The role of Jobcentres in preventing and ending homelessness: learning from Crisis and DWP pilots 2016-2020

Crisis

Together we will end homelessness

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Acknowledgements

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for people experiencing homelessness. We help people directly out of homelessness, and campaign for the social changes needed to solve it altogether. We know that together we can end homelessness.

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Executive summary

Homelessness is not inevitable. We know that in most cases it is preventable, and in every case, it can be ended. The Department for Work and Pensions is in a unique position to be able to prevent and alleviate homelessness.

Crisis' reports, *Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain*, and *Preventing Homelessness: It's Everybody's Business*, show how preventing and ending homelessness requires co-operation across government.[1][2] The need for action across several government departments has been recognised in the Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy.[3] The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) identifies effective housing support as one of its key objectives, and has perhaps gone further than any other department in trying to develop its role in tackling homelessness.[4]

Since 2016, joint working between Crisis and several Jobcentres (JCPs) has demonstrated the extent to which the DWP can achieve a standard of housing support that actively prevents and alleviates homelessness. JCP staff support people during what is often one of the most difficult times of their life, so the DWP is in a unique position of being able to support individuals who are on the brink of homelessness, and help them to avoid homelessness altogether.

DWP, Crisis and some relevant authorities have worked in partnership in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Brent, Merseyside and Birmingham, piloting an integrated model of housing and employment support, with the aim of preventing and alleviating homelessness. This achieved positive outcomes on the ground and demonstrated the decisive role that JCPs can play in people's lives.

This report summarises the achievements of our work together, and sets out the key lessons arising from that work. A key finding throughout this work has been that excellent practice exists within DWP. Embedding this can be the difference in keeping a roof over someone's head, making it easier for them to retain or secure employment, and can even help people access help with finding accommodation. These

1   Downie, M., Gousy, H., Basran, J., Jacob, R., Rowe, S., Hancock, C., Albanese, F., Pritchard, R., Nightingale, K. and Davies, T. (2018) *Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain*. London: Crisis
2   Jacob, R. (October 2018) Preventing Homelessness: It's everybody's business London: Crisis
3   MHCLG (August 2018) Rough Sleeping Strategy
4   DWP (17 February 2020) Department for Work and Pensions single departmental plan

interventions can be the difference in helping people leave homelessness behind for good.

As we emerge from a global pandemic, support to prevent and end homelessness is needed more than ever. The virus has thrown into sharp relief the importance of having a safe and secure home in which to sustain good health and thrive, including by being able to work. The welfare system has been put under significant strain during the pandemic, but Universal Credit (UC) and DWP staff have demonstrated resilience and agility. In the months and years ahead, people will continue to require support to keep a roof over their head and if they have lost jobs, to get back into work. With DWP adapting to emerging needs, and doubling the number of work coaches to 27,000 by March 2021, this is the prime opportunity to do ensure that staff are equipped to prevent and tackle homelessness.

Embedding successful partnership working in Jobcentre Plus to prevent and tackle homelessness

The direction set by ministers and senior officials has been a key factor in the success of the pilots and will be crucial to following through on the findings now. This requires DWP to reframe homelessness, moving beyond it being one complex need amongst many, to embedding housing support and engaging with housing security as a key metric of the department's success.

Joint working has been key to stabilising people's housing and securing employment. This is helping DWP to achieve its objective of building a more prosperous society by supporting people to enter into work and supporting the most disadvantaged.[5] People who have a safe and stable home are more likely to be able to manage their employment, health, and housing costs, meaning that focusing on homelessness prevention in customer support is an economical choice.

When feeding into this report, other charities have commented on the cases of brilliant practice that has gone "such a long way" in supporting their clients. This is backed up by hundreds of unpublished responses to the Frontline Network Survey 2019, often with named staff and Jobcentres being singled out for specific praise by homelessness support workers.[6] For the most part, DWP has tried and tested the solutions and they work. The challenge is to roll out and embed good practice across the board, so that no one slips between the cracks.

5   DWP (17 February 2020) Department for Work and Pensions single departmental plan
6   Unpublished findings. Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network

Summary of recommendations:

Recommendation one: Embedding effective partnership working throughout DWP

a. Mechanisms for consistent rollout of effective partnerships
   i.   Introduce regional housing managers to offer deeper and more specialised support to JCPs in the area
   ii. Monitor and evaluate all partnership working to refine a best practice model and gain a better sense of impact (outcomes on homelessness prevented or alleviated)

b. Forming the right partnerships and making them effective
   i.   Implement joint ways of working with local authority housing options teams
   ii. Develop a broad range of strategic partnerships, supported by a locally developed 'pathway tool' to help work coaches navigate partnerships
   iii. Resource and equip partnerships to succeed, based on careful assessment of staffing and training needs from all partners

c. Data sharing is key
   i.   Investigate the use of shared case-management systems to enable effective partnership support
   ii. Adapt existing data-sharing guidance to enable better case management outcomes and identify customers at risk

Recommendation two: Enable staff to deliver meaningful support to people with acute housing need

a. Professional skills
  i.   Roll-out housing and homelessness training to all relevant work coaches and provide a national toolkit of relevant resources
  ii. Encourage professional development and career progression of work coaches into specialist housing and homelessness roles
  iii. Identify information gaps on housing and homelessness matters for work coaches, managers and other relevant personnel

b. Ensuring work coaches have the tools to personalise support
  i.   Ensure that communication needs are met
  ii. Improve practice so that work coaches are expected to pro-actively assess whether advances, alternative payment arrangements or budgeting support are needed
  iii. Amend guidance on the Claimant Commitment to ensure that housing circumstances are better identified
  iv. Allow work coaches to apply a benefit cap grace period as an easement and exempt those who have experienced the worst kinds of homelessness
  v.   Support claimants to manage debts and prevent arrears

Recommendation three: Embed processes to actively prevent homelessness

a. Include housing circumstances and support needs as part of the work coach assessment and UC applications
  ii. Include a follow-up question for customers who don't have housing costs to help DWP identify homelessness risk
  iii. Following an application or a change of circumstances, use work coach assessments to identify homelessness risk
b. Monitor the impact of welfare policies and DWP operations on homelessness and housing security

Introduction

Every case of homelessness is an indignity that no one in our society should have to face. Sadly, too many people are left without access to a safe, stable and affordable home. On any given night in 2020, 202,300 families and individuals were experiencing the worst forms of homelessness in England.[7] As a society, we can and must end homelessness, and preventing homelessness before it happens, whenever possible, is central to achieving this.

Our UK welfare system is designed to provide financial and personal support for people experiencing hardship. There are conditions attached to this support, but it is widely available to most people that live in the UK. Much of this support is channelled through the online system, Universal Credit (UC), and through a network of over 650 local Jobcentre Plus (JCP) offices, offering one to one support from a work coach. The welfare system is not only a highly effective tool for tackling poverty, but is also a powerful tool for preventing homelessness, the most acute form of poverty that exists.

The introduction of the *Homelessness Reduction Act* (HRA) in 2017, a landmark policy that represented the most important changes to homelessness legislation of the last 40 years, brought about a new prevention agenda to tackling homelessness.[8] This in turn raised questions about the effectiveness of the welfare system in proactively preventing homelessness. In October 2018, the HRA instituted a new duty for certain public authorities in England, including JCPs, to refer people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness to the local housing authority to try and prevent or relieve their homelessness.

The introduction of UC has streamlined the benefits system, increasing the role of DWP in relation to housing and homelessness. Previously administered by local authorities, Housing Benefit has been subsumed into UC, and with it DWP has had to develop new responsibilities and expertise. Although challenging new territory for JCPs, this presents an important opportunity.

Given the unique role that work coaches play, the opportunity to prevent homelessness can and should be ambitious beyond the statutory requirement. People often claim benefits because of a change in circumstance; they may experience a loss of income, health problems, unemployment or a change in their household living situation. While the welfare system will support many

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7   Albanese, F (2 December 2020) How many people are homeless in England on any given night?

8   ICF for MHCLF (16 March 2020) Evaluation of the Implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act: Final Report

people to weather these challenges safely, there are plenty who will struggle to find a secure home, or fall into rent arrears, and face eviction. Work coaches' contact to people in these situations is a crucial opportunity to identify, support and protect those most at risk of homelessness. The scale of homelessness across the UK means that almost all JCPs will work with people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness in some way.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the interdependence of work, welfare, health and homes as government worked quickly to transform policy across the world of work, welfare and housing in order to address the health crisis. The initiative to bring "Everyone In" has been a

remarkable effort to ensure that those experiencing the worst forms of homelessness had a safe place to self-isolate.[9] The Westminster Government also took preventative action, suspending evictions and adapting the welfare system to ensure that people could keep a roof over their heads.[10] This included temporarily suspending conditionality and some deductions, increasing the UC standard allowance and restoring Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates to cover the cheapest 30 per cent of rents.[11] JCPs retained in-person access for those who needed it, and adopted a "trust and protect" approach to new claims.[12]

These changes have involved incredible efforts on the part of DWP services to meet the sudden

9   MHCLG correspondence (23 April 2020) Dame Louise Casey writes to Local Authority homelessness managers and rough sleeping coordinators
10   MHCLG press release (18 March 2020) Complete ban on evictions and additional protection for renters
11   HM Treasury (20 March 2020) The Chancellor Rishi Sunak provides an updated statement on coronavirus
12   DWP Press release (23 March 2020) Claimants are asked to apply online as jobcentres limit access

influx of need, and to support 3.7 million people claiming UC in unique circumstances.[13] Over the last year, DWP has demonstrated the resilience of the UC system and the flexibility of its workforce to meet customer needs at a remarkable speed. The significant influx of UC claims means that DWP has a lot to deal with over the months and years ahead, but this makes its role in housing support all the more important. High unemployment tends to lead to housing insecurity and homelessness, but DWP can play a key role in averting that through effective partnership working, while delivering meaningful support to customers and embedding a prevention approach.

13   DWP (10 November 2020) Official Statistics: Universal Credit statistics: 29 April 2013 to 8 October 2020

Homelessness prevention pilots: an integrated model of employment and housing support

"I had one claimant who I'd referred to different organisations...And he just wasn't getting anywhere. I referred him to Crisis and within two months he was in his own flat. And, you know, just to see the difference in that for him; he's just absolutely amazing. And then other youngsters that I've referred, they've benefited through … not only from getting their housing sorted, but from the other events and support that Crisis offers.... And to see them coming back to me flourishing, and their confidence growing because of the provisions and events that you put on alongside it, it's just fantastic. It's really heart-warming. It's really good to see, and … I've lost my track now. I'm going to cry in a minute.

DWP focus group participant, Birmingham pilot

DWP has long fostered partnership working between JCPs and local partners, and in recent years, Crisis has worked closely with the department to pilot new ways of integrating housing and employment support. Crisis, the DWP and local authorities have been working closely to test and develop an integrated model that moves beyond organisations simply making referrals, towards establishing a culture of joint working and co-ordination. The integrated housing and employment model aims to enable claimants who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to stabilise their housing situation and to subsequently engage more effectively with employment support.

The homelessness ministerial working group set the direction for piloting a prevention approach, and senior leadership within DWP underscored the importance of this. The partnerships were developed jointly by local Crisis service centres (Skylights) and JCPs, with DWP partnership managers and homelessness or housing single points of contact playing a significant role. Crisis' policy, best practice and evaluation staff have provided further support in developing the pilots and their recommendations, as have DWP's national partnership and homelessness policy officials.

Pilot	Partners	Activities	Resourcing
Edinburgh	Crisis, JCP	Training for JCP staff Regular co-location of Crisis staff in the JCP	Crisis coaches located in JCP on a fortnightly basis JCP Homelessness Lead
Merseyside	Crisis, Merseyside District DWP	Development of local strategic partnerships Training for JCP staff Case management support	Full-time secondment of a member of Crisis staff since June 2018, first in Merseyside, then across UC North
Newcastle	Crisis, JCP, Newcastle city council, Arms-Length Management Organisation (ALMO)	Training for JCP staff Referral process from JCP to Crisis, the local authority, and the ALMO Multidisciplinary data-sharing to proactively identify homelessness risk Full evaluation process	Funding for the Trailblazer was provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Training delivered by Crisis, local authority and ALMO staff A full-time member of staff from the JCP, the ALMO, a housing association, Council Debt and Money and Welfare Rights Services each were seconded into the multi-disciplinary team Evaluation was resourced by the city council
Brent	Brent Single Homelessness Prevention Service (SHPS), JCP	Training for JCP staff Referral process from JCP to the SHPS Improvement of local practice relating to Alternative Payment Arrangements (APAs)	Training delivered by Crisis staff Homelessness lead covering local JCPs
Birmingham	Crisis, JCP	Training for JCP staff Referral process from JCP to Crisis Regular co-location of Crisis staff in the JCP Full evaluation process	Crisis coaches in JCP Two training sessions delivered by Crisis staff Evaluation conducted by Crisis staff JCP partnership manager JCP homelessness Single Point of Contact (SPOC)

Edinburgh: Co-location of services to provide complementary support

Crisis' partnership with the DWP began in 2016, with the shared objective of trying to try to help people experiencing homelessness to get support at the right time. The pilot aimed to reduce the "pillar to post" approach that some experienced.

In Edinburgh, Crisis team members delivered initial training to JCP work coaches to build understanding of homelessness, Crisis' services and what referrals could offer local JCP customers. A partnership was developed from this, supported and led by a homelessness lead in the JCP. For fortnightly drop-in sessions, Crisis coaches are co-located in the JCP, which means the work coaches can make appointments for their customers with the Crisis coaches to address housing and homelessness issues. During these sessions, Crisis staff can assess customers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and can then offer signposting, information, advice, or full access to the Crisis service. Crisis coaches and work coaches discuss cases to ensure the support provided complements each other, and Crisis staff are also a point of call for work coaches to ask about housing issues.

"We were delighted to work in partnership with Newcastle city council, Your Homes Newcastle and the DWP. We all know that it is better to prevent homelessness if possible. We also know that it can be difficult for people to know where to go for the help and support needed to keep their home. For many people the first point of contact is their local Job Centre Plus. It makes sense for services to work together. One of the key and sustaining benefits of the trailblazer was improved understanding and communication between the partners. Work coaches were able to identify people at risk of homelessness; we came together as a team to ensure people kept their home, had time and space to get back on their feet and where ready to work with their work coaches to secure employment."

Andrew Burnip, Director, Crisis Skylight Newcastle

Newcastle: The local authority-led Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer

Newcastle was one of two "early adopters" to receive funding from MHCLG from autumn 2016-2018 for a Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer Programme: a pilot project testing new ways of partnership working to prevent homelessness under the HRA.[14] The Homelessness Ministerial Working Group had asked Newcastle to be the pilot city for a partnership with DWP, looking at how JCPs can prevent homelessness. The Working Group asked Newcastle to pilot:

- Identifying and responding to the risks of homelessness related to benefit administration and unemployment

- Reducing the impact that unstable housing can have on the resident's search for work.[15]

The pilot partners were Newcastle city council, Newcastle JCP, Crisis Skylight Newcastle, and Your Homes Newcastle – an Arms-Length Management Organisation (ALMO) that manages 26,700 council homes on behalf of Newcastle city council, and over 700 homes on behalf of a social housing provider.[16]

One pilot element introduced early identification of at-risk residents by a multi-disciplinary team from the JCP, Your Homes Newcastle, a housing association and council debt, money, welfare rights services. Staff were seconded full-time from each partner and co-located for intensive integrated casework. They used housing and benefit data to identify residents at potential risk of homelessness, reviewed cases jointly to share data

on the resident and offered support. By 31st March 2019, the team had identified and approached 296 households using this case-finding model, establishing contact with over 60 per cent and providing holistic support to 40 per cent of those households to address risk and stabilise housing.[17]

Another element of the Trailblazer was the JCP referrals pilot, referring DWP customers to appropriate support services if they were at risk of homelessness.[18] 134 work coaches received training from Your Homes Newcastle, the council and Crisis on triggers for homelessness; statutory duties; the role of partners; services available; and who to refer customers to. Work coaches then made referrals to delivery partners according to individual needs and by the 31 March 2019, this approach had identified 729 residents in unstable housing or at risk of homelessness. Newcastle JCP did this work before the HRA came into force, so some referrals to the council were a forerunner of what would become statutory obligation for work coaches everywhere. However, the pilot went beyond the HRA, with 325 referrals made to Crisis, 51 referrals made to Your Homes Newcastle, and 353 referrals to the council's Housing Advice Centre. The pilot prioritised simplicity in the referral pathways, and included a feedback loop, so that work coaches can easily refer, and are aware of interventions afterwards. This pilot also encouraged personalisation of support with easements, advance payments etc. Research by Heriot-Watt University concluded that "the partnership between the JCP, local authority, Your Homes Newcastle and Crisis is widely seen to have radically increased opportunities for supportive

14   MHCLG (16 November 2018) Evaluation of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers
15   Newcastle city council (December 2019) Newcastle's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Review 2019
16   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer: 1 January 2017 to 31 March 2019
17   Newcastle city council Active Inclusion Team: Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer Multidisciplinary team Summative review
18   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer: 1 January 2017 to 31 March 2019

interventions to target homelessness risk upstream and pre-crisis."[19]

The role of DWP in referrals and the multi-disciplinary team identifying risk demonstrates that DWP to add significant value to homelessness prevention work in a way that no other agency can substitute. DWP's benefits data and contact with benefits claimants mean that it has unique opportunities to intervene before someone experiences homelessness.

"We will share as best practice the innovative partnership work between Newcastle Jobcentre Plus and Newcastle Local Authority, an early adopter of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer Programme across the whole Jobcentre Plus network."

The Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy, 2018

Brent: Referral processes for the Single Homeless Prevention Service

The Single Homelessness Prevention Service (SHPS) was established in Autumn 2017 and is a local authority-led partnership to prevent homelessness.[20] Crisis is the delivery partner for the Brent SHPS, which provides support to single adults in the borough who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, taking referrals from the local authority in line with the objectives of the HRA.

SHPS staff develop Personal Housing Plans (PHP) with clients, to prevent or relieve homelessness. A PHP identifies the housing need and a series of actions the client and SHPS support staff agree to complete. These

actions include: assisting people with benefits issues; negotiating with landlords; referring for legal advice to stop evictions; helping people to find and secure accommodation; and signposting or referring to additional support services.

Under their HRA duty to refer, local DWP staff have made referrals to Brent council's housing options team, who will refer onwards to the SHPS for relevant clients (single adults, or couples without children). In order to streamline this process, SHPS worked with the local JCPs to establish a direct referral process. In the Autumn of 2019, Crisis delivered training to work coaches in the Harlesden and Wembley JCPs, explaining the how the SHPS works, and how to make effective referrals. The SHPS is mostly co-located with council staff and can work effectively with them, while the Brent Crisis Skylight can also refer directly to the SHPS.

SHPS staff work in partnership with a lead worker on housing and evictions, who covers both of the relevant local JCPs. SHPS staff had struggled to persuade work coaches to implement direct payments to landlords. However, that relationship has made it significantly easier to have direct payments put in place, which helps clients to secure and sustain tenancies. Having a lead worker has also offered a more effective case discussions than through clients' journals, they are now collaborating with SHPS on developing better communication processes.

Merseyside: Embedding homelessness expertise

In July 2018, Crisis seconded Stuart Robinson, a frontline coach from Merseyside Skylight, to work with

19   Watts, B., Bramley, G., Blenkinsopp, J., McIntyre, J. (2019) Homelessness prevention in Newcastle: Examining the role of the 'local state' in the context of austerity and welfare reform. I-SPHERE / Heriot-Watt University

20   Brent Single Homelessness Prevention Service website

JCPs in Merseyside, the only district to obtain a homelessness specialist under the Community Partner scheme. The secondment's objective was to improve understanding and joint working between DWP and Crisis in the region.

This included delivering training across a number of JCPs, focusing on newly introduced duty to refer under the HRA. Work coaches were also trained in identifying homelessness and homelessness risk, supported by a new Homelessness Conversation Tool, which set out a series of prompts to ask customers about risk factors of homelessness during appointments. The secondment raised awareness of homelessness issues and the support options available by providing upskilling sessions internally for staff, and for external partners. This also included delivering homelessness-specific networking event for work coaches who are time-poor and 'provision-rich'. Stuart led on partnership development, which included starting an External Partner Forum to sense-check local DWP activity with homelessness stakeholders. He also introduced 'Housing Hubs', bringing partners into JCPs on a regular basis to provide more support to customers experiencing housing-related issues.

Having completed the secondment in the community partner role, Crisis' member of staff was further seconded to DWP as strategic homelessness reduction co-ordinator for UC North, a role developed to provide robust support to DWP customers who experience homelessness. The co-ordinator supports staff with complex casework, as well as raising awareness and offering training to senior executive officer service leads, homelessness leads, and work coaches. The co-ordinator also acts as a link between the three northern districts, the National Employer and Partnership Team, OED and housing/homelessness policy team, to assist with cross-cutting activities. He has worked on identifying existing good practice within DWP and incorporating this into a homelessness support framework to support northern districts. Finally, he is responsible for aligning individual district strategies on homelessness to the DWP policy intent framework.

As well as bringing specialist expertise into the DWP, the secondments have gained specific experience and insight for Crisis' services, best practice work and policy. By being embedded within the DWP, the secondments have facilitated ongoing dialogue and mutual understanding.

"When I came into DWP on secondment from Crisis, I was expecting hesitance or a reluctance to engage with me and or homeless customers. However, I quickly realised this expectation was unfounded. My view was changed when I saw work coaches wanting an upskilling, wanting to support and help this vulnerable population. Their willingness to listen and increase their understanding of homelessness, evidences a shift in DWP culture."

Stuart Robinson, Crisis secondee to DWP

Birmingham: An evaluated pilot of integrated housing and employment support

A formal partnership between DWP, Crisis and Birmingham city council aimed to conduct an evaluated pilot to integrate housing and employment support.[21] The programme of work built on a lot of the approaches used in previous pilots, offering training and awareness-building, developing clear

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21   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

referral processes, and introducing co-location by having Crisis staff in the JCP each week.

In March 2019, Crisis delivered two training sessions to Central Birmingham JCP staff, covering the pilot, Crisis' services and identifying homelessness. It also covered the ways in which work coaches are able to support customers at risk of homelessness, under duty to refer obligations and by referring to Crisis. The Homelessness Conversation Tool was also disseminated to equip work coaches to discuss housing with customers, and increased work coaches' confidence over time.

Two Crisis coaches were co-located at the JCP for two half-days each week. Referrals to the Crisis coaches could be made by in person, via email or telephone, or details of clients referred to Birmingham city council under the duty to refer could be shared with Crisis.

An evaluation of the pilot included a survey of DWP staff, focus groups with work coaches, analysis of Crisis' case management data, and interviews with senior representatives of each stakeholder. As well as positive feedback on the usefulness of the training, and the value of making referrals, 83 per cent of those DWP staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the pilot helped them to provide more personalised support. They showed increased awareness of the impact of homelessness on someone's ability to work, and outlined examples of how they had better supported customers.

"When it started in June, we had the templates that give us a kind of how to approach things, how to ask them, but as we became more confident here, we didn't have to use the form to literally go through it one by one. You now know what kind of questions to ask and how to phrase it. So, for those of us in the front of house when they come to us at the initial application stage, you know the things to look out for. So, the things you could ask when you go through their form, so you see that they have not declared any housing costs in their declared housing costs. You ask them about their housing situation. If they have temporary housing you can ask them how they're getting on with finding permanent accommodation, if they have any support."

DWP focus group participant, Birmingham pilot

"I think it would be unfair for us to ask them to do 35-hours'-worth of work search when they're possibly not ... got a roof over their head or some secure place to live, really, so ... I think we recognise that that's a waste of time, isn't it?... There's no point asking somebody to do 35 hours of work search there without their housing ... is pointless. So, you generally say, "Get your housing sorted first", don't you?"

DWP focus group participant, Birmingham pilot

What has worked well?

Although each pilot has been specific to the local objectives and partners, some key elements of joint working have emerged as being particular success factors.

Leadership and commitment

Visible leadership was identified as a crucial component in the Newcastle Trailblazer, with commitment from the deputy leader of the council, a senior local authority officer, the DWP district manager, and senior Crisis staff at a local and national level.[22] The leadership of the Homelessness Ministerial Working Group was also a valuable signal from Westminster government about the importance of the pilot and the preventative approach. In Birmingham, discussions with district-level DWP staff set the direction of the pilot, and ensured commitment. Agreed aims and objectives, in which all partners buy into the importance tackling homelessness supported commitment to these aims throughout the delivery of the pilots. **Visible senior buy-in supports partnerships to succeed, and can secure sustainable resourcing, open communication, and meaningful feedback and evaluation** (Recommendation 1, pg. 26-27).

"I think it probably highlighted areas of homelessness that I wouldn't have previously judged as being homeless. So we all think of rough sleeping, but I probably wouldn't have thought about people coming to the end of their tenancy or being evicted or whatever, particularly, being homeless or at risk of homelessness."

DWP representative, Birmingham pilot

Awareness, understanding and skills

Feedback from staff in DWP and Crisis has shown the value that they have taken from working with one another, and often, the desire for further collaboration. Opportunities for training, visits, joint events and ongoing communication were instrumental in improving outcomes for customers. Training and resources (such as the Homelessness Conversation Tool) offered staff confidence, skills and knowledge to identify homelessness and the risk of homelessness when working with customers. Through training for frontline staff, four of the pilots improved JCP staff's understanding

and awareness of housing, homelessness and employment issues, particularly in understanding homelessness beyond rough sleeping. **Feedback highlighted the importance of high-quality training, which is contextualised, engaging and relevant, and in organising training, JCPs may particularly benefit in hearing from local services and voices of lived experience** (Recommendation 2, pg. 29-31)

"You just kind of have to know there's more to it than just being on the streets. There are quite a number of people who are homeless that they call hidden homelessness, that it's not very obvious that we could potentially identify and then offer them the support they require..."

"It told us to actually have a conversation with people as well, because especially for us, I'm on the front of house team, when we're doing our ID appointments, when we're talking to people about their tenancies and we're verifying their housing costs, they don't tell you if they're in trouble. But obviously having the training with Crisis taught me especially to have that conversation to ask about their housing to find out what's going on."

DWP focus group participants, Birmingham pilot

Referrals and support measures

In several projects, Crisis has trained work coaches on the services available locally and referral options that work coaches can use. The pilots have identified appropriate support agencies and have established clear referral processes, or simplified existing referral processes for work coaches to use for claimants who needed further assistance. **Well-developed, clear referral processes, supported by training, help work coaches to seek out the right support for their customers** (Recommendation 1, pg. 26-27). This was done in the Newcastle Trailblazer by including a clear division of casework between referral partners.

"It might be that we adapt the claimant commitment...until the situation is more stable... and ... whatever it is, you can put easements on the claimant commitment, and adapt and that claimant commitment is unique to that person. So, what we might do for one wouldn't ... might not be able to do for another."

DWP focus group participants, Birmingham pilot

Work coaches use a wide range of tools to support customers to stabilise their housing situation, and the training offered by partners supported thoughtful use of these measures. Frontline workers who participated in the Newcastle prevention pilot "argued that stronger partnerships between the JCP and other services had also helped claimants avoid being erroneously sanctioned".[23] **Training, guidance and local practice can help work coaches to personalise the support that they give customers** (Recommendation 2, pg. 32-36).

Supported by investment in partner relationships and access to named contacts, improved communication has enabled work coaches to better personalise support. **Open and case-specific communication with partners enables work coaches to better tailor support to customers in co-ordination with local partners** (Recommendation 1, pg. 27-29; Recommendation 2, pg. 32-33). Co-location has improved communication and referrals, with Birmingham JCP staff saying that it led to a kind of informal case management approach being taken to supporting clients. **Partnerships can benefit from co-location to enable referrals under a**

single roof, minimise disengagement and enable partners to better support work coaches (Recommendation 1, pg. 27).

"We can do it all on site, we can get face-to-face feedback, and just like an individual caseloading and chat and conversation about that individual that we've referred to [Crisis Coaches]."

DWP focus group participant, Birmingham pilot

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23   Watts, B., Bramley, G., Blenkinsopp, J., McIntyre, J. (2019) Homelessness prevention in Newcastle: Examining the role of the 'local state' in the context of austerity and welfare reform. I-SPHERE / Heriot-Watt University.

What challenges have arisen?

Despite significant successes, some challenges emerged.

Resourcing and capacity

Although Birmingham JCP and Crisis invested heavily in the local pilot, staffing issues in Birmingham city council limited their engagement and the benefits of the project. **Joint working between the local authority and the DWP is essential to the success of a co-ordinated approach to homelessness prevention, and local government leaders should ensure that they engage with JCPs** (Recommendation 1, pg. 26; Recommendation 2, pg. 35-36).

Despite good project planning and resourcing, referrals from the JCPs in Newcastle and Birmingham to the local Crisis Skylights exceeded 200 cases each, impacting Crisis' local capacity. **A consideration of resource needs, and potentially the development of dedicated resource, is essential** (Recommendation 1, pg. 23-24, 27).

"With 10 minute appointments we have so little time with each person it is really useful to know that if an issue is flagged we have people that can take more time to help."

DWP survey respondent, Birmingham pilot

Being given time to properly identify the risk of homelessness is important, and in Birmingham, work coaches didn't have enough time to spend with vulnerable claimants. **Co-located partners can help meet customer needs, but work coaches should also be trusted to assess the time needed to support claimants facing housing risk, and supported by better assessment tools customers** (Recommendation 1, pg. 32-33; Recommendation 2, pg. 36-37).

Communication and data

Once housing needs have been identified, work coaches can offer meaningful support, staff can already use a range of tools to offer meaningful support to claimants, including the Domestic Emergency Easement and APAs. **These can be more widely applied, and new tools can help to personalise support for people facing homelessness** (Recommendation 2, pg. 32-36). **Staff need to have the information and capability to provide personalised support** (Recommendation 2, pg. 29-31).

Whilst communication between partners has improved, shared case-management has not yet been possible, with an exception of the multi-disciplinary team element of the Newcastle pilot.

Exploring greater data-sharing in national guidance and local partnerships would enable better co-ordination of support and access to up-to-date customer information (Recommendation 1, pg. 27-29).

In some areas data-sharing policy prevented partnership managers from sharing useful information with partners, affecting project evaluations. **Greater data-sharing and agreements on evaluation metrics would support the ongoing improvement of partnerships** (Recommendation 1, pg. 24-25). There isn't currently any data collection on housing risk and homelessness, which was a challenge for monitoring and evaluating pilots. **Collecting monitoring data on housing risk and homelessness would support evaluations of partnerships and local prevention efforts, and support national benchmarking** (Recommendation 3, pg. 37).

The UC system doesn't yet collect systematic information customers' housing risk, but **adding a question on customers' housing in the UC form would enable work coaches to better those customers who need support, and allow DWP to monitor homelessness and housing outcomes** (Recommendation 3, pg. 36-37).

Efficacy of referrals
In Brent, the SHPS referral mechanism has grappled with the challenge of balancing a streamlined and manageable process for work coaches with detailed and quality referrals that are usable for swift and meaningful intervention. **Training by, and feedback loops with, partners can help to improve the quality of referrals** (Recommendation 1, pg. 27-29; Recommendation 2, 29-31).

"And sometimes you get feedback, but then after that we don't hear anything, like…the plan going forward. We just get the feedback from the interview, and then I don't really hear anything. That would be easier for us, so we can obviously know that they're going to get that support."

DWP focus group participants, Birmingham pilot

The efficacy and quality of referrals were a priority in the Newcastle and Birmingham pilots, but there were still some issues of clients either failing to attend referral appointments or disengaging after support. There was no assessment of why uptake of referrals was significantly higher for the ALMO (94 per cent) in Newcastle, than referrals to Crisis and to the council (around half of customers referred).[24] **JCPs seeking to evaluate partnerships and invest in continuous improvement, might consider monitoring disengagement rates as an important metric, and gauging the causes of this** (Recommendation 1, pg. 24-25).

Despite being the main referral organisation in most of the pilots, Crisis was not always the most appropriate organisation to support a client, meaning that clients needed to be referred on, putting pressure on capacity, and risking disengagement. Broadening the range of support organisations is beneficial, but it introduces complexity for staff. Building on the recommendations of the Newcastle and Birmingham evaluations, **work coaches would benefit from a locally developed pathway tool to support them in navigating referrals** (see Recommendation 1, pg. 26-27; Recommendation 2, pg. 31).

24   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Pilot with Jobcentre Plus.

Recommendations

The Newcastle and Birmingham pilots were formally evaluated, with recommendations jointly generated by partners. Evidence has been gathered on other partnerships through feedback from DWP and Crisis staff. The recommendations were further developed through a workshop with Crisis frontline staff, and other homelessness organisations have also fed in.

Recommendation one: Embed effective partnership working throughout DWP

Effective collaborations between JCPs, local authorities and the homelessness and housing sector are key to supporting people experiencing homelessness.

Mechanisms for consistent rollout of effective partnerships
Introduce regional housing managers to offer deeper and more specialised support to JCPs in the area

There have been a variety of arrangements for specialist input and partnership management within the DWP over the years, and key staff have been crucial to the success of the pilots. Each arrangement has had its merits.

- Most pilots have relied on partnership managers, who have been crucial. However, the role varies significantly across the country in terms of local engagement and responsibilities, sometimes acting as a key contact and advocate within JCP, resolving casework issues, improving local practice, sharing information and developing partnerships. However, responsibilities vary by location, and not all partnership managers have capacity to work on housing and homelessness as they have to juggle partners across a wide variety of issues.

- Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) have been important resource in several of the DWP/Crisis pilots and act as a key advocate for the sector in JCPs, but their capacity and case-management influence is limited.

- A seconded member of Crisis staff currently leads on homelessness case management across UC North. This offers valuable support with complex cases, but the number of JCPs involved means that there isn't capacity to take a strategic lead on developing partnerships, or upskilling staff.

- A previous secondment as homelessness co-ordinator in Merseyside district was highly successful and is an exemplary model for what could be achieved with the right resourcing and expertise across all districts.

"the Jobcentre partnership manager is an excellent source of information and advice"

"The homeless lead at the jobcentre is very helpful."

"there are SPOCS in each job centre to speak to directly but these workers are often that overwhelmed with work that you cannot access them"

Unpublished responses, Frontline Workers Network Survey, 2019

The most important thing is that someone has the experience, capacity and responsibility to be strategically useful on homelessness and housing partnerships locally. Useful responsibilities include developing and maintaining partnerships, upskilling staff, supporting case management and feeding into policy. Currently, lead contacts and routes for escalation aren't always clear for local services, so it would be useful to for these to be consistent and well-communicated.[25] While DWP could consider a range of options for resourcing this, it might consider introducing regional housing managers to offer deeper and more specialised housing and homelessness support. Anyone with responsibility for housing and homelessness partnerships and casework would also be able to offer valuable input to national policy, partnership and operational strategy, feeding in insights from local services.

Monitor and evaluate all partnership working to refine a best practice model and gain a better sense of impact (outcomes on homelessness prevented or alleviated)

Monitoring and evaluating the pilots has been useful in building the case for further partnership working, and in generating recommendations for subsequent pilots. The Newcastle and Birmingham pilots were formally evaluated and have offered the most useful insights as a result.

25   Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network

"Evidence helps create consensus and provide transparency"

Interviewee, Trailblazers evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are valuable but require agreed resourcing, data collection and sharing between partners. In Newcastle, evaluation was resourced by a member of project staff who was recruited partly because of their research expertise, and in Birmingham, Crisis' evaluation team conducted the evaluation. In Birmingham, concerns about data-sharing policy posed a challenge for evaluating certain outcomes (see pg. 21). Another challenge for monitoring impact has been that the UC system does not use data 'flags' or markers to highlight homelessness or housing risk, which means it cannot produce national-level information to benchmark against (see Recommendation 3, pg. 37). Currently, partnerships require separate processes to record outcomes, which can be supplemented by qualitative research, including focus groups, surveys and interviews. In Newcastle, the local authority cultivated links with academic researchers such as at Heriot Watt University who contributed research about the impact of welfare policy and the impact of the Trailblazer, which added significant value to the evaluation and subsequent local projects.

Useful metrics to evaluate include overall impact, disengagement rates, successful referrals and a range of other outcomes relating to homelessness prevented or alleviated, including through employment gained.

Findings from evaluations can be used to amend and improve partnerships to refine a best practice model as part of an open culture of continual improvement. In Newcastle, a "diagnostic", "test and learn" approach was applied.[26] Staff in the multi-disciplinary team had allocated time for reflective practice, completing weekly learning diaries and reporting back to a local multi-agency board with in-depth case reviews on how residents had fallen between the cracks of service provision.[27] This generated an evidence base on the local causes of homelessness and the effectiveness of different preventative approaches, while also building trust and engagement with local providers. To further support the ongoing improvement of their service, JCPs can develop arrangements with local partners to identify clients who disengage from DWP support, investigate why and develop measures to mitigate the risk of drop-out from support services.

26   MHCLG (16 November 2018) Evaluation of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers
27   Newcastle city council Active Inclusion Team: Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer In-depth case reviews.

Number of people recieving support from Newcastle city council following JCP referrals	
Accommodation secured / sustained, made up of:	68
- Supported housing provided	28
- Accommodation secured with assistance from local authority through housing options service	28
- Negotiation/mediation to return to family or friend	6
- Helped to secure accommodation found by applicant, with financial payment	2
- Helped to secure accommodation found by applicant, without financial payment	4
Advice and information provided	65
Negotiation / mediation / advocacy work to prevent eviction / repossession	9
Debt advice	7
Resolved benefit problems	4
Discretionary Housing Payments to reduce shortfall	1
Housing-related support to sustain accommodation	2
Sanctuary scheme / target hardening measures (assisting a resident to maintain their accommodation by adding and improving security)	1

Forming the right partnerships and making them effective

Implement joint ways of working with local authority housing options teams

JCPs and local authority housing options teams are valuable partners for one another, and local authority involvement was a key factor in the success of the Newcastle pilot, especially with engagement from city council leadership.[28] Newcastle JCP made 353 referrals to Newcastle city council during the Trailblazer, of which 51 per cent of referred residents engaged, receiving a wide range of support.[29] Moreover, the success of the multi-disciplinary team relied on DWP and ALMO data combined with local authority support tools. On the other hand, the staff turnover in Birmingham city council team caused challenges for the pilot, and one of the recommendations arising from the evaluation was to explore strategies to achieve more effective participation by the council.[30]

Develop a broad range of strategic partnerships, supported by a locally developed 'pathway tool' to help work coaches navigate partnerships

JCPs and homelessness services rely on one another to effectively support service users, and partnership working can improve outcomes. JCP staff in Birmingham were pleased with the partnership, reflecting that Crisis coaches could dedicate more time to an individual, and went the extra mile to support clients. In Newcastle and Birmingham, lots of referrals were made to Crisis for support but there were instances where Crisis was not the most appropriate support organisation. The ALMO was a useful partner in the Newcastle Trailblazer: although it did not receive as many referrals from the JCP as the local authority or Crisis, a higher

28   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Pilot with Jobcentre Plus.
29   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Pilot with Jobcentre Plus.
30   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

percentage of referred residents engaged with ALMO support (94 per cent, compared to 51 per cent and 44 per cent respectively), suggesting that it was highly appropriate to their needs.[31] JCPs can engage in a wide range of partnerships and might also consider using the Flexible Support Fund to commission partnership-based support, building on increasingly innovative uses of the Fund in response to the pandemic.

Support provided by Your Homes Newcastle to residents following JCP referrals	
Advice and information provided	2
Negotiation / mediation / advocacy work to prevent eviction / repossession	11
Debt advice	7
Discretionary Housing Payments to reduce shortfall/ resolution of benefit problems	20

Having multiple referral options is useful, but introduces complexity for JCP staff. A pathway tool has been developed in Newcastle agencies to navigate effective referrals, but it is not a DWP-specific resource.[32] The Birmingham pilot set out to develop a pathway tool to support multiple referral pathways, building on the district provision tool and the complex needs tool.[33] Unfortunately, this wasn't delivered during the project, but it would be useful for a district to develop a pilot pathway tool that makes it easier to navigate local referral options.

Resource and equip partnerships to succeed, based on careful assessment of staffing and training needs from all partners

Resourcing arrangements in each of the pilots have been varied, but sustained and dedicated resourcing is a key feature of the most successful partnership working. The Merseyside pilot and an element of the Newcastle pilot included full-time seconded staff, and the Newcastle Trailblazer had recruited several dedicated project staff. In many partnerships, a partnership manager, SPOC or other work coach was given ring-fenced desk time for admin. The regular presence of Crisis coaches in JCPs in Edinburgh and Birmingham is seemingly straightforward to resource, but the increase in caseload is hard to predict. In Newcastle and Birmingham, the volume of referrals put a strain on the local Skylights. Partnerships need to fully consider the training and other resourcing needs of each partner and how these might be met in order to ensure successful work together.

Data sharing is key
Investigate the use of shared case-management systems to enable effective partnership support

Data sharing needs to be supported by trusting and open communications processes, to encourage JCP staff to invest time in effective referrals, and to encourage local partners to share information such as PHPs. In several pilots, co-location has fostered better case discussions.

31   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Pilot with Jobcentre Plus
32   Newcastle city council: Pathways – Clarifying responses for residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Newcastle
33   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

"And I think that's part of the issue with Housing Options, in that we don't know what's happening; once we've referred them, it tends to be a black hole and customers aren't always that forthcoming. So, it's how we can work together, with the customers' agreement, to try and support them."

"If we knew more about what was happening between the customer and Crisis, then we could make sure that what we're doing and what Crisis is doing makes sense, it fits well together. We could be … come out with a kind of … whatever we're doing could complement each other rather than perhaps causing issues, and maybe there are times when we might expect less from customers if we knew what they were doing with Crisis"

DWP focus group participants, Birmingham pilot

Having made referrals for support from partners, the Newcastle and Birmingham pilots have aimed for joint case management to co-ordinate personalised support (Recommendation 2, pg. 32-36). The Newcastle Trailblazer pilot in the JCP relied on weekly "batch updates" in order to try to manage cases jointly. The Birmingham pilot had intended to trial joint case management through a shared platform, but DWP data-sharing policy and local authority resourcing prevented this.[34] Both evaluations recommended investigating options for shared case-management.[35][36] Agreeing joint data standards between

partners, and doing joint batch updates on a weekly basis would ensure that data held on customers is accurate and up-to-date, in line with GDPR data management principles.[37]

Adapt existing data-sharing guidance to enable better case management outcomes and identify customers at risk

Despite the excellent practice in many partnerships, there are cases where work coaches can be overly cautious about data protection in making referrals, meaning that can customers miss out or referrals are low-quality. In Brent, the SHPS often receives incomplete referrals, making it hard to contact clients and to properly support them in a timely manner. When referrals miss out case information, key facts can be missed, and customers are forced to repeatedly disclose information that might be upsetting. Internal guidance can better support high-quality referrals by including illustrative examples data-sharing that is appropriate and encouraged.

The Birmingham pilot was unable to explore a shared case-management approach because of DWP's data-sharing policies.[38] This meant that opportunities for co-ordinated support were not fully exploited, with some work coaches not knowing what kind of support their customers were receiving after referral. Amending DWP's data-sharing policy would enable deeper partnership working with joint case management.[39][40] By working with the Information Commissioners' Office, DWP can continue to protect customers'

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34   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot
35   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Pilot with Jobcentre Plus.
36   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot
37   ICO website: GDPR principle (d) Accuracy
38   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot
39   Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Pilot with Jobcentre Plus
40   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

rights, while using the consent-based provisions within the Data Protection Act (2018).[41]

The multi-disciplinary team in the Newcastle Trailblazer demonstrated the value of sharing and deploying DWP data, not just for referrals but as a predictive resource.[42] The team analysed benefits data alongside other datasets to proactively identify homelessness risk and prevent it, with successful interventions and PHPs as a result. Data-sharing policies should enable innovative use of analytics to identify claimants at risk to prevent homelessness, with the appropriate safeguards in place.

Recommendation two: Enable staff to deliver meaningful support to people with acute housing need

The findings of the partnerships have shown that JCP staff have been able to deliver increasingly meaningful support to customers when equipped to do so with professional skills, and the right tools to personalise support.

Professional skills

Work coaches are the cornerstone of DWP's ability to understand customers' needs and supporting them. The pilots ensured that participating work coaches were trained and confident in identifying homelessness and housing need, and in the range of support available to for clients. This can be rolled out to support JCP staff and their customers across the country.

"…he had lived experience, and looking at him now, you would not put the two characters together, the chap who had lived rough and the chap who was standing in front of us talking to us and training us about homelessness. He was happy to answer our questions about our particular catchment areas straight away. In particular, customers who lived in London and who'd been moved up here into our area, so that was really good that he had the excellent knowledge to be able to … you know, an off-the-cuff question which you didn't know was going to come. So, yeah, excellent."

DWP focus group participant, Birmingham pilot

Roll-out housing and homelessness training to all relevant work coaches and provide a national toolkit of relevant resources

Work coaches should be provided with introductory training on the skills and knowledge needed to identify when people are at risk of homelessness and how take steps to prevent it. Crisis has developed significant training material for the pilots with DWP, and feedback has been very positive. 92 per cent of staff in the Birmingham pilot said the training was relevant to their role.[43] Evaluations found that the training was important for staff's ability and motivation to identify residents at risk of homelessness, and that knowledge of homelessness, its causes and risk factors was higher after the training.[44] [45] Training increased staff confidence in discussing housing situations with clients, and in their ability to identify appropriate support and make effective

41   ICO website: GDPR lawful basis for processing: Consent

42   Newcastle city council Active Conclusion Team: Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer Multidisciplinary team Summative review

43   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

44   MHCLG (16 November 2018) Evaluation of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers

45   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

referrals.[46] Useful training includes:

- Different forms of homelessness, moving beyond rough sleeping

- Local trends in homelessness

- Underlying causes of homelessness and specific trigger points

- Ways of identifying homelessness

- The principles of homelessness prevention at every stage of risk

- Their statutory duty to refer, its legal basis, and why it exists

- The tools available to them to support customers, including the easements they can apply, further referrals that they can make, and the specialist support that is available in-house and through local partnerships

When organising training, JCPs might want to consider how to involve referral partners as this was effective in communicating a tangible idea of the support available to customers on referral in Newcastle.[47] Where this can be facilitated, there is value in including the voices of those with lived experience, and homelessness service workers, so that work coaches understand the context in which they operate, the human impact involved and the concerns of people facing homelessness.

To supplement training, staff should have easy access to a toolkit of relevant guidance, training, advice and resources. The pilots have developed a range of materials that could be included, such as the Homelessness Conversation Tool. This has helped build work coaches' confidence in discussing housing and homelessness

46   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot
47   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

with customers, with useful questions, including "Is the address we have for you your permanent address?", "What is your living situation there? Is it permanent? Is it temporary?" and "What impact might the housing situation have on work search commitments – e.g. phone or internet access, laundry facilities?"

DWP is already working to launch this internal toolkit to provide a centralised hub for homelessness and housing information, including:

- An A-Z of information

- Advice on basic bank accounts

- Examples of best practice

- A blog and podcasts

- Support with the district provision tool

- Good news stories

- Guidance and training materials learning

- An outline of a customer's journey through homelessness support

- Information on national partnership support

- Safeguarding information

- FAQs and an "Ask the Expert" facility

In order to be locally relevant and useful, the district provision tool in this could be replaced over time with a comprehensive pathway tool (Recommendation 1, pg. 26-27).

Encourage professional development and career progression of work coaches into specialist housing and homelessness roles
Although introductory training would be valuable for all JCP staff, opportunities for further professional

development can help to supply the experience and skills that can support effective partnerships and lead specialist strategic work (Recommendation 1, pg. 23-24). Staff can benefit from opportunities for development including additional training, volunteering days, shadowing, secondments and opportunities to work on delivering local partnerships.

Many of these opportunities can be accessed through partner organisations, with the potential for improved working relationships, increased trust and understanding as well as well as professional development. To encourage this, JCPs can agree ring-fenced time for staff to take up opportunities for development, and demonstrate that they value specialist skills and experience for career progression. Progression paths could include developing towards becoming a SPOC, outreach worker or regional homelessness expert.

Identify information gaps on housing and homelessness matters for work coaches, managers and other relevant personnel
In encouraging the tailored support outlined in pgs. 32-36, work coaches and case managers each need access to the right information to be able to personalise support. To ensure that information gaps for key decision-makers are not inadvertently barriers to personalised support, DWP should consider reviewing its processes to identify where there are gaps in the flow of information.

"Tried to build up partnership with jobcentre but they have limited access to UC info and influence over claims."

Unpublished response, Frontline Workers Network Survey, 2019

Personalising support

Staff can use a range of tools to offer personalised support to claimants, including APAs, easements and support with shortfalls. Partnerships can support improved use of these tools, with 83 per cent of those DWP staff surveyed in Birmingham agreeing or strongly agreeing that the pilot helped them to provide more personalised support.

Ensure that communication needs are met

Most customers can receive appropriate support within a short appointment, but people with complex needs may require more time. The Birmingham pilot coincided with a DWP review of weekly and fortnightly mandatory attendance of customers for 10-minute reviews. In the evaluation, JCP staff referred to the constraints time limit, and they would need longer to adopt a true coaching approach for people facing acute housing needs.[48] Work coaches should have the flexibility to spend more time supporting vulnerable claimants, using their professional judgement to manage their time.

Many customers require further support in understanding the benefits system. Until they accessed specialist support, vulnerable customers in various Trailblazer projects were unaware of changes to their entitlement, the potential to challenge decisions or options for further support.[49] This makes it hard for customers to navigate the system and manage their money, but DWP has identified delivering inclusive customer service for those with different or complex needs as a departmental objective.[50] For most customers communications have become easier since UC streamlined and digitised the process.[51] However, some challenges still remain for a people who have additional communication needs due to digital exclusion, lower levels of literacy, language barriers and/or learning difficulties.

Without an internet connection, a smartphone, laptop or the right skills, digital exclusion already posed a challenge for accessing UC online, but the pandemic das disrupted access to libraries and other digital support.[52] However, JCPs ensured that despite closing their doors, some staff remained on-site to support customers if really needed. DWP also responded rapidly to stakeholder feedback to ensure that "Don't call us, we'll call you" was effective, by communicating through the journal, creating an identifiable caller ID number, and giving advance notice of calls for people who might be anxious about answering the phone.[53] The DWP should continue its efforts to ensure that UC works for those who are digitally excluded or have other communication needs. Given that some people struggle to understand key phrases in the benefits system, (e.g. "child element of Universal Credit", "Advance Payments") there might also be value in trialling new approaches to simplifying communications.[54] [55]

During the pandemic, the DWP also maintained customers' access to support workers during phone appointments, by dialling them

48 Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot
49 MHCLG (16 November 2018) Evaluation of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers
50 DWP (2018) Single Departmental Plan
51 Unpublished findings. Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network
52 Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network
53 DWP (9th April 2020) Press Release: Don't Call Us, We'll Call You
54 Digital Scotland Resources
55 National Audit Office (10 July 2020) Universal Credit: getting to first payment

in, which was valuable. When the Birmingham pilot was evaluated before the pandemic, JCP staff had described the importance of external support for customers, as Crisis coaches had longer to get to grips with the detail.[56] Ensuring that support workers are included in communications can help to minimise the risk of miscommunications and inaccuracies, which makes work coaches' jobs easier and reduces the need for lengthy mandatory reconsiderations or appeals processes.

> "Universal Credit is not easy for the clients to understand. majority of clients have no knowledge of using smart phones and continually miss appointments and don't understand why benefits are sanctioned and why they are stopped."
>
> Unpublished responses, Frontline Network Survey 2019

Improve practice so that work coaches are expected to pro-actively assess whether advances, alternative payment arrangements or budgeting support are needed

The roll-out of UC has included the consolidation of payments to be monthly single payments for customers in England and Wales, with a five week wait before the first payment. Many customers feel confident managing their money since this consolidation and simplification but others struggle, because they are used to managing on more frequent wage payment cycles.[57] [58] This has an impact on housing security, with a third of UC customers having experienced difficulties with housing cost payments, and a link to rent arrears.[59] [60] People facing homelessness are especially likely to struggle with these arrangements and to need help with managing and planning their own finances.[61] [62]

DWP has instituted a range of arrangements to support customers to manage their money, including options for advance payments, more frequent payments, direct payments to a landlord, or "in very exceptional circumstances, split payments between partners.[63] Alternative Payment Arrangements (APAs) are undoubtedly useful, and in Scotland, where more frequent payments are easier to request than England and Wales, uptake is 12 times higher, so there is reason to believe that more people would benefit from APAs than currently receive them.[64] Awareness of APAs is low and some claimants encounter challenges in requesting them, which can impact homelessness.[65] [66] In Brent, the SHPS has built a good relationship with the Housing Lead Worker in the local JCPs, who has helped to shift local practice to make it easier to secure direct payments to landlords. With training and amended guidance, DWP can encourage work coaches to pro-actively assess whether advances, more frequent payments, direct payments to landlords and/or referral for further budgeting support are needed.

56   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot
57   DWP (2018) Full Service Survey. London: DWP.
58   Work and Pensions Select Committee (19th October 2020) Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment
59   DWP (2018) Full Service Survey. London: DWP.
60   Work and Pensions Select Committee (19th October 2020) Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment
61   MHCLG (16 November 2018) Evaluation of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers
62   Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network
63   DWP (13 May 2020) Guidance: Alternative Payment Arrangements
64   Work and Pensions Select Committee (19th October 2020) Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment
65   Work and Pensions Committee (10 June 2020) Oral evidence: Universal Credit: the wait for first payment
66   Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network

"We have worked with local DWP to support people who come through our charity to get landlord direct payments. This was not before many people were evicted for non payment of rent after the introduction of UC."

Unpublished responses, Frontline Workers Network Survey, 2019

Amend guidance on the claimant commitment to ensure that housing circumstances are better identified

The claimant commitment can and should be adapted to recognise the impact of homelessness, and homelessness risk in a constructive and supportive way. DWP has introduced and expanded the use of the homelessness easement in recent years, to protect people experiencing homelessness, and increasingly, those at risk of homelessness. This has been invaluable in protecting people from unfair sanctions due to limited internet access, an insecure postal addresses and the "full-time job" of managing their homelessness.[67] The Newcastle pilot showed that training can increase use of the easement where it had previously been "patchy", and can help work coaches to better understand how to support some customers with additional needs related to their homelessness, including applying further easements for those precipitating factors.[68][69] Internal controls on the application of sanctions have reduced their use and the associated homelessness risk. However, there are still people for whom benefit sanctions are a

factor in becoming homeless, possibly due to difficulties in identifying the risk.[70] An affordability assessment as an additional condition for applying sanctions would reduce the risk that sanctions can pose for homelessness. Sanctions should not be imposed unless someone is known to be able to continue to cover the cost of their rent (if they pay rent) if a sanction were to be applied, taking account of overall living costs.

"I think it was to just build a close working relationship with DWP and prevent vulnerable homeless people from being sanctioned. Because we were seeing a lot of cases … I'm sure nationwide, not just in our office … where people are often penalised for missing appointments, for not sticking to commitments, some not even being able to make a claim for benefits because they've got no fixed address, which we know isn't correct, but it still happens."

A member of Crisis staff on their motivations for engaging with the Birmingham pilot.

Beyond the homelessness easement, work coaches on the Birmingham Pilot discussed the ways that, given the right feedback from local partners, they can adapt the claimant commitment to better support people.[71] Conditionality can be co-ordinated with support provided by local authorities (e.g. personalised housing plans) or by other organisations in the housing and homelessness sector. This can mean

67   Batty, E., Beatty, C., Casey, R., Foden, M., McCarthy, L. & Reeve, K. (2015) Homeless people's experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions. London: Crisis.
68   Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2017) The Homelessness Monitor: England 2017, London: Crisis.
69   Watts, B., Bramley, G., Blenkinsopp, J., McIntyre, J. (2019) Homelessness prevention in Newcastle: Examining the role of the 'local state' in the context of austerity and welfare reform. I-SPHERE / Heriot-Watt University.
70   Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network
71   Crisis Evaluation Team (August 2020) Evaluation of the Birmingham Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Pilot

reducing the work-search activity requirements to enable customers to complete the actions required of them by their PHP, or to participate in support being offered by a partner organisation (e.g. Crisis' *Renting Ready* training). This personalisation should never attach the threat of sanctions to other services requirements to ensure that customers feel supported to engage and other services are encouraged to share information. The claimant commitment can also be personalised to reflect individual needs and priorities, to ensure that people struggling with literacy, learning difficulties and/or language barriers are being asked to undergo appropriate training and apply for appropriate jobs.

> "[easements] were very, very rare, people saw them as very exceptional whereas since the Trailblazer, that was part of the training that we did with staff... 'these are the easements that you can use, this is what they look like, this is how you should use them'. So now... those easements have become much more widely used and much more appropriately used."
>
> Statutory sector key informant, Newcastle pilot[72]

Allow work coaches to apply a benefit cap grace period as an easement and exempt those who have experienced the worst kinds of homelessness

Compared to the claimant commitment, and APAs, the benefit cap remains comparatively rigid, reducing customers' entitlements, often making renting unaffordable.[73]

The existing grace period exempts people from the benefit cap for the first nine months of their claim, if they have consistently been in work for a year.[74] This gives people time to get back on their feet if they become sick or lose work, although it does not protect everyone. By extending and adapting this protection, a grace period could be applied to support people at risk of homelessness, alongside the homelessness easement.[75] As with other personalisation, this would recognise the time that people need to stabilise their housing before focusing fully on work search obligations once more. Adding this to the tools a work coach can use would help to prevent homelessness among those facing the greatest housing risk.

A permanent exemption from the benefit cap would be useful for people who have experienced the worst kinds of homelessness, such as rough sleeping and more than three months in a hostel. This would allow them to afford a secure and stable home near their support services without sleeping in hostels, on sofas, or the street.

Support claimants to manage debts and prevent arrears

Despite investment in LHA, many people at risk of homelessness face shortfalls in their rent because of deductions, the benefit cap or other issues.

While deductions can play an important role in helping someone to manage their rent arrears, keep a roof over their head and keep their utilities switched on, the levels deductions are set at can create rent shortfalls. Plans to reduce the maximum level

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72 Watts, B., Bramley, G., Blenkinsopp, J., McIntyre, J. (2019) Homelessness prevention in Newcastle: Examining the role of the 'local state' in the context of austerity and welfare reform. I-SPHERE / Heriot-Watt University.

73 Crisis (September 2020) Introducing flexibility to the benefit cap to prevent and end homelessness

74 The "grace period" applies if all of the following are true: an applicant is claiming Universal Credit because they stopped working or their earnings went down, they are now earning less than £604 a month and in each of the 12 months before their earnings went down/they stopped working, they earned the same as or more than the earnings threshold.

75 Crisis (September 2020) Introducing flexibility to the benefit cap to prevent and end homelessness

of deductions are very welcome, but even 25 per cent can make renting costs unmanageable, impacting a lot of people at risk of homelessness.[76] Personalisation of deduction repayment plans could help to reduce the impact on rent affordability and homelessness, for example, by applying the delay to UC deductions for anyone at risk of homelessness, as well as providing the option for token payment plans for a small number of cases. [77][78][79]

In cases where there is still a shortfall, work coaches can be incredibly useful by checking the customer's application and award, and supporting customers to apply for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs), and Council Tax Relief. DHPs have a useful function in preventing homelessness but people are not always aware that they can apply but by supporting customers to find and complete the forms, work coaches can reduce the risk that they fall through the net.[80]

Local authorities do not have access to data on who is being hit by the benefit cap or LHA shortfalls, so cannot target them with relevant information on how to apply. With the right data-sharing policy (Recommendation 1, pg. 27-29), JCPs may want to consider using local authority partnerships to explore quicker, easier ways of consensually sharing relevant information for DHP applications.

Recommendation three: Embed a prevention approach

DWP has done more than any other government department in recent years to consider how to extend its role in supporting people experiencing homelessness and engaging with prevention of homelessness under its duty to refer. The prevention of homelessness can be further embedded in DWP by more systematically identifying customers at risk of homelessness and monitoring the impact of policy and practice.

Include housing circumstances and support needs as part of the work coach assessment and UC applications

In personalising support and working effectively in partnerships, one of the biggest barriers to supporting customers effectively is that work coaches may not receive full disclosure of the risks that someone is experiencing. This is despite the fact that the life events that bring people into contact with DWP mean that they are more likely to be experiencing a period of housing risk. A reduction in income was the most widely cited risk factor in the need for support across MHCLG's Trailblazers, often linked to a change in their benefit entitlement and typically causing rent arrears.[81]

Training and the Homelessness Conversation Tool can help to encourage disclosure, but small changes to DWP processes can enable work coaches to reliably and systematically identify homelessness.

76 Unpublished findings. Frontline Network (1 September 2020) Annual Frontline Worker Survey 2019: Full Report. London: St Martin in the Fields Frontline Network

77 Downie, M., Gousy, H., Basran, J., Jacob, R., Rowe, S., Hancock, C., Albanese, F., Pritchard, R., Nightingale, K. and Davies, T. (2018) Everybody In: How to end homelessness in Great Britain. London: Crisis.

78 Department for Work and Pensions (2018) Guidance: Universal Credit Advances.

79 StepChange (2017) Held Back by Debt: how Britain's lack of financial resilience is tipping people into a debt trap. London: StepChange Debt Charity

80 Park, M. (2019) The Implementation of Discretionary Housing Payments by Local Authorities in England, Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research, Heriot Watt University

81 MHCLG (16 November 2018) Evaluation of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazers

Include a follow-up question for customers who don't have housing costs to help DWP identify homelessness risk

Seconded staff to DWP identified that although the UC application form asks whether a customer has housing costs but if they don't there is no follow-up, despite the fact that it's an indicator that someone may be homeless, or at risk of homelessness. Including a follow-up question on housing circumstances for people who have no housing costs would increase the chances to identify homelessness risk. This equips work coaches to ask more relevant questions about the customer's circumstances and offer better support. This would also identify housing and homelessness need among claimants who are in work, and who therefore are not supported by work coaches. This information-gathering would be in accordance with GDPR principles, as it would only be asked where there is a clear risk (due to the absence of housing costs) and it enables DWP to fulfil its legal obligations under the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Following an application or a change of circumstances, use work coach assessments to identify homelessness risk

Given the value of housing circumstances conversations during the pilots, embedding housing circumstances in the work coach assessment framework would help work coaches to reliably identify customers' housing needs. Based on specific circumstances, such as sofa-surfing, requests for crisis loans etc., work coaches could trigger relevant tailored support.

Monitor the impact of welfare policies and DWP operations on homelessness and housing security

Introducing some kind of monitoring would help to assess the value of the department's policies and practices in tackling homelessness. "Effective housing support" is a key part of the DWP's objectives in its *Single departmental plan*, but unlike many other objectives in the Plan, it does not have a headline indicator for monitoring its achievements in this area.[82] Introducing a headline indicator for housing support in the *Single departmental plan* would help DWP to monitor its efficacy and evidence its investments. This would bring housing support in line with many of the other objectives in the *Single departmental plan*, and would help to embed a prevention approach to homelessness within the department's performance metrics. It might also allow for benchmarking local partnerships against national performance.

A headline indicator could be further supplemented with further research and analysis to evaluate the impact of specific policies and practices on housing security and homelessness. Further evidence on the impact of welfare policy on homelessness would be incredibly valuable for DWP in evaluating measures, and making the case for funding and developing further evidence-led policy.[83][84]

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82   DWP (2018) Single Departmental Plan
83   Work and Pensions Select Committee (19th October 2020) Universal Credit: the wait for a first payment
84   NAO (13 September 2017) Homelessness

Conclusion and next steps

Since the introduction of the HRA, DWP has done a lot of work on preventing and alleviating homelessness, doing more than any other government department to develop its role on this. The pilots have showcased excellent practice and have succeeded because of the incredible professional commitment of JCP staff. Moving forward, the lessons from this work can be embedded and secured across the department, making the most of the commendable progress that we saw in the pilots. This requires homelessness to be perceived differently, instead of only being seen as an issue of severe complex needs, it should also be considered as an issue that is best addressed by providing housing security. This is consistent with DWP objectives to provide effective housing support.[85]

With clear direction and commitment from ministers and senior officials, a homelessness prevention approach can be built into the welfare system. With the right guidance and resources, JCPs and work coaches can offer remarkable support to prevent and alleviate homelessness. Every recommendation in this report has the potential to contribute meaningfully to ending homelessness, and Crisis stands ready to support the DWP in delivering them.

**Together
we will end
homelessness**