

# **This much I know: What I learned so far about how to end homelessness**

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## **Introduction**

What have we learned so far about how to end homelessness? We will only succeed if we prioritise prevention. In this short essay we employ a widely used homelessness prevention typology to reflect on current progress towards ending homelessness in the UK. We then delve specifically into the issue of 'systemic dysfunction' - a pervasive barrier that impacts all stages of prevention. Several other barriers and enablers in our collective efforts to prevent and end homelessness are also identified.

## **Preventing homelessness**

Amongst the many framings of homelessness prevention, one typology that has proven particularly useful in the UK and European context was originally co-produced by voluntary and statutory sector stakeholders in England, before being further adapted and extended in academic research (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2021). There are five core 'stages' in this temporally-driven typology: universal prevention, upstream prevention, crisis-stage prevention, emergency-stage prevention, and repeat prevention (Mackie *et al*, 2024).

Universal prevention relates to population-wide interventions to tackle poverty and increase 'protective factors' across the whole population (e.g. decent income, secure home, positive relationships, good health). There is strong global evidence pointing to the particular importance of sufficient affordable housing and effective poverty reduction strategies, yet diminishing social security protection coupled with an insufficient supply of new social housing supply, means that universal homelessness prevention has regressed across the UK over the past 15 years.

Upstream prevention refers to early-stage homelessness prevention focused on high-risk groups, such as vulnerable young people, and risky transitions, including leaving local authority care, or prison. Despite the vast evidence base of the heightened risk facing some groups, and the opportunities and need for public institutions to protect against homelessness, upstream homelessness prevention efforts have been limited in scale. However, promising institution-specific innovations, such as Upstream in schools, Critical Time Interventions in prisons, and the Staying Put policy for young people in foster care, as well as local authority-led initiatives like the data-driven One View approach in Maidstone, are now beginning to emerge (Mackie 2023, Sanders *et al*, 2024).

Crisis-stage prevention focuses on preventing homelessness likely to occur within a foreseeable period, such as following an eviction notice. Across the UK an array of interventions centre on households at high risk of homelessness in the relatively near future, with a particular focus on short-term financial support, often to prevent the loss of private rented accommodation. Legislation in

Wales and England, which places duties on local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness, has had a particularly notable impact, widening access to statutory support and preventing homelessness for many households, albeit there is evidence of a gap between the highly aspirational intent of the legislation and current implementation.

Emergency-stage prevention relates to support for those who are not yet homeless but may imminently be so, or who are already homeless and at risk of sleeping rough. The ineffectiveness of earlier-stage prevention efforts across the UK means demand for emergency-stage support is very high and the lack of suitable settled accommodation means households across the UK are living for long periods in temporary accommodation that is not intended for long-term occupation and is also incredibly expensive to the public purse (Rodriguez-Guzman *et al* 2024; Wilkins and Gray, 2024). There is an urgent need to reduce the number of people who require this emergency response, and an equal imperative to move people on swiftly into suitable settled accommodation.

Repeat prevention aims to stop homelessness from recurring for individuals who are currently or have recently been homeless. Across the UK, there is a policy drive to adopt housing-led approaches at this stage, such as Housing First and Rapid Rehousing, alongside a noticeable shift away from the concept of housing readiness — although this perspective still lingers in some contexts. However, progress towards this goal has been hindered by insufficient investment in and limited access to suitable, affordable housing, as well as a reduction in funding for housing-related support services, particularly in England and Scotland.

### **Addressing systemic dysfunction**

A cross-cutting issue relevant to all levels of the prevention typology is that of systemic dysfunction: systems not working properly together to prevent homelessness as they should. There has been increasing interest in ‘systems thinking’ in the housing and homelessness sector in the UK in recent years with, for example, systems mapping a core component of the work being undertaken by the Centre for Homelessness Impact in their MHCLG-funded [‘Systems-wide Evaluation’](#). Our contribution to current systemic dysfunction discussions is to identify four key system failings that undermine homelessness prevention efforts, and to consider effective responses.

First, a classic system failure is the **shunting** of people from one organisation or public service to another, without anyone taking responsibility for preventing or resolving their homelessness. The solution here is to unambiguously place primary responsibility on one part of the system, ideally with legal backing. The shunting of homeless families between local authority social services and housing departments was exactly the problem that the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 set out to solve, and did so by placing a clear, enforceable legal duty on the latter (Fitzpatrick & Davies, 2021).

Second, and a related issue, is that once statutory responsibility for homelessness is placed on one part of an interacting system, other key players often **withdraw** completely. For example, when prison leavers were designated as a Priority Need group in Wales in 2001, the responsibility for providing accommodation was placed on local housing authorities. As a result, prisons and probation services increasingly withdrew from their role in planning transitions into stable housing (Humphreys and

Stirling, 2008). Plans to place stronger responsibility on wider public systems to identify people at risk of homelessness, to act to mitigate those risks, and to cooperate with housing authorities in resolving homelessness, are captured in the current [White Paper on Ending Homelessness in Wales](#) and in the [Housing \(Scotland\) Bill](#) making its way through the Scottish Parliament.

Third, even in contexts where there are a lot of services and resources aimed at preventing homelessness, system failure can occur when these efforts are **uncoordinated**. This is less of an issue in a context like the UK where the state, and particularly local authorities, play such a key and legally-mandated role. But where homelessness reduction efforts are left mainly in the hands of a multitude of voluntary and faith sector players, as is often the case in North America, but also in some European contexts, organisations can get in each other's way and fail to effectively assist those in greatest need. An overarching coordinating body, based in the voluntary or statutory sector, and a unified point of system access for service users, are indispensable to ending homelessness (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2022).

Fourth, even more damaging than a lack of coordination can be circumstances where systems act in directly **contradictory** ways. A classic example is one part of a local authority striving to prevent someone's homelessness, while another part of the same authority pursues them for rent or council tax arrears. There is no single solution to this particular system challenge, however one route is through a 'due regard duty' that requires all public services to be aware of and understand a particular issue (usually a social issue) and to consider this issue in all decision making. Examples include the Public Sector Equality duty and The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011. Applied in a context of homelessness, all public bodies would be required to give due regard to the prevention of homelessness in all decision-making processes.

### **Barriers and enablers**

In addition to the multifaceted challenge of systemic dysfunction, we wish to very briefly highlight four further barriers. First, achieving a significant shift in responses to homelessness, often with high upfront investment and an upheaval of prevailing systems, requires considerable **political will** (Mackie *et al.*, 2019; Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2022; Mackie 2023). Its absence at any level of government can be a key barrier but its presence can drive remarkable change at pace.

Second, homelessness prevention must be **appropriately resourced**. There are many examples in the UK and elsewhere of poorly resourced services leading to rationing or supports so thinly spread that people's needs cannot be met (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Furthermore, funding is too often provided on a short-term basis, preventing long-term planning and mainstream integration of services.

Third, a gap between intent and implementation often arises from a lack of **support for implementation** and **accountability mechanisms**. It will be particularly interesting to see how these are considered during the implementation of promising new homelessness prevention legislation in Scotland and Wales.

Finally, barriers in access to services include a range of **equalities concerns**, with recent and overdue research attention paid to the structural and systemic racism that places some minoritised communities, particularly Black people, at highly disproportionate risk of homelessness in the UK (Bramley et al, 2022; Allard et al, 2024; Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2024). While leading homelessness charities have made commitments to become 'anti-racist' organisations, the wider political context in the UK, Europe and North America is, alarmingly, pushing in exactly the opposite direction, given the growing power and influence of the Far Right. There is an urgent need for the homelessness sector, academics, and concerned citizens more generally to mobilise against the nativism, misogyny, and toxic religiosity now threatening to engulf our societies and destroy our hard-won commitments to push forward with equalities agendas.

## Conclusion

Homelessness can only be ended if we achieve a step change in prevention efforts. Current social, political and economic headwinds have intensified the challenge but the emerging evidence base, alongside promising legislative and practice developments, provides a solid platform for progress that we must build upon at pace.

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