rough sleeping, particularly those with complex needs. This outreach work includes efforts to source temporary accommodation by working with third sector organisations, and alternate pathways are being explored through works with voluntary organisations.



<sup>5</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-rough-sleeping-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-rough-sleeping-strategy)

Some of these joint working initiatives undertaken by district councils are set out in the table below:

District Council	Case Study
St Albans City & District Council	St Albans have employed a Community Engagement and Recovery Worker to combat anti-social behaviour linked with alcohol abuse in the town centre. This post is linked with the work of the outreach team to address the negative effects of rough sleeping in the district. They have also established a Rough Sleeper Steering Group. This group has parent responsibility of a range of action groups focusing on specific areas, for example those who have no recourse to public funds.
Cambridge City Council	Cambridge are looking to introduce a three-part integrated programme of assistance for people on the streets of Cambridge, which will include the police, safer communities officers, housing staff and others. They will issue advice and assistance on the street between 11:00 pm and 02:00 am and provide emergency accommodation in the first instance, following up the next day with a specially-funded worker beginning work to find more permanent housing solutions. The programme will initially run for eight nights each month in the winter, integrating with the Council's Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEPP) which sees dozens of additional beds provided for rough sleepers.
Stratford District Council	Stratford are working and have engaged with local churches, the police, other organisations and colleagues on a district and county level and are looking at how to build on their responses to homelessness. A recent countywide homelessness conference helped bring together commissioners and providers to look at challenges, solutions, and good practice in relation to health and homelessness, and will help to inform the development of a countywide homelessness and rough sleeper strategy.
Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk	This Borough Council has recruited an officer to work with rough sleepers and to be key in co-ordinating single homelessness services including an outreach service. The work includes a multi-agency approach to supporting rough sleepers in accessing support and accommodation, as well as working with hostel providers to move people through hostels more quickly and therefore freeing up accommodation for this client group. In addition, they have commissioned a charitable organisation to provide intensive support and self-contained accommodation for the most entrenched rough sleepers.
Ashfield District Council	<p>The Nottinghamshire Street Outreach service provided by Framework has a team which includes a Band 6 nurse and are therefore able to support rough sleepers with their health needs as well as rehousing requirements.</p> <p>Ashfield is also adopting a multi-disciplinary approach to its community protection team structure, including substance misuse and domestic violence professionals. It also includes complex case workers providing holistic, long term support to residents in response to changing needs of residents and the withdrawal of many other services.</p>

Homelessness departments feel routinely pressured to house rough-sleepers in general needs accommodation when no suitable supported alternative can be offered. Not only does this increase the likelihood of an individual losing this accommodation, it also makes it even more difficult to re-house them after this, with another failed tenancy added to their housing history.

Whilst any funding and initiatives introduced to end rough sleeping will always be seen as a positive move, unless the government tackles the root causes of homelessness then there is a risk that initiatives will not remain successful in the long term.

## Support Services

There are pressures on the levels of revenue funding for housing-related support services as there have been cuts to 'non-statutory' support services for homelessness due to wider government cuts and pressures on the statutory provision of adult and children's social care.

Districts also highlighted that the thresholds set for a range of support services are now so high that they are predominantly crisis-focused and are less responsive to addressing the lower level issues that lead to homelessness. This impedes the work to prevent homelessness as well as having a contributory effect on the levels of complexity for some individuals and families seeking assistance.

Mental Health services struggle to meet the demand for services. There are examples of at least a 6 month wait for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and the adult mental health services are even more stretched. Funding cuts to mental health and drug and alcohol services have meant that many people with complex needs are falling through the gaps and becoming homeless as they struggle to live independently. The cuts that have been made have limited the availability of supported accommodation and clients can therefore become trapped in a cycle of homelessness.

District councils have a unique understanding of their local area and have well-established relationships with partners and other public services. They can therefore play a pivotal role in developing partnership working for long term solutions for clients who are the most difficult to reach.



The table below sets out some of the new initiatives and ways of working district councils have adopted since the implementation of the HRA to tackle homelessness in their areas:

District Council	New initiatives and ways of working
Eden District Council	Making more contact with private landlords who are ending an Assured Shorthold Tenancy and carrying out negotiations to enable the tenant to stay.
Test Valley Borough Council	Have developed a pilot approach which includes multi-agency task and targeting funding, e.g. to make small payments to unblock obstacles in the system, such as a prevention fund, a prototyping fund to support new initiatives with partners, and importantly, a Single Homelessness Fund with the intention of trying to ensure that no-one ever has to leave the council offices and sleep rough without first having been made an offer of accommodation.
South Norfolk Council	<p>Have combined the Benefit Team and the Housing Team into one, making sure all tools available within each are present. These include Discretionary Housing Payments, Universal Credit support and affordability work.</p> <p>Have also widened/increased FIRST provision (Financial Independence, Resilience, Skills and Training) and resourced a Temporary Accommodation (TA) specialist. This makes sure that all occupants in TA have the support and training opportunities to make sure they will be able to sustain their housing in the future.</p> <p>The multiagency preventative approach has continued through the implementation of the duty to refer whereby simple referral routes have been implemented and training delivered to 20 key partner organisations throughout South Norfolk by using their Early Help hub as an avenue for engaging their customers and preventing homelessness as early as possible.</p>
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council	Have used the Flexible Homeless Support Grant to fund a Housing First project which includes outreach work for people who are rough sleeping and/or are at risk of rough sleeping, plus a four bedroom supported housing facility which caters for anyone who has been rough sleeping or is at risk of rough sleeping. They have also increased the funding available in order to 'spend to save' and provided front line officers with credit cards to make use of this fund directly.
Dacorum Borough Council	<p>Have agreed that the Homeless Prevention Fund, previously primarily used for paying deposits on privately rented properties, can now in certain cases also be used to cover Rent in Advance. This coupled with the closer working relationships developed with the Housing Benefit Department (allowing homelessness staff to pre-approve DHP payments) has meant they are able to help more clients secure access to the Private Sector.</p> <p>Dacorum are also developing a Homeless Hub between all services in the borough to create a 'single point of access' concept for clients so they can get linked in with appropriate support services regardless of who they approach first.</p>
Oxford City Council	Plan to work with local schools to develop suitable communications (such as a DVD) to raise awareness within schools and at youth events about homelessness/housing issues, and provide advice about how these issues can be prevented
South Northamptonshire Council	Have established a Homelessness Prevention Network with partner agencies, which meets on a six weekly basis and has helped to improve communication, understanding and joint working between services.

## Administration of HRA

The introduction of the HRA has required authorities to source the provision of additional staffing to deliver the additional administration required and to allow officers more time with customers to support them with their individual and tailored personalised housing plans. These tailored action plans allow authorities to provide more information and encourage applicants to take more responsibility, which enables a potentially longer term solution.

For those authorities unable to employ additional staff, alternative means of distributing information has been sourced through initiatives such as self-serve systems which provide residents with access to detailed local and national guidance on a range of issues which are known causes of homelessness, such as debt, benefit problems, relationship breakdowns and substance misuse.

In order to ensure consistency across all district councils regarding the level of support provided to those seeking help, there must be a review of the administrative requirements of the new HRA to provide a more streamlined process due to the significant level of additional administration the new process has created.

## Conclusion

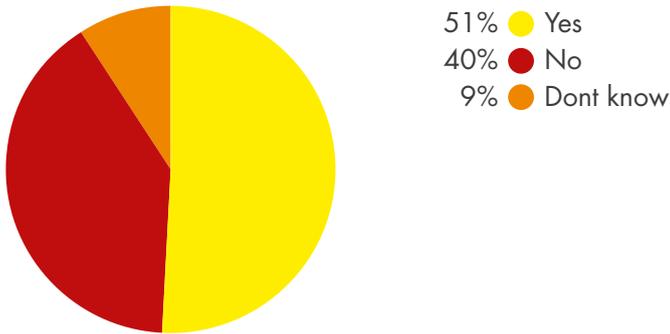
Everyone deserves to live in secure and affordable homes. This report shows that there has been a worrying acceleration in demand for homelessness services in recent years, with over two thirds of districts seeing an increase in the visible signs of homelessness. Whilst policy and legislative developments such as the Homelessness Reduction Act, the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account cap and the Rough Sleeping Strategy are to be welcomed, it will be crucial that councils can build more homes to help alleviate the housing crisis, and that in the shorter term the rise in demand for homelessness services must be reflected in the new funding formula for local government.

Districts councils have the experience, knowhow and local knowledge to act as the hub in their locality to ensure a multi-agency approach to tackling homelessness and are keen to share their best practice and expertise. Whilst districts broadly welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act, we hope that the recommendations set out in the beginning of this report can contribute to preventing homelessness amongst those we serve.

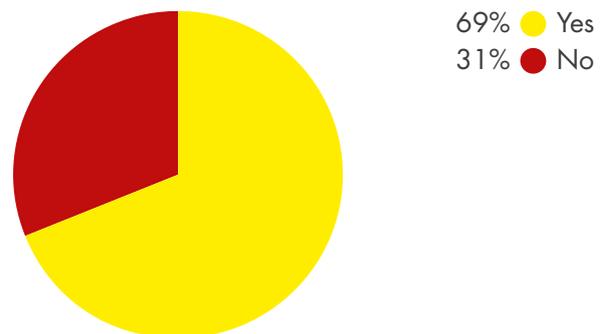


# Appendix 1 – Survey Questions

**1.** Since the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA), have you seen an increase in the number of people approaching your authority for homeless advice & assistance?



**5.** Have the visible signs of homelessness increased in your area compared to 3 years ago? If you answered yes, please provide an indication of this increase

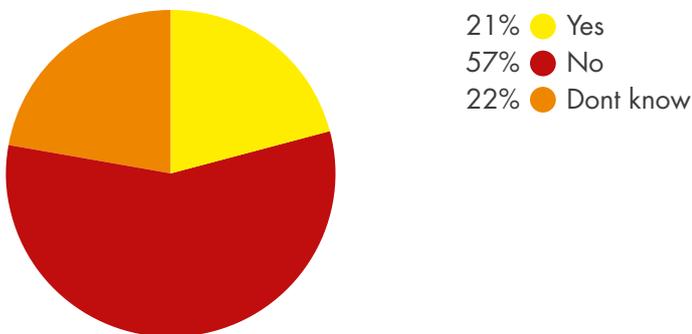


**1a.** If yes, please could you provide a figure for how many more people have approached your authority for homeless advice & assistance?

**2.** In its early stages, is the HRA having the intended impact on preventing and/or relieving homelessness? Please explain your answer.

**3.** What initiatives or new ways of working are you introducing in order to provide advice & assistance to clients who would previously have fallen outside your statutory duty (prior to the HRA)?

**4.** Has the additional New Burdens funding been sufficient to support the implementation of the HRA and the Duty to Refer, or is more required?



**6.** Are you pursuing new strategies, initiatives or partnerships to address rough sleeping in your area which could be useful good practice examples for other districts? Please describe and/or share project links if available.

**7.** Do you have any comments or reflections on the Government's recent Rough Sleeping announcement and funding aimed at ending rough sleeping by 2027?

**8.** In your area, what other factors do you consider are impacting on homelessness (in terms of numbers, causes or complexity)?

**9.** What do you consider to be the main barriers to assisting applicants to secure sustainable accommodation?

**10.** What other measures would you like to see from the MHCLG to support district councils in tackling homelessness?

**4a.** If you answered no and think more funding is required, how much would you estimate is needed? As part of your answer, please summarise what any additional New Burdens funding would be used for in your district.



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